

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

THE BEING OF A METAPHOR:
A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS IN
RELATION TO THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE MODERN WORLD

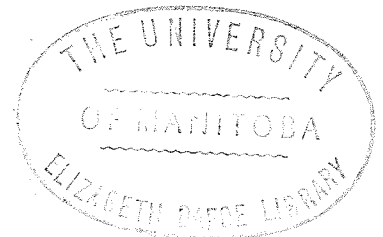
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THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to see the poetry of Wallace Stevens as an embodiment of the most fundamental thought and feeling of the modern world. The nature of this thought and feeling, as I see it, is ultimately rooted in the nature of man's being in history. Chapter I of this thesis outlines the significance of Stevens' poetry in relation to the historical being of man over the past three or four centuries. Chapter II discusses this theme in his poetry more specifically in terms of modern western man's separation of himself from being with the advent and growth of a scientific consciousness. Chapter III and Chapter IV delineate the possibility of an emergence out of this dualistic condition of existence. This emergence is viewed in terms of Stevens' conception of the world of appearance in Chapter III; in Chapter IV this emergence is viewed in terms of Stevens' conception of the world of order. Focusing on Stevens' image of the hero the concluding chapter of this thesis summarizes and assesses Stevens' existential position in the modern world.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In "Adagia" Wallace Stevens has remarked that "the body is the great poem."¹ The very source of poetry declares itself to be within the body. It is from the rhythms of the body that the rhythms of poetry first discover their birth. The most important aspect about Stevens' body in relation to his poetry seems to be the fact that he was fat. Who else could have written the following passage but a fat poet?

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,
The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates
Of snails, musician of pears, principium
And lex. Sed quaeritur: is this same wig
Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,
Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea
Created, in his day, a touch of doubt.
An eye most apt in gelatines and jupes,
Berries of villages, a barber's eye,
An eye of land, of simple salad-beds,
Of honest quilts, the eye of Crispin, hung
On porpoises. . . .²

In terms of the surface texture of feeling in these lines, who could have written them but a joyously fat zen monk rapturously singing the world in a twinkling of his eye? In the pregnant excess of his flesh we have an image of a poet chanting the abundancies of the world that the pregnancy

¹ Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," Opus Posthumous (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 168. All subsequent references to Opus Posthumous will be made to this text and will be indicated with the abbreviation OP and page number in parentheses after each quotation.

² Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 27. All subsequent references to The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens will be made to this text and will be indicated with the abbreviation CP and page number in parentheses after each quotation.

of his flesh has given birth to. It is this central image of a voluptuously fat poet composing voluptuously overflowing poetry that first confronts us in the reading of The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.

The body of the world has to be accepted in the physicality of its flesh or not at all. It is for this that Stevens cries out in so much of his poetry:

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
Is too difficult to tell from despair. . . . (CP 325)

In his essay entitled "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress" Yvor Winters suggests that the nature of Stevens' commitment to the physical world is essentially hedonistic.³ The tone of Winters' essay seems to imply that Stevens' quest for the physical was somehow an evasion of a total experience with the world. I think this view of the physicality of Stevens' poetry is a mistaken notion. The fulness of the physical world that Stevens calls forth is not the mere physicality that Winters is perceiving in him. In the above quoted passage from "Esthétique du Mal" Stevens' conception of the physicality of the world is infused with a meaning that had become forgotten in our scientific conception of the materiality of the world. We shall see that what Stevens is intimating is a unity of vision that implies both a world of physical nature that is fulfilled by the human imagination and a world of imagination that is fulfilled in its marriage with the physicality of nature. The physical world has no real existence if taken by itself. Stevens has remarked in "Adagia" that "nothing itself is taken alone" (OP 163). The world exists as a process of

³ Yvor Winters, "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress," In Defence of Reason (New York: Swallow, 1947), pp. 431-459.

the revelation of itself as the imagination to the same degree that the imagination exists as a process of the revelation of itself as the world.

Such a view of the nature of human physicality and human imagination is much more revolutionary than it might appear to be. This view not only states that the physical world is composed of the imagination, it also states that the imagination is composed of the physicality of the world. In his delineation of his hero's renewed encounter with the soil in "The Comedian as the Letter C" Stevens proclaims:

Nota: his soil is man's intelligence.
That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find. (CP 36)

In his identification of the soil with man's intelligence Stevens is not merely figuratively asserting that the soil is at one with the imagination. That would be tantamount to saying that the imagination is only imaginatively in identity with the soil--which is to say nothing of real significance. But if it is "worth crossing seas to find," Stevens must be attempting to articulate something really serious. This means that he wants us to take his metaphor seriously. He wants us to accept his metaphor as literal fact--as a metamorphosis that can transform the way we look at things:

Nota: his soil is man's intelligence.

It is difficult to express how really subversive this idea is. To assert that the imagination reveals itself in its physicality is to assert that we are actually at one with the physicality of the world that we are imaginatively apprehending. This is to say that there exists no real boundary demarcating its shadow between the inner and the outer, the body

and the not-body, the self and the not-self, reality and the imagination. All boundaries are artificial boundaries created by the imagination in its act of defending itself against the reality of the world.

The barriers that have separated our being from the world have been erected within us socially by means of culturally conditioned myths that have dominated us with great force since the end of the renaissance. Barriers erected between the imagination and the physical world have always to some extent been with man. However, these barriers had not begun to reveal the full terror of their devastating presence until the advent of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century. With the birth of the scientific era the physical universe was gradually reduced to matter--dead matter. Man's body and the body of the world were no longer at one with one another. The world found itself emptied of all participation of inner vision; and the imagination found itself abstracted from its very reality in the world of which it was a part. Life was defrauded of its basic relationship with itself.

The orientation toward the world emerging from a scientific consciousness can be seen in the writings, both mathematical and philosophical, of Rene Descartes. Descartes occupies a very central position in the intellectual history of the West; the direct influence of his thought upon such a writer as Samuel Beckett can almost be said to be traumatic. Descartes' geometric view of space may be seen to be that of a series of isolated points extending indefinitely in space and existing without reference to a human observer. His physical position in relation to the universe as was his metaphysical position was essentially dualistic. For

Descartes the objective universe of time and space and the subjective consciousness of that universe declared themselves to be radically separated from one another. This separation implied an even deeper separation dividing man at the very heart of his existence. Being itself and consciousness of being became existentially divorced from one another. I think therefore I am. All that holds consciousness and being together is the consciousness that consciousness and being are held together. Man's being is made external to himself. Consciousness loses all its immediacy in its encounter with the reality of the world that is the very ground of its being.

The loss of a fundamental participation existing between consciousness and being necessarily leads to a loss of a fundamental relationship existing between language and the phenomena of the universe that language represents. This break in a basic relationship between language and reality can be perceived in Stevens himself in his assertion that "life consists/Of propositions about life" (CP 355). Language degenerates into statements about life. Words no longer embody the things and events of the world which they symbolize; the word is unfleshed of its meaning and true significance. An abyss divides the world of consciousness with its source in language and the externalized being of a world of objectified things. Words are dislocated from the world of experience of which they are a part. No dialogue is possible between the processes of language and the processes of the world of phenomena. No dialogue is possible because the very basis of the perception of the universe is grounded on duality. Every modern poet of any significance has experienced this dual-

ity that frigidly divides life from itself. Stevens experienced it with as intense a horror as anyone else:

Things as they are have been destroyed.
Have I? Am I a man that is dead

At a table on which the food is cold?
Is my thought a memory, not alive? (CP 173)

The poet is divided from himself because he is divided from his words. Language, in its very affirmation of itself as consciousness, seems to deny consciousness the true significance of its presence in the world. The loss of connection that made its appearance between language and the flesh of experience is crucial for the understanding of the development of Stevens' poetry. In the following chapters of this thesis I hope to delineate more fully the question of this poet's adventure into language.

The modern artist must enter upon and be conscious of the despair of the world into which he was born. Stevens once remarked that "the wound kills that does not bleed" (CP 360). It is only with the modern poet's encounter with the duality of his predicament that he may emerge with a deeper vision of a world that lies beyond duality. With the faintest shift of eyesight the poet can then see the catastrophe of blood that surrounds him in a new light:

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know? (CP 68)

In this passage we can see that Stevens is experiencing the world both in its being and its "seeming." However, for Stevens this appearance or "seeming" of the world was not a mere appearance. In his usual use of

the words "appearance" and "seeming" in his poetry he was suggesting a conception of experience in which the physicality of the world and the human imagination were bound together with one another. The physicality of the world discloses itself as at one with the imagination in its appearance as a phenomenon of experience. The world is what it appears to be before our eyes.

If the world is that which appears before our senses, it is also that which lies concealed within and beyond them. There is an invisible undisclosed element in all of experience. It is precisely this concealment which makes the revelation of phenomena in the physicality of their appearance possible. If the imagination were omniscient, our existence would be solipsistic nightmares. The physicality of the universe must point to something beyond itself, if it is to fulfil itself in its mystery:

And they said then, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are." (CP 165)

The nature of this disclosed-undisclosed or immanent-transcendent polarity in all experience will be examined more fully in connection with Stevens' poetry in the third chapter of this thesis.

The world in its mystery of appearance was seen in a wider sense by Stevens as the mystery of the world in its appearance as order. The truth of the world is seen as a revelation of order. This order discloses itself in the emerging appearance of reality, and as such, cannot be explained by an order external to it. It is an order of its own order that

reveals itself, to use Teilhard de Chardin's phrase, from "the within of things."⁴ The new order of the world opposes itself to all impositions of order that have been handed down to us over the past few centuries. In his early poem "The Comedian as the Letter C" Stevens speaks of the character of Crispin's cry against the fraud of all preconceived orderings of the imagination:

He could not be content with counterfeit,
With masquerade of thought, with hapless words
That must belie the racking masquerade,
With fictive flourishes that preordained
His passion's permit, hang of coat, degree
Of buttons, measure of his salt. (CP 39)

Order is to be discovered only in its revelation of itself as appearance. It cannot be imposed from the outside by modalities of thought that exist independently of the world in its revelation.

With a new conception of the world in its order the poet must necessarily have a new conception of metaphor to express that new order. Metaphor must be perceived as something much more than a mere ornament or artifice of the mind contrived or imposed by the poet to evade the reality of the world in its emergence:

To say that 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)

⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man, trans. Bernard Wall (London: Fontana Books, 1959), p. 64.

The poet cannot stick to the preconceived contraptions of his mind; he must blow its incestuously glued images to shreds if he wants to encounter the world that he has forgotten he is already at marriage with. He must dare to destroy all "metaphor that murders metaphor."⁵ If the truth of metaphor is to be believed in, literally believed in, it must be accepted as a revelation of the world in its growth, in its metamorphosis. In a sense the whole world is a metaphor, but only if it is to be literally believed in with the vision of a human eye. The nature of this metamorphosis of a new order within the world will be further elucidated upon in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

There was always a part of Stevens that hung suspended in a disbelief of the wisdom of the vision it cried out for. At the beginning of my discussion I pictured Stevens as a fat adorable zen monk rapturous in the pregnancy of his flesh. But the fatness of Wallace Stevens may take on another image which is far less flattering. It is the image of a fatness that is self-protective: the image of a fat American insurance businessman which Stevens took great pains not to intrude upon his poetry. However, in "Adagia" Stevens proclaims that the "theory of poetry is the theory of life" (OP 178). The act of poetry is precisely the act of intrusion of everything that operates within the poet's field of vision. How could a poet exclude half of his field of vision from his poetry? In a way it seems preposterously funny for a man who believes that poetry

⁵ Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel (New York: Vintage, 1951), p. 84. All subsequent references to The Necessary Angel will be made to this text and will be indicated with the abbreviation NA and page number in parentheses after each quotation.

is as ephemeral as "a pheasant disappearing in the bush" (OP 173) to also believe that it is possible to insure life. The duality of this predicament may not at first seem that inappropriate by the very fact that we ourselves have long been immersed in the same broken vision of things. But if we dare look at what is in front of our eyes, we cannot help seeing the irony of Stevens' dualistic position in all of the terror of its comic disparity.

"Money," Wallace Stevens proclaims, "is a kind of poetry" (OP 165). Stevens who in his poetry had visions of "the unaccountable prophet" (CP 274) rarely freed himself altogether from the duality that is embodied in his occupation as the vice-president of an insurance company that made its money out of accounting for the very mystery of life and death itself. Things must be accounted for. Part of Stevens always seemed to be wanting to pull back from a full commitment to a deeper vision of the human condition. Yet Stevens' greatness as a poet lies in the fact that he could see as far as he did. He never turned his back to seeing the revelation of the world as an alive possibility existing within the poem. This in itself is an enormous task. His vision of the possibilities of the human condition extended with more breadth than that of any other poet of his time. But nevertheless in many of his poems the possibility of this vision never took on a full concreteness for Stevens. As we shall see in the final chapter of this thesis, the idea of the hero that Stevens visualized tended to reveal itself as an abstraction that could never quite transcend itself as an abstraction.

A certain kind of abstraction is a necessary prerequisite for a poet born into a world which is self-conscious. A poet cannot escape

from the duality of his condition as a creature abstracted from his place in the world. It is only by means of a conscious process of entering into that duality that he may emerge out of it with a unity of vision. In the next chapter I wish to describe more fully the nature of the duality that Stevens entered upon.

CHAPTER II

DUALITY: THE PALM AT THE END OF THE MIND

Our deepest secrets lie hidden upon the surface of our faces. Everything that exists discloses its existence before our eyes as surface; depths can only lead to hell. Yet it is this hell that confronts modern man. What is significant about most twentieth century artists and philosophers is their inability to naively confront the surface gesture of reality in all of its quality of aliveness. The very surfaces of objects themselves become abysmal. In the mind of a Kafka all that remains of the miracle of sunlight is reduced to the vacant glitterings of the whitenesses of snow; the living reality of things has become ghosted. But as ghosts things are not quite dead. They have enough life within them to seek revenge upon those that have taken revenge upon them. This is the dark mystery seen by Joseph Conrad in his Heart of Darkness:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there--there you could look at the thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it--this suspicion of their not being inhuman.¹

The maternal earth is reduced to

. . . an infernal mess of rust, filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet-drills--things. . . .²

¹ Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (New York: Dell, 1960), p. 70.

² Ibid., p. 84.

One is never quite certain what these objects are doing here or where one's nerve endings are. Are these objects themselves distorted or has one's perception of these objects merely distorted them? Where are these objects? Where am I? A shadow falls between subject and object. A shadow falls. Our simplest, most human concerns are paralyzed in bottomless questionings:

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat? (CP 131)

A shadow falls. All of the modern poets have seen it staring them back into their eyes. Eliot has seen it

Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent. . . .³

Auden has seen it

Between attention and attention,
The first and last decision. . . .⁴

And Stevens has also seen it fall

Between farewell and the absence of farewell,
The final mercy and the final loss,
The wind and the sudden falling of the wind. (CP 152)

³ T. S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 21.

⁴ W. H. Auden, Collected Shorter Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 27.

Stevens certainly never wallowed in despair over man's condition in the modern world. His sense of loss of perspective was not as apparently extreme as that of certain other artists of his time. Nevertheless, as I hope to show by means of some of his poetry, Stevens at times did intensely feel a deep sense of estrangement that resulted from a bifurcation of man's vision of the universe and man's place in it.

