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SEASONAL IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

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ABSTRACT

This paper, a study of seasonal imagery in Wallace Stevens's poetry, attempts to demonstrate the relationship between this imagery and the development of many of Stevens's central themes, e.g., the relation between imagination and physical reality, chaos and order, life and death, the analytic and synthetic processes. These apparently opposing forces are seen to function more precisely as complementary elements, subsumed by a still larger order which possesses a continuity not unlike that of the seasonal cycle. Stevens's notion of such a cyclical process is further seen to share much in common with Santayana's concept of the "flux of existence".

I. Introduction

> If from the earth we came, it was an earth
> That bore us as a part of all the things
> It breeds and that was lewder than it is.
> Our nature is her nature. Hence it comes,
> Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows
> The same. We parallel the mother's death.
> She walks in an autumn ampler than the wind
> Cries up for us and colder than the frost
> Pricks in our spirits at the summer's end,
> And over the bare spaces of our skies
> She sees a barer sky that does not bend.
>
> — "Anatomy of Monotony", CP, 107.[1]

The image of the turning seasons appears often in Wallace Stevens's poetry. On the simplest, most intuitive level, it suggests the mutability of all living things: the birth, flowering and gradual withering away of all earthly beauty, and with it (as only one small part of the general phenomenon) the decay of the animal man. When he uses the seasonal metaphor in this particular fashion, Stevens is of course participating in a tradition as old as literature itself. Had he been so unimaginative as to limit his use of the image to its narrowest physical sense, the subject most probably would not deserve more than cursory attention. However,

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[1] Throughout this paper I shall use, for convenience's sake, the following abbreviations:

CP: The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. London, 1959 (has identical pagination with the 1954 New York edition).
LWS: Holly Stevens (ed.). Letters of Wallace Stevens. New York, 1966.
NA: The Necessary Angel. New York, 1951.
OP: Samuel French Morse (ed.). Opus Posthumous. New York, 1957.

upon careful reading through all the poetry -- with assistance, perhaps, from certain remarks passed in the letters, and a few relevant passages from the critical prose -- the attentive reader will discover that Stevens's seasonal imagery operates on several levels, of which the physical may be judged the lowest. In the course of this paper, I shall try to demonstrate how this imagery functions on an intellectual plane, and figures into many of Stevens's central themes, e.g. the relation between imagination and reality. It appears to me that he uses the seasonal cycle as a particular metaphor for the "life of the imagination", and extends this metaphor generally to speculate on the nature of the eternal flux between idea and matter, chaos and order.

Naturally, such a discussion has a built-in difficulty. It presupposes, for example, that one can speak in highly general (if not to say schematic) terms of a man's poetic output spanning thirty-five years -- always a dangerous assumption. The question to be settled immediately is whether or not Stevens demonstrates sufficient consistency to justify such an approach. It is my belief that he does. His work is characterized by a peculiarly narrow range of themes: the imagination's operation on reality; man's need for beauty and pleasure; the nature of order; the craft of writing poetry -- such are his concerns in poem after poem. Moreover, his attitudes never really appear to change (as, for example, Eliot's do in the years between "The Hippopotamus" and "Ash Wednesday"):

rather, they persist through various modes of restatement, as though the poet had always just a few more thoughts to deliver on his favourite themes. What does change is the verse form, which grows increasingly meditative and abstract. The long poem, consisting of many shorter poems all revolving about a single unifying idea, is more characteristic of the later Stevens, while Harmonium abounds with less ambitious, even trivial, vignettes; but the attitudes and observations of the poetry generally, late or early, would appear to reflect a consistent aesthetic sensibility. Moreover, there exists a certain consistency in symbol and metaphor, as well. Stevens had his favourite images which recur throughout the poetry. His treatment of colour is perhaps the outstanding example: nearly all his critics have remarked on his private spectrum and its various significances. This is not to say, however, that every time Stevens uses the word "red" he is implying such-and-such: surely we must allow the man the privilege to remark on something's being red simply because it is. So it is with his seasonal images. The burden of responsibility, then, rests on the critic to read carefully and objectively, choosing those references which seem best illustrative of the ideas he wishes to discuss, without taking the lines out of their proper context. This is what I have tried to do.

Because of the unusually narrow concentration of Stevens's themes and their related imagery, Thomas Walsh's concordance is a helpful tool to any critic who wishes to explore the function of individual images in Stevens's work.[1a] The most cursory examination of this concordance will confirm the significance of seasonal imagery in the poetry: of some 380 poems by Stevens, over 150 contain some kind of explicit seasonal reference (e.g. the words "summer", "winter",

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[1a]Thomas F. Walsh, Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963).

"snow", etc.), and many more carry implicit references. At least thirty poems allude explicitly to autumn; spring and winter each appear in over forty poems. The most frequent seasonal reference is to summer, which figures (whether briefly or in some detail) in nearly seventy of the poems. Summer is undoubtedly Stevens's favourite season, featuring some of his lushest imagery: burgeoning blossoms, ripe fruit, exotic tropical excursions. Aside from the purely sensuous delight this season afforded him, it served also as an analogue to the imagination's creation of metaphor, one of the more dominant themes.

I have already remarked upon the relatively static character of the themes and the evolution, instead, of a progressively abstract verse form. I think it important to note, however, that while Stevens becomes increasingly cerebral in the later poetry, his imagery nevertheless retains its compellingly sensuous appeal. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the conspicuous dependence upon seasonal images in the more ambitious (and abstruse) later works -- "Auroras of Autumn", for example, or "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": as the poet's meditations become more and more rarified, the greater becomes the need for an "anchor" of sorts in physical reality. The seasonal imagery becomes more important as it functions interpretatively, serving as an intuitively apprehended analogue by means of which we may approach Stevens's more difficut abstractions.

Many critics have touched on Stevens's use of seasonal imagery, and some interpretations do not differ substantially from my own. The problem, however, is not so much one of originality as of adequate development. Frank Kermode, for example, suggests a

perfectly viable line of interpretation:

> . . . The seasons — not only as a natural analogue to the phases of human life but also as figuring the cyclical nature of the creative imagination — become dominant motives in the later work, and they are present, inexplicitly, in Harmonium. Out of "The Snow Man" (C.P., p. 9) grows the recurring metaphor of winter as a pure abstracted reality, a bare icy outline purged clean of all the accretions brought by the human mind to make it possible for us to conceive of reality and live our lives. . . . The arrival of spring is the analogue of the mind's producing "what will suffice" to clothe the intolerable body of reality. . . . Summer is the season of the physical paradise, the full human satisfaction, when imagination for a moment as long as midsummer fully accounts for reality, makes it wholly bearable to human beings.[2]

Mr. Kermode's remarks suggest a useful outline which may be more fully explored by future critics. He does not, however, attempt to develop these ideas much beyond the outline stage, devoting as he does only three pages to the subject. Similarly, James Baird acknowledges "Stevens's attention to the seasons of the poet-self" throughout the poetry, from Harmonium through The Auroras of Autumn, but never elaborates upon the idea.[3] E.P. Nasser has tried a potentially useful approach with an anatomy of Stevens's central images, including some seasonal ones. However, his interpretation seems most unsatisfactory to me; and since it introduces a line of criticism (the "dualist" approach taken also by Yvor Winters and Northrop Frye) to which my own views are very much opposed, I should

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[2] Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), pp. 34-37.

[3] James Baird, The Dome and the Rock (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), pp. 102-103.

like to dwell for a few moments here on Mr. Nasser's line of attack.

