

THE CREATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS: THE METAPHYSICS OF PROCESS
AS DEMONSTRATED IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

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PREFACE

Wallace Stevens was a poet intentionally involved in expanding his consciousness by means of the metaphysical process. That he was metaphysical is manifest in his poetic technique. That he used this technique to expand his awareness of both his outer and inner world is evidenced by his assumption of several poetic personae who are engaged in the submission of their various "selves" to the fires of experience created by the juxtaposition of these various "selves" upon the world around them. The measure of the degree of success of this effort is the degree to which Stevens manages to create immediate experience for the reader. The result is often ironic, in that the "self" of any individual poem often discovers the falsity, or romanticism, of its preconceptions; it discovers the inadequacies of previously discovered "answers" to the human dilemma of change and death.

This study is divided into four chapters. In the first, I shall discuss the metaphysical perspective, the key to the understanding of Stevens's method. In the second, the process of art, a process which can only occur with the admission of the flux of both the world and the self, Time. In chapter III, I shall closely examine some individual poems to illustrate the points that are made in the first two chapters, in hopes that the concreteness of the poems will clearly illustrate the concepts of the first two chapters. Chapter IV will be a

concluding chapter, and the one in which I shall also carry out certain logical extensions concerning the theory of aesthetics manifest in Stevens's art; most notably the implications of the theory about the concepts of tradition and history.

Most of the poems quoted from Stevens are from The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. These will be documented by enclosing CP, along with the page number, in parentheses following the quotations. A few passages will be quoted from Opus Posthumous, both poetic and prose quotations. The same procedure will be followed, except that the abbreviation will be OP.

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CHAPTER I

THE METAPHYSICAL PERSPECTIVE

The poetry of Wallace Stevens is metaphysical in that it is dominated by form, rather than by idea or the subjective effusions of a Wordsworthian Romantic; it is addressed to the intellect and attempts to create an experience for the reader, as does the work of Stevens's predecessors, John Donne and the other seventeenth-century poets dubbed by Dr. Johnson as "metaphysical." Stevens's poetry is one of form; it is not complete until the last word is put down; the people in it, the personae, are not fully drawn until the act of the poem is completed.

The Victorians, and even the Romantics, had wondered about a place for poetry in a scientific world. Rather than allow poetry to retreat into a niche, Stevens, among others, wanted to vitalize it; hence, his poetry is filled with irony, wit, humor, sounds, color, boldness.¹ His remedy lay in the usage of figures of speech:

. . . those phenomena that twist accidance away from the straight course, as if to intimate astonishing lapses of rationality beneath the smooth surface of discourse, inviting perceptual attention, as well as intellectual, and weakening the tyranny of science over the senses.²

¹Robert Buttell, Wallace Stevens, The Making of Harmonium, p. 45.

²John Crowe Ransom, "Poetry: A Note in Ontology," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 41.

Stevens's method is metaphysical, and his aim is to create immediate experience for his reader.

To study a modern poet, and especially Stevens, is to study the masks that he assumes in his poetry.³ Stevens is typical of twentieth-century poets, who have adopted the use of personae. Ezra Pound even entitling a collection of poems Personae. As do Jamesian novelists, modern poets shun using their own voices.⁴

The mode of Stevens's poetry is dramatic and descriptive. The meaning of the poems emerges from variations worked out upon a series of basic metaphors that inform the reader of the exact emotion that the protagonist is experiencing at any given moment in each poem. These metaphors represent the working out of the protagonist's sensibility on the reality which confronts it. Ultimately, the meaning in all the forms stems from the situation of their protagonists who are involved in a world of reality which is not theirs, but which they must make theirs.⁵ In Stevens, one is made aware of a deliberately impersonal voice that amounts to a refusal to use the poem as

³Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, p. 184.

⁴John J. Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements, p. 24.

⁵Roy Harvey Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 115-116.

a vehicle for the direct outpouring of personal emotions. This impersonal quality, however, impresses one not as the bloodlessness of a shallow temperament, but as restraint, the reserve of a man who is willing to accept the reader as a fellow in an intellectual enterprise, but who has no interest in making him his confidant.⁶ And it is in this sense that one can speak of the impersonal and objective tone of Stevens's poetry.⁷

This impersonal quality is attributable to Stevens's awareness of the fact that the act of experiencing is always different; and, so, too, are the possibilities, the materials which confront the poet, into which he enters in the poetic act.⁸ It is this sense of endlessness of possibility which distinguishes the metaphysical perspective from all the other poetic "heresies." This endlessness of possibility constitutes experience, and it is with experience that the metaphysical poets are so involved. Perhaps, the most comprehensive work on the subject of metaphysical poetry is Thompson's, in which he attempts to paraphrase Eliot's doctoral dissertation on Bradley's Appearance and Reality. In this unpublished

⁶Marie Borroff, "Introduction; Wallace Stevens: The World and the Poet," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 7.

⁷Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens, p. 34.

⁸William F. Lynch, Christ and Apollo, p. 151.

dissertation, Eliot takes his stand with those who hold that the mind is the key to whatever is in the universe, as opposed to those who choose matter.⁹ Eliot, in attempting to clarify his terms, uses the following lines from Shelley:

Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. . . .

Thompson points out:

Radiance is the real, what Eliot's "experience" points to; the glass is the ideal, what Eliot's "knowledge" points to; the stain is appearance, what Eliot's "objects" are. Although radiance, glass, and stain are distinguishable, they are not separable.¹⁰

The dome of glass is the "Absolute of Idea" (which is in one's power), and the white radiance is the "Absolute of Real" (which one can only attempt to point to).¹¹ Unlike Whitman, but like Eliot, Stevens works from a persona cut off from nature and at the edge of it, rather than in the center.¹² One person, experiencing, traces a line across the dome, a line which is his "self" and is also the reality that his "self" experiences. Eliot believed that in their fallacy, the rationalists mistook

⁹Eric Thompson, T. S. Eliot: The Metaphysical Perspective, p. 18.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 29-30.

¹¹Ibid., p. 37.

¹²Joseph N. Riddell, "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens: Functions of a 'Literatus,'" Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 31.

a single area on Shelley's dome of glass for the whole dome, confusing a partial or practical point of view with a complete or metaphysical one.¹³

"Point of view" arises as the major phrase in any discussion of the metaphysical perspective. It is from a point of view that the experience that points to reality takes place. In a poem, this point of view is seen through the persona assumed by the poet. It is the persona that undergoes the immediate experience.