In a sense this feeling of dislocation experienced by nearly all the significant artists of the twentieth century is illusory. In itself it cannot ultimately change things. Nothing is changed,

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

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens speaks of the feelings of dislocation of the persona as

. . . a petty misery
At heart, a petty misery. . . . (CP 170)

Yet man has fallen from his innocence because of a pettiness. It is a pettiness that man has to knowledgeably account for things. It is a pettiness that he must die. In a poem significantly entitled "Burghers of Petty Death" Stevens sees the pettiness of death as

. . . a total death,
A devastation, a death of great height
And depth, covering all surfaces,
Filling the mind. (CP 362)

Infused with death, the very surfaces of objects have fallen into their depths and have become indistinguishable from them. Everything is de-

vastated, made flat. Yet in their pettiness the burghers themselves are unaware of the actuality of the devastation that has taken place:

These two by the stone wall
Are a slight part of death. (CP 362)

The bourgeois economic way of looking at the universe, which came along with the scientific and industrial revolutions of the seventeenth century, is literally an attempt to account for existence. However, any attempt to account for existence is a pettiness that can only lead to catastrophe. What is still worse is that the Bourgeoisie lack an awareness of the nature of the despair that dominates their lives. This lack of awareness is the split hair that distinguishes them from the artist. The artist goes to the trouble to force himself to see what is happening in front of his eyes:

A devastation, a death of great height
And depth, covering all surfaces,
Filling the mind. (CP 362)

What the eye of the artist sees is a series of flat surfaces which the mind envelopes, but cannot penetrate. The mind itself exists as a series of surfaces. Consequently any attempt to cut beneath the flat surfaces of things can only lead to an opening of a new series of flat surfaces. Interestingly enough, a basic theorem of modern topological analysis states that an entity of genus 0 (an entity without holes) can only be cut into entities which are topologically identical with it. We can see this fruitless cutting open of identical surfaces in Steven's poem, "Sea Surface full of Clouds," which I will examine later in this chapter. In

his book Irrational Man William Barrett observes that in the work of other modern artists, such as in the case of Eliot's Wasteland, there is "a flattening of all planes" and as in the case of the cubist movement in painting, "a flattening of all climaxes."⁵

I have already stated that the feeling of horror that the modern artist experiences is illusory. But it is illusory in more than one sense of the word. It is also illusory in the sense that it involves a direct confrontation with the reality of the world in its masking of itself as illusion. But ironically the central illusion that has cut man off from the physical universe over the past few centuries is the belief that the universe and the things in the universe subsist independently of all human illusion! The universe has become devoid of what Stevens calls fiction. This is to say that we have tended to believe in a world that exists independently of human belief.

It is very difficult to transform such a belief by the very fact that it itself is presupposed by an idea of what constitutes belief. We have habituated ourselves into believing only in ideas that describe propositions concerning the nature of the physical universe. Because of a dislocation of imagination we have found it unimaginatively difficult to believe in the physical universe in itself. It has become incredibly difficult for us to believe in flowers or moonlight or people in themselves. We have tended to believe in things only in their extrinsicality and not from their within, a within that must necessarily emerge as co-existent with our within. As a consequence to our beliefs about the nature of life we have become estranged from life itself. In his poem "Men made

⁵ William Barrett, Irrational Man (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), p. 50.

out of Words" Stevens adventures into the true nature of this kind of belief in all of its underlying terror:

Castratos of moon-mash--Life consists
Of propositions about life. The human

Revery is a solitude in which
We compose these propositions, torn by dreams,

By the terrible incantations of defeats
And by the fear that defeats and dreams are one. (CP 355-6)

The scientific and objective way of looking at life as consisting "of propositions about life" ironically leads us to a purely subjective nightmare world in which "defeats and dreams are one." Our defeats and dreams are one because in a world of purely objective fact all dreams have been defeated. The objective world has become so estranged from its own subjectivity that it has become identical to it. A world devoid of dreams is itself a kind of dream. As Stevens remarked, "the absence of the imagination had/Itself to be imagined" (CP 503).

When the imagination can only imagine its absence, the life of the imagination loses all of its immediacy. This loss of immediacy is not necessarily altogether bad. The scientific "literal" way of thinking is a mutation that can lead to an evolution within the centre of our lives. By the imagination's apprehension of the "plain sense of things" (CP 502), it is able to purge itself of its magical or superstitious fictions that have falsely or only partially bound it to the true physicality of the world. It is out of the death of angels that "the necessary angel of earth" is issued life. Death is the mother of beauty: the theme is repeated like a heartbeat throughout Stevens' poetry. Poverty gives birth

to affluence; ignorance gives birth to truth. Life is a mystery whose opposites are part of one another:

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires. (CP 68-69)

This passage does not go so far as to suggest that death is the answer to all our problems. Death in itself has no meaning except in relation to the dreams and desires of our lives. Death can only bring fulfilment if we reach out beyond death.

It is immensely difficult to get beyond death--"the plain sense of things"--that dualistically separates man from his universe. This is so because the very conception of the world in its "plain sense of things" is itself illusory. Science is the subtlest form of magic. The scientific way of looking at the universe in its bare empiricity has enabled man to conquer magic and superstition. Yet, it itself is the final superstition. In its act of absolutely objectifying the universe science betrays an attempt to unconditionally justify and redeem the subjectivity upon which the act of absolute objectification is grounded. It is a final attempt at a purification of human consciousness by meeting it at the point of its own death.

As a poet locked in the consciousness of the modern world, Wallace Stevens could not help finding himself caught in an attempt to seek redemption through this act of purification. In a poem entitled "Of Mere Being" Stevens voyages into the purity of a world of mere being uncontaminated by human thought:

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down. (CP 117-118)

The poem strangely haunts the reader with a clarity of feeling and tonality of statement that reaches toward the sublime. There is an evocation of a mystery. But its mystery is spurious; it meets itself at the point of death. The objects being presented to the imagination are beyond life itself:

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

The existence of the bird is illusory. Objective reality stripped of human consciousness is as unreal as the subjectivity of consciousness stripped of its contents in the physicality of the world. Indeed these two worlds of unreality mirror one another:

The wind moves slowly in the branches
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

The bird is "fangled" into the poem. Because it is a purely objective bird it is also a purely imaginary bird. Should this not be the case if the imagination and reality are one? The poem hits very near to the heart

of a mystery, so very near, near, almost touching, like the asymptote of a curve crawling towards its axis. But something is missing. The reality of the poem flashes back and forth, faster than time, between its purely objective stance and its purely subjective stance. The poet is divided from himself in his very quest for a purity of vision. Caught in an irrevocable either/or position, there is a refusal on the part of the poet toward an irrevocable commitment to the fulness of the imagination within the physical world. There is a refusal of birth. Nothing happens: there is no metamorphosis. The golden feathers of the bird dangle down at the edge of space, dead. Nothing intrudes: there is nothing that is sudden. All that remains of the reality of the physical world and the reality of the imagination are two mirrors vacantly reflecting into one another. The novels of Kafka come to mind. What exactly is the mere being of The Castle? There is nothing left to do but grasp blindly in search of something to hold on to with our flesh.

Being is that which overflows with itself. It cannot be held on to. It is the very attempt to grasp for mere life that dooms us to failure. There was always a part of Stevens, who like Kafka, was always grasping, pressing himself to remember the endless details of things, terrifyingly "conscious of too many things at once" (CP 271). Such an artist finds himself becoming a kind of metaphysical accountant who sees the world as a bureaucracy of details insidiously interconnected with one another. But as soon as all of the details seem to be accounted for, the wind suddenly shifts its direction to obliterate all of the artist's efforts. Pages of calculation flutter away in the air. In a passage from Kafka's The Castle an official from the Castle is described in terms of the wind as "an intriguing nature, acting blindly, it seemed, like the

wind, according to strange and remote behests that one could never guess at."⁶ Man's hope is seen as remote and as strange as the wind itself. Yet, despite his desperation he sees hope in one final act of revenge upon the act of injustice that has been cast upon him. The wind shifts its direction; and so in one final lunge, the artist seeks to take hold of the wind, the pneuma, the very breath of life that holds everything within it. But this lunge is by its very nature spurious. To take hold of the wind is to take hold of one's breath. Look at a poem entitled "The Wind Shifts" by Stevens:

This is how the wind shifts:
 Like the thoughts of an old human,
 Who still thinks eagerly
 And despairingly.
 The wind shifts like this:
 Like a human without illusions,
 Who still feels irrational things within her.
 The wind shifts like this:
 Like humans approaching proudly,
 Like humans approaching angrily.
 This is how the wind shifts:
 Like a human, heavy and heavy,
 Who does not care. (CP 83-84)

This poem is Stevens' struggle to account for the shiftings of the wind. There is an attempt to account for the irrationality of life itself, even if that irrationality is to be accounted for only in its irrationality. Stevens sees the wind as something unalterably connected with the human predicament. The wind is somehow human. And yet in its humanness the wind seems to have lost contact with all that which is truly human. It is seen as a human being who is so full of care that he cannot care

⁶ Franz Kafka, The Castle, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Modern Library, 1969), p. 153.

any longer. In its apparent humanity the wind takes on the image of human being much like Kafka's K, an inhumanly ageless man without illusion, sinking heavily beneath his thought, proudly and angrily approaching his Castle.

It is not surprising that most of Kafka's writings found their setting in the middle of winter. It is in the frozen snow that the mind achieves its final crystalization: mere being. Stevens also entered into "the neurosis of winter" (CP 482) in search of a timeless purity of being. His poem entitled "The Snow Man" is perhaps his most memorable tracing of that search:

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. (CP 9-10)

The textural rhythm of this poem might call to mind Debussy's musical piece "Footsteps in the Snow," or perhaps Malevich's abstractionist paintings "White on White." In its intimate strangeness of beauty it is a poem that insists upon our fascination. Yet it is a beauty that is fatal. It is the beauty of a strange beautiful woman who demands everything of her

beauty. She demands everything because like the snow she is a virgin. In another poem of winter entitled "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" Stevens suggests:

It is here, in this bad, that we reach
The last purity of the knowledge of good. (CP 294)

This is precisely where the trouble lies. Nothing intrudes "into the same bare place." In the purity of its knowledge the mystery lies frigid in the permanence of its orgasm. The timelessness that is felt is the timelessness of time, not the timelessness of the moment. Everything remains in the glittering distance for the Snow Man; and consequently everything remains in his mind, the mind of winter. It is a suffering of mere being:

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds,
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Because the Snow Man seeks to take hold of the everything of his mystery, he holds on to nothing. Life is reduced to both absolute tautology and absolute contradiction. Nothing is everything and is nothing. Because reality is divided from itself it cannot be equal to itself.

In "Adagia" Wallace Stevens confesses that "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me it is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (OP 158). This is a central issue. Stevens was rarely able to see that his "Castle" and the village of people from which it arose were at one with one another. Never are the people who inhabit Stevens' poetry confronted in the smell of their actuality. They are dis-

tilled into symbols that Stevens employs to intimate his vision of the world. But when you get right down to it, visions are worthless if they do not help to lead us into our fuller humanity. It is the word--love--that is so difficult to utter. It is beyond accounting. But it must be dared:

Which is correct: whether, if I respect my ancestors
I am bound to respect myself, or, if I respect myself
I am bound to respect my ancestors? (OP 167)

In this statement, like many of his other statements from "Adagia," we find Stevens groping toward something that cuts deeper than the flash of his mind, something unalterably human. But something holds him back. The words do not come as they must:

Which is correct: whether, if I love others I am
bound to love myself, or, if I love myself I am
bound to love others?

I am certain that this is the question that lies beneath the one that Stevens has formulated for us. Within it stares Freud and Marx and all of the anxiety of the modern world. However, Stevens does not seem to let the words come out and say exactly what he wants them to say. It would mean that he would have to let go of himself completely. But Stevens, as I further will attempt to show, often could not altogether let go of himself and stand in equality with the reality of the human world that surrounded him. Many of the inhabitants who populate his poems are transformed out of all human proportion. If reality is divided from itself, it cannot be equal to itself.

If reality cannot be made equal to itself, it must lose all of its human proportions. At the birth of the scientific era in the seventeenth century two inventions physically transformed man's way of looking at the cosmos--the microscope and the telescope. These extensions of the eye opened up new possibilities of vision for man; he could now approach the infinite and infinitesimal horizons of experience that had previously been clouded from his perception. But within this possibility of a new perception of things lay an even deeper despair concerning man's position in the universe. To see the universe in its infinite or infinitesimal aspect is a desperate evasion of a full eye to eye encounter with the finite physical fact of the universe. Reality can no longer be equal to itself, if it is no longer equal to man's perception of it. Stevens experienced this loss of fulness of vision in all of its terror. In two consecutive poems in his Collected Poems entitled "The Dwarf" and "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts" Stevens confesses to his sense of loss of equality to the physical fact of the world. In the poem "The Dwarf" Stevens speaks of the human self as being reduced to the size of an insect:

The winter is made and you have to bear it,
The winter web, the winter woven, wind and wind,

For all the thoughts of summer that go with it
In the mind, pupa of straw, moppet of rags.

It is the mind that is woven. . . . (CP 208)

Teilhard de Chardin speaks of the arthropod phylum as a dead end in the process of evolution. The immense possibilities of intelligence in the arthropods are frozen within the omnipotent control of their own spontaneity. According to de Chardin the mind of the insect has remained un-

liberated from its woven patterns precisely because he is diminutive in size.⁷ Its imagination is doomed because of a physical fact of its existence. But the converse is also true. Because Stevens at the moment of his writing of the poem "The Dwarf" refuses to liberate his mind to the proportions of his human physicality, he finds himself to be the size of an insect.

Insects have not been the only living creatures doomed because of their size. The dinosaurs have already been erased from the face of the earth due to their enormous proportions. In the poem "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts" Stevens describes the self in terms of a rabbit of dinosaur magnitude that "touches all edges" (CP 209). The poet sees the rabbit imaginatively assuming its gigantic form in order to defend itself against its own finitude in the physicality of the world. To accept its finitude the rabbit would have to accept the possibility of death as symbolized by its enemy--a red cat. In identifying the color of the cat as red Stevens seems to be representing the double significance of human physicality. Red is the color of blood; it is a color that is both a representation of the imaginative life within us and a manifestation of our death. Yet the "rabbit-light" (CP 209) of an imagination that has turned in on itself cannot accept the possibility of death:

You become a self that fills the four corners of night.
The red cat hides away in the fur-light
And there you are humped high, humped up,

You are humped higher and higher, black as stone--
You sit with your head like a carving in space
And the little green cat is a bug in the grass. (CP 209-210)

⁷ de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man, p. 170.

In its refusal to accept the death that is inherent within its physicality, the imagination itself ironically becomes an image of death--an immobile carving in space as "black as stone." A refusal to accept the blood of death reveals itself to be also a refusal to accept the blood of real life and imagination. The imagination can be seen to be reduced to "mere" imagination. In the rabbit-imagination's transformation of its cat-physicality into insect-mere being, we find the mere imagination taken by itself is revealed to be just as inhuman as the remote "physical" world taken by itself.