As he himself points out, his effort has the failing intrinsic to most anatomies in that it cannot always deal with "the wider suggestiveness" of many of the figures, limiting itself to a circumscribed examination of each image.[4] I think Mr. Nasser's book suffers seriously from this lack of a "wider suggestiveness", perhaps even more than he is himself aware: his approach leads him to a peculiarly shortsighted overview of Stevens in which opposing or disparate elements of the poet's sensibility appear to rocket off in opposite directions simultaneously, leaving the critic with the disconcerting feeling that he is dealing with an erudite and whimsical schizophrenic. This line of interpretation is set out early in Mr. Nasser's first chapter, "The Two Minds of Wallace Stevens":

> Structural frameworks, embedded stanzas, phrases, or single words all partake of an unfailing double vision that appears to be the very essence of Stevens' mental and emotional life. It will be the purpose of this study to investigate the double nature of Stevens' figures while being as precise as possible in defining the core signification of the "disparate halves" of a specific figure. . . .[5]

The "double nature" is nowhere clearly defined, but by the term Mr. Nasser appears usually to suggest something of Stevens's undercutting irony. The method by which he attempts to explore this

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[4] E.P. Nasser, Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), p. 14.

[5] Ibid.

"double nature" is, however, brutally mechanical, and often confusing:

> We are studying the consistent doubleness of Stevens' vision, and have asserted that a given figure, either within itself or through its contextual relations, disposes itself into two separate and opposing aspects. It is therefore reasonable (and correct) to assume that different aspects of the same figure will not lie together in a strict classification. However, I feel one can still handle the figures as entities, without an absurd anatomical dismemberment, by keeping in mind that a Stevens' figure has a doctrinal aspect and an ironic aspect. The former, that aspect of a figure that contributes to a coherent argument, indifferent to the wants and anguish of the human ego, can serve as the basis for classification of a figure. The irony, the welling up of the irrational human will in mockery or anguish, can be handled together with the doctrine, as it should be, since Stevens feels both concomitantly.[6]

The presupposition that every Stevens image has always this conscious duality is overly schematic and, in many of the individual readings, absurd. It is this assumption which colours Mr. Nasser's consideration of more particular dichotomies: reason vs. imagination, order vs. chaos, skepticism vs. faith, reality "controlled by imagination" vs. reality "out of control". I do not dispute that some of these themes do appear in Stevens's work; I do dispute, however, the interpretation which sees him as a poet caught and agonized by the opposing forces of a Manichaean cosmos. It is in this respect that Mr. Nasser's treatment of the seasonal imagery leaves most to be desired: in his persistent hunt for "dualities" he misses the most crucial attribute of Stevens's seasons, — i.e., their <u>cyclical</u> nature. Within the seasonal cycle, the dualities of summer and winter (or, for that matter, as we shall see later, of order and

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[6] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 23.

chaos, birth and death, analysis and synthesis, etc.) function not merely as opposing forces, but more precisely as complementary forces subsumed by, and united within, a larger natural framework. This is my central contention, which I hope to develop in greater detail in the chapters following.

Another difficulty one encounters in the growing body of Stevens criticism is a frequent lack of sympathy for, or, perhaps more accurately, empathy with, Stevens's point of view. It is difficult to understand how so whimsical a poet as Stevens should have attracted such a lugubrious crowd of commentators, at the head of whom Yvor Winters, with his "anti-hedonist" moral bias, stands painfully conspicuous.[7] Among the more "objective" critics, Frank Doggett concludes an impressively learned study of philosophical cross-references to Stevens with the just observation, almost a truism, that "idea in Stevens has a poetic rather than a philosophic function";[8] but he appears somehow to be disappointed by the fact. Mr. Doggett's concerns are primarily philosophic, not poetic, and this attitude cannot help but place him at a certain disadvantage in his consideration of Stevens's poetry: especially since Stevens himself repeatedly disclaimed personal adherance to any systematic school of philosophy.

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[7] Yvor Winters, "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress." The Anatomy of Nonsense (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1943).

[8] Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 203.

Robert Pack's study, while less obviously "scholarly", is still on the whole a more felicitous effort.[9] He demonstrates unusual sensitivity to Stevens's point of view and renders careful exegesis on a number of important poems with admirable lucidity. While his discussion of the seasons is limited to only the winter and summer imagery, still it has proven most helpful to me. Daniel Fuchs[10] also offers an intelligent approach to Stevens, having reacted specifically against the lack of humour in the earlier criticism. His study of Stevens's comic vision is spirited and sound; in addition, he offers an incisive rebuttal to that "high-toned old Christian gentleman", Yvor Winters.

In my discussion, I shall devote a separate chapter to each of the seasons, and conclude with some observations about the seasonal cycle as a general metaphor.

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[9] Robert Pack, Wallace Stevens: An Approach to his Poetry and Thought (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958).

[10] Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1963).

II. Winter

Nota: in the cycle of the seasons, Stevens observes the eternal iteration of the pattern of life: not human life merely, but of the earth itself, and all its varieties of life. "We parallel the mother's death", -- which is to say, the earth's death. The voluptuous green of summer withers at the coming of frost just as the human organism degenerates at the onset of senescence. But for Stevens, the imagination has its winter as well, its "death", and to understand it we must first familiarize ourselves with Stevens's winter vocabulary.

Colour is especially important throughout the seasonal poetry. I have already remarked upon his personal imaginative spectrum. In it, green and blue figure most prominently as the colours of vital nature and imagination, respectively. It is not the aim of this paper to deal expressly with the colour symbolism, except where it bears directly upon the seasonal imagery. However, the subject has been well treated by George McFadden.[11]

The colour which Stevens most frequently associates with winter is white. While it is of course the colour of ice and snow, his use of the word has still broader implications. As Mr. McFadden points out, white in Mallarmé expresses sterility, and in Stevens

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[11] George McFadden, "Probings for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens," Modern Philology, LVII, No. 3 (February 1961), pp. 186-193.

also this connotation is often apparent.[12] White for Stevens represents a kind of negation in a highly abstract sense: an absence of warmth, colour, movement, or fantasy. Mallarmé, however, associates his idea of sterility and nothingness with an ideal state of pure contemplation, a removal from reality, whereas Stevens uses the idea of negation as an approach to a specific kind of reality. In such poems as "The Snow Man", he considers reality at its barest level, almost mathematic in its starkness:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,
>
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place
>
> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The seasonal elements of frost, snow, cold, wind are associated with a more general "bare place" which is as much an interior as it is an exterior landscape. William York Tindall suggests that the nothingness which the snowman contemplates here is "the universe of twentieth century science, emptier and even more discouraging

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[12] Ibid., p. 188.

than Hardy's nineteenth century universe."[13] E.P. Nasser would appear to agree: "The sound that does not change is the desolate fundamental tone of the universe. . . . The mind attuned to winter sound, the mind of the snowman, will not engage in futile pathetic fallacy or think his misery has any meaning, except to himself, in the larger landscape."[14] These interpretations hardly seem compatible, however, with Stevens's own comment that the poem illustrates "the necessity of identifying oneself with the reality in order to understand and enjoy it. (LWS, 464) (Italics mine.) The explicit sympathy between the observer and the scene ("And nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there. . . .") makes one think of the algebraic "zero" of Valéry's reflexive consciousness. The "winter mind" of the true snowman ("the listener. . . in the snow") knows that the barrenness which surrounds him is not intrinsically malevolent. The sound of the wind (suggested by the repeated sibilants: "pine trees crusted with snow", etc.) is only the particular sound of that landscape. The man's perception of this single element, the wind, is sufficient to give him a larger knowledge of the whole (synecdoche). Ultimately this is a kind of self-knowledge, since the listener is himself a part of the

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[13] William York Tindall, Wallace Stevens. Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 11 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 23.

[14] Nasser, op. cit., p. 54.

landscape. The "winter mind", far from being so pernicious as Tindall and Nasser would suggest, is a natural, in this case volitional, state of mind: a mode of analytic perception which deals with the most barren, least imaginative reality _in the terms_ of that reality.

The vocabulary which Stevens uses to deal with the winter experience is remarkably consistent: the central poems abound with references to snow, ice, cold, wind -- all the usual "seasonal" associations. But there are more general images as well: glass, air and light, for example. The quality which these images share is a sparsity of physical presence. Robert Pack has observed further that they are all "translucent and conducive to sight, . . . to a fresh vision into the possibility of things."[15]

The barrenness which is the subject of "The Snow Man" represents the imagination's nadir: reality is here stripped of all fanciful embellishment and is viewed with the colder eye of bare factuality. Far from presenting this "absolute zero" of imaginative life as an undesirable state, Stevens demands it as a necessity of the imagination's progress. I do not agree with E.P. Nasser that winter appears as "just another metaphor, the fabric of another dream."[16] Rather, it is, in a sense, the beginning: the starting-point of a perception which will grow richer

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[15] Pack, _op. cit._, p. 123.