Eliot holds that one is forced to acknowledge immediate experience, but that he can know nothing about it.¹⁴ He means that one cannot order experience while one is going through it, as one does at every moment. One can, however, know immediate experience in art through the persona that is assumed. For Stevens, truth is identified with one's own experience with one's state of consciousness at a given time.¹⁵ The given time, however, must be a matter of art; hence, a conscious artifice. It is always particularized by means of the persona's going through an experience. Standpoints in philosophy are limited and ancient, but the landscape (the details of the

¹³Thompson, op. cit., p. 42.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁵Borroff, op. cit., p. 3.

world) is always new.¹⁶ Hence, the endlessness of art, the endlessness of personae and experience. Eliot's metaphysics is, therefore, an inquiry into point of view; an attempt to bend all points of view into one point of view. He is striving to explain all experience as immediate experience.¹⁷

Lynch says that man's insights into the reality of his soul's condition stems from his knowledge of the events through which his soul has passed.¹⁸ "More so than the pure intelligence (logic), the imagination's trade is to deal with the very multiplicity, divisions, colors, sounds, and complications of actuality itself."¹⁹ It is the poet's job to deal with what Stevens has called ". . . the almost incessant bombardment of stimuli that disturbs our peace of mind and ease of contemplation. . . ." ²⁰ In short, the metaphysical poet's job is to communicate from a "standpoint," or, in Eliot's term, the standpoint, as opposed to a point of view, such as the scientific, the Platonic, or the stoical. Yet, this assumption of an absolute standpoint may lead to solipsism, if

¹⁶Thompson, op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁸Lynch, op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 126.

²⁰William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens, p. 105.

one were writing a poem that takes the point of view of an individual, a persona. How can such a poem contain generalizations that will communicate to its readers? The solipsistic dilemma rears its ugly head. The subsequent discussion points up the fallacy of this "dilemma."

According to Eliot, "Dissociation of feeling" occurs when the language orbits too far out from a metaphysical standpoint and spurious centers are established. The language is, then, making absolute some specific or relative view (some order) or some specified point of view that visualizes an order instead of the standpoint that cannot be fixed in any view or point of view.²¹ To begin with, Eliot's adoption of the term, "the standpoint," sounds arbitrary, as if he were calling his point of view "the standpoint," or as if he had the Right Answer. Such a charge can easily be levelled at the metaphysical poet: he seems to be standing on that which he does not have, the Right Answer. To take such an attitude is to imply that there is a tie that binds all things.

Thompson notes Eliot as having said: "Every moment of attention is a point of view"; he explains that science attempts to fix one, while metaphysics attempts to find the one. However, it is never found, but always had; thus, the labor of the classic metaphysician is always the same, that is,

²¹Thompson, op. cit., p. 69.

". . . to reaffirm the Right Answer by unfixing it from every answer."²² In other words, if a persona of a poem is wrong in his world view, the poem will reveal that he is, and the Right Answer will have had another Wrong Answer removed from the field of contention. The reader, then, will be brought closer to Shelley's concept of white radiance or Reality. Hence, one sees that the metaphysical process is a never ending process of elimination. Nevertheless, the problem remains of determining how a point of view can communicate in a poem, when it is the point of view of one person (the persona). To use Thompson's example, one may suppose that 30,002 people are watching a ballet. He may ask himself if there are 30,002 ballets (streaks on the dome), because there are 30,002 viewers, or if there is one ballet, and 30,002 different views of it. Eliot would claim that there is no master copy of the ballet from which 30,002 prints are made, but that, by running back and forth between the two points of view (one ballet, and 30,002 ballets), the questioner creates a solipsistic dilemma by focusing only upon the barriers. This kind of a solution is unsatisfactory. On the other hand, a second solution maintains that all 30,002 viewers will "idea-ize" the ballet (as one "idea-izes" a blur of trees into "forest," and agrees upon that image as the forest). Perceptions, then, are made to fit

²²Ibid., pp. 20-27.

a world. Eliot states that although all experiences are private, ideas are common: "I am a state of my objects";²³ and the viewers will agree that they have all seen a "ballet."

Thus, Eliot and Stevens strike a similar note in one respect as to the communicability of point of view; Thompson explains:

Any point of attention is an object. What is significant is from how many point of views (finite centers) the point of attention is cognizable as the same point of attention.²⁴

Seeing the problem of the one and the many and the possibility of the accurate communication of such experience as being the task of the poet, Stevens has said:

I think that his (the poet's) function is to make his imagination theirs (others') and that he fulfills himself only as he sees imagination become a light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people live their lives.²⁵

In short, the art of the poet must stand the test of its audience. If it fails its audience, the poem fails. Shelley's metaphor must have, however, a more analytical approach. Eliot spoke of objects as being Appearance, the stain on the glass, behind which lies the white radiance of eternity or Reality. In the art of Stevens, and all other poets metaphysical, objects

²³Ibid., pp. 44-45.

²⁴Ibid., p. 42.

²⁵Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," The Language of Poetry, p. 118.

are used to best advantage as metaphors. The persona must be "created" of metaphors from the world of Appearance. Therefore, it is to the nature of metaphor that one must now give his attention.

In "The Comedian as the Letter C," Crispin, Stevens's persona, discovers that one can lend grace and some transcendence to the unwieldy, even dirty, soil of his contemporary existence by the use of metaphor.²⁶ For Stevens, the structure of a poem becomes the action of its metaphors, which, in their concreteness and comparative quality, add up to something.²⁷ Ransom speaks of the "commitment" to metaphor:

Specifically, the miraculism arises when the poet discovers by analogy an identity between objects which is partial, though it should be considerable, and proceeds to an identification which is complete. It is to be contrasted with the simile, which says "as if" or "like" and is scrupulous to keep the identification partial.²⁸

Stevens points out that all things resemble all others in some way, and that the imagination has three types of comparison available to it: e.g., between the real and the real ("That man is a real brick."), between the real and the imagined ("You're an angel."), and between the imagined and the imagined ("God is good.").²⁹ These levels of comparison are obvious

²⁶Fuchs, op. cit., p. 111.

²⁷Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 15.

²⁸Ransom, op. cit., p. 45.

²⁹Wallace Stevens, "Three Academic Pieces," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 25.

enough, but the problem remains as to how they can be logically explicable in a poem. The problem is to determine on which level the metaphor must rest. Again, one must point to the persona, the person undergoing the experience of the poem. The persona must become the unifying sensibility of the poem.