Wallace Stevens was born into a world in which the mind had become isolated from the reality of the world of which it had been a part. The mind was by itself. But has the mind any meaning by itself? It is a question that lacks meaning because the mind by itself is precisely that which lacks the fulness of its own meaning. Stevens concludes in "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," that the mind "can never be satisfied" (CP 247). The mind by itself can never be satisfied because it confines its existence only within its own boundaries. All attempts at its gratification are self-consumptive. Stevens is devastatingly exact in his portrait of the purely reflective modern man in his poem entitled "Cuisine Bourgeoise":

This outpost, this douce, this dumb, this dead, in which
 We feast on human heads, brought in on leaves,
 Crowned with the first, cold buds. On these we live,
 No longer on the ancient cake of seed,
 The almond and deep fruit. This bitter meat
 Sustains us . . . Who, then, are they, seated here?
 Is the table a mirror in which they sit and look?
 Are they men eating reflections of themselves? (CP 228)

The mind by itself cannot exist; its existence is illusory. It is only able to create an illusion of being by feeding itself upon the illusions that it has created for itself. It exists as a mirage of itself, a mirage that it can never touch. But if the reflective mind is an illusion of itself, its self-consumption is also an illusion. As Kierkegaard has pointed out, the despair of the self-consumptive self lies in its very inability to consume itself.⁸ Within its bourgeois, European face it draws itself inward toward Africa, cannibalistic, dark:

This outpost, this douce, this dumb, this dead, in which
We feast on human heads. . . .

Pure mind takes on the image of pure flesh. It cannot do otherwise. The mind is like a man who eats and is eaten by a violent beast that "can kill a man" (CP 193). There is nothing to be explained; life has found itself isolated at an outpost of its being. It is the same outpost where the ghost of Conrad's Kurtz stood dwarfed, whispering, among the seated inhabitants of the heart of darkness.

In Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness a native boy mutters contemptuously "Mistah Kurtz--he dead."⁹ It is a phrase that echoes within everything that is hollow, coming from apparently nowhere, a mere phrase. Eliot just had to use it as an epigraph to his "Hollow Men." "Mistah Kurtz-- he dead." The missing verb of the phrase utterly shocks, devastates us in its absence. The word that connects the subject to the object, the

⁸ Soren Kierkegaard, "Sickness unto Death," trans. Walter Lowrie, in A Kierkegaard Anthology, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: Modern Library, 1946), p. 342.

⁹ Conrad, Heart of Darkness, p. 115.

inner to the outer, reality to the imagination, is not there any longer; there is nothing to hold on to. Language itself becomes as tortured with holes as the reality from which it has found itself estranged. There are holes in the words, no verb, no copula, nothing. For a modern poet this discovery of a loss of a direct relationship of language and reality was immensely catastrophic. How can a poet continue to write, if he has lost faith in his words? Stevens understood the overwhelming significance of this loss as deeply as a Conrad or Eliot did. In his "Adagia" Stevens cries out that "Words are everything else in the world" (OP 174). This phrase might be described as the point of despair at which Stevens initiated his quest for a renewal of faith in a belief in language. The language of his poetry itself participated in a relentless search for its own meaning. In "Adagia" Stevens also committed himself to an ultimate belief that the "word must be the thing that it represents" (OP 168). This is not the magic that it might seem to be. In this commitment Stevens does not attempt to return nostalgically backward to an unconscious shamanistic belief in the identity of the word and the thing. What we find Stevens searching for throughout his poetry is a fully conscious participation of the language of the poem with the world outside of it. This conscious participation is brought about by means of metaphor. As Owen Barfield suggests:

When we use language metaphorically, we bring it about with our own free will that an appearance means something other than itself, and usually, that a manifest "means" an unmanifest. We start with an idol, and we ourselves turn that idol into a representation.¹⁰

¹⁰ Owen Barfield, Saving the Appearances (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), p. 126.

In this sense metaphor is seen to be something far more significant than simply artifice or ornament. As I have suggested in Chapter I, the concept of metaphor must be seen in a new light as a process of metamorphosis, a revelation of truth.

Such a belief in the truth of metaphor involves a leap of one's entire being into the reality of the world. At times it might be felt that throughout his writing a part of Stevens could never surrender himself completely to the challenge. In many of his poems and prose writings Stevens introduces us to a conception of metaphor that divides language even more deeply from its reality in the world than it had previously found itself in. In The Necessary Angel Stevens remarks that "There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel" (NA 58). Are the worlds of imagination and nature merely parallel lines that meet at some unlocatable point in infinity? In his analysis of this passage, Northrop Frye states:

Clearly, if poetry is "merely" this, the use of metaphor could only accentuate what Stevens' poetry tries to annihilate, the sense of a contrast or a great gulf between subject and object, consciousness and existence.¹¹

Stevens did not always succeed in getting beyond this limited conception of metaphor.

If metaphor is just simply to be accepted as a parallel or an analogy to human experience, it must betray itself as something less than

¹¹ Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," Fables of Identity (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), p. 248.

metaphor in the deeper sense of the meaning of the word as metamorphosis. Metaphor as mere analogy must by necessity turn in upon itself in the same illusory self-consumptive way that the mind in its isolation must necessarily turn in upon itself. In Stevens' poem entitled "Domination of Black" we confront the full despair of this kind of imagination:

The colors of the bushes
 And of the fallen leaves,
 Repeating themselves,
 Turned in the room,
 Like the leaves themselves
 Turning in the wind.

.

The colors of their tails
 Were like the leaves themselves. . . .

.

I heard them cry--the peacocks.
 Was it a cry against the twilight
 Or against the leaves themselves
 Turning in the wind,
 Turning as the flames
 Turning in the fire,
 Turning as the tails of the peacocks
 Turned in the loud fire,
 Loud as the hemlocks
 Full of the cry of the peacocks?
 Or was it a cry against the hemlocks? (CP 8-9)

In this poem the entire world is perceived as a system in which one meaning is defined in terms of another in a complex network of overt and implied analogies. Yet in the very ordering of the world into a system of analogy the mind finds itself imprisoned from the world within the very order that it has imposed upon the world. The imagination escapes the world in its very attempt to order it. What we finally discover is a purely closed system of thought in which all meaning is found to be purely

circular. The colors of the peacock tails are "like the leaves themselves"; and the "leaves themselves" turn as "the tails of the peacocks." The logic is circular. It is without fulfilled meaning. If everything in the universe finds its meaning only in relation to everything else in the universe, then nothing has any meaning. The spectacle of colors brought before our eyes in the poem "Domination of Black" is dominated by black. Life (as represented by the extravagance of the peacocks) and death (as represented by the hemlocks) disintegrate into one another in hopeless questionings:

Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

Is life merely a cry against death? In its cry against death life ironically flattens into a world as black as the death that it defies. The network of analogies that hold the life and death images of the poem together turns circularly in upon itself. The logic is circular because the poet, in his cry against death, has refused "the pleasures of merely circulating" (CP 149). To merely circulate would mean to accept that

Mrs. Anderson's Swedish baby
Might well have been German or Spanish. . . . (CP 150)

Anything could be anything else. But in "Domination of Black" Stevens feels that he must withhold himself in his encirclement of the circulation of being.

In terms of theme, although not tone, Stevens' poem "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" represents a similar attempt to impose, almost manufacture, an order upon the reality of the world. The structure of the poem con-

sists of five parts which like the sea have a changelessly changing formal arrangement. It is within this formal arrangement that the poet is caught and attempts to escape. He does this by interpreting the "meaningless plungings" (CP 129) of the reality of the sea in terms of images that have been self-conceived within his own skull:

In that November off Tehuantepec,
The slopping of the sea grew still one night
And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate
And gilt umbrellas. Paradisal green
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine

Of ocean, which like limpid water lay. (CP 98-99)

The sea is conceived by the poet only in terms of the imagination's conception of it. The imagination is reduced to fancy. The verbal contraptions that the poet is articulating are far removed from the actuality of the presence of the sea and sky that the poet is perceiving. Meaning is no longer discovered in true dialogue. The imagination's valuation of the meaning of the sea's presence is almost solely determined by the poet's valuation of it as meaning. This is to say that the poet is attempting to make reality become simply what he says it is. The reality of the sea unfolds as an unobtruded image of the poet's self-creating self: the sea is "mon enfant, mon bijou, mon ame" (CP 99). But this child of the poet's imagination is revealed to be a "batard" (CP 102) in the final section of the poem. The marriage of the sea and sky is merely something of a flirtatious affair. Throughout the poem the sea is constantly referred to as a "machine." It is because the imagination has degenerated into a machine that reality has taken on the image of that

which has given illegitimate birth to it.

What makes "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" so different from such poems as "Domination of Black" and "The Wind Shifts" is its tone. The whole feeling of the poem is permeated with a relishing sense of its own irony. A grand performance is put on before the reader. The words and the images of the poem are juggled by the poet with the precision of a most skillful clown:

Good clown. . . . One thought of Chinese chocolate
And large umbrellas. And a motley green
Followed the drift of the obese machine

Of ocean, perfected in indolence.
What pistache one, ingenious and droll,
Beheld the sovereign clouds as jugglery

And the sea as turquoise-turbaned Sambo, neat
At tossing saucers--cloudy-conjuring sea? (CP 102)

Art must put on an act in a world where things do not mean what they appear to mean. The artist must wear a mask.

A great many of the modern poets from Yeats to Auden to Stevens reveal themselves through the masks that they wear. Each of these poets has at one time or another played the role of the clown--that hero who through his masks reveals to us the face that humanity keeps hidden from itself. It is by taking upon himself the image of the clown that Stevens is able to sustain his strength in a poetry that would otherwise sap away his energies in face of the literally dead seriousness of the subject matter. Indeed, in many of his poems it is the very tension created between the dead seriousness of the subject matter and the comic mask which he super-imposes upon it that generates the power of his poetry. Just as

the "comic relief" of the graveyard scene in Hamlet intensifies our sense of the tragic, the mask of irony that Stevens uses to express himself intensifies our sense of his anguish. In many of his poems Stevens' apparent gaiety and playfulness of language lends an added pressure to our sense of the underlying terror of its message. In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," a poem about life in its almost obscene frigidity, Stevens employs his diction with an almost excruciating zest:

Call the roller of big cigars,
 The muscular one, and bid him whip
 In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
 Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
 As they are used to wear, and let the boys
 Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
 Let be be finale of seem.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. (CP 64)

The grotesque lushness of diction has the ironic effect of suggesting the barrenness and sterility of life's empire of ice-cream with more precision than any direct poetical statement of the matter possibly could.

Stevens also succeeds in creating irony by employing a technique that is strikingly clear in its surface representation. In a poem by Stevens entitled "The Death of a Soldier" the rhetoric strikes us as disarmingly vivid:

Death is absolute and without memorial,
 As in a season of autumn,
 When the wind stops,

 When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
 The clouds go, nevertheless,
 In their direction. (CP 97)

In these stanzas the clarity of rhythm and diction has the control of a

circus performer walking a tightrope. Yet out of this intense formal clarity of statement there arises a subterranean region of feeling which is far from easily locatable. The clarity itself seems to obscure our perspectives.

It is this ironic tension between what is overtly stated and what is implied which forms the basis of every clown performance. The clown is the supreme ironist; by the surface gesture of his movement he implies a universe of meaning that can only be covertly understood. If you notice a clown in a Picasso or Toulouse Lautrec painting, you will observe an enigmatic mixture of attachment and detachment in his pose: he seems to embody all of the terror and wonder of the human universe, and yet at the same time to linger on the horizon of an unknowable cosmos that is foreign to all human feeling and all human meaning. The clown cannot be perceived without a double focus; the very basis of his existence is rooted in duality. To be ironical is to be dual.

Yet for Stevens the image of the clown, as an embodiment of the divided face of human reality, is also a representation of a movement out of that essential duality. Duality must be entered into and consciously experienced before any resolution of it can occur. But to be truly conscious of the duality of our position we must be somehow detached from it. By means of the clown's ironic awareness of the irony of his position this is made possible. In Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" the hero of the poem is able to see and even take joy in the extreme irony of his predicament on this planet:

We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
 The laughing sky will see the two of us
 Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains. (CP 16)

Unlike another middle-aged clown of modern poetry, J. Alfred Prufrock, the persona of this poem dares to eat his peach. Indeed, he dares to become the unholy fruit that he has eaten. The trouble with Prufrock is in fact his fear of fully revealing to himself the clown that he really is. A true clown, like Stevens' "Uncle," must not be afraid of falling flat on his face like an apple that falls "of its own weight to earth" (CP 14). Paradoxically man finds himself divided from himself in guilt only if he refuses to recognize his fall from innocence. It is only because man has fallen from above that he can turn his eyes upward and see that "fluttering things have so distinct a shade" (CP 18).

A clown's fall is spectacular in its innocence. In Stevens' poem entitled "The Man with the Blue Guitar" we see the blue guitarist as a clown nervously balancing the divided world on the tip of his "eternal" nose (CP 178). But the clown soon realizes that

. . . the balance does not quite rest,
 That the mask is strange, however like. (CP 181)

In the midst of this realization the clown falls suddenly and silently from his proud Olympian stance. The crowd stands in a horror of anticipation. Everything is hush. But nothing happens! The world that was held together at the tip of the clown's nose continues to circulate in the electrifying madness of its own "jocular creations" (CP 183). Now it is really a clown performance.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" is Stevens' clearest and wildest

expression of himself as a clown. In turns the surface texture of the poem crinkles, gleams, seethes, bellows like blubber, scintillates, and crackles like a voluptuous ishka tree. The poem's wildness overflows with itself. Yet it is as seriously a poem as Alice In Wonderland which it closely resembles in certain ways. Like Alice In Wonderland it operates on a dual formal structure of fierce logic, on the one hand, and unbounding fancy, on the other. This split between logic and the imagination is another aspect of modern man's separation from the world of which he is a part. But, like the heroine of Alice In Wonderland, the hero of "The Comedian as the Letter C" is struggling on a quest to grow out of his sense of incongruity with the world. At the beginning of the poem we see the hero, Crispin, as a kind of adventurer-poet like Rimbaud (a politer middle-aged Rimbaud) searching throughout the far corners of the world to discover himself.

Crispin begins his journey adventuring forth into the sea, but he soon discovers that the "sea/Severs not only lands but also selves" (CP 30). In his attempt to account for the chaos of the sea, Crispin, described as an "insatiable egotist" (CP 30), has his ego torn by "inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world" (CP 27). The essential duality of his position can no longer be veiled from him by his overpowering domination over it by his intelligence. In his realization that man is something more than the mere "intelligence of his soil" (CP 27) Crispin travels forth to the tropics. But the tropics also prove to be an evasion in that the "too juicily opulent" (CP 32) landscape overpowers the imagination of which it is a part. From the tropics Crispin searches forth

to the moonlit shadows of Carolina. But this also proves to be an evasion:

Moonlight was an evasion, or if not,
A minor feeling, facile, delicate. . . . (CP 35)

Where can Crispin go from here? He has travelled north, south, in the sunlight, and in the moonlight. After having gone in all directions in the world, there is only one direction that is left for Crispin to go-- back into himself. Crispin must see himself without "jugglery" (CP 37) within the basic duality of his position. Crispin, the clown-hero, has to learn to accept the world on its own terms and accept it, in all of its bitter irony of "chance event" (CP 39), with a sense of humour. Only if Crispin can fully accept the world as the world is, can he do something more than merely accept it as it is. Because Crispin is able to do just this, the subject of his real quest, his real questionings, begins to reveal itself:

Should he lay by the personal and make
Of his own fate an instance of all fate?
What is one man among so many men?
What are so many men in such a world?
Can one man think one thing and think it long?
Can one man be one thing and be it long? (CP 41)

These questions point to a groping of a world that lies beyond mere duality.