[16] Nasser, _op. cit._, p. 41.

and more fanciful until it reaches its culmination in the "summer" reality, which is the height of the imagination's activity.

In his consideration of Stevens's work, Mr. Pack has suggested that the movement from the "winter" to the "summer" mind reaches its culmination in the "supreme fiction" which is Stevens's concern in the later poetry. "'Nothingness' and 'the supreme fiction' are polarities that are never reached, but within which we move through a cyclical change, like the cycle of the seasons."[17] Stevens approaches such a suggestion himself in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP, 382):

> And not to have is the beginning of desire.
> To have what is not is its ancient cycle.
> It is desire at the end of winter, when
>
> It observes the effortless weather turning blue
> And sees the myosotis on its bush.
> Being virile, it hears the calendar hymn.
>
> It knows that what it has is what is not
> And throws it away like a thing of another time,
> As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.

In a sense, then, it is the "winter mind" itself which occasions the desire for poetry. It may even be a state of mind prerequisite to the very writing of poetry, the "final slate" for which the uninspired poet yearns in "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" (CP, 96). He complains that

> The time of year has grown indifferent.
> Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
> Are both alike in the routine I know.

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[17] Pack, op. cit., p. 122.

The problem is not in the time of year, however; it is the poet who has grown indifferent. Caught in an unrelenting routine, -- "the malady of the quotidian", -- he finds himself somehow outside the invigorating cycle of imaginative life and muses wistfully on the possible return of the "winter mind":

> Perhaps, if winter once could penetrate
> Through all its purples to the final slate,
> Persisting bleakly in an icy haze,
>
> One might in turn become less diffident,
> Out of such mildew plucking neater mould
> And spouting new orations of the cold.
> One might. One might. But time will not relent.

The "winter mind" is here a beneficial state, offering a reprieve from the trivia of everyday life. It is a chance to begin the imaginative life over again, discarding all the old, overworked images which have lost their vitality and relevance. Like "The Man on the Dump" (CP, 201-203), "One feels the purifying change. One rejects/ The trash." Stevens's spiritual winter allows the poet to return to the root of knowledge, the bedrock of bare fact. He is thrown back upon the basic faculties of perception so that he may evolve new patterns for interpreting reality.

While the "winter mind" appears as a necessary stage in the life of the imagination, it may be seen also as a learned discipline. One must "have been cold a long time. . . not to think of any misery in the sound of the wind." Stevens's winter may be a welcome refuge from the operations of imagination; however, the spiritual winter is not for that reason always easy to bear. One must learn to make use of

it, as in "The Dwarf" (CP, 205):

> Now it is September and the web is woven.
> The web is woven and you have to wear it.
>
> The winter is made and you have to bear it,
> The winter web, the winter woven, wind and wind. . . .

If the spiritual winter is to be of any value it must be acknowledged for what it is:

> It is all that you are, the final dwarf of you,
> That is woven and woven and waiting to be worn,
>
> Neither as mask nor as garment but as being,
> Torn from insipid summer, for the mirror of cold. . . .

One must realize that it is merely a "dwarf" stage in the imagination's life cycle, -- as well as a reaction against the luxurious summer, which must grow "insipid" as its pleasures begin to pall. This realization requires a certain discipline, not unlike the discipline of the snowman who, because he has learned to identify himself with the winter level of reality, no longer thinks of "any misery in the sound of the wind" but has come to understand the void and its limitations.

The cyclical operation of the winter and summer seasons of the imagination is seen also in the fluctuation between states of chaos and order. Both order and disorder are a part of the process of change: they are "opposite things" which "partake of one", as are life and death in "The Connoisseur of Chaos" (CP, 215). (This poem will be more fully discussed in Chapter VI.) The inevitable break-down of any order is connected with the passing of summer in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" (CP, 357):

> People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,
> Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old,
>
> The air is full of children, statues, roofs
> And snow.

The "lashing wind" is seen as "the spirit of Ludwig Richter." Like the snowman, he observes the landscape of which he is himself a part. "Turbulent Schlemihl" suggests a certain inept passivity. He

> Has lost the whole in which he was contained,
>
> Knows desire without an object of desire,
> All mind and violence and nothing felt.
>
> He knows he has nothing more to think about.
> Like the wind that lashes everything at once.

The negatives suggest that he is approaching the winter stage in the life of the imagination. There is a certain violence in the transition; however, it is an indiscriminate violence, like that of the wind. Since there is "nothing felt", there is no connotation of malice.

Because of the cyclical nature of chaos and order, one state is always implicit in the other, just as death is implicit in our awareness of life. "A great disorder is an order." (CP, 215) Chaos will form its own new order. Just so, the "winter mind", having reached imagination's nadir, must occasion new perceptions which will begin the reconstruction of an imaginative world.

This idea appears as an undercurrent throughout "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven", one of the longer (and later) poems which concerns our fundamental need to "keep coming back and coming back/

To the real." (CP, 471) Stevens's remark on the intent of this poem illustrates his own attitude towards the winter experience:

> . . . Here my interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false. (LWS, 636)

Most of the sections within the poem deal with either the difficulty of perceiving bare reality without the mind's intervention ("Not that which is but that which is apprehended"), or the yearning for such a perception ("We seek/ The poem of pure reality. . ."). The desire presupposes Stevens's attitude towards the winter experience: he sees it as a kind of purgation which makes way for new creation. We must seek stark reality, not as an end, but as a beginning:

> It is the infant A standing on infant legs,
> Not twisted, stooping, polymathic Z.

Its very nature anticipates the cyclical change:

> Alpha continues to begin.
> Omega is refreshed at every end.

In its highest sense, the "winter mind" is a spiritual state. The desire for plain reality is as strong as that for god. To Stevens's mind, the idea of plain reality resembles that of god in that both represent the starting-point of creation. This is surely the attitude of Professor Eucalyptus, who "seeks/ God in the object itself."

> It is the philosopher's search
>
> For an interior made exterior
> And the poet's search for the same exterior made
> Interior: breathless things broodingly abreath

With the inhalations of original cold
And of original earliness. Yet the sense
Of cold and earliness is a daily sense,

Not the predicate of bright origin.
Creation is not renewed by images
Of lone wanderers. To re-create, to use

The cold and earliness and bright origin
Is to search. Likewise to say of the evening star,
The most ancient light in the most ancient sky,

That it is wholly an inner light, that it shines
From the sleepy bosom of the real, re-creates,
Searches a possible for its possibleness.

"Possibleness" searching out a "possible" suggests the notion of formlessness seeking form, idea (or essence) seeking to become reality (matter). This phenomenon I shall discuss as the "spring experience", because it appears as the subject of many of Stevens's poems featuring springtime imagery.

III. Spring

Critics of Stevens have given but scant consideration to the springtime poetry; most usually they will discuss "The Paltry Nude" and one or two of the others. Spring, however, has lost out to winter and summer with the commentators, probably because (a) there are more poems dealing with these seasons, and (b) the spring experience is more difficult to pin down. It is a time of transition, possessing some characteristics of both the seasons preceding and following it. It is an ambiguous season, and Stevens is accordingly ambivalent towards it: he sees it alternately as the difficult end of winter and as the delightful beginning of summer.

> Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
> And forth the particulars of rapture come.
> (CP, 392)

In spring the winter mind begins to thaw; it feels the first stirrings of growth, natural and imaginative. It is a time of immaturity: the colours of spring are pale, its forms are only half-forms. The poems dealing with this time of year feature, understandably enough, images of young growing things: grass, seed, buds. "Half-frost" may yet linger on from winter; but the first dew may now appear. Because spring is a time of thaw, rivers also figure prominently in Stevens's imagery, along with marshy ground and mud.