The logical order of a poem is explicit, although the the multiple associations and ramifications of the images will not submit to logic. Ransom explains:

Here it is enough to say that the development of imagery by extension, its logical determinant being an Ariadne's thread that the poet will not permit us to lose, is the leading feature of the poetry called metaphysical.³⁰

In Stevens's "Asides on the Oboe," the following lines illustrate what Ransom is alluding to in mentioning "Ariadne's thread":

But we and the diamond globe at last were one.
 We had always been partly one. It was as we came
 To see him, that we were wholly one, as we heard
 Him chanting for those buried in their blood,
 In the jasmine haunted forests, that we knew
 The glass man, without external reference.
(CP, 251)

In terms of the narrative, the "diamond globe" metaphor makes sense, carrying as it does its associations of light refraction, light diffusion, and other properties of light reflection. It is also a way of describing "loss of self," with which the speaker is obviously concerned. In short, the metaphor is logically engendered and explained by the associate figures

³⁰Allen Tate, "Tension in Poetry," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 58.

that succeed and precede it.³¹ Logic, however, only succeeds in paraphrasing a certain aspect of the poem, which, as one reads it, either communicates or does not. With the diamond globe, for example, there is a development by rapid association of thought that requires considerably more agility on the part of the reader than does the mere explication of content of a comparison, as in a logical paraphrase. Two connections that are not implicit in the first figure are forced upon it by the action of the speaker of the poem.³² It is this phenomenon of the perceived interconnection of reality in a poem that constitutes the attempt to provide immediate experience for the reader. Comprising this possibility of experience is the inexhaustible "realm of resemblance" in which all the faculties of the imagination, using all their powers, "extend the object" by metaphor, or the process of analogy.³³ Stevens frequently employs color as a bond to describe dissimilar resemblances between seemingly disparate things, such as shade and water, palm tree and sky, and other seemingly "unlike" things.³⁴

³¹Hi Simons, "The Genre of Wallace Stevens," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 52.

³²T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 48.

³³Louis L. Martz, "Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 149.

³⁴Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, "Metamorphosis in Wallace Stevens," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 60.

A particularly valuable aspect of metaphor has been defined by Tate as tension, by which he means the length to which the connotations of the metaphor may be extended without violating the denotation of the object being used in the comparison. For example, he uses a passage from Donne, but the following from Stevens's "Bowl" will serve as well:

For what emperor
 Was this bowl of earth designed?
 Here are more things
 Than on any bowl of the Sungs,
 Even the rarest--
 (OP, 6)

The denotation of the earth as bowl makes sense, in that the speaker is looking at the things which the earth "contains." The connotations (especially as reinforced by "emperor," the "Sungs," "things," and "designed," metaphors for artifice), rather than detracting from the intension of the speaker's mind, add to, or are one with, the denotative value, and extend the meaning.³⁵ Tate explains: "It is enough to say . . . that good poetry is a unity of all the meanings from the furthest extremes of intension and extension."³⁶ Again, one must observe the workings of his own mind as reader when he considers these lines and their complex metaphors. The lines are far from pure statement or scientific statement that

³⁵Tate, op. cit., p. 61.

³⁶Ibid., p. 59.

deals only with denotations and which is always about something rather than creating an experience itself. When a kind of deadening of description comes about in the language, when one focuses upon the world of description so completely that he loses the ability to see the community between persons that every language implies, he loses his capacity to believe in any real community of persons. Eliot would call this failure of belief the result of adopting a point of view, rather than the standpoint. That such a loss has happened in the language (and it is against this loss that Stevens is consciously reacting) was more or less precipitated by the successes in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries of the scientific way of thinking--the "neutralization of nature."³⁷

The very opposite of this neutralization is a living, vivid use of language. As Spender argues:

The poet's vision has symbolic value. . . . But let me say here at once that although the poet may be conscious of this aspect of his vision, it is exactly what he wants to avoid stating, or even being too concerned with. His job is to recreate his vision.³⁸

In the same vein, Stevens has written: "The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it."
(CP, 473)

³⁷Thompson, op. cit., p. 62.

³⁸Steven Spender, "The Making of a Poem," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 21.

One must also give consideration to the concepts of objective and subjective. Thompson (not Eliot) uses the example of a man's awakening in a dark room and exclaiming, "What is this?" The this one could call the subjective, or the emotions and sensations at the moment. The what is objective and is of what the this is trying to make sense. This and what are not, in the final analysis, separable. The what ("black space," or "bad moment") is an object and must be incorporated into the senses before the man can relax and go back to sleep. In literary terms, it is a matter of creating a "context" in that the experience must somehow be accounted for and put into order by the mind. He may remember, for example, that he is in Chicago for a convention and be able to go back to sleep. The point is that the objective and subjective are inseparable.³⁹ In other words, the this of "What is this?" is the subject of all predicates; the man would have had a different set of emotions and reactions if he had been, say, feverish, than if he had awakened from a nightmare. This is what one must start with in his effort to order his environment.⁴⁰

Again, contrasting poetry with the sciences, Thompson writes:

Once we assume that whatever is in a context of mind;
once we assume that the world is a whole whose stuff is

³⁹Thompson, op. cit., p. 32.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 33.

feeling and whose structure is thought, have we not discarded the possibility of a separate science of mind? An investigation of what experience really is is metaphysics; and an investigation of what thought really is is logic. I think we can see why Eliot calls the data of the analytical psychologists "half-objects." They are this-whats and this-whats, but not this-whats.⁴¹

In short, the psychologist makes the mistake of trying to dichotomize in terms of subject-object; a dichotomy is impossible and romantic, or, perhaps even worse, inhuman. What, however, of the emotions that the waking man feels--are they public (out there) or private (in here)? Eliot wrote that emotions are no more subject than light because the blind cannot see it. All emotions affect the blood stream and other aspects of bodily behavior. They can, at times, be better understood by a person other than oneself. "Emotions, it would seem, are part of a situation; their thisness is indissociable from their whatness."⁴² According to Eliot, reason, dealing only with the "whatness" of things, is, then, also inseparable from situation. Frye states that emotions and reason tend toward the vague and general respectively; the imagination, containing both, imposes form or order by arresting the ". . . flow of perceptions from without and of impressions within."⁴³

⁴¹Ibid., p. 38.

⁴²Ibid., p. 33

⁴³Northrup Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism, p. 269.

Immediate experience is the point of view that one has when he discovers the standpoint; but what is not a closeness to immediate experience is the degree to which one does not have his wits about him (as the upset man awakening in the dark). Eliot says that ". . . we must focus now this-ward, now that-ward"--it is a matter of consciousness.⁴⁴ Order, then, is a matter of conscious contrivance, not of immediate experience as it is experienced, if it is violent to the point that one cannot function imaginatively.