CHAPTER III

BEYOND DUALITY: THE WORLD AS IT APPEARS TO BE

To talk about the poetry of any real poet is to deal in mysteries. What I mean when I say that poetry deals in mysteries is that it involves a movement from that which is known to that which can never be known completely. That which is known may be called life and that which is unknown may be called death, or that which is known may be called death and that which is unknown life. Life and death only acquire the meanings of "known" and "unknown" in relation to one another. But what is essentially important is that there is a distinction between what is known and what is unknown. Poetry like love is only possible if there exists a separation at the very centre of our being: one can only achieve oneness with the universe if one is split apart from it. Aphrodite was only born as a consequence of the separation of Father Sky and Mother Earth: poetry is only possible when the words reach out and touch a world that is other than itself.

The central question concerning the nature of good poetry is the question of the relation that exists between the known element in poetry and the unknown. A certain kind of poetic imagination which I shall term "romantic" has emphasized the unknowable element in poetry. Shelley, in his Defence, describes the poet as participating in "the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and space

and number are not."¹ Keats describes the poetic imagination as the dream of Adam in which "he awoke and found truth"² and Sidney similarly describes poetry as imitating "the inconceivable excellency of God."³ With certain reservations this view of poetry may be summarized in Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination as "the repetition of the finite mind of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I am."⁴ In its act of recreating the mystery of the world that lies outside of itself the poetry of the romantic poet tends to become completely at one with the mystery which it celebrates. The danger of such a romantic position lies in its very possibility of triumph. To know the secret of the universe is to know it no longer simply because it is no longer a secret. As soon as life becomes imaginatively indistinguishable from death, all that remains of the mystery of life is the boredom of death. To speak the unspeakable is always boring to the point of disgust. Poetry like love will only reveal itself in its hiddenness. The mystery has to be let go of until we can again be reborn and surprised into its wonder.

In response to the ultimate despair of romanticism various poets throughout the course of poetry have asserted the necessity of poetry grounding itself in the apprehendable facts of the knowable universe.

¹ Percy B. Shelley, "In Defence of Poetry," Selected Poetry and Prose (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 485.

² John Keats, "Letter to Benjamin Bailey," Selected Poetry and Letters (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), p. 301.

³ Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," The Golden Hind, ed. R. Lamson and H. Smith (New York: Norton, 1956), p. 276.

⁴ Samuel Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1960), p. 167.

This rebellion against the romantic imagination may be elucidated by remarks from a number of modern poets. In his essay "Romanticism and Classicism" T. E. Hulme submits that "fancy will be superior to the imagination."⁵ In one of his early essays Eliot suggests that source of all good poetry must come from "a particular people in a particular place."⁶ In "Adagia" Wallace Stevens (in the pose of an antiromantic romantic) states that the "ultimate value is reality" (OP 166). Each of these statements implies that poetry must concern itself with the known world if it is to say anything at all.

The imagination must come back to its source in a world that lies outside of itself, if it is to regain its quality of aliveness. The unknown can only acquire reality in relationship to that which is known; the poetic or metaphoric can only acquire meaning in relation to the prosaic and literal. If everything were a dream we could no longer be able to dream. But there is always the real danger that the literal and prosaic will replace the metaphorical and poetic completely in any rebellion against the extremes of the romantic imagination. For fear of being consumed by that strange woman who secretly dazzles his imagination the poet shies away from her faintest touch. And so in apprehension a poet like Pope or Tennyson plots to methodize or stylize or idealize her out of existence.

For all their apparent differences the extreme romantic position

⁵ T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," Prose Keys to Modern Poetry, ed. Karl Shapiro (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 62.

⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition," Selected Prose (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 21.

and the extreme antiromantic position betray the same despair. They are the opposite poles of the same sickness inadvertently masquerading one another. The romantic at its extreme tends to look antiromantic; the antiromantic at its extreme tends to look like the ultimate romantic. If you take Edgar Allan Poe as the ultimate romantic writer and Franz Kafka (who wrote in prose) as the ultimate antiromantic writer, you might be able to see a direct relationship going on between these extreme positions. As the extreme romantic Poe was solely intent upon being consumed into ecstasy by the unknowable mysteries of death. His prose essays reveal his preoccupation with writing only the purest and most ethereal of poems. Yet what do we get? The poetry achieves such a purity that it purifies itself completely of its poetry. The language is utterly devoid of any significant metaphor: its dream-like passion freezes into an unlocatable objectivity. It is precisely this sense of inhuman objectivity which is the starting point in Kafka's novels. Kafka was a man dislocated in a world of objective facts: the human self itself was nothing but another fact in a world littered with facts. Yet in The Castle and The Trial this world of brutally literal facts emerges as a world that is indistinguishable from dreams. A world devoid of dreams itself becomes a kind of dream. Kafka's dream-haunted novels are unquestionably more poetically interesting than Poe's stark poems, but nevertheless the malaise that both writers experience is essentially the same. Kafka's objective universe of facts becomes so estranged from the subjective reality of the imagination that it becomes completely identical with it; Poe's subjective universe of pure imagination becomes so estranged from an objective world that it becomes identical with it. Both writers suffer the same despair.

As can be observed from what has been said in the previous chapter, Stevens himself was haunted by a despair cast upon him by the dual demons of both extreme romanticism and extreme antiromanticism. The question that Stevens faced all of his life was how to get out of the essential dualism that confronted him in his poetry. One way out for Stevens could have been an attempt to resolve these two positions by means of a compromise; he could have anti-romanticized his romanticism or romanticized his anti-romanticism. Such an attempt would have made his vision of things far more comfortable. It would mean that he would only have to face half his death. Yet it would also mean that he would only be able to experience life to half of its fulness. But Stevens was too much of a man to fall into such a compromise:

That he might suffer or that
He might die was the innocence of living, if life
Itself was innocent. (CP 322)

Life must be suffered and celebrated in all the violence of both its radical knowability and radical unknowability:

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)

The world must be accepted in its fundamental separation. It is only then that dualism may be transformed into a much deeper dimension of man's place in the universe as a place of dialogue.

It cannot be said that dialogue implies a resolution of the polarities of human existence. If we are to claim that life and death or the knowable and unknowable facets of experience are finally resolved into

one another, then all resolution with life's mystery has broken down by our very utterance of that claim. Our sense of the oneness of existence in its dialogue with itself can only occur once:

Just once,
everything, only for once. Once and no more. And we, too,
once. And never again.⁷

As Stevens has suggested, the inspired moments of a lifetime "Occur as they occur" (CP 222). The moment cannot be held on to, not even with words, not even with the cry of the poem. The blackbird comes and goes. The poet sees the pheasant that he is celebrating "disappearing in the bush" (OP 173).

The world suffers disappearance before our senses and our being only because the world is precisely that which appears before our being. What we know of the world is what it appears to be. What we do not fully know of the world is the being of that appearance, the being that underlies all appearance and predicates the emergence of all appearances in the world. Being is that which lies beyond all appearances including the appearance of the human self which in itself is the predicate of all appearances other than the self. But if being is the predicate which lies beyond the self, it is also that which lies more deeply concealed within the self than the self itself. This is to say that being partakes in a twofold nature that is both transcendent and immanent.

More than any other poet of our time, including Eliot and Auden, Stevens may be described as a poet of being. He himself defined poetry

⁷ Rainer M. Rilke, "The Ninth Elegy," Selected Poems, trans. J. B. Leishman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 63.

as the "unofficial view of being" (NA 41). The forms of the verb "to be," used as representations of beingness, are employed dozens of times in Stevens' poetry. As a poet of being the tenor of Stevens' thought follows that of the existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century. However, as a poet Stevens was far more generally interested in the being of the world in its appearance as poetic revelation than in being in appearance as abstract consciousness. In The Necessary Angel Stevens remarks that

The philosopher proves that the philosopher exists.
The poet merely enjoys existence. (NA 56)

Yet Stevens' enjoyment of the world was never mere. An examination of Stevens' poetry from the "without" of a philosophical orientation may in many ways be helpful in discovering the withinness of his profoundly joyful encounter with the world. A large variety of modern philosophers could probably deepen our understanding of Stevens, but the modern philosopher which I find most of all to resemble Stevens in his thinking is Martin Heidegger.

The question of the nature of being was the central question that governed Heidegger's philosophical quest throughout his life.⁸ His philosophy might be said to be an attempt to rediscover the beingness of reality as it disclosed itself in the appearances of this world, and more specifically, the human self. The problem with being is that it had lain submerged in the very appearances from which it had arisen to assert its presence. Consequently for Heidegger the concept of appearance has both a positive and a negative aspect. We can see these polar aspects of this

⁸ Martin Heidegger, An Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Anchor Books, 1968). My entire argument concerning Heidegger's theory of being is based upon this book.

concept of appearance in our very use of the word "appearance" in common everyday speech. Looking at the sun during the day we might say that the sun appears to circle the sky--in the sense that the being of the appearance is not to be believed. This kind of appearance Heidegger calls "mere appearance."⁹ But at the break of dawn we might say that the sun appears on the horizon. In this sense of appearance we mean appearance as revelation of being. This is what Heidegger calls "physis."¹⁰ In Stevens' poem entitled "Description without Place" we can see the full meaning of appearance as revelation of being as distinct from mere or "flat appearance" (CP 340):

It is possible that to seem--it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are.

.

. . . seeming to be
Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening. (CP 339-346)

The discovery of the truth of the being of the rubies is only revealed to us by the process of the revelation of that truth in its appearance into the world.

The two distinct meanings of appearance as "mere appearance" and appearance as "physis" are inextricably bound together with one another. Appearance as revelation discloses being; mere appearance hides being. Yet it is precisely from within its strange hiddenness that being reveals itself. As soon as an appearance completely succeeds in emerging out of

⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

its unknowable invisibility it must necessarily disintegrate into mere appearance. As Heidegger notes "Being (emerging appearing) inclines intrinsically to self concealment."¹¹ The mystery must necessarily fall in upon itself as is suggested by Stevens:

The honey of heaven may or may not come,
But that of earth both comes and goes at once. (CP 15)

The splendour of life "both comes and goes at once," constantly revealing itself only to conceal itself in its very self-revelation. The glory of life's truth also calls forth an anxiety, an anxiety as deep as the mystery of life itself, a worm eating into a rose in the name of love. In the first section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens sees the appearance of the "inconceivable idea of the sun" (CP 380) in all of the terror that its wonder signifies:

. . . 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.
May there be a ennui of the first idea?
What else, prodigious scholar, should there be? (CP 381)

This ennui is positive in the sense that it is an expression of the poet's care and concern for the preciousness of life as it passes by him. It is the sorrow that all sensitive human beings must feel over the irretrievability of time. But a man must not surrender to his sorrow if he is to live and grow. He must have the courage of joy. Life is prodigious.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 96.

Irretrievable time is dead time. If a poet unconditionally surrenders to his "ennui," the anxiety of life that he feels must necessarily betray itself as the anxiety of death itself, as it unfolds in its manifestation of time, dead time. This wastage of time is ironically the result of an attempt to root beingness out of time. This in essence is the romantic despair. The extreme romantic poet, like Poe, reaches to grasp eternity from time in its manifestation of itself as time. In doing so he abstracts being from the appearances that flow from their emergence as appearances of being in time. By this process of abstracting being from appearance the romantic poet can thus create an illusion of permanence that insulates him against the world in its mutability. But his abstraction of being from its appearances in the world is itself illusory. Being cannot be taken apart from its appearances. Eternity takes time. Eternity without time itself takes on a negative image of time in all of its excremental wastage. It is time that defines eternity:

It was like sudden time in a world without time,
This world, this place, this street in which I was,
Without time: as that which is not has no time,
Is not. . . . (CP 237)

But what is time if it is not the revelation of the eternal being of appearances in its process of revelation:

Felicity, ah! Time is the hooded enemy,
The inimical music, the enchantered space
In which enchanted preludes have their place. (CP 330)

Time is music, the rhythm of things and events as they shape our lives, the coming and going of the wind, the inhalations and exhalations of our

breath.

To be is to breathe. The verb "is" originally came from the Aryan root "as" meaning "to breathe." Like human breath the mystery of life must fall back upon itself, if it is to reappear again in all its forgotten fire and light:

The romantic should be here.
 The romantic should be there.
 It ought to be everywhere.
 But the romantic must never remain. . . . (CP 120)

Wallace Stevens gave the second section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" the title of "It Must Change." Reality cannot remain preserved in its Grecian Urn. It must not remain what Stevens called "the barrenness/Of the fertile thing that can attain no more" (CP 373).

Because reality is constantly changing we cannot know it in any permanent and absolute way. We can only know it at the point of death. There is, of course, a sense that we can know more about ourselves and the world around us. All good poetry is a committed adventure into a new knowledge of life, but in so far as poetry is a way of knowing the universe it simultaneously asserts itself as a way of not knowing the universe. To know the secret of the universe is to know it no longer as a secret. The poet must grow beyond the known world which he immerses himself within:

Is it himself in them that he knows or they
 In him? If it is himself in them, they have
 No secret from him. If it is they in him,
 He has no secret from them. This knowledge
 Of them and of himself destroys both worlds,
 Except when he escapes from it. To be
 Alone is to not know them or himself.

This creates a third world without knowledge,
 In which no one peers, in which the will makes no
 Demands. It accepts whatever is as true,
 Including pain, which, otherwise, is false. (CP 323)

Throughout his poetry Stevens celebrates the ignorant man who looks at the universe with an "ignorant eye" (CP 380). In "Adagia" Stevens states that "the poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man" (OP 160). I do not think that Stevens acknowledges the importance of ignorance merely on the grounds that a certain kind of ignorance can lead to a profounder knowledge within ourselves. Not only is ignorance a means to knowledge, it is also a part of knowledge that is inseparable from knowledge itself. In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens observes of reality:

It must be visible or invisible,
 Invisible or visible or both:
 A seeing and unseeing in the eye. (CP 385)

Reality must be both. The visible and invisible worlds perceived by the seeing and unseeing eye partake in one another:

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

The dress of the woman of Lhasa is the being of the place as it manifests itself in the appearance of its being. This is not to say that the invisible world of being sacrifices its invisibility in its unconcealment as appearance. Love cannot tell beforehand. The invisible world, if it is to be operative, must remain concealed beyond and within the withinness of appearance. Although the invisible world of being is a part of and

immanently identical with the world of appearances, it is also something irrevocably other than the world of appearances. As Heidegger observes, "the self-manifestation of the apparent belongs immediately to being and yet again (fundamentally) does not belong to it."¹²

The logic that weds being and appearance in relation to one another is essentially dialectical. The truth of any statement concerning the nature of being is by necessity intimately bound up with a statement which appears to contradict it. Yet it is precisely this incomprehensible contradiction in being which frees reality from the doom of tautology:

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
 Into a village,
 Are
 Twenty men crossing a bridge
 Into a village.