Such poems as "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" (CP, 5) suggest the idea of sexual immaturity during this season. A figurehead on a ship, the "paltry nude" recalls Venus's birth

from the sea. Stevens was evidently fond of the association because, as Northrop Frye points out, he uses it again in other "springtime" poems: "Infanta Marina" (CP, 7); Susanna reclining in "a wave, interminably flowing" (CP, 92); and "Celle qui fût Heaulmiette", the "child/ Of a mother with vague severed arms" (CP, 438), suggestive of the Venus di Milo.[18]

The "paltry nude" is "archaic" because, like spring, she is eternal; she is "discontent" through yearning for the self-realization, the fulfillment, which summer will bring:

Yet this is meagre play
In the scurry and water-shine,
As her heels foam --
Not as when the goldener nude
Of a later day

Will go, like the centre of sea-green pomp,
In an intenser calm,
Scullion of fate,
Across the spick torrent, ceaselessly,
Upon her irretrievable way.

She is inseparable from the relentless cycle of the seasons, the cycle of change, and in this sense her way is indeed "irretrievable".

The need for vitalizing change combines with the sexual motif in the more humourous "Depression Before Spring" (CP, 63). Although the speaker feels, at the close of winter, the first stirrings of the vital energy, he meets with no complementary response from the anima:

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[18] Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens." Wallace Stevens: a Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 168-169.

> The cock crows
> But no queen rises.

The barnyard noises "ki-ki-ri-ki" and "rou-cou-cou" (Stevens had a genius for evocative nonsense syllables) are suggestive of a male mating cry and a female response. Spring and its "green queen" are slow to arrive, too slow for the impatient mind which feels the need for regeneration. A similar impatience is expressed in "Ghosts as Cacoons" (CP, 119):

> The grass is in seed. The young birds are flying.
> Yet the house is not built, not even begun.
>
> The vetch has turned purple. But where is the bride?

The quest for the anima represents a dual desire: the physical, procreative urge, and the imaginative, creative one. The advent of summer brings a joint fulfillment with its physical fruition on the one hand and the culminating "supreme fiction" on the other.

There is still another, more abstract level on which the spring imagery operates. In spring, the budding-time of all creation, all formlessness seeks to become form. From chaos is developed all potential order. Stevens expresses this tendency most effectively through the image of soft, marshy ground, or more particularly, mud, as in "The Mud Master" (CP, 147):

> The muddy rivers of spring
> Are snarling
> Under muddy skies.
> The mind is muddy.
>
> As yet, for the mind, new banks
> Of bulging green

Are not;
Sky-sides of gold
Are not.
The mind snarls.

The poem reveals the ambivalence in the poet's reaction to the spring experience: the negatives remind us of winter and the "bulging" green and gold of summer are still in the future, seen as yet unrealized potential. The creating mind is clouded, unclear, muddy. "Snarling" suggests tangled confusion and, perhaps, violence as well. Mud, while essentially formless and pliant, possesses tangibility at least; it shows the lowest level of form. It is emblematic of possibility.

Blackest of pickanines,
There is a master of mud.
The shaft of light
Falling, far off, from sky to land,
That is he --

The peach-bud maker,
The mud master,
The master of the mind.

The image of the shaft of light anticipates that of the evening star in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" -- the "most ancient light" that "re-creates,/ Searches a possible for its possibleness." It too signifies the creative spark. To be the "mud master" is to be the shaping force -- the mind, indeed, which shapes imaginative peach blossoms from earliest springtime mud.

Stevens dramatizes the "spring experience" as a necessary stage in the development of man's mind in "The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP, 27) -- a lengthy poem which moreover illustrates the

various levels on which his seasonal imagery may operate. Here the changing seasons symbolize the ceaseless flux of reality; the growth of a man from youth to maturity; the mind's progress from the bare fact to the supreme fiction. Crispin, the "introspective voyager", takes his journey on several levels simultaneously. Because it is suggestive of those themes central to Crispin's development, Stevens's use of seasonal imagery helps to unify them by lending them a common expression.

It must be noted that it is winter, spiritually at least, when Crispin sets out:

> The salt hung upon his spirit like a frost,
> The dead brine melted in him like a dew
> Of winter, until nothing of himself
> Remained, except some starker, barer self
> In a starker, barer world. . . .

The austerity of the winterish seascape answers to the youthful Crispin's need for bare factuality, the starkest reality of all. It is the need of the young man who believes that "man is the intelligence of his soil" and who therefore begins his quest for knowledge of all things by first seeking to understand his most fundamental self:

> The sea
> Severs not only lands but also selves.
> Here was no help before reality.
> Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new.

In the course of his wanderings, the tropics offer him a different, more luxurious reality; but Crispin is "too destitute" in spirit, in imagination, to appreciate it in any but the most superficial

fashion.

> So much for that. The affectionate emigrant found
> A new reality in parrot-squawks.
> Yet let that trifle pass.

Crispin requires something more prodigious than parrot-squawks to arouse in him any significant awareness of a reality beyond the "basic slate" of self-knowledge. Now, however, he encounters the storm in Yucatan: frightening in its force, almost mystical, it forces a fleeing Crispin to seek refuge in a cathedral. The wind, like some terrible pneuma, inspires in him a knowledge of "something harsher than he learned/ From hearing signboards whimper in cold nights. . . ." It is his first awareness of a reality beyond his ken or control. In meditating on this "quintessential fact" his mind grows "free, elate, intent, profound": he senses a new aspect to reality and, perhaps as a result, to himself as well.

Crispin is ready to move onward in his journey: to Carolina, to a more imaginative reality, to a greater maturity -- for it is in Carolina that Crispin first puts down roots. The time of year, appropriately, is spring, "a time abhorrent to the nihilist/ Or searcher for the fecund minimum." But Crispin has outgrown his desire for the "fecund minimum". Spring assaults his senses with rude violence and exhilarates him. He is aware now of possibilities which he may manipulate just as he might pull the strings of a marionette:

> The spring,
> Although contending flatly in its veils,
> Irised in dew and early fragrances,

> Was gemmy marionette to him that sought
> A sinewy nakedness. A river bore
> The vessel inward. Tilting up his nose,
> He inhaled the rancid rosin, burly smells
> Of dampened lumber, emanations blown
> From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,
> Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks
> That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.
> He savored rankness like a sensualist.

The images of dew, dampness, the river, are all characteristic of Stevens's treatment of the spring experience. Things are muddy, half-formed, but suggestive of unlimited possibility: the "marshy ground around the dock,/ The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence" are sufficient to suggest the idea of a colony. These elements of spring (physical and imaginative) are a "curriculum for the marvelous sophomore" Crispin, who until now has indeed been in many respects a "wise fool". He finds spring a purifying experience: "It made him see how much/ Of what he saw he never saw at all." Principally, it leads him to the realization that "his soil is man's intelligence": that man is what surrounds him. He must relate actively to his environment, not merely survey it, "a skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass." He develops his soil as the imagination develops richer realities. This realization is, of course, "better" than Crispin's original proposition, and one "worth crossing seas to find."

A minute exegesis of the poem from this point would contribute little more to the discussion. It suffices to note that Crispin passes into the summer of life, the time of fertility and fruition, with his marriage and the birth of four daughters (four

seasons?). As the poem draws to a close, Crispin is left to face the autumn experience in which he must take stock of his life. This is his "disguised pronunciamento, summary,/ Autumn's compendium." His perception of life, his "concocted doctrine", is expressed in a cycle analogous to the iteration of the seasons:

> The world, a turnip once so readily plucked,
> Sacked up and carried overseas, daubed out
> Of its ancient purple, pruned to the fertile main,
> And sown again by the stiffest realist,
> Came reproduced in purple, family font,
> The same insoluble lump.

Crispin has either resolved everything or nothing, and Stevens leaves us, rather whimsically, to decide for ourselves whether or not his protagonist is a "profitless philosopher".