One can see, by now, that the subjective-objective dichotomy is invalid, and that the emotion-reason concept is equally invalid. Imagination, then, is the key. Imagination is the conscious artificer that reconciles what generally may be considered as disparate objects. It does so by creating a persona who is created by virtue of the objects in his world from which he is inseparable and upon which all of his emotions and thoughts are dependent. Still, however, there remains the problem of Reality, the Right Answer. The poet cannot create the white radiance of eternity (in terms of Shelley's metaphor), but can only mark a path on the dome. The Surrealists, who so blatantly desecrate and exploit the "normal" scheme of things, who so obviously play God, are wrong. Stevens has written:

The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is

⁴⁴Thompson, op. cit., p. 32.

to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination.⁴⁵

Thus, Stevens wishes to correlate the world of the imagination and the world of Appearance, subjugating neither to the other. Stevens is closer to Aristotle than to Plato, for whom a poetic figure of a plum (A) is a copy of a real one (B), that is inferior to an ideal plum (C). For Stevens, C drops out, and A is superior to B. Or, in short, the plum of the conscious imagination, A, is superior to any "ideal" plum, because it exists for someone and is superior to a real plum for the same reason.⁴⁶ It means something and has a part in the discovery of reality which is the task of the poem. Imagination is the human power that makes this artificial plum superior to a real one; it exists, through a poetry that is the action of metaphors, in the human consciousness; a real plum can only be known to the human (or animal) senses. Frye argues for the imagination by inducing from Stevens's poetry that this is a metaphorical world in which myth gives each object a comparative value to patterns. If this is the case, he argues, then there is a central man (a man-ness, in Platonic terms), and, logically, a central mind (the standpoint). Finally, there

⁴⁵Quoted in Buttell, op. cit., p. 163.

⁴⁶Quinn, op. cit., p. 63.

must be ". . . a general being or human universe."⁴⁷ The solipsistic dilemma is, then, offered yet another argument; the self, it appears, is not separate from a "general being" if it is willing to exercise its imaginative powers.

The similarity of Stevens's and Coleridge's attributing of such all-encompassing powers to the imagination has been noted by many critics. Coleridge, however, links the imagination with the supernatural, while Stevens does not. Both, however, use light as a symbol for imagination, Stevens, for example, in "The Emperor of Ice Cream," and Coleridge in his "Dejection: An Ode."⁴⁸ It is, perhaps, not overly pretentious to say that the imagination functions for them as if a miner were fixing his beam on what is, as the artist does. The world of Appearance is made to be, rather than simply to seem. Stevens, in "The Emperor of Ice Cream," wrote:

Let be be finale of seem. . . .
Let the lamp affix its beam.
(CP, 64)

In common experience, a plum can only seem to be, since it is always in a state of becoming (becoming rotten and dead); but, in a work of art, the plum can be something to somebody (a persona) and be something every time the poem is read by someone. Yet, Stevens has written,

⁴⁷Frye, op. cit., pp. 278-279.

⁴⁸O'Connor, op. cit., pp. 89-90.

Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
 Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
 Burn everything not part of it to ash.
 Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
 Without evasion by a single metaphor.
 ("Credences of Summer," CP, 372)

What one sees here, however, is the outcry of a Stevens persona, one that has a lesson to learn; i.e., one must go indirectly, from the familiar to the attention-arresting, to get to the familiar, if he wishes to communicate verbally.

There is also a limit, a finitude to the poet's potential. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the guitarist says: "I cannot bring a world quite round, / Although I patch it as I can. . . ." (CP, 165) The artist cannot be all-encompassing; all that he can do is to make the appearance real in the consciousness of the reader, and the principle which makes this transformation possible can only be called the principle of reality.⁴⁹ Stevens has pointed out that one cannot make his own world by means of metaphor.⁵⁰ The poet cannot, then, really create a world, but only an artifice of the world, through the act of the poem in the mind of the persona. There must be, then, an interdependence of imagination and reality. This interdependence is not a definition of poetry, however, since it is incomplete. It is, rather, the nature of poetry as seen by Stevens.⁵¹

⁴⁹Thompson, op. cit., p. 27.

⁵⁰Enck, op. cit., p. 196.

⁵¹Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," The Language of Poetry, p. 116.

Has not language become man's host?⁵² The answer must be in the affirmative, since it is by the medium of language that the poet attempts to encompass more fully the dome that stands between man and the white radiance. In Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," one finds the following:

The words they spoke were voices that she heard.
 She looked at them and saw them as they were.
 And what she felt fought off the rarest phrases.
 (CP, 380)

What the woman feels is the standpoint, the urge to know, to get closer to the world around her. Simply feeling this way, however, does not communicate. To simply feel is not an order, but it is the motivation which brings about the "rage for order" which culminates in the making of a poem. This urge, or even necessity, is the rage within one which prompts the imagination to begin its task of more fully dispelling the duality of self and world from which comes the rage for order.⁵³ The poem is a form of life come to order in a vivid abstraction (in metaphor, the sound of words) and, thus, to reality.⁵⁴

It must be pointed out that the poet, having achieved form, means the poem, not the line.⁵⁵ Statements such as this

⁵² Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 183.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁵ Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 104.

are perhaps necessary if one is to keep straight the fact that one is dealing with a poet who makes words into a form to create an experience, and not a philosopher who is trying to work out a system that will be an answer to the problem of reality. Also, the metaphysical effect may be either large-scale or small-scale; as Ransom argues: "I believe that generically or ontologically, no distinction is to be made between them."⁵⁶ In other words, the length or size of a work does not validate or invalidate the work's claim to the metaphysical effect; a long dialogue, in common terms, could qualify, if a metaphor which would relate the images and make the mind jump with the action of the work were included somewhere in the poem. The consciousness of the attempt must be apparent if the reader is to stay interested and alert; an order is generated out of chaos, if the relations between objects are kept moving--then, the poem is metaphysical. Otherwise, the language of poetry could lose vitality and immediacy without the consciousness of artificiality; the poetic action could become an undisciplined stream-of-consciousness (as it is, at times, in Wordsworth). What is being described is the difference between the intellectual and the contemplative poets; the former "feels thoughts as immediately as the smell of a rose."⁵⁷

⁵⁶Ransom, op. cit., p. 42.

⁵⁷T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 51.

And, if the poem is successful, so will a reader feel the thoughts of a poem.