That will not declare itself
 Yet is certain as meaning. . . . (CP 19)

As can be seen from the passage that immediately follows the above passage in "Metaphors of a Magnifico," life is only meaningful when its meaning escapes:

The boots of the men clump
 On the boards of the bridge.
 The first white wall of the village
 Rises through fruit-trees.
 Of what was it I was thinking?
 So the meaning escapes. (CP 19)

Life at its most tangibly concrete is at its most mysterious. The power of this mystery of life lies in the fact that it "knows that what it has

¹² Ibid., p. 95.

is what is not" (CP 382). It is a dialectic process. Antithesis follows thesis only to be followed by an implication of a more fundamental statement of thesis. It is a process as sure as the breath of our lives:

The wind suddenly stopped. . . "What's that?"
"It's the wind."¹³

In "A Primitive like an Orb" Stevens very simply proclaims that "It is and it/Is not and, therefore, is" (CP 440).

This profoundly simple dialogue of being and appearance is captured in a gem of a little poem by Stevens entitled "Life Is Motion":

In Oklahoma,
Bonnie and Josie,
Dressed in calico,
Danced around a stump.
They cried,
"Ohoyaho,
Ohoo" . . .
Celebrating the marriage
Of flesh and air. (CP 83)

Flesh and air, earth and sky, are consecrated to give birth to life in its motion. The intense excitement and energy of the poem is brought forth by the violence of its opposites clashing into a unity of inscrutable depth. At the very beginning of the poem we have the tension created between the title and the first line. We read "Life Is Motion," and then we read "In Oklahoma." A universal statement is made concrete, and yet, in its concreteness it remains universal, unspecified, invisible. In the next three lines of the poem we are presented an image of two girls,

¹³ Richard Brautigan, In Watermelon Sugar (New York: Delta Books, 1968), p. 30.

dressed in calico, dancing around a stump. This simple image creates a series of new tensions. The dress of the girls contrasts with the leafless nakedness of a tree stump. The stump is an emblem of the invisible still centre upon which the motion of the girls and the motion of the poem is made possible. The tree stump is the negation, the image of death, that impels life into the poem. In the next three lines of the poem, the named girls, Bonnie and Josie, cry out the unnamable syllables "Ohoyaho,/Ohoo." That which is known by names participates in that which is without names, the unknowable. Yet the unnamable syllables "Ohoyaho,/Ohoo" resonate within our ear back to that which is named, the word "Oklahoma," giving back to that word an invisible element which makes it more than merely the name of a state in a particular place. We can almost feel the mystery of the entire world filling up this little poem.

It is the dialogue of being and appearance, the visible and the invisible, the knowable and the unknowable, that opens the possibility of change and growth in the world of experience. In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens maintains:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
 On one another, as a man depends
 On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change. (CP 392)

It is the apparent violent conflict between being and appearance that makes the emergence of being as appearance possible. This paradox can be felt in all its physical intensity in Stevens' poem entitled "The Red Fern":

The large-leaved day grows rapidly,
 And opens in this familiar spot
 Its unfamiliar, difficult fern,
 Pushing and pushing after red.

There are doubles of this fern in clouds,
 Less firm than the paternal flame,
 Yet drenched with its identity,
 Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-motes

And mist-mites, dangling seconds, grown
 Beyond relation to the parent trunk:
 The dazzling, bulging, brightest core,
 The furiously burning father-fire . . .

Infant, it is enough in life
 To speak of what you see. But wait
 Until sight wakens the sleepy eye
 And pierces the physical fix of things. (CP 365)

In the first stanza we feel the presence of this red "burning father-fire" fern pressing itself in tight, fierce exertion in its emergence into and with the world. It battles its being into the world fighting against the pressure of "the familiar spot," the world of mere appearance that has habituated our lives. In its appearance in experience the red fern challenges all appearances that have preceded it. In the second and third stanzas of this poem we feel that the fern has reached a moment of consummation in its growth, an ecstasy. In its ecstasy the red fern momentarily stands outside of itself, becoming something other than itself, and yet still "drenched" with its own "identity." For a moment the fern is ecstatically at one with the clouds above it. But this ecstasy can only survive for an instant; the "doubles" of the red fern grow "Beyond relation to the parent trunk." Consequently in the last two lines of the third stanza the movement and growth of the poem fall back to the "brightest core" which initiated the plant's and the poem's growth in the first

place. The poem must always go back to "infant" new beginnings, if there is to be a change and growth that "pierces the physical fix of things." As Stevens states in "Add This to Rhetoric" the mystery of life cannot remain locked within a preconceived pose that is stylized by a false rhetoric of being:

It is posed and it is posed
But in nature it merely grows. (CP 198)

The artist, in order to grow, must relentlessly struggle to emerge in awakeness from beneath all posturings and all impositions that have been cast upon him by the mere appearances of the world.

Struggle is a necessary prerequisite for any artist attempting to grow and blossom. Yet life is something infinitely far more interesting than a mere struggle of will in a Darwinian universe. The will of the self must be broken down if it is to attain the goal that has been directed from the will:

The pears are not seen
As the observer wills. (CP 197)

This fact can be taken as a challenge to our being in the world, but it can also be accepted as the grace given to us by the world. It is this grace alone which makes our labour and our struggle meaningful. This gift of grace makes the presence of wonder possible. Only if we are capable of seeing reality as something other than ourselves, are we capable of relating to the universe in all of its awe and inexplicable surprise:

You as you are? You are yourself.
The blue guitar surprises you. (CP 183)

It is by the irrational grace of "delicate clinkings not explained" (CP 340), things inalterably other than ourselves, that we become most ourselves. In a sense these irrational clinkings are given to us by grace alone. Our irrational feelings of wonder are not "balances that we achieve but balances that happen" (CP 386). We do not have to work or struggle for them:

But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
On the image of what we see, to catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning. . . . (CP 398)

In a sense we do have to labour with the "difficultest rigor" to attain grace. And yet when we do finally obtain grace it exhibits absolutely no rational relation to the labour that was directed to it. Once grace is obtained our labour for it is seen to be of no worth. Grace is unaccountable. It comes and goes, a "heavenly pity" (CP 88). If it were accountable, it would no longer be grace. We can reason about it only with a later reason.

To encounter reality in its surprise and wonder means necessarily to encounter it in its otherness, its inviolable strangeness. Our lines of attention and intention must be broken, intruded upon. Art is not possible unless it itself participates in an encounter with the world outside of itself:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own, and much more, not ourselves. . . .
(CP 383)

The artist must work to confront reality in its strangeness, irrationality,

eccentricity. As Stevens has said in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," the "eccentric" is "the base of design" (CP 151). But the strangeness that the artist must enter into must not be a mere strangeness in the sense of remoteness. It is precisely when we are estranged from life's strange wonder that our experiences seem remote from us. The wonder of life must emerge in appearance before our eyes in the strangeness of the commonplace, the familiar:

The large-leaved day grows rapidly,
 And opens in this familiar spot,
 Its unfamiliar, difficult fern. . . . (CP 365)

As Heidegger suggests, "the strangeness, the uncanniness of these powers of emergence resides in their seeming familiarity."¹⁴ It is most peculiarly within the seeming ordinary that our beings are torn apart into ecstasy and wonder:

The peaches are large and round,
 Ah! and red; and they have peach fuzz, ah!
 They are full of juice and the skin is soft.
 They are full of the colors of my village
 And of fair weather, summer, dew, peace.
 The room is quiet where they are.
 The windows are open. The sunlight fills
 The curtains. Even the drifting of the curtains,
 Slight as it is, disturbs me. I did not know
 That such ferocities could tear
 One self from another, as these peaches do. (CP 224)

¹⁴ Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, p. 131.

A dish of peaches in a curtained sunlit room contains the world. This is what Goethe called "the open secret" of the universe. The mystery of life stands obvious before and within man's sensitivities. Yet in our culture it is only the child and the creative man who have an eye for the obvious, the wondrously obvious. This strange wonder is for the artist a strangeness of intimacy, as intimate and strange as his own being:

Intangible arrows quiver and stick in the skin
And I taste at the root of the tongue the unreal of what
is real. (CP 313)

It is a strangeness that lies rooted in us closer to us than our tongue, than the words we speak. It is a strangeness that is the silent source of all human words.

In a sense this strange silence of being is that which lies concealed within and beyond all language. In many of Stevens' poems, such as "To the One of Fictive Music" and "Six Significant Landscapes," we see the dark and obscure silence of this mystery as something analogous to the dark and obscure silence of the mystery of a woman:

The night is of the color
Of a woman's arm:
Night, the female,
Obscure,
Fragrant and supple,
Conceals herself. (CP 73)

But in the proceeding lines in the same poem it can be seen that it is from within her very darkness that a woman gives birth to light:

A pool shines,
Like a bracelet
Shaken in a dance. (CP 74)

In a similar way silence gives birth to language. In so far as silence is that which lies concealed within being, it is also that which reveals itself through the appearance of language. The silence of being is brought into light through language.

It is the appearance of language which makes the appearance of being in the being of appearances possible. The first chorus of Sophocles' Antigone begins with these words:

There is much that is strange, but nothing
That surpasses man in strangeness.¹⁵

What makes man the strangest of the strange is his ability to be conscious of himself and his universe through his use of language. In a poem entitled "Certain Phenomena of Sound" Stevens explains:

You were created of your name, the word
Is that of which you were personage.
There is no life except in the word of it. (CP 287)

It is the appearance of language that makes the strangeness of being reveal itself. Being in its fulness presupposes consciousness in its manifestation of itself as language. Nature is barren if it is taken as an entity that is separable from human consciousness. As Heidegger remarks:

Naming does not come afterward, providing an already
manifest essent with a designation and a hallmark
known as a word; it is the other way around; originally
an act of violence that discloses being, the word sinks

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 123. This translation of the first chorus of Sophocles' Antigone differs from other translations such as Robert Whitelaw's (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

from this height to become a mere sign, and the sign proceeds to thrust itself before the essent.¹⁶

The trouble is that it has come the other way around for us. We have lost our faith in our names.

In The Necessary Angel Stevens has made note of the fact that over the past centuries the denotative function of words has tended to take precedence over the connotative function of words. With the advent of a scientific consciousness man had taken on the belief that language is merely an arbitrary set of symbols whose syntax and logic somehow parallel that of an objective universe that lies apart from that language. Language is seen as only peripherally participating in reality, if at all. As can be seen in his comment from "Adagia," "Words are everything else in the world" (OP 174), Stevens himself experienced this radical chasm between language and experience. Yet as I have remarked in my previous chapter, such a view of language is both inevitable and necessary, if we are to encounter the universe and our experience in it with a full consciousness of self. It is only because the appearance of language, like all other appearances, must necessarily degenerate into mere appearance that we are able to encounter the world of being in all of its strange wonder of otherness that so intimately binds us with it. It was the refusal to accept the necessity of this split which led to the despair that was inherent in the Romantic Movement in poetry. In their rebellion against the extreme antiromanticism of the scientific revolution the Romantic Poets made the fatal error of elevating language above experience. The world

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 144.

of facts had taken priority over the world of language and so in defiance the Romantic Poets created a world of imaginative language that was to take priority over the world of facts. Such a view of language is a death-wish, a refusal to grow, a nostalgia for the womb of the past. But we cannot turn back. We must pass through. A pre-scientific shamanistic consciousness views language and the universe as identical to one another in the sense that they are indistinguishable from one another; a post-scientific consciousness is beginning to develop a view of the world in which language and the universe are one with one another in the sense that the two participate in one another. We have to move from the one view of reality to the other if we are to grow.

It was toward this second revolutionized view of language that Stevens evolved in his career as a poet. The question of the nature of language and its relationship to reality is central to any poet whose commitment to life is based upon the turnings of language. It was a particularly burning question for Stevens. The language of Stevens' poetry is literally self-conscious of itself as language: the words of his poetry grope outward and inward in a search for their possibilities of meaning. This self-consciousness of language can be seen in a definition of poetry by Stevens as "a revelation of words by means of words" (NA 33). This definition may appear to be devastatingly circular, if we mean by words only mere symbols of an externalized universe. But language usually meant something much more than "propositions about life" (CP 355) for Stevens:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the res itself and not about it. (CP 473)

Words can give birth to the appearance of a poem only because the words themselves are appearances that emerge out of the reality of the world. Language itself is an integral part of reality which cannot be separated from it without reducing reality to a barren abstraction. Language may be said to be the ecstasy of the flesh of the world in its ecstasy of awareness of itself as itself. We commonly say that a word "stands for" an entity. The word stands for, stands outside of, an ecstasy. (The Greek roots of the word "ecstasy" mean "to stand outside of.") In "Adagia" Stevens states:

The word must be the thing it represents; otherwise,
it is a symbol. It is a question of identity. (OP 168)

In the first section of "Description without Place" Stevens describes the reality of a queen who "seems to be on the saying of her name" (CP 339). The word, the name, re-presents reality; it compels it to re-appear. It makes reality emerge out of its hidden sitting position. Language stands for reality.

In as much as the appearance of language, like all other appearances, reveals the reality of being, it also tends to conceal it. In Stevens' "Description without Place" the same queen who "seems to be on the saying of her name" also has an "illustrious nothing" (CP 339) of a name. In its very evocation of the quality of reality's universal silence language disturbs the texture of that silence. We cannot know that which cannot be known. The word cannot bear the full weight of being. It, too, must wither like the flower that it is. That which is unknown must lay hidden beneath and within that which is made known through language. In his poem

entitled "Nudity in the Colonies" Stevens suggests that "one is most disclosed when one is most anonymous" (CP 145). Throughout many of his poems Stevens celebrates "the anonymous color of the universe" (CP 470), a namelessly colored universe in which the silence spoken is profounder and more immediate than that of any speech:

The cry that contains its converse in itself,
In which looks and feelings mingle and are part
As a quick answer modifies a question,

Not wholly spoken in a conversation between
Two bodies disembodied in their talk,
Too fragile, too immediate for any speech. (CP 471)

There is a secret that is so basic that it is beyond human speech. The trouble with speech, including poetic speech, is that it tends to pose reality, freeze it, in its very utterance of itself as speech. If the language of poetry is to suggest something beyond its own posturings, it must remain at a distance from the silence of the mystery it can only intimate.

In "Adagia" Stevens describes the poet as "the priest of the invisible" (OP 169). The poet is a priest in the sense that his language is sacramental. He participates in an evocation of the invisibly holy by means of that which is visibly present:

"The thing I hum appears to be
The rhythm of this celestial pantomime." (CP 243)

Yet the poet like the priest must make certain that his visible appearance of the invisible is not mistaken for the invisible itself. This sacramental function of art is delineated clearly in a passage from Auden's

The Dyer's Hand:

The impulse to create a work of art is felt when, in certain persons, the passive awe provoked by certain beings or events is transformed into a desire to express that awe in a rite of worship or homage, and to be fit homage, this rite must be beautiful. . . . In poetry this rite is verbal; it pays homage by naming.¹⁷

Auden goes on to say that for the poet "the notion of writing cannot occur to him, of course, until he has realized that names and things are not identical and that there cannot be an intelligible sacred language. . . ." ¹⁸
 This paradoxical nature of the sacred act of naming may be seen in Stevens' poem entitled "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges" in which he evokes a picture of a woman named Ursula who praises the Lord with an offering of radishes. At the end of the poem Stevens states that "This is not writ/In any book" (CP 22). An invisible text lies behind the visible text. It is a text that cannot be touched; it can only be intimated by human words. The human is as far as we can go:

To say more than human things with human voice,
 That cannot be; to say human things with more
 Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
 To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
 Of human things, that is acutest speech. (CP 300)

Yet the limits of human possibility are unaccountably wider in scope than we have imagined them to be. In the next chapter I hope to further explore the heights and depths of the human universe into which Stevens adventured forth.