IV. Summer

While Stevens maintains that the imagination must always revert to the winter stage of its cycle, he seems most content with summer, when the imaginative life is most intense. The reality of winter consists of barest fact, unembellished by fanciful interpretation. That of summer is the absolute antithesis. Now the fact of the observed object is inseparable from the idea of it. Here again I am forced to disagree with E.P. Nasser's insistence upon a "dual vision": "The mood of summer, if anatomized, will show that a real object, say a pine tree, takes on accretions and significations that have to do with the poet's subjective desires, so that the pine finally has a place in doctrine that has little to do with the facts of that particular tree."[19] It has _everything_ to do with the facts of that tree: the imaginative accretions _complement_ the factuality of the tree and complete its summer reality. The summer vision of life is no less real than the winter vision; it is merely a different order of reality, and as such, requires an entirely different vocabulary.

As usual, many of Stevens's colour symbols derive from their occurrence in nature. Green, the colour of growing things, is for him the colour of natural vitality, of the life force. Blue represents nature as interpreted or reordered by the imagination --

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[19] Nasser, _op. cit._, p. 80.

as the colour of the sky it is appropriate for describing a less tangible reality. The primary colours figure quite prominently in general. Mr. McFadden's interpretation of red as the "feebly real" or the colour of the "dying or dead past" seems inadequate;[20] while it is impossible to pin down all the references, red more often seems to represent a level of reality minimally touched by imagination, yet nonetheless vivid, intense (as in "What They Call Red Cherry Pie", OP, 75-76). Yellow appears as a more fanciful reality. It is most closely associated with the sun, which Stevens often uses as an emblem for a reality which inspires, and yet outlives, its myths ("The wheel survives the myths", CP, 222; "the sun,/ Down-pouring, upspringing and inevitable", CP, 465).

Since summer is the season of fruition, Stevens makes good use of flower and fruit imagery as well. While his summer vocabulary suggests primarily a visual approach, he attempts to appeal to all the senses, often blending several at once in the manner of the French symbolists: "the roses are heavy with a weight/ Of fragrance" (CP, 372). All potential must now be fulfilled: sensuous, imaginative and sexual.

"Credences of Summer" (CP, 372) deals with the plenitude of the imagination during this season. "Now in midsummer" one realizes that this is the highest point of all possible fulfillment: "green's green apogee", beyond which one may anticipate only the

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[20] McFadden, _op_. _cit_., p. 189.

decadence of autumn and the autumnal mind:

> This is the last day of a certain year
> Beyond which there is nothing left of time.
> It comes to this and the imagination's life.

Surrounded as he is by the superfluity which is attendant on plenitude, the poet meditates on the impossibility of perceiving the bare fact of an object "without evasion by a single metaphor" -- i.e., the intervention of imagination. "This is the barrenness of the fertile thing that can attain no more." In midsummer we have reached the saturation-point of myth and metaphor and so

> the sun,
> Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.
> This is the refuge that the end creates.

Summer's apogee of fulfillment is "a feeling capable of nothing more." "Things stop in that direction" and this suspended moment of culmination becomes an end enjoyable in itself.

> The utmost must be good and is
> And is our fortune and honey hived in the trees
> And mingling colors at a festival.

In the sixth section, summer appears as "the rock. . . , things certain sustaining us in certainty" -- perhaps because in the life cycle's constant state of flux, the culminating moment of fruition is as certain as that of birth or death. Individual summers, whether natural or imaginative, may vary in particulars but the fact of summer itself is a certainty. The rock is majestic, "a mountain" which partakes of both the vital force of nature (green) and the imagination (blue).

In summer one cannot avoid the imagination's operation on

the things of nature: it is the inevitable desire of the mind, "the concentrated self", to seek , through metaphor, "to make captive, . . . to subjugate" the observed object. In this way one may

> proclaim
> The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
> Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.

The metaphor becomes the "trumpet of morning" which announces the triumph of imagination. But the human mind is never satisfied, demanding change in an ever-changing world. It is not surprising, therefore, that metaphor must break down, must (like the "supreme fiction!") change,

> as what is possible
> Replaces what is not. The resounding cry
> Is like ten thousand tumblers tumbling down
> To share the day.

This is the inevitable disintegration of any order and the natural successor to the summer vision.

Stevens considers this impending decadence in the ninth section, where a "cock bright" surveys a fading scene. The bird seems a straggler from the summer season, or as W.Y. Tindall suggests, the poet in our time.[21] Summer here is over:

> The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone,
> And last year's garden grows salacious weeds.
>
> A complex of emotions falls apart,
> In an abandoned spot.

One is reminded of Ludwig Richter's world, which also careens

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[21] Tindall, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

towards chaos when summer changes to winter: "People fall out of windows, trees tumble down." But unlike Ludwig, the "turbulent Schlemihl" who cannot see past the impending nothingness of the winter experience, the "cock bright", a "polished beast", is capable of detecting in a prophetic sort of way "another complex of other emotions" which must replace the decaying order.

In the last section, Stevens returns to the summer vision, where "the personae of summer" enact various characters of an "inhuman author" -- the poet, now seen as "a deliberate and distant manipulator of marionettes."[22] As a puppetmaster of sorts, the poet "does not hear his characters talk"; rather, "the characters speak because they want/ To speak." He has merely set them in motion; now, however, they seem to take on a life of their own, partaking of summer's plenitude, "the fat, the roseate characters", "complete in a completed scene."

Who are Stevens's personae of summer? They are elements of the "necessary fiction", metaphors through which we may apprehend, however briefly, the substance of reality: the "cock bright", "summer, the drunken mother"; Phoebus, who personified the sun, or reality; the "fat girl" or summer vision of the earth. We understand the world around us only insofar as we can interpret or reconstruct it in the mind's eye. Our fictions, then, are neces-

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[22] Helen Hennessy Vendler, On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 243.

sary if we are to "understand" anything at all:

> So, say that the final belief
> Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose. (CP, 250)

As Ronald Sukenick suggests, the supreme fiction is neither reality itself nor a projection of the ego; rather, it is "an abstract construction of the relation between the two in which the feelings of the ego are adjusted to the fact of reality."[23] It must be abstract because it must crystallize the relation between the self and reality; it must change because the reality itself is in an eternal state of flux and the imagination quickly surfeits on the metaphors of its own invention; lastly, it must give pleasure. The summer mind is most conducive to the creation of a supreme fiction: for it is then that the play of imagination is most active, most fertile.

The fertility of imagination is associated also with the advent of sexual maturity. In "Last Looks at the Lilacs" (CP, 48) the speaker ridicules the half-hearted lover ("poor buffo!") of the "divine ingénue". The title implies that the time of year is now the end of spring. While the uninspired lover can look at the fading lavender and see "nothing but trash", the ingénue's body, stirred to sexuality by the changing season, is "quivering in the Floréal" (or month of blooming):

> Do you suppose that she cares a tick,
> In this hymeneal air, what it is

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[23] Ronald Sukenick, _Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure_ (New York: New York University Press, 1967), pp. 26-27.

> That marries her innocence thus,
> So that her nakedness is near. . . ?

The fading of the lavender at the onset of summer heralds the impending loss of innocence at the appearance of a more virile lover:

> 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.

The "divine ingénue" is close kin to the "green queen" (CP, 339), the "naked, nameless dame" (CP, 271) and the Jungian anima (CP, 321), all of whose sexuality is inseparable from the poet's creative and procreative urges.

Many of the poems dealing with the summer vision make no specific reference to the season, relying instead upon an evocative geographic association. Tropical places -- Cuba, Florida, Carolina, Mexico -- signify a "summer" experience for Stevens by virtue of their perennial warmth, bright colours and lush flora. Such titles as "O Florida, Venereal Soil" link the idea of tropical summer with an overt sexuality which Stevens sees, not so much as sensational eroticism, but as a physical ripeness. It parallels that ripe imagination characteristic of the "summer mind". Stevens makes this association explicit in "Farewell to Florida" (CP, 117), where a weary sojourner, grown dissatisfied with the luxurious tropics, looks eagerly towards his return to a "North of cold". The "pine and coral and coraline sea", the "vivid blooms", have all grown insipid after a time and the mind yearns for a bleaker landscape, interior as well as exterior. It is the desire "to be free again,

to return to the violent mind" of winter.