Poetic form is an order or, as it is sometimes referred to, unity, that implies a quality of oneness. As Lynch writes:

This one is not a dead, monotonous fact; it only becomes itself by articulating itself into many joints and members, and it has not created itself until, in its advance, it has created the last member, the last jointing of itself.⁵⁸

This is form, the whole of a work of art that is totally expressible only by itself. As Stevens has said in "The Motive for Metaphor": "The sharp flash, / The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X." (CP, 288)

Buttell argues that Stevens probably received from the Symbolists the fluency that gives him the means for ". . . presenting more intensely those ideal presences and spiritual feelings known to his imagination." They also, no doubt, helped him to see how every detail in the poem must function in the whole, ". . . so that the poem becomes a sacramental symbol justifying its own existence. . . ." As an icon, however, he uses the poem as a symbol which must render the phenomenal world and human emotions, earthly existence.⁵⁹ The techniques of the Symbolists gave him poetic means for imbuing

⁵⁸Lynch, op. cit., p. 147.

⁵⁹Buttell, op. cit., p. 111.

his ideas with both mysterious depth and immediacy, and enabled him ". . . to create the experience on the page."⁶⁰

If a work of art has form, the objects in that art are vital to the being of that form, and their existence is determined by their context. Returning to the analogy of the man awakening in the dark room: if he had awakened with a thirst and had begun to look for the water faucet, things would have had a different reality for him than if he had awakened desperately anxiety-ridden about where he was and how he had gotten there.⁶¹ Two opposite sides of the literary coin wherein this concept has not been accepted are the "naturalistic" and the "grotesque." Naturalistic discourse, according to Ransom, fails for one of two reasons:

It has the minimum of physical content and starves the sensibility, or it has the maximum, as if to avoid the appearance of evil, but it is laborious and pointless. . . . For scientific predication concludes an act of attention but miraculism initiates one. It leaves one looking, marvelling, and revelling in the thick dinglich substance that has just received its strange representation.⁶²

In short, the naturalistic work contains details simply for the sake of details, as if reality consisted solely, or mostly, of things without relationships. On the other hand, there are the "grotesque," or eccentric poets whose unusual and unintelligible poems are inexplicable, who

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

⁶¹ Thompson, op. cit., p. 34.

⁶² Ransom, op. cit., p. 46.

. . . may have feelings which cannot be shared or are not worth sharing, and are, therefore, socially worthless; while the genuine poet discovers new shades and variations of sensibility in which others can participate.⁶³

In other words, the naturalist tends to rely too heavily upon the scientific "objective," while the gushy eccentric tends to rely upon the overly-personal "subjective."

Unlike the naturalistic or grotesque poets, those who use form as a vehicle of communication, like Lucretius and Dante, teach the reader what it feels like to hold certain beliefs as a matter of personal experience.⁶⁴ Stevens speaks of this phenomenon:

In the meantime the tale is being told and the music excites us and we identify with the story and it becomes the story and the speed with which we are following it. When it is over, we are aware that we have had an experience very much like the story just as if we had listened with complete sympathy to an emotional recital. The music was a communication of emotion. It would not have been different if it had been the music of poetry or the voice of the protagonist telling the tale or speaking out his sense of the world. How many things we should have learned in either case! (NA, 126)

The term, metaphysical, was first used by Samuel Johnson in reference to the group of seventeenth-century poets, Stevens's forbears. He got it from Pope, who probably got it from Dryden. Johnson used it in the sense in which it was used in the Middle Ages and up through Shakespeare's time. It meant

⁶³T. S. Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 113.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 107.

supernatural or "miraculous."⁶⁵ Miraculous, indeed, when, using merely words as its medium, it is poetry that can provide immediate experience for the disinterested reader; and when it can, it imparts to the reader a fresh and particular vision. In "Angels Surrounded by Paysans," it is doubtless this phenomenon that Stevens has in mind when he writes: "I an the necessary angel of earth, / Since, in my sight, you see the earth again." (CP, 496)

To go on the journey of a poem is to learn to see in a certain way ". . . the details, the bewilderingly concrete but twisting, maneuvering details of this journey."⁶⁶ What is implied is a movement through the mysterious, enigmatic thing called Time.

⁶⁵Ransom, op. cit., p. 41.

⁶⁶Lynch, op. cit., p. 131.

CHAPTER II

TIME: THE ACTION OF ART

Lynch, in his Christ and Apollo, dichotomizes two ways of looking at the world, ways that he calls the "univocal" and the "equivocal." He argues, against the univocal:

The greatest weakness of every univocal pattern in literature is that it stays outside of the image and is not at all, therefore, strictly speaking, a real dimension of the literary imagination. . . . It does not respect reality; it exploits and uses it.⁶⁷

As an example, Lynch cites Parmenides's doctrine which states that the unity of all things is in their "being."⁶⁸ This quality, however, provides an answer for nothing; it is a generality, and, as such, is useless to the literary imagination. As Lynch says, "In this world there are generalities about things, but there are no generalities."⁶⁹ Parmenides's idea, then, has no meaning for the literary imagination, which deals with particulars, not generalities.

Stevens, in his poetry, is deeply concerned about the ideal, but for him it is to be found in the individual's imagination, and not in some transcendental or Platonic realm

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 118.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 124.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 20.

of ideas; or, generalities.⁷⁰ As Ransom says of Platonistic poets:

[They] practice their bogus poetry in order to show that an image will prove an idea, but the literature which succeeds in this delicate mission does not contain real images but illustrations.⁷¹

Science, too, uses images for a particular interest and robs them of their infinite nature; it destroys images by abstraction, although not by refutation.⁷² Images are more fleeting than science would have them be; they will not hold still for abstraction, or "classification," either of which process is the mistaking of a zone on Shelley's dome for the entire dome; an amoeba simply does not care if it is placed in a genus. As Ransom notes:

We think we can lay hold of image and take it captive, but the docile captive is not the real image but only the idea, which is the image with the character beaten out of it.⁷³

Stevens was intrigued by man's passion to avoid, to transcend, the violence of time.⁷⁴ Such a desire for avoidance is Platonism, using the term in the pejorative sense that may be applied to any philosophy, or philosophy of poetry, which dismisses images, or "things" as experienced by a persona, in

⁷⁰O'Connor, op. cit., p. 124.

⁷¹Ransom, op. cit., p. 39.

⁷²Ibid., p. 32.

⁷³Loc. cit.