¹⁷ W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 57.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

CHAPTER IV

THE MANY AND THE ONE: CHAOS ALL IN ORDER

Nietzsche has remarked in Beyond Good And Evil: "Whatsoever is profound loves masks; what is most profound even hates image and parable. Might not nothing less than the opposite be the proper disguise of the shame of a god?"¹ But, if I may add another question to Nietzsche's image, might not nothing less than the opposite be the proper disguise for the glory of a god? In the previous chapter we have seen how in Stevens' poetry the glory of being reveals itself through the masks of its opposite--through the appearances that conceal it. In this chapter I would like to show other aspects of this same paradox of being. A great deal of philosophical investigation in the western world has tantalized itself with questionings that imply a choice between exclusive alternatives. Questions like the following are asked: is the universe essentially monistic or essentially pluralistic? Is all activity in the universe governed by ascertainable laws or is all apparent order simply illusory? These questions themselves imply a way of looking at things--a bifurcated way, at that. Yet if questions are to remain alive, they cannot imply preconceptions of a choice of answer within them. Stevens explains of his hero in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 50.

He had to choose. But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. (CP 403)

Questions must remain alive, open. Consequently, if they are to remain alive, questions concerning the nature of the universe in its unity and plurality and in its order and chaos must be restated as questions of relation, not exclusion, of "ofness," not "betweenness." These must not be seen merely as objective questions to be ascertained by knowable facts in a closed world. These questions must grow from within, not outside of, the centre of our being.

The question of the relationship existing between the unity of the universe and its plurality is itself intimately related to the question of being and its appearances. Being by its very nature is that which is undefinably single, unified, common to all things. Yet this unity of being of all things reveals itself in the plurality of the appearances of things. In a passage from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens fully describes this process:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
From the ever-early candor to its late plural

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
The poem, through candor, brings back a power again
That gives a candid kind to everything. (CP 382)

Louis Martz notes that "Candor, in its root meaning, here signifies the thing grasped in its radiant essence, the full clear, white, pure, dazzling realization of the world and all things in it."² Candor is thus the revelation of being in its first and one moment of appearance into the world. The plurality of all other moments of human creativity are re-creations of the first and one dazzling moment of creation. The abundant plurality of all things is itself a consequence of this one "candid" moment of creation. The one moment of creativity overflows with the oneness of itself. Yet this oneness is not lost in its overflowing splendour. The one moment of creativity is an "ever-early candor"; it is recreated and contained within all moments that proceed from it. The oneness of the universe is recreated once again out of the very plurality that it has created out of itself.

The oneness and unity of creation is never really lost. It is there to be discovered again by the human imagination. The purpose of the human imagination is not to create or impose upon the world a unity or order that is not already there. In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens states:

. . . to impose is not
 To discover. To discover an order as of
 A season, to discover summer and know it,

 To discover winter and know it well, to find,
 Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
 Out of nothing to come on major weather,

 It is possible, possible, possible. It must
 Be possible. (CP 403)

² Louis Martz, "Wallace Stevens: The Skeptical Music," The Poem of the Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 189.

To impose is not to discover. The purpose of poetry is to discover the hidden relationships that already exist within the universe. All works of creativity are re-creations that celebrate the first moment of creativity within the universe. This is the sacramental act in which all poetry participates. It is not an easy task.

In order to create a work of art, an artist must begin at the beginning of the world as he sees it in the facts of his experience. If the artist is to apprehend a momentary vision of the world in its unity, he cannot start with any preconceived notion of what that unity is going to be. It has to come from the plurality of particulars in experience that he confronts in the world. As Stevens has stated in The Necessary Angel, "The accuracy of accurate letters is an accuracy with respect to the structure of reality" (NA 71). It is the inherent structure of the world that the poet must discover, if he is to re-create an accurate and honest structure of unity in his art. This task is difficult because, as Henri Bergson suggests, it operates in defiance of our normal way of doing things in the universe:

Thinking usually consists in passing from concepts to things, and not from things to concepts. To know a reality, in the usual sense of the word "know," is to take ready-made concepts, to portion them out and to mix them together until a practical equivalent of the reality is obtained.³

The title of Stevens' final poem in his Collected Poems called "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" is an allusion to a phrase in William

³ Henri Bergson, An Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), p. 38.

Carlos Williams' Paterson which reads, "no ideas but in things."⁴ In Williams' words there must be a "dispersal" of old preconceived socio-linguistic conceptions of the truth before there can be a "gathering up"⁵ of a new revolutionized vision of the truth and unity of the world. In Stevens' poem entitled "On the Road Home" we can see a radical attempt on the part of the poet to disperse all presuppositions of what constitutes the unity and truth of the world:

It was when I said,
 "There is no such thing as the truth,"
 That the grapes grew fatter.
 The fox ran out of his hole.

You . . . You said,
 "There are many truths,
 But they are not parts of a truth."
 Then the tree, at night, began to change,

Smoking through green and smoking blue.
 We were two figures in the wood.
 We said we stood alone.

It was when I said,
 "Words are not forms of a single word.
 In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
 The world must be measured by eye. . . . (CP 203-204)

The world must be encountered in the particulars of its truths, if we are to change our visions of it. To say of anything that "this is the one truth" is to limit truth's revelation of itself as truth. This is to impose an idea of truth that we have conceived of beforehand. But truth does not come beforehand. In a poem entitled "Landscape with Boat" Stevens

⁴ William Carlos Williams, Paterson (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 14.

⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

suggests:

And that if nothing was the truth, then all
 Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.
 (CP 242)

Any generalized conception of the truth, by its very nature, limits the multiplicity of all particular truths. But truth is more than a conception, a conceptualized statement that corresponds to reality within a framework of analogy. Truth is a revelation. It cannot come beforehand. It happens. The Greek word for truth, Aletheia, also means revelation. In the final stanza of "On the Road Home" we can see the plurality of truths expressed in the previous stanzas manifest themselves in a revelation of a unity that lies beyond the saying of any single truth:

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)

It is only when plurality is unconditionally acknowledged that unity may reveal itself.

Only by an encounter with the physical world in its concrete particularity of truth may the artist take hold of a vision that transcends the world in its particularity. In "Esthétique du Mal" Stevens feels "metaphysical changes" (CP 326) only after realizing that the "greatest poverty is not to live/In a physical world" (CP 325). The world in its physicality must come first. The artist cannot "evade" the difficulty of accepting "the structure/Of things as the structure of ideas" (CP 327). In the ninth section of Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" we

can see the cry of the poem in its quest for the particulars of experience:

We keep coming back and coming back
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
Transfixing by being purely what it is,
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection. 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 471-472)

The object, the particular of experience, transfixes "by being purely what it is." By being completely physical, true to itself in its physicality, the object is transformed from being something that is merely physical. By being composed completely out of the "simple seeing" of the eye, the object apprehended by the poet is something more than "merely the visible." The within of the object transfixes itself as part of the poet himself and the "moment" that his poetry celebrates. It is at this moment that the poet experiences the plurality of the particulars of experience merging together in a unity as profound as the "pattern of the heavens."

Getting down to the particulars of experience is the most crucial, and, at the same time, the most difficult occupation of a poet. As I have shown in my quotation from Bergson, the usual process of our experience

in the world is from preconceived ideas to things, and not from things to ideas. As Stevens observes in "The Bed of Old John Zeller" this common mode of confronting life can only lead to disaster:

This structure of ideas, these ghostly sequences
Of the mind, result only in disaster. It follows,
Casual poet, that to add your own disorder to disaster

Makes more of it. It is easy to wish for another structure
Of ideas and to say as usual that there must be
Other ghostly sequences, and, it would be, luminous

Sequences, thought of among spheres in the old peak of
night:

This is the habit of wishing, as if one's grandfather lay
In one's heart and wished as he had always wished, unable
To sleep in that bed for its disorder, talking of ghostly
Sequences that would be sleep and ting-tang tossing, so
that

He might slowly forget. It is more difficult to evade

That habit of wishing and to accept the structure
Of things as the structure of ideas. It was the structure
Of things at least that was thought of in the old peak of
night. (CP 326-327)

Neither an old nor a new "structure of ideas" can be imposed upon the reality of particulars by the poet. The structure of ideas must emerge from and within the structure of reality. It must be discovered by the poet from the withinness of his experience. Otherwise, even a newly manufactured "structure of ideas" must necessarily degenerate into an "obsolete fiction" (CP 250), as obsolete as the stylizations of last year's model of cars. To stylize reality is to make it obsolescent, old, un-reborn, unawakened. "Ghostly sequences/Of the mind" that "would be sleep" are created so that "He might slowly forget" the true ancient presentness of his being which lies in the "old peak of night."

The artist has to cut deep into the idealizations and stylizations

that "the structure of ideas" in his cultural tradition has imposed upon him to suppress him from "the structure of things." The tradition that Stevens most unremittingly embattled against was the poetic-cultural tradition of romanticism. In his early poem "The Comedian as the Letter C" Stevens has his hero cry out against it:

Nota: his soil is man's intelligence
 That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find.
 Crispin in one laconic phrase laid bare
 His cloudy drift and planned a colony.
 Exit the mental moonlight, exit lex,
 Rex and principium, exit the whole
 Shebang. Exeunt omnes. Here was prose
 More exquisite than any tumbling verse. (CP 36-37)

"Cloudy drift" and "mental moonlight" are typical romantic images that the poet must cut into, if he is to get back to the soil where his true intelligence lies, to "the essential prose/As being" (CP 36) that lies beneath the contraptions of obsolescent romantic imagery.

In a later poem entitled "Man on the Dump" we see the poet himself experiencing all the emptiness of the dead contraptions of the past:

Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
 (All its images are in the dump) and you see
 As a man (not like an image of a man),
 You see the moon rise in the empty sky. (CP 202)

In face of the obsolete garbaged images of the past "the man on the dump" sits confused and distraught in questionings:

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
 One beats and beats for that which one believes.
 That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
 Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
 To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
 Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear

Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
 Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds
 On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
 Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur aptest eve:
 Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
 The day to pieces and cry stanza my stone?
 Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the. (CP 203)

In the above stanza we can feel a sense of the terrifying estrangement and confusion of the poet's predicament. The poet "wants to get near" life, but he is separated from his very belief in it. The image of the nightingale, a romantic image of the belief in the music of life, merely "tortures the ear." All feelings about these images of the past seem to dissociate themselves from one another in an array of garbled meaninglessness. The abstract "structure of ideas" has lost meaning in relation to "the structure of things." Words have lost contact with reality. What could an "aptest eve" or an "invisible priest" possibly be? Language is so garbled up with reality that all that remains of language at the end of the poem is the stunted phrase "The the." In a way this sense of confusion of language on the part of the poet is utterly necessary, if he is to get beyond the false preconceived clarities that have been imposed upon him by the leaden mere appearances of the world. In the writing of The Four Quartets Eliot speaks of making "a raid on the inarticulate."⁶ Yet this battle against the inarticulate must never be purely defensive. If a poet is merely defending himself against the confusions of his language and the confusions of his feeling, he is ultimately defending himself against real clarity and eloquence of the first degree. It is precisely

⁶ Eliot, Complete Poems and Plays, p. 128.

that which is too easily articulated that the poet must battle against. In "The Hero as the Poet" Carlyle has remarked of the "Great Man" that "whatsoever is truly great in him springs from the inarticulate deeps."⁷ The poet must venture forth into the inarticulate, if he is to transcend it. The poem must always be suspicious of the dawn of his first clarity. In the first stanza of "To the One of Fictive Music" Stevens speaks of his muse as "Most near, most clear, and of the clearest bloom" (CP 87). Yet in the final stanza he makes the qualification:

Yet not too like, yet not so like to be
 Too near, too clear, saving a little to endow
 Our feigning with a strange unlike. . . . (CP 88)

As Stevens suggests in this poem, the poet must undertake a vigilant musing of the "obscure" (CP 88). The poetry cannot allow the appearance of reality to freeze into a rigid clarity. The poet must remain open to the strangeness of life in all the obscurities of its strangeness.

If a poet is to reach down toward the "inarticulate deeps" of his being, he must dare to tear himself even deeper than confusion into a world of total chaos. But it is a very special kind of chaos. The concept of chaos as used in Stevens' poetry, like most other important concepts that he uses, suggests two opposing meanings, one positive and one negative. In his poem "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" Stevens delineates the nature of chaos in its negative aspect:

People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,
 Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old,

⁷ Thomas Carlyle, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," Prose of the Victorian Period, ed. W. E. Buckler (New York: Riverside, 1958), p. 128.

The air is full of children, statues, roofs
And snow. The theatre is spinning round,

Colliding with deaf-mute churches and optical trains.
The most massive sopranos are singing songs of scales.

And Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemil
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. (CP 357-358)

Coleridge referred to this kind of chaos as the chaos of an indifferentiated whole reduced to "one vast homogenous drop."⁸ All images are held in a "wind that lashes everything at once" without distinction. In its chaotic undifferentiated wholeness the wind, which represents life, has lost all relation to that which is other than itself, or more specifically, that which is other than itself in itself. This is to say that as an "undifferentiated whole" the wind has ironically lost relation with itself. Consequently as the title suggests the wind in its motion is not in motion. If everything belonged to the wind, then the wind could not blow. It is a simple truth of relativity. This variety of chaos in the wind of things is in fact far too viscerously clear in the fatality of its order. But Stevens was a connoisseur of chaos. He knew all varieties.

The first two sections of Stevens' poem entitled "Connoisseur of Chaos" read like lunatic syllogisms written on a mountain top by a Buddhist monk:

⁸ Samuel Coleridge, "Theory of Life," Complete Works, ed. W. G. Shedd (New York: Harper and Bros., 1876), p. 401.

I

A. A violent order is disorder; and
 B. A great disorder is an order. These
 Two things are one. (Pages of illustrations.)

II

If all the green of spring was blue, and it is;
 If the flowers of South Africa were bright
 On the tables of Connecticut, and they are;
 If Englishmen lived without tea in Ceylon, and they do;
 And if all went on in an orderly way,
 And it does; a law of inherent opposites,
 Of essential unity, is as pleasant as port,
 As pleasant as the brush-strokes of a bough,
 An upper, particular bough in, say, Marchand. (CP 215)

These passages seem to flow with the startling humour of a zen koan. The point that Stevens is implying is that even our illogical statements concerning the nature of the human predicament are self-satisfying evasions of the illogic or "great disorder" of human existence. To say that the order and mystery of life is "chaotic" can itself be a rhetorical device of the mind created to cushion us from reality. The reason why the illogic of the second section seems so complacent in its pose is that its illogic finds its point of definition in relation to logic, not in relation to life itself. In doing this the illogical takes on the hidden assumptions of the logical. It glues itself to the mind and the logic of the mind. But the truly illogical or unaccountable must get beyond the language of the mind. Stevens remarks in the third section that the "squirming facts exceed the squamous mind." The truly chaotic or unaccountable must emerge from beneath the violently disordered order of our language:

The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind,
 If one may say so. And yet relation appears,
 A small relation expanding like the shade
 Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill. (CP 215)

The true irrational mystery emerges from chaos to reveal the unaccountable order of that chaos. Real order grows; it cannot survive entrapped within language.