It is the desire characteristic of what we might term the autumnal experience.

V. Autumn

Our consideration of autumn may conveniently begin with an examination of several sections of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" (OP, 150). By Stevens's own admission, many of these vignettes are "written in terms of autumn, but do not concern autumn" (LWS, 349): i.e., as in "The Comedian as the Letter C", the seasonal image is broadly suggestive of a variety of themes. Here, however, they are quite loosely linked, more by a basic similarity of tone than by any constant symbolism. The "Decorations" bear a striking resemblance to both the Adagia and the earlier "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird": they are pithy, whimsical, with all the aridity of Japanese haiku. The themes are quite diverse, as the title suggests, referring (Stevens tells us) "to the litter one usually finds in a nigger cemetery" (LWS, 272) -- the phrase having been used by his friend Judge Arthur Powell, to whom the poem is dedicated.

In the first section, autumn is associated with the passing of time and the season, and (by extension) with death:

> In the far South the sun of autumn is passing
> Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore.
> He is singing and chanting the things that are part of him,
> The worlds that were and will be, death and day.
> Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end.
> His beard is of fire and his staff is a leaping flame.

While the lines deal explicitly with death, it is not seen as a terrifying phenomenon; the phrase "death and day" suggests that

day, with its light and life, will somehow follow death: "nothing is final", after all. The choice of Walt Whitman as an oracle of continuing life is particularly apt. Stevens's view of death greatly resembles Whitman's in that both saw death not as the end of life, but simply as one more stage in the greater cycle of Life.[24] Hence the shore along which Whitman walks is "ruddy" with the light of the sun and, implicitly, with the robustness of insuppressible life. The beard of fire and the staff of flame suggest at once burning intensity and a kind of spiritual truth, as though the poet were invested with a pentecostal sagacity. The passage of the sun of autumn, therefore, also partakes metaphorically of these qualities which Stevens attributes to the oracle-poet Whitman.

When dying ceases to hold terror for us, we may more easily accept it. Acceptance, when it follows this Whitmanesque understanding of the nature of death, becomes in fact the ultimate wisdom, as illustrated by the last section of "Decorations":

> Union of the weakest develops strength
> Not wisdom. Can all men, together, avenge
> One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?

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[24] This idea figures prominently in "Song of Myself", as expressed by the image of grass springing from the graves of the dead:

> They are alive and well somewhere,
> The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
> And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait
> at the end to arrest it,
> And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.
> All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
> And to die is different from what any one supposed, and
> luckier.

But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow. Stevens is not one to "rage, rage against the dying of the light." For him, identification and empathy with the phenomenon constitutes the best spiritual preparation for passing from the autumn to the winter experience. One is reminded of the snowman's state of mind. In fact, for H.H. Vendler, to "build one's city in snow" is "to be the Snowman. . . and to decorate the cemetery."[25]

Empathy, acceptance constitute one way of viewing the autumn experience: but not the only way. Alternately, one may be assailed by an ineffable sensation of loss:

> Between farewell and the absence of farewell,
> The final mercy and the final loss,
> The wind and the sudden falling of the wind.

The lines are strongly reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men". According to Stevens, the subject is the "'sudden falling' that succeeds farewell, the final mercy, the wind." (LWS, 349) The "sudden falling" is the terrible gap of nothingness: worse even than farewell, it is the absence of farewell, the sense of vacancy which follows finality. It is the feeling which may set in after the bloom of summer has finally, irrevocably blown, before the idea of winter has become an accepted fact. There is no simple way to reconcile this view of autumn with the earlier one; like spring, autumn is, for Stevens, fraught with ambiguity, as a transitional season. However, he appears to be ambivalent to autumn as he some-

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[25] Vendler, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

times is to winter: he understands, accepts, even enjoys, the flux of reality and life; but that does not necessarily make all the phases of the cycle easy to accept at all times. The winter experience is a necessary analytic breakdown to the "basic slate" of bare reality, yet it may occasionally be a difficult process, as in "The Dwarf". Just so is the ambiguity implicit in autumn. It is the beginning of the inevitable process of physical and imaginative disintegration, a transition which necessarily makes itself felt first by a sensation of loss.

The ambiguity is sensed as an abstract truth by the man in "Contrary Theses (II)" (CP, 270). It is a "chemical afternoon in mid-autumn,/ When the grand mechanics of earth and sky were near": i.e., a day in which one senses the fundamental structure of nature and reality, gaining insight into the order of things. Walking with his baby son in his arms and a barking dog beside him, the man reflects on the changing season:

> He wanted and looked for a final refuge,
> From the bombastic intimations of winter
> And the martyrs à la mode. He walked toward
>
> An abstract, of which the sun, the dog, the boy
> Were contours. Cold was chilling the wide-moving swans.
> The leaves were falling like notes from a piano.
>
> The abstract was suddenly there and gone again.
> The negroes were playing football in the park.

The man becomes aware, briefly, of the scheme in which life and death coexist on equal terms: the swans continue to move in the oncoming cold, the sun shines, the boy sleeps, the dog and the

football players romp in the face of approaching winter. This abstract truth he sees as

> The premiss from which all things were conclusions,
> The noble, Alexandrine verve. The flies
> And the bees still sought the chrysanthemums' odor.

Sensuous life, for all its perishability, does not diminish in intensity even when faced with its mortality. Such a truth may indeed provide a refuge from the thought of winter as a time of martyrdom and death. It lends an especial poignancy to the sensuousness of autumn which is absent from the simple lush physicality of summer.

As with the other seasons, Stevens repeatedly uses certain words and images to suggest the autumnal experience. Not unexpectedly, falling leaves appear symbolically in many of the poems; images of vegetation are used generally to evoke the idea of disintegration or organic rot: blasted flowers, over-ripe fruits and vegetables. Of the colours, red and yellow appear frequently, in much the same context as they do in the summer poems. Purple is likewise important, conveying especially the notion of the "over-ripe" imagination as it manifests itself in sentimentality and hackneyed metaphor. As in the winter poems, wind is a favourite image, often suggesting the passage of time, and the relentlessness of change, as in "A Room on a Garden" (OP, 40):

> O stagnant east-wind, palsied mare,
> Giddap! The ruby roses' hair
> Must blow.

Change is essential to life as Stevens perceives it. Mutability is

not for him (as it was for, say, Donne) purely a disintegration into chaos; rather, it is a kind of order.

> Behold how order is the end
> Of everything. The roses bend
> As one.
>
> Order, the law of hoes and rakes,
> May be perceived in windy quakes
> And squalls.

The same order which is found in the hoes and rakes — implements of construction, of synthesis — is likewise found in the destructive, analytic force of the wind that blasts the flowers. Both forces are necessary, both equally good — or, more accurately, equally indifferent; so that the gardener seeks vainly for "the truth" about nature.

> He might well find that eager balm
> In lilies' stately-statued calm;
> But then
>
> He might well find it in this fret
> Of lilies rusted, rotting, wet
> With rain.

Summer "truth" and autumn "truth" are equal; they are not separate orders, but part of the larger order of things. "The aesthetic order," says Stevens in the Adagia, "includes all other orders but is not limited to them." (OP, 166)

The necessity for change, and our eternal lot of impermanence, is later developed as a central theme in "The Auroras of Autumn" (CP, 411), a lengthy, rather diffuse poem which, however, repays close examination. Here the autumnal experience manifests itself on a variety of levels, as it affects us physically, emotionally and philosophically.