⁷⁴Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 202.

favor of something else, something unsubstantial--for example, ideas. As Stevens states: "Funiest philosophers and ponderers, / Their evocations are the speech of clouds." ("Life on a Battleship," OP, 77) Such ideas give a reader nothing to feel; rather, they impose form upon content. It is against this sort of univocality that Plato himself warned when he cautioned that one should not go too fast from the many to the one.⁷⁵ To do so is to ignore too readily the objects, the moments, the details of this world and this life. The difficulty, the inadequacy of what one calls "ideas" is that they are out of time.

Lynch states that man wants, at one and the same time, the unlimited and the dream, and the earth, too.⁷⁶ The earth, however, is in a continual state of flux and will not hold still and be an idea, and the human imagination is afraid of the narrow and non-simultaneous character of time.⁷⁷ Fuchs uses the revolutionary as an example of the sort of univocal, out-of-time idealist to which Lynch is referring:

Revolutionary politics hardens into ideology, a system of ideas with no real relation to existence. In its logical lunacy, ideology evades the intricate chaos of life from which we make our intricate order.⁷⁸

⁷⁵Lynch, op. cit., p. 28.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 30.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 64.

⁷⁸Fuchs, op. cit., p. 187.

What the revolutionary forgets, and what any univocalist forgets or ignores, is the intricacy of the present, which, in all its intricacy, seems too formidable a thing to face. Reality is, then, approached with an imagination that evades, one that feeds on images of everything but things as they are now (e.g., the revolutionary).⁷⁹

Stevens, unlike a romantic, Platonistic poet, refuses to compromise sentimentally and rejects what he calls the spirit's "habit of wishing."⁸⁰ These sorts of "wishing" romantic's "images" are always immediately translatable into ideas. Citing Browning's Pippa Passes as his example, Ransom notes how the poets, in the face of science in the nineteenth century, had to "fly in shame" to objects, which were only used for illustration of the "idea" of the poem. In Browning's poem, for example, the image of the lark on the wing, or the exclamation that "the snail's on the thorn," are images that are marched "like little lambs to the slaughter," the slaughter being the final "All's right with the world!"--the main idea which sums up everything for which the images were exploited, although they remain nothing in themselves.⁸¹ This sort of poetry is a form of "wishing."

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 142.

⁸⁰ Joseph N. Riddell, "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 37.

⁸¹Ransom, op. cit., pp. 35-37.

By attempting to escape from the realm of ideas, and by imitating the philosophers, Stevens was claiming for the poem that which the philosopher claims: the definition of truth. But, as opposed to an ideal truth, he feels the necessity perpetually to re-define reality.⁸² That this necessity exists is due to the fact that, at some point or another in a poem, no matter how excited or "inspired" the poet may become, the poem must release, must flow back to the level of active life, with the emotions caught up from life and pent in the aesthetic reservoir. Otherwise, like Pippa Passes, the poem is simply a wax effigy in a glass case, a curiosity.⁸³ Such a poem is ideal, and anything but immediate experience.

Stevens, in "Theory," writes:

I am what is around me
 Women understand this.
 One is not a duchess
 A hundred yards from a carriage.
 (CP, 86)

Time flows, and is a series of inextricable moments; no part of the past can be forced to remain in the present.⁸⁴ Stevens believed that since there is nothing but the present, the Infinite can offer no real solution to anything; there is only

⁸²Fuchs, op. cit., p. 19.

⁸³Edgell Rickword, "The Use of 'Negative' Emotions," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 84.

⁸⁴Lynch, op. cit., p. 46.

the Finite, the world of things and people in time. For this reason, almost all of Stevens's work is executed with a conscious theory of antitheses: sentient man against unconscious nature, animal existence against intelligence, mind against passion and appetite, order against chaos.⁸⁵

Consequently, Stevens's images are, essentially, metaphors or consciousness, the products of a perception refreshed in a state of flux, a state of process. They describe a landscape of sensibility, rather than of a physical world. They adhere to things--ordinary and exotic--but only when the mind and the thing marry.⁸⁶ Stevens, in his poetry, is a man who enjoys his speculations about the world, yet never forgets that he lives primarily in his sensibilities, because he lives in a physical world.⁸⁷ And, as a poet of the Finite, rather than the Infinite, he discounts the antithesis of the poetic process: "inspiration." As Spender notes about the difference between inspiration and the poetic process:

If a line embodies some of the ideas which I have stated above, these ideas must be made further clear in other lines. This is the terrifying challenge of poetry. Can I think out the logic of images? How easy it is to explain here the poem that I would have liked to write!

⁸⁵Morton Danwen Zabel, "Wallace Stevens and the Image of Man," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 156.

⁸⁶Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 12.

⁸⁷O'Connor, op. cit., p. 78.

How difficult it would be to write it. For writing it would imply living my way through the imagined experience of all these ideas, and such an effort of imagination requires a lifetime of patience and watching.⁸⁸

In that He went through all the pain and chaos of human time, a non-ideal existence, Lynch regards Christ as the culminate example of the literary imagination. It is Lynch's feeling that Christ ". . . is the enemy only of the romantic imagination and pure intelligence as ways of life."⁸⁹ By the "pure intelligence," he means the univocal, or ideal. Through time, Christ created a "self" by means of the objects of His existence. A good example of the fact that Stevens's prose ideas can be misleading is that he viewed traditional Christianity incorrectly; he seemed to regard it as being only concerned with spirituality, not with creation.⁹⁰ Stevens's poetic method, however, is completely in accord with what Lynch is expounding as the Catholic position (which Eliot shares), in that Stevens is involved with a process through time to relegate the seeming dichotomy between human aspiration and finite limitation, and continually to recreate "self." Stevens would agree with Riddell that ". . . art itself is the only

⁸⁸Spender, op. cit., p. 23.

⁸⁹Lynch, op. cit., p. 62.

⁹⁰Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Wallace Stevens: The Image of the Rock," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 99.

refuge from time."⁹¹ Art is a refuge from time in that it is a conscious attempt to make order out of chaos, an attempt which endeavors to avoid the pitfall of the unconsciousness that results from any attempt to avoid the constant flux of things which can so easily confuse, if one is not constantly redefining one's "self," one's "world," and one's "place," in the midst of the uncertainty of living in the changing Finite.