In the fourth section of the poem we see a restatement of the truths stated in the first section as qualified by what has been said in the third section:

A. Well, an old order is a violent one.
 This proves nothing. Just one more truth, one more
 Element in the immense disorder of truths.
 B. It is April as I write. The wind
 Is blowing after days of constant rain.
 All this, of course, will come to summer soon.
 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. (CP 216)

The truth of the world in its chaos is not merely an abstraction of the intellect "posed" like a statue. The world must be concretely encountered in its winds of change "blowing after days of constant rain." All metaphysical statements of truth must grow in appearance from that which is concretely physical. A metaphysical order also can only emerge from the chaos of the concretely physical as the poet experiences it:

The pensive man . . . He sees the eagle float
 For which the intricate Alps are a single nest. (CP 216)

What the pensive man or poet sees is not a chaos of sensations bound together in an "undifferentiated whole." He sees a plurality of details that make their appearance in relation to one another. This new relation be-

tween things is "chaotic" in the sense that it cannot be known beforehand. It is also chaotic in the sense that it cannot be made accountable to any formal order conceived of by the human mind. The unity and order of the perception of an eagle floating above "the intricate Alps" is of its own unity and order and only of its own unity and order. It is very difficult to conceive of an order of "things as they are" (CP 165) within the framework of our western tradition of thinking. When we usually think of an order we think of an imposed order. We conceive of the order of the stars in the sky as basically chaotic; and so in fear of this chaos we impose names like "The Little Dipper" upon it. But the stars in the sky do have an order--their order. The leaves on a tree also have an order which is their order and their order alone. Zen has given the name li to this kind of order. This is the kind of order that Stevens is experiencing in his perception of "the intricate Alps."

In the final section of "Connoisseur of Chaos" we can see that the order to which "the intricate Alps" emerge does not exist independently of man's perception of that order. Although all order is in some sense man's order, man must go beyond himself and his words if he is to grow. The order of the universe is simply the chaos of "one vast homogenous drop" without man and his words. This can be seen in Stevens' poem entitled "The Idea of Order at Key West." In this poem we can feel the "maker's rage to order words of the sea" (CP 130), of "the meaningless plungings of the water and the wind" (CP 129). But the energy that compels the creator to order words out of the sea is ironically the chaos within man, the inarticulate depths of his soul. The "she" that is called forth in

the poem is, I think, the poet's soul, the female soul within a man to which Jung gave the name anima. It is through the ordering of her chaos that the world is ordered from out of its chaos. It is from the wordless unknowable depths of her being that words first emerge in appearance. From the appearance of her words the world comes into being from its unknowable depths. The world is recreated out of her song of it:

She was the single artificer of the world
 In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
 Whatever self it had, became the self
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
 As we beheld her striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made. (CP 129-130)

The appearance of the words of her song gives birth to the world in its appearance. Yet, as I have previously noted, the appearance of words which reveals the strange order of reality also tends to conceal that order. The mystery of the sea lies beyond words; the sea in its "mimic motion" is "inhuman" (CP 128) and "ever-hooded" (CP 129). The syntax of language tends to conceal the syntax of the world. Yet within human language resides the possibility of intimating something beyond mere language and the merely human. It was only after "the singing ended" (CP 130) that the poet was able to comprehend a deeper invisible order beneath the visible orderings of his words:

The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
 As the night descended, tilting in the air,
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (CP 130)

Reality is constantly deepening into itself, re-ordering and re-arranging itself, changing. The difficulty with language, including poetic language, is that it tends to grasp hold of the order that it has created for itself into an unchanging pattern. The very creation of poetic metaphor slows down the process of the metamorphosis of reality. Stevens observes in "Adagia" that the "absolute object slightly turned is a metaphor of the object" (OP 179). Everything is constantly turning. As Stevens suggests in "Description without Place" metaphor cannot capture the world in its immensity of change:

There might be, too, a change immenser than
A poet's metaphors in which being would

Come true, a point in the fire of music where
Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe,

And observing is completing and we are content,
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind. (CP 341)

Life dazzles. It reaches us at the speed of light, far faster than words can tell. The world dazzles into the clarity of an order and unity "immediate" and "complete" in itself. All linguistic "secret arrangements of it in the mind" are evasions of its central clarity. Life's order touches us at a point beneath our conscious understandings, even beneath our unconscious understandings. The dazzling clarity of life's unity and oneness can only be perceived in all of its intimacy at a level which Stevens calls "clairvoyant" in "A Primitive like an Orb":

One poem proves another and the whole,
For the clairvoyant men that need no proof:
The lover, the believer and the poet. (CP 441)

Clairvoyancy cannot be explained, in any real sense, through language. It represents a hidden unity of being that cuts beneath language. Yet it can be intimated through the very language that conceals its clear-sightedness. All clairvoyance is silent. But it is a silence which comes only after the coming of the poem.

At one point Stevens expressed a desire to call his Collected Poems "The Whole of Harmonium." This desire suggests an assumption on Stevens' part that there was some sort of underlying order in his poetry. But considering the mass of poems and the complexity of his themes I do not think that Stevens considered his poetry to have an explainable order. I think he simply wanted the order of his poetry to be considered in its own terms like that of the order of the leaves of a tree. This does not mean that its order is chaotic in the sense of being random or completely unconscious. It means that the order and harmony of the poems intimate that very clairvoyant order and harmony of the universe of nature that has given birth to these poems. This order I have previously described in Buddhist terminology as li.

In a very important sense the nature of li cannot be known by the very fact that it cannot be stated in terms of an order other than itself. Li is of its own order and of its own order alone. But because we and the language that we utter are also part of li there are certain fundamental elements in the nature of this universal harmony that we can consciously apprehend, and by our comprehension of them, somehow deepen our comprehension of li at intuitive or clairvoyant levels. One element that we can consciously apprehend in the harmony of the universe and poetry

that participates in the universe is repetition. Every leaf on a tree echoes all other leaves on that tree. Every spring follows the upbeat of every other spring that has preceded it. Our hearts beat. The sun dies to be reborn out of its death to die again. Rhythmic repetition is the open secret of the universe. It is with the very sounding of poetry that this open secret is made sacred. This rhythmic repetition of everything in creation is celebrated by Stevens in the final part of his "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" entitled "It Must Give Pleasure." He speaks of the things of life and nature as comprising a series of repetitions:

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 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 405-406)

Every creative moment is a repetition of all creative moments that have preceded it; for, as I have explained at the beginning of this chapter, all moments of creation participate in the One first moment of creation. The human imagination itself is what Coleridge called "the finite repetition of the infinite I am."⁹

⁹ Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, p. 167.

There is of course a negative sense in which we can say that all things within the universe are repetitive. It is in this negative sense that Kierkegaard speaks of "repetition" in his book called Repetition. Things degenerate into mere repetitions when rhythmic repetition in its fulness becomes habituated into our lives. In the same poem that Stevens celebrates the importance of repetition he complains of its possible fatality:

. . . the distaste we feel for this withered scene

Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,
It is a repetition. The bees come booming
As if--The pigeons clatter in the air.

An erotic perfume, half of the body, half
Of an obvious acid is sure what it intends
And the booming is blunt, not broken in subtleties. (CP 390)

The imagination must get back to a "beginning, not resuming" (CP 391). It must get back to all the potent subtlety of its beginnings, to its identity with the one moment of creation from which the plurality of all creation springs. Yet this identity of all creative acts is not a "blunt" identity of sameness; what makes a creative act is precisely its difference from other creative acts. One can make an amusing logical paradox out of this and say that the common attribute of all creative acts is their lack of common attributes. But that would be looking at the issue from without. The unity of all creative acts comes from within and cuts deeper than logic.

Real rhythmic repetition implies a universe of constant change in which no moment is the same. Every moment is as unique as the moment it

emerges from. But this does not mean that events within time are unrelated to one another. On the contrary, every event in the universe is bound with every other event in time by its very uniqueness. It is by an event's very uniqueness that it can unfold as a variation or an improvisation of the events that have preceded it. Through variation or improvisation that most profound unity of an order reveals itself:

The law of chaos is the law of ideas,
Of improvisations and seasons of belief. (CP 255)

The formal pattern of an initial theme and its improvised variations can be seen in many of Stevens' poems from "Peter Quince At The Clavier" to "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Indeed the "whole of harmonium" may be seen as an unstated theme cast in its numerous complex variations.

Stevens' poem entitled "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is probably the most vivid example of his working through the process of a theme and its variations. In this poem we are presented thirteen haiku-like poems apparently connected to one another only by the presence of a blackbird. But there are unities within this poem that suggest themselves at a far subtler level, subtler than the words themselves. At a most elusively obvious level, the individual poems flow into unity with one another by the very silence that separates them from one another:

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after. (CP 93)

The blackbird whistling and the silence that comes just after cannot be preferred to one another because they are a part of one another. The silence that proceeds from the sounds of a blackbird or the sounds of a poem has something of the quality of those sounds within it. Conversely, all sound, including the sounding of a poem, has a quality of silence within it:

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime. (CP 93)

The noise of a blackbird in a whirl of wind is part of the soundless pantomime it has emerged from. Every moment in the poem participates in what has preceded it:

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow. (CP 95)

In an even deeper sense all moments in the poem conceal themselves within each other. Each of the thirteen sections comes and goes like the coming and the going of the blackbird. But each of these comings and goings are part of one another:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles. (CP 94)

The going of the blackbird from the edge of one circle marks the coming of the blackbird upon the edge of another. The participation of all events and things in one another is categorical as well as spatio-temporal:

A man and a woman
 Are one.
 A man and a woman and a blackbird
 Are one. (CP 93)

In the above passage we can feel the unity of the universe retained as it expands in its multiplicity. Yet, at the same time, this unity retains its multiplicity in its very unity. As Northrop Frye observes, the man and the woman and the blackbird retain individuality in their oneness among themselves.¹⁰ In a larger sense, the entire poem may be seen as a unity of distinctly individual poems. The essential nature of the mystery of multiplicity within unity cannot, of course, be explained. It is non-rational, intuitional, clairvoyant:

The river is moving.
 The blackbird must be flying. (CP 94)

The moving of the river in relation to the flying of the blackbird is of its own order. It cannot be explained by an order imposed upon it from without.

We cannot impose an order upon the real. Reality is there only to be discovered as it discloses itself before and within our being. The ecological mess that this planet is in now is an inevitable result of a spurious attempt to impose an order upon nature that is not its own. Any attempt to go against the grain of nature is self-defeating from the very beginning: to conquer oneself is to conquer oneself. The roots of this suicidal desire to defeat ourselves began to manifest themselves with the rational consciousness of the seventeenth century and the scientific and

¹⁰ Frye, "The Realistic Oriole," Fables of Identity, p. 248.

industrial revolutions of which it was a part. Since that time poets and various other artists have cried out against the obstinate stupidity of such a consciousness. In the nineteenth century this cry for life could be heard from the Romantic Poets, but the trouble with the Romantic Poets is that they wanted to go back. However, it is impossible to go back. A more realistic attempt to grow forward into the world can be seen in twentieth century America in the writings of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. Paterson may be seen as Williams' struggle to emerge and grow from the decay of the earth around him. "The Whole of Harmonium" may be seen as the testimony of Stevens' struggle. In some ways Stevens grandly succeeded in recreating a new vision of man's place in nature. Yet there are, as far as I see, terrifying limitations in some aspects of Stevens' growth as a poet. In my assessment of Stevens in the final chapter I will attempt to examine some of these limitations.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: STEVENS' IDEA OF THE HERO

In his timeless visions of the order and wonder of things the poet experiences that which whispers within him at a point that is deeper than life itself. Yet the life that is lived from day to day is what most concerns us. Timeless visions will betray themselves as the most devious evasions of timeless wonder itself, if the poet does not define their presence in relation to time. The poet must see his poetry in relation to the specific time and place of his being. The time that the modern poet finds himself immersed in is a revolutionary period of a great shift in life and consciousness. Throughout this thesis I have attempted to delineate this great shift in consciousness in its emergence from the intense despair of a dualistic view of the world toward a new and deeper realization of life's possibilities. What gives the modern world, as say compared to the medieval world, the possibility of a deeper fulness of life is its very self-consciousness. As I have elucidated in the second chapter of this thesis, this greater self-consciousness of man grew with his scientifically oriented dualistic conception of himself. Yet within this dualistic separation of man from his universe paradoxically lies the possibility of man experiencing the appearance of life in its multiplicity and unity with a greater fulness of consciousness. In the third and fourth chapters of this thesis I have tried to reveal some of the dynamic processes of this new appearance of life.

This intense consciousness of self that gives the fundamental character to the modern world may be perceived in Stevens' poem entitled "Of Modern Poetry":

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
 What will suffice. It has not always had
 To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
 Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
 To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
 It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
 It has to face the men of the time and to meet
 The women of the time. It has to think about war
 And it has to find what will suffice. It has
 To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
 And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
 With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
 In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
 Exactly, that which it wants to hear. . . . (CP 239-40)

In this poem Stevens is picturing the modern creative artist as an improvising actor who through his act of creating poetry discovers the underlying passions of his time. The artist must himself self-consciously discover the meaning of his own drama by the fact that the preconceived cultural consciousness concerning man's place in the universe has broken down and proved itself to be unworkable. The scene is no longer set. In face of this disintegration the artist's responsibility is to help generate a new cultural consciousness. However, the basis of a new cultural consciousness would not lie in cultural consciousness itself; it would lie in self-consciousness. In "Adagia" Stevens states:

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you
 know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The
 exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that
 you believe in it willingly. (OP 163)

Pascal, a revolutionary thinker himself, remarked in one of his pensees that the "only reason for following custom is that it is custom, not that it is reasonable or just. . . ." ¹ One must see through the "fiction" or transparency of all human activity; and yet one must also celebrate human activity in its very transparency.

Stevens' conception of the transparency of human reality and the values or "fictions" of human reality finds its point of definition in his creation of the "hero" in his later poetry. In many ways Stevens' idea of what constitutes a creative artist resembles his idea of what constitutes a hero. In some of his poems it is next to impossible to distinguish between the two. This necessarily should be the case. The ideal of the artist, as Stevens sees it, should be to achieve the same degree of total transparency that the idea of the hero embodies. Yet the idea of the hero is ultimately greater than the reality of any given individual--artist or otherwise. In his poem entitled "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" Stevens remarks that the "hero is not a person" (CP 277). He more sardonically suggests in "Adagia" that "no man is a hero to anyone who knows him" (OP 174). Stevens conceived of the hero as "anonymous" (CP 279), unnameable. The hero manifests his existence prior to all human attributes and forms the basis of them. The hero or "the glass man" (CP 251) is the elemental transparency through which the colorations of being reveal their appearances.