The first section opens with a conceit turning upon the image of a "bodiless" serpent, whose sloughing of its skin symbolizes the world of substance yearning for a loss of form and particularity: "This is form gulping after formlessness. . . ." Just as spring is the time of formlessness deliberately seeking form (as in "The Mud Master"), autumn represents a surfeit, and consequently a conscious shedding, of form. The serpent, an emissary of mutability, is "the master of the maze/ Of body and air and forms and images", whose "poison" lies in his ability to make us disbelieve any form of permanence, even his own. Northrop Frye agrees that Stevens's concern here is that mental activity which analytically breaks down a world of discrete objects into a kind of amorphous substratum; but he views this process, oddly enough, as an error of reason.[26] The latter judgment seems ill-founded in the rather limited distinction which Frye draws between reason and imagination (as they function in Stevens's work): he sees them as operating merely in direct opposition to each other, whereas according to my interpretation they function, not so much as opposites, but as complements within a larger framework of order.

Each of the next three sections begins with "Farewell to an idea. . . ." The "idea" in each is some notion of, or belief in, any kind of permanence. Section two is full of images of whiteness, emptiness, coldness, of the same sort found in the winter poems.

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[26] Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

Here, white (bareness, sterility), the past, and aging -- physical and imaginative -- all seem a part of the same phenomenon, subject to the same laws of time and change, as suggested by the image of the wind blowing the sand across the floor.

> Here, being visible is being white,
> Is being the solid of white, the accomplishment
> Of an extremist in an exercise. . . .

"Being white" -- attaining the "winter mind" of the snowman -- is seen as a necessary condition of human existence. The changing season is attended by a definite sense of loss, but there is something of a compensatory sublimity in the feeling:

> The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand.
> He observes how the north is always enlarging the change,
>
> With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps
> And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,
> The color of ice and fire and solitude.

Here we meet the fitting symbol for autumn's "auroras" or glories in the northern lights, an image to which Stevens returns repeatedly in the poem. They are a phenomenon of the north which "enlarges the change" -- i.e., which enhances, or helps us to a greater awareness of, the mutability to which we are all subject. Like the serpent, they represent a species of formless form as they constantly shift and change in the sky.

In the third section the "idea" to which we must bid farewell is that of the permanence of love and tenderness, as represented by the image of the mother who "gives transparence" -- that is to say, "through" her filters the light of love which warms, humanizes, "makes that gentler that can gentle be." She too, however, is

"dissolved" by the touch of transience: she has grown old. Her life is caught up in the flux of physical reality. "The soft hands are a motion not a touch": and the larger motion in which she is caught must propel her relentlessly towards death.

> Boreal night
> Will look like frost as it approaches them
>
> And to the mother as she falls asleep
> And as they say good-night, good-night. Upstairs
> The windows will be lighted, not the rooms.
>
> A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round
> And knock like a rifle-butt against the door.
> The wind will command them with invincible sound.

Here the autumnal experience, as manifested in physical decay and death, has a definitely sinister connotation.

The father of the next two sections appears stolid, massive, motionless, even oblivious: "Of bleak regard. . . / He says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes/ To no; and in saying yes he says farewell." Against his inertia we more easily perceive the process of change. His "throne", an image of permanence more than of authority, is juxtaposed with the image of the wind (time, change). He "fetches", presumably for the amusement of his family, a motley company of storytellers, musicians and dancers, curiously reminiscent of the personae of summer. But now, in time of autumn, the gaudy pageant does not satisfy; the speaker's response is cynical:

> What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?
> These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests?
> These musicians dubbing at a tragedy,
>
> A-dub, a-dub, which is made up of this:

That there are no lines to speak? There is no play.
Or, the persons act one merely by being here.

The cloyed imagination, rejecting the trash of outworn images, reveals its eternal restlessness; but its aspect is not sinister, unlike the experience of section three.

Back now, once more concerned with the less tangible world of imagination, Stevens returns in the fourth section to the image of the northern lights which appear as a "theatre floating in the clouds". Unlike the garish, brutal theatre of the father, it possesses a curious detachment, transforming itself

idly, the way
A season changes color to no end,
Except the lavishing of itself in change.

One has the sense of the enormous indifference of autumn's auroras, as demonstrated by the pageant of events in the grand theatre of history:

A capitol,
It may be, is emerging or has just
Collapsed. The denouement has to be postponed. . .

The colossal indifference makes itself felt on the more individual, human plane as well, in the "scholar of one candle" who sees the awesome arctic lights and is afraid, finding his poor human awareness terribly dwarfed by the magnitude of the unknowable, sublime aurora, an emblem of the incomprehensible nature of the cosmos as a whole.

In section seven, the poet arrives at the realization of an imagination "as grim as it is benevolent", which impels our minds through alternate stages of receptivity and rejection. It is the

"crown and diamond cabala" of our interior life, and its mysterious, restless spirit is aptly symbolized by the fluctuating lights of the aurora. The imagination does not function merely by chance, however: "it must change from destiny to slight caprice", even as the seasons change from winter to summer. It can lead us back to "innocence", as Stevens understands the word. For him, the "innocent man" is one whose mind has been purged of outworn myth and who, thus stripped of stock metaphorical response to reality, is free to respond anew -- spontaneously, immediately -- to the world around him. The auroras, in symbolizing the mind's restless casting-off of stagnant form, symbolize also its return to "innocence". In section nine the poet speculates on what such a state would be like: we should be "as Danes in Denmark", totally at home in our new world.

Given the operation of the imagination's ceaseless flux, we may envision any variety of combinations for the interplay between mind and physical reality:

> An unhappy people in a happy world --
> Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference.
> An unhappy people in an unhappy world --
>
> Here are too many mirrors for misery.
> A happy people in an unhappy world --
> It cannot be. There's nothing to roll
>
> On the expressive tongue, the finding fang.
> A happy people in a happy world --
> Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar.
>
> Turn back to where we were when we began:
> An unhappy people in a happy world.

We roll through the possibilities as we do through the seasonal

cycle,

> Contriving balance to contrive a whole,
> The vital, the never-failing genius.

With our human limitations, we cannot know the "whole" by first-hand experience; we may apprehend it but dimly only through each of its parts or stages. It is the imaginative genius (spirit) which impels us through these various stages, of which the autumnal experience, with all its ambiguities, is one. The two closing stanzas are cryptic and elliptical in the extreme,[27] but the sense they appear to convey is that it is necessary to acknowledge the ambiguities. The autumn mind constitutes "a haggling of wind and weather", as it were, in that it partakes of the extremes of both winter and summer: "Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick."

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[27] I cannot help wondering if "hall harridan" is a misprint for "hell harridan". The passage seems to deal with reconciling opposites; and the words "hushful paradise" scarcely seem to fit as the text stands.

VI. The seasons and the flux of existence

When asked by a graduate student whether he were doing a "seasonal sequence" as some of his titles would appear to suggest (_Transport to Summer_ closely followed by _The Auroras of Autumn_), Stevens replied that he was not. However, he qualified his denial in the following significant way:

> From the imaginative period of the Notes [Toward a Supreme Fiction] I turned to the ideas of Credences of Summer. At the moment I am at work on a thing called An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. . . . This is not in any sense a turning away from the ideas of Credences of Summer: it is a development of those ideas. That sort of thing might ultimately lead to another phase of what you call a seasonal sequence but certainly it would have nothing to do with the weather: it would have to do with the drift on one's ideas. (LWS, 636-637)

Stevens's continuing use of seasonal imagery, from the poems of _Harmonium_ (1923) through those of _The Rock_ (1954), shows unusual consistency for a device which was not deliberate. This remark is therefore interesting for its very casualness: for me, it implies that the development of the seasonal metaphor was unsystematic, incidental. In the years following the publication of _Harmonium_, Stevens did not so much extend the metaphor as simply sketch in its details. The idea, however vague, appears to have been in his mind from the beginning: it was so fundamental a point of view for him that it was to become automatic, almost unconscious. It expressed most succinctly his personal conception of the operation of the imagination.

With Coleridge, Stevens envisions the imagination as a universal, inspirational force. However -- unlike Coleridge -- he distinguishes very finely between imagination as metaphysics, and imagination as art: the two lead us in very different directions. To identify the imagination only with the romantic is to limit, even to degrade, one of the great human powers.