"Self" and time are, then, inseparable. When discussing the concept of "self" in terms of the metaphysical perspective, Eliot makes an important distinction between "self" and "soul":

The reflection of reality in finite centers is not pluralism, because the centers are not things. They are not "isolated." When we think of them as isolated we are not thinking of finite centers but of "souls"--i.e., our idea of something that has our experiences.⁹²

Of "self," he says:

Where the real and ideal intersect, a functional definition of "self" occurs. As soon as a point of view is recognized, it is transcended. The self is that which holds past and present together. At any given moment of vision, the self is no more present to awareness than is awareness of intercellular action!⁹³

"Self," then, is that which makes the continuity of a poem possible, and which makes it possible for the reader to see that a person is going through an experience in a poem. The

⁹¹ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 76.

⁹² Thompson, op. cit., p. 47.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 46.

"self" is that to which proper names are given, but this self is going through a series of points of view and is not present to awareness until the experience is mulled over. The persona of the poem only develops a soul by which one can remember him after one has read the whole poem. The soul of a creature of fiction only comes into being with the accumulation of experience within the piece of fiction over a period of time, the period of time that is necessary for the reading and understanding of the piece of fiction. The name becomes a symbol for a series of experiences and associations that have been developed through the work of art.

Stevens is never so much attracted by the discovery of things as they are, such as relationships like red wheelbarrows glazed with rain water beside white chickens, as he is by the discovery of himself in the act of discovery.⁹⁴ He is involved with the constant formation and reformation of a soul, which, then, becomes a self in the face of new experience, and which, then, becomes a soul again. The soul is constantly reborn in Stevens; it must be, or it runs the risk of becoming a univocal idea of self. The soul must constantly reënter the details of experience, the process of time.

Thompson writes that, when the streak of light is painted across Shelley's dome, the resultant phenomenon is, in

⁹⁴ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 12.

theological terms, an Incarnation. He, then continues:

Thus "self" is an ideal which cannot rest anywhere short of the ultimate. It is the streak of light on the dome of glass that aims by encircling to encompass the total white radiance.⁹⁵

The self, then, will not rest until it has gained eternity, although it can certainly pay the penalty of confusion should it choose a soul in which it wishes to believe; the test of daily reality, the fight against consciousness, however, will not surrender to such a univocality.

The recreation of one's world, although distinguishable from the recreation of one's self, is inseparable from it.

Buttell writes about Stevens:

More than a dilettante, he was obsessed with the power of the imagination to enrich and order life. He wanted more than to escape from banality and to affront the philistines . . . he became increasingly absorbed in his search for techniques and forms that would give poetic embodiment to his deepening conviction that the actual world is apprehended and shaped by the imagined one at the same time that the imagined is dependent upon the actual.⁹⁶

In terms of Stevens's identity with the world, one sees again the dichotomy between the self and the world in that one feels life as he feels his separation from it, by noticing the "resistance involved."⁹⁷ Riddell notes Stevens's statement

⁹⁵Thompson, op. cit., p. 47.

⁹⁶Buttell, op. cit., pp. 100-101.

⁹⁷Joseph N. Riddell, "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 42.

that "order begins in the word."⁹⁸ He, then, quotes from "To the One of Fictive Music":

In the way you speak
You arrange, the thing is posed
What in nature merely grows.
(CP, 87)

The quotations suggests the dichotomy between the mind (idea) and the flux of nature, and is ironic in tone. Ransom offers the following speculation:

If we've all great ideas in our heads . . . where is innocence then? The aesthetic moment appears as a curious moment of suspension; between the Platonism in us, which is militant, always sciencing and devouring, and a starved inhibited aspiration toward innocence, which, if it could only be free, would like to respect the object as it might of its own accord reveal itself.⁹⁹

In the light of Ransom's remarks, the quotation from Stevens's "To the One of Fictive Music" takes on more meaning. It is a double-edged statement and ultra-sophisticated. While, at one and the same time, man wants the freedom to see the world as it is, he is aware that he cannot; therefore, he must admit the sophistication that he cannot be rid of, the level of consciousness that forces him to admit that things have the meaning that his consciousness will allow him to know. So, in nature, things do merely grow, because they do not mean, all by themselves. It is the price that man pays for his high level

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 41.

⁹⁹Ransom, op. cit., p. 40.

of consciousness, his sophistication--he must act, through the imagination, upon his world; rather than simply react, as do the unconscious creatures of the world.

The mutual creation of self and world comprises what one may call one's making of his "place" in the world. Frye has written that one can resist routine (unconscious, mechanical movement through life) by consciousness, but that one usually acts against consciousness. The revolt against routine is the start of mental activity, the center of which is imagination, the process of changing "reality" into an awareness of it. One is free only by virtue of what begins in his awareness of his condition.¹⁰⁰ Stevens writes, in "Esthetique du Mal":

And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make

So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we are.

(CP, 313)

Of this excerpt, Mills observes:

This kind of man charts his explorations, visualizes his horizon, from his experience of participation in the physical world and what the expansive movements of his mind can make of that.¹⁰¹

And, Lynch notes:

The concept of mind as a mirror of reality simply reflecting reality is indeed superficial, for the mind,

¹⁰⁰ Frye, op. cit., p. 268.

¹⁰¹ Mills, op. cit., p. 101.

like the heart, has its own desires, desiring to be what it sees, and not merely to reflect it.¹⁰²

In short, the mind wishes to make all places one place, and all things one thing--it seeks unity, order. For this reason, description, for Stevens, is revelation not of things, but of self.¹⁰³ Things making up self, and self making up things, so that both occupy an ever-shifting place.

Along with Bergson, Stevens believes that the projecting of the imagination on reality is the struggle to maintain the self (its duration) in time and space.¹⁰⁴ To order both time and space, which Stevens does through poetry, is to attempt to provide the reader with an experience whereby the reader can come to know his place in the scheme of things.

In the light of this discussion, Eliot uses a term which provides a good means of understanding this concept of place. He discusses "degree of reality." Depending upon a person's situation, his concerns at any given moment, and his emotional state, some objects will be more important or have a higher degree of reality than others. "Unreal" objects seem to have no existence only if one confuses, or arbitrarily identifies, reality with the physical world. At all waking

¹⁰²Lynch, op. cit., p. 121.

¹⁰³Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 14.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 27.

moments, one is confronted with objects, even though their degree of reality may be so low that one ignores them.¹⁰⁵

In this light, the poet's choice of images becomes apparent and rational, and ceases to appear arbitrary; since some objects will seem important to the "character" (the persona, or central figure of action), his choice of objects that have high degrees of reality for him will, in turn, tell what he is--the context will be established; one will know what his emotions are, what his thinking is, why his place is what it is. Again, the movement is toward unity; although one may distinguish between the person and his objects, one cannot separate them. The person of the poem, by letting the reader know what objects have a high degree for him, will be on the way to defining himself; he will be setting up the tension which must be resolved in the poem--an Incarnation of a self, a world, and a place will have been brought about. A persona will emerge.

It is, however, the ephemeral quality of this event about which Stevens writes in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": "It resides / In a permanence of impermanence." (CP, 465) And so should it be for a poet whose thought is dominated by the concept of metamorphosis. Quinn comments: "A mosaic of a man, even a major artist, is like a mosaic of the weather;

¹⁰⁵Thompson, op. cit., p. 43.

in the very fluidity of both there is permanence of a sort."¹⁰⁶
 She, then, quotes from Stevens's "The Statue at the World's
 End":

See how
 On a day still full of summer, when the leaves
 Appear to sleep within a sleeping air,
 They suddenly fall and the leafless sound of the wind
 Is no longer a sound of summer. So great a change
 Is constant.
 (OP, 43)

Stevens comes to grips with time as both friend and enemy and notes that it can destroy through change, but can aid by assuring that human striving rejuvenates a pattern of partial renewals.¹⁰⁷ The sun comes up every day, but is different because man is. Time is nothing but oneself.¹⁰⁸ And one is nothing but time. It is an understanding of the impermanence of the world that enabled Stevens, as well as Williams, to achieve what Monet had sought for--a primitive eye, the desire to recover from blindness to see the world with utmost clarity, without preconceptions (or without a univocality).¹⁰⁹ This primitive eye is Stevens's ". . . poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." (CP, 239) It is the action of the mind in ordering the chaos of experience, the creation

¹⁰⁶Quinn, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

¹⁰⁷Enck, op. cit., p. 178.

¹⁰⁸Lynch, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁰⁹Buttell, op. cit., p. 155.

of a consciousness which will "suffice," but which is never-ending, as is experience.

Tate points out that the price for "really done" things is suffering and pain, the pain of giving up one's simple, univocal "solutions" to change, and the submission to time. The reward is knowledge and individuality, and a measure of freedom. For Stevens, this is the full life of the imagination.¹¹⁰

Of the nature of the action of poetry, Frye has written: "All art is practical, not speculative; imaginative, not fantastic; it transforms experience, and does not merely interrupt it."¹¹¹ He is arguing that art is a part of life and not a diversion from it. To argue thus implies a responsibility on the part of the artist to perform his function well. Therefore, in this vein, Stevens felt himself to be in a transitional period; old images (idols) and beliefs were gone, and new ones were needed.¹¹² He felt that it was his function, as a poet, to provide the basis for belief in creation for his time. The speaker in "To the One of Fictive Music," for example, finds that experiencing music (or any art) perfects those who make it, and in Pearce's words, ". . . involves them deeply in the

¹¹⁰ Pearce, op. cit., p. 132.

¹¹¹ Frye, op. cit., p. 271.

¹¹² Mills, op. cit., p. 104.

intensely imaginative experiences from which, as modern men, we would flee."¹¹³ Wagner notes:

In Stevens we find a moral and philosophical center through which reality may be repossessed and recreated with each new poetic act. To those who claim that moral order is unnecessary for the making of great poetry, Stevens replies that actual poetry is the embodiment of a theory of poetry, and that a theory of poetry is identical with a theory of life.¹¹⁴

Pearce is arguing that the poet, himself, is embarking on a journey towards consciousness, starting from where he was, to get to where he is, and that this poetic process is one of the life of consciousness; but not simply one of a diversion from life.

Stevens's view is based upon that of the Aristotelian tenet that art grows out of nature, not simply as an "imitation," but as a realization.¹¹⁵ And, as such, the metaphysical must be the enemy of the absolute.¹¹⁶ Lynch has stated that "The mind that has descended into the real has shot up insights that would have been impossible to pure concepts."¹¹⁷

Realization is the end product of the search for order, and a

¹¹³Pearce, op. cit., p. 115.

¹¹⁴C. Ronald Wagner, "A Central Poetry," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 71.

¹¹⁵Frye, op. cit., p. 270.

¹¹⁶Thompson, op. cit., p. 9.

¹¹⁷Lynch, op. cit., p. 38.

constant search for order or form is the life of the mind, a constant reëxamining of itself in the act of finding "what will suffice."¹¹⁸

To find what will suffice implies finding what the self needs in order to live well in this world; and to live well is to act, to imagine, to speak--it is to arrange, to encounter experience and, thus, ask questions of the "pediment," the limitations of being human.¹¹⁹ For Stevens, the motivation for action is a feeling of alienation from Nature and God, and poetry offers a way of miraculous integration for each--what was once the office of religion; thus, for Stevens, poetry must be "the subject of the poem." The act of life is the act of reconciling one's self to that-which-is-not-self.¹²⁰ That-which-is-not-self is fleeting and unconquerable; Stevens wrote in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

And yet what good were yesterdays devotions?
I affirm and then at midnight the great cat
Leaps quickly from the fireside and is gone.
(CP, 264)

Lynch states that ". . . neither life nor the literary organism is given in a basic stroke. Both are basically actions

¹¹⁸ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 11.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 192.

¹²⁰ Joseph N. Riddell, "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 37.

achieving themselves in the growth, the moving structure, the flowing pattern."¹²¹ Action, then, in Stevens, is meaningful; it does not connote the mere retelling of experience, but the acting out of experience. Vendler notes that "One of the continuing pleasures of reading Stevens is to feel his rapidity of change as he is flicked by various changes."¹²² In "New Haven," Stevens writes: "The poet speaks the poem as it is, / Not as it was." (CP, 473) Ransom quotes Senior as saying:

According to its practitioners [symbolism] is a better way of accomplishing what the romantics wanted to achieve. Briefly, and not at all crucially, the difference between the two "kinds" of poetry are [sic] the differences between the philosophical rather than the presentational. The world views are the same, but the Romantic poet tends to write about his ideas or to relate experience in which these ideas were acted out, the Symbolist tries to create the experience on the page.¹²³

Ransom, then, points out that, contrary to what Senior says, the difference is very crucial, indeed. Unless the experience occurs on the page, it could hardly be called an "action" on the part of the poet; meditation would, perhaps, be a better word. Were it not an action, it would not depend upon the details of time for its validity, and could easily fall prey (as did the poems of the Romantics) to the univocal.

¹²¹Lynch, op. cit., p. 45.

¹²²Helen Vendler, "Stevens' 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,'" Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism, p. 478.

¹²³Buttall, op. cit., p. 51.

One asks, then, if a poem is an action, what is the nature of its action? It has two possible natures: comedy and tragedy. The controlling force