Although the hero does not rest his identity in any one man, he is common to all men. In the same poem in which Stevens states that the "hero

¹ Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 214.

is not a person" he also states:

The common man is the common hero.
The common hero is the hero. (CP 275)

The idea of the hero is the most common and universal characteristic of all men. It is perceived as the "self of selves" (CP 297). This universal characteristic within all men lies beneath all other characteristics and makes them possible. In these terms the idea of the heroic may simply be stated to be the idea of human possibility or that which is humanly possible. In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" Stevens speaks of a quest of "the possible for its possiblensness" (CP 481). The heroic is the "possiblensness" of experience. In Stevens' poem entitled "Paisant Chronicle" the indefinable nature of this hero of the possible is explored:

And the chronicle of humanity is the sum
Of paisant chronicles.

The major men--
That is different. They are characters beyond
Reality, composed thereof. They are
The fictive men created out of men.
They are men but artificial men. They are
Nothing in which it is not possible
To believe, more than the casual hero, more
Than Tartuffe as myth, the most Moliere,
The easy projection long prohibited.

The baroque poet may see him as still a man
As Virgil, abstract. But see him for yourself,
The fictive man. He may be seated in
A Cafe. There may be a dish of country cheese
And a pineapple on the table. It must be so. (CP 335)

The hero or "the major man" is not merely the sum of "paisant chronicles" --that is to say, realized human possibilities; he is the image of possibility itself. In Sartre's existential terminology he may be said to be

the existence that is concealed in its priority to human essence. Man "may be" anything. But as soon as the heroically possible actualizes itself in the fact of human experience, it limits its own possibility and thus is no longer a complete image of the heroically possible. Consequently the idea of the hero can never be human in actuality. The hero is the "fiction" that lies behind all human "fictions" or what Stevens calls "paisant chronicles."

The appearance of any actualized particular fiction reveals and yet at the same time conceals what Stevens calls the "supreme fiction" of being in its possibility. Every "fiction" or "story" of a man's life has something deeply submerged within it that makes it more than merely the story of his "personal" life. All personal stories have a strange "impersonal" depth in them, an inhuman strangeness with which all humanity participates. It is this more than personal element in myths and stories that has attracted every known culture toward them. The fascination with story, whether in picture or in word, is in itself the very basis of art. On still another level the human fascination with story reveals itself even below our conscious thinking in the area of our dreams. The story of every individual's life and dreams is different from the story of every other individual's. It is this difference that makes life endurable and exciting. Yet the very plurality of the stories of human experience also constitutes a unity. In terms of what I have said in the previous chapter the inherent order of every story must necessarily participate in a clairvoyant unity with every other story. Every story is a repetition of every other story and all stories ultimately tell one and only one story. This

one story is what Stevens calls a "supreme fiction" in his "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." This "supreme fiction" is the ground of possibility which frees all stories that proceed from it to actualize themselves. The "supreme fiction" is that which makes the belief in the truth of all stories possible within us. We may identify with Iago in Shakespeare's Othello, not because we are all Iagos, but because we all have the possibility of becoming Iagos within us. It is from the place of the "supreme fiction" that the belief in the possibilities of actual experience emerge. But in itself the "supreme fiction" must not be mistaken for the actual fiction of our lives. It is completely transparent, invisible, closer to us than our eyes.

This impersonal "supreme fiction" finds its embodiment in what Stevens refers to as the "hero." As an expression of the possible forms existing within man, the hero by necessity can have no distinct human form. To perceive the heroic in men is to "perceive men without reference to their form" (CP 296). He is the more than human which provides the invisible root of human activity. In order to suggest this more than human quality of the hero Stevens pictures him as a giant in many of his poems, such as "Chocorua to its Neighbor," "Gigantomachia," "Jumbo," and "Primitive like an Orb." The final two verses of "Primitive like an Orb" explain in fair detail Stevens' conception of the hero:

XI

Here, then, is an abstraction given head,
 A giant on the horizon, given arms,
 A massive body and long legs, stretched out,
 A definition with an illustration, not
 Too exactly labelled, a large among the smalls

Of it, a close, parental magnitude,
 At the centre on the horizon, concentrum, grave
 And prodigious person, patron of origins.

XII

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)

In these stanzas we can see that the gigantic "primitive" or primal hero is given the form of a human body, but it is a form that is "not/Too exactly labelled." He himself cannot have a specific human form, for he is the "patron of origins"--the originator of all human forms. Of "parental magnitude" he gives birth to all possibilities; and dwelling "at the centre of the horizon" he is that which gives to us the possibility of perspective and vision. He is like the "concentrum" earth itself, constantly turning and changing. He is the "abstraction" that frees life and art to actualize themselves in their "fated eccentricity." Yet the hero is a "giant of nothingness." By himself he does not exist; Stevens represents him as a kind of invisible "ether" through which creation moves.

In his poem entitled "Asides on the Oboe" Stevens more deeply describes the invisibly transparent nature of the hero. The hero who is a "glass man, without external reference" (CP 251) is further described by Stevens as:

The impossible possible philosophers' man
 The man who has had the time to think enough,
 The central man, the human globe, responsive

As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up. (CP 250)

The hero is the "impossible possible philosopher's man" because he is the ground of human possibility without being distinctively human himself. He is "the central man" who reflects within himself everything in the glittering moving universe that encompasses him. He is the "transparence of the place in which/He is" (CP 251)--the transparent secret through which reality reveals itself. The nature of this revelation can be seen in Stevens' poem entitled "Jumbo":

Who the transformer, himself transformed,
Whose single being, single form
Were their resemblances to ours?

The companion in nothingness,
Loud, general, large, fat, soft
And wild and free, the secondary man,

Cloud--clown, blue painter, sun as horn,
Hill-scholar, man that never is,
The bad-bespoken lacker,

Ancestor of Narcissus, prince
Of the secondary men. There are no rocks
And stones, only this imager. (CP 269)

Here the hero is described as the central or prime image of man that generates all "secondary men" and all secondary images. Yet as a "bad-bespoken lacker" the image in which the hero participates is one of lack of content. He is the transparent image of nothingness that creates forms, that transforms the appearances of the world in their emergence from being. The hero is described in this poem as representing a "single being, single form." However, out of the singularity of the hero there arises a multiplicity of "resemblances" to him in all secondary men. He is the "general"

man or the genus that gives birth to the specific in the world. Being "general" the hero in some sense must be necessarily abstract. It is noteworthy that Stevens gave the title "It Must Be Abstract" to the second section of his "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." However, if the hero is merely a literally vacant abstraction, how can its image have any concrete human significance to our lives? The question is crucial.

The problem concerning the "abstract" nature of the hero is identical to the problem concerning the "abstract" nature of being. The problem of the abstract nature of being is posed by Heidegger as follows:

Beyond the domain of this most universal concept "being," there is, in the strictest sense of the word, nothing more, on the basis of which being itself could be more closely determined. The concept of being is an ultimate. Moreover, there is a law of logic that says: the more comprehensive a concept is--and what could be more comprehensive than the concept of "being"--the more indeterminate and empty its content.²

After posing this problem Heidegger later goes on to state:

Thus the word "being" is indefinite in meaning and yet we understand it definitely. "Being" proves to be totally indeterminate in meaning and yet at the same time highly determinate.³

The indefinite quality of being is embodied in Stevens' explanation that "It is and it/Is not and, therefore, is" (CP 440). Being is in a sense so indefinite that it cannot be made distinct from its opposite--not being.

² Heidegger, Metaphysics, p. 33.

³ Ibid., p. 66.

It is this indeterminate character of being that gives birth to freedom and the possibility of change in the world. Yet in passages such as the following Stevens speaks of being with a concreteness that can almost be touched:

What place in which to be is not enough
To be? You go, poor phantoms, without place. . . . (CP 320)

To be is to be concretely in the place of our lives. Being is so real in its concreteness it might be mistaken for the merely inconcrete and indefinite.

The being of the hero, like being itself, also has a double aspect of both indefinite abstraction and determinate concreteness. In one sense the hero is a "giant of nothingness" (CP 443) who must always appear more than human in relation to human being. Yet in another sense the hero in his very quality of being more than human is more concretely human than any individual human being. In "Primitive like an Orb" Stevens refers to him as "an abstraction given head" (CP 443) and in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" he refers to the hero as an "abstraction blooded" (CP 385). This double conception of the hero can be seen in Stevens' poem "Chocorua to its Neighbor":

They wanted him by day to be, image,
But not the person, of their power, thought,
But not the thinker, large in their largeness, beyond
Their form, beyond their life, yet of themselves,
Excluding by his largeness their defaults. (CP 299)

The hero is "beyond their forms," "yet of themselves." In "Gigantomachia" Stevens makes the suggestion that there are times when man can achieve a

oneness with the more than human within him:

Each man himself became a giant,
Tipped out with largeness, bearing the heavy
And the high, receiving out of others,
As from an inhuman elevation
And origin, an inhuman person,
A mask, a spirit, an accoutrement. (CP 289)

This meeting of the human and the more than human may be described as an incarnation brought to birth in the "bread and wine of the mind" (CP 275). In his conception of an invisible abstraction that is "blooded" or made incarnate there is a resemblance to the idea of the incarnation of the invisible in such religious "heroes" as Christ and Buddha. Yet the resemblance for Stevens was limited. Alluding possibly to Nietzsche's references to Christianity Stevens speaks of a "too, too human god, self-pity's kind" (CP 315). The idea of a full incarnation of the invisible seemed unheroic for Stevens.

The closest approximation to an incarnation of the hero was, for Stevens, the artist. The artist, like the hero, is a transparency through which creation moves. The artist does not add to reality; he is an empty impersonal vessel through which creation discovers itself. This conception of the artist is what Keats asserts in his theory of "negative capability."⁴ Eliot also conceived of an impersonal theory of art in which the artist is seen only as a "catalyst" to the changing chemistry around him."⁵ A similar theory of art is also suggested by Stevens in the following poem:

⁴ Keats, "Letter to George and Thomas Keats," Selected Poetry and Letters, p. 304.

⁵ Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Prose, p. 26.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
 And round it was, upon a hill.
 It made the slovenly wilderness
 Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
 And sprawled around, no longer wild.
 The jar was round upon the ground
 And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
 The jar was gray and bare.
 It did not give of bird or bush,
 Like nothing else in Tennessee. (CP 76)

The jar is an image of the vacant self of the artist at the centre of his experience in the world. As we can see, the jar does not add anything to reality by giving "of bird or bush." What it does do in its barrenness is to transform the "wilderness" of life into something that is no longer "wild." Through his transparent receptivity the artist frees the wild passions of life to enter through his soul and be transformed. In this poem the artist is conceived of as a kind of receptacle who through his impassioned passiveness toward experience transforms and reveals it.

There is, I feel, a limitation to the receptacle theory of art. This limitation is, I think, the major limitation of Stevens' poetry. To experience the world passionately as "negative capability" is the first responsibility of the artist. The artist must see "things as they are" with a totally open unobtruded vision. Yet the poet, especially the poet in the modern world, must learn to get beyond his passionately passive receptivity. He must act. In a sense, to see with vision and to write with vision are acts. But the difficulty with Stevens and other poets like him is that they tend to turn everything around them into a poem. On

one level everything is a poem to be enacted; but the point to be made is that this is true only on one level of experience. The poet cannot be caught at experiencing and acting in the world on merely an aesthetic level. There are other levels of experience that must be cut across, be intruded upon. To put it in simple human terms, if a child is dying on the street, a man does not write a poem about how mystical and poetic that act of dying is. A vision of the world on merely an aesthetic plane can be an evasion of that very world that the poet is trying to see. The poet has to cut into the flesh and dirt of the world in all directions--social, economical, political, and the moral, as well as the aesthetic.

Poetry must move beyond poetry. If it remains contained within its own dimensions, it will inevitably sap itself of its force and its energy. This is William Carlos Williams' major criticism of Stevens in his "Prologue to Kora in Hell":

The attention has been held too rigid on the one plane instead of following a more flexible, jagged resort. It is to loosen the attention, my attention since I occupy part of the field, that I write these improvisations. Here I clash with Wallace Stevens.⁶

The imagination has to move in directions other than its own. A movement outward toward the real world of historical time and facts in which we live out our lives first declared itself in the poetry of Ezra Pound. Pound's adventure into politics and economics can be seen by most people as at least partially mistaken. Nevertheless, it was an impetus to the

⁶ William Carlos Williams, Selected Essays (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 11.

formation of a new conception of the modern poet's responsibilities. In Williams' Paterson we can see a further movement outward to a definition of the poet's responsibilities to the particular social community in which he is a part. In the work of such contemporary American poets as Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, and Charles Olson we can feel an urgent commitment toward seeing and acting in face of the realities of the modern social and political world. This commitment toward the world in its facts of experience does not necessarily imply a loss of vision. In actuality it implies a deepening of vision. Stevens himself remarked in "Adagia" that "To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of the imagination but it is to be at the end of both" (OP 175). However, the trouble with Stevens is that he did not believe in the truth of his statement on all planes of experience. He believed it passionately at the aesthetic level of experience. That is not enough.

This limitation can be seen in Stevens' approach to poetry first of all in the lack of range of subject matter. We would hardly think that an economic or political or moral world existed from the reading of his poetry. Things of the world, of course, intrude into his poetry, but too much is excluded. Stevens' poetry may be seen to be too directional, too intentional, too held within itself. Everything seems to move toward the aesthetic. This one-directionality of Stevens' poetry had, it seems to me, a debilitating effect upon his development as a poet. The fire of a fierce lyricism in Harmonium seems to lose much of its energy in Stevens' later, more expository, treatment of his poetry. His earlier poetry is less defined in the character of its feeling and not altogether sure where it was

going, but it is precisely for that reason that it opened a possibility for a more liberated vision of the total world. Stevens' later poetry seems to turn in upon itself in a closed, almost incestuous way. The conception of the hero that Stevens celebrates in his later poetry seems to me to be too remote from the actual world. The hero is not believed in by the poet in full concreteness, as a literal fact of a world in which we must act. The literal idea of the hero is accepted by the poet merely at an aesthetic plane. The danger of perceiving the world only at an aesthetic level can be seen in Stevens' poem entitled "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" in which he sees the misery of the world:

In so much misery; and yet finding it
 Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
 Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead. . . . (CP 509)

The poetry of the poor may indeed be moving. Yet there is a terrible comic disparity in the idea of an insurance executive celebrating the "profound poetry of the poor." The poet must accept experience at all of its level and act accordingly. He has an obligation not to be always lost in the ecstasy of his vision.

In spite of his possible limitations Stevens must be accepted as one of the two or three most important American poets in the first half of the twentieth century. At his best Stevens gives to his readers an awareness of life in all of its immediacy and strange mystery:

Beauty is momentary in the mind--
 The fitful tracing of a portal;
 But in the flesh it is immortal. (CP 91)

Only a great poet would have dared go that far--as unaccountably far as human speech can declare. Yet the secret that the poet proclaims is as close to us as the touch of human music as we feel it surrounding us in the air:

Air is air,
Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere.
Its sounds are not angelic syllables
But our unfashioned spirits realized
More sharply in more furious selves. (CP 137)

"The Whole of Harmonium" can be seen to be nothing more than a celebration of furious life sharpened into song. In the immortality of our flesh we must be grateful.

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