> The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction. . . . One wants to elicit a sense of the imagination as something vital. In that sense one must deal with it as metaphysics. (NA, 139)

When he speaks of the imagination as "something vital", Stevens means we want to understand the imagination "as the clue to reality." (NA, 139) The imagination is an undeniable part of our life: in a very real sense we <u>do</u> live in the mind. To understand our own lives, then, it is necessary to understand the peculiar functions of this miraculous faculty.

For Stevens, "when we speak of the life of the imagination, we do not mean man's life as it is affected by his imagination but the life of the faculty itself." (NA, 144) The idea suggests an attitude not unlike that of Santayana, whose conception of the interplay between idea and reality throws much light on Stevens's own views.

Central to Santayana's thought is the idea of the "flux of existence", which resembles in many respects the "durée" of Bergson and the "stream of thought" of William James. It is the coursing of the interior life, which reflects in its turn the greater, uni-

versal flux between essence (idea, spirit) and reality (matter). Substance is ever changing, flowing from formlessness to form and back again to its formless state. The mind attends this physical flux, regardless of its yearnings for something eternal.

> Such a sense of persistence may become tedious, sublime, or excruciating; it includes an acute tension or sense of existence. It is therefore an admirable expression of the life of nature, emphasizing the continuity not without implying the variation. It marks the fact that the flux of existence, although it really never stops, often sustains certain recognisable forms, such as the psyche herself, in a precarious being.[28]

Stevens's conception of the flux shares with Santayana's the sense of persistence, of tension; and surely the metaphor of the seasonal cycle suggests, even obviously, a ceaseless variation which yet partakes of a greater continuity. The idea of a cycle is a _sine qua non_ for understanding Stevens's reflections on the life of the imagination: and it is here that many of his critics have gone astray, notably Yvor Winters. To see only the polar extremes of the cycle — summer and winter, the florid imagination and plainest reality, the zenith of hedonistic pleasure and ennui, — is to dichotomize falsely, as Winters does, when he speaks of "the severance between the rational understanding and the poetic imagination."[29] The same is true of much of E.P. Nasser's consideration of Stevens's "dual vision" as manifested in his encomiums on the imagination, which are nevertheless coupled with an awareness of the ultimate

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28 George Santayana, _The Realm of Matter: Book Second of Realms of Being_ (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1930), p. 80.

29 Winters, _op. cit._, pp. 103-104.

inadequacy of metaphor. Within the imaginative cycle, as represented by the change of seasons, there is no real "severance": the extremes of summer and winter are unified within a larger whole, a process whose details are constantly changing, but which remains ultimately the same. I think it worth observing that those critics who do dichotomize as Winters and Nasser do are those who generally neglect the significance of the spring and autumn experiences within Stevens's imaginative framework. It is in these transitional seasons, after all, that one best senses the phenomenon of change, and all Stevens's ambivalences. Unfortunately, these remain the seasons least adequately touched upon by Stevens's critics, even those who do give some consideration to the seasonal metaphor.

When we understand the cyclical nature of the process, we may appreciate the seeming paradox of "Connoisseur of Chaos" (CP, 215) that

> A. A violent order is a disorder; and
> B. A great disorder is an order. These
> Two things are one. . . .

Stevens would agree with Santayana that "physical continuity. . . includes instability, and physical change includes continuity."[30] A "violent order" -- one that is fixed, static -- by its very stagnant nature runs counter to the greater "order" of things, i.e., the flux of existence: hence it constitutes a kind of disorder. By the same token, the "disorder" of physical change in inherent in the

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[30] Santayana, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

nature of flux; it is therefore a species of order. "The natural flux goes its own pace. . . . Its order in one place may produce a mind to which its general order seems a chaos."[31]

> But suppose the disorder of truths should ever come
> To an order, most Plantagenet, most fixed...
> A great disorder is an order. Now, A
> And B are not like statuary, posed
> For a vista in the Louvre. They are things chalked
> On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see.

Even the "truths" of A and B are subject to the cyclical operation between chaos and order. They are not permanent, like statuary (Stevens's most common image for reality fixed, static, and therefore false), but have all the perishability, the casualness even, of children's chalk scrawlings on the sidewalk.

The idea of a "seasonal" sort of cycle is mandatory for an understanding of Stevens's attitude towards death. As chaos and order function together according to "a law of inherent opposites,/ Of essential unity", so must we see that

> After all the pretty contrast of life and death
> Proves that these opposite things partake of one. . . .

One recalls the image of Walt Whitman walking along the ruddy shore, chanting, "Nothing is final." And indeed, nothing can be final in a cosmos where the phenomena of birth and death participate in the largest order of continuing life. As it is true of physical life, so must it be of the imaginative. Since Stevens and Santayana concur in their faith in a cyclical process, it is not surprising that

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[31] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

the philosopher's attitude towards death should parallel that of Stevens:

> . . . Art succeeds in vindicating the forgotten regions of spirit: a new spontaneous creation shows how little authority or finality the given creation has. . . . That death or change should grieve does not follow from the material nature of these phenomena. To change or to disappear might be as normal a tendency as to move; and it actually happens, when nothing ideal has been attained, that not to be thus is the whole law of being. There is a nameless satisfaction in passing on, which is the virtual ideal of pain and mere willing. Death and change acquire a tragic character when they invade a mind which is not ready for them in all its parts. . . .[32]

The absence of pathos or sentimentality in Stevens's consideration of death is evident throughout his work: we find it in the early pieces of Harmonium as well as in the much later poem, "As You Leave the Room" (OP, 116-117). One of the most explicit statements of the death theme -- certainly the most quoted -- may be found in "Sunday Morning":

> Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
> Within whose burning bosom we devise
> Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly. (CP, 69)

The idea has been much developed as a favourite with Stevens's critics, most of whom agree generally in the interpretation that our awareness of death, of mutability, heightens the hedonistic enjoyment of the present moment. When considered in seasonal terms, however, the idea strikes with still greater impact:

> Is there no change of death in paradise?

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[32] George Santayana, The Life of Reason (New York: Charles Scribner, 1954), p. 63.

> Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
> Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
> Unchanging. . . ?

The questions are rhetorical, even ironic: the conception of an earthly paradise eternally unchanging, without death, is utterly incomprehensible to the poet. The very idea of "ripeness" is inseparable from that of change and death.

This, I believe, is the particular strength of Stevens's seasonal metaphor: the great suggestiveness of the imagery lends itself to consideration of the theme of change (and death) on a variety of levels. In the most superficial sense, it offers a rich poetic insight into the turning kaleidoscope of nature; traditionally, it suggests the purely physical aging of man; as a metaphor for "the drift of one's ideas" -- the life of the imagination -- it opens onto an awareness of the vast interplay between idea and reality, order and chaos, the synthetic and analytic processes, the hedonistic and ascetic impulses which form the basic patterns of man's interior life. Most particularly, it conveys the sense of continuity which man feels to underlie all existence, "not without implying the variation", if one may borrow Santayana's phrase. Without some sense of this continuity, as given by the seasonal cycle of eternal iteration, eternal renewal, -- the critic of Stevens is left at a considerable disadvantage in his attempt to understand the workings of the poet's sensibility. Without Stevens's feeling for the greater order which unifies the polar extremes of existence, one may fall into the mistaken impression

(as Winters does) that the poetry is a jumble of self-contradictory, and ultimately self-destructive, impulses.

But Stevens's aesthetic awareness goes beyond the purely sensational appreciation of the mere hedonist: his is vital, energetic, and inevitably self-renewing; it never degenerates absolutely, hopelessly, into ennui. One season of the mind provides for the next in an eternal cycle of regeneration

> Because new colors make new things
> And new things make old things again. . .
> And so with men.
>
> Crispin-valet, Crispin-saint!
> The exhausted realist beholds
> His tattered manikin arise,
> Tuck in the straw,
> And stalk the skies. (OP, 24)

So (if one may make the judgment) may the imagination of each man be clipped.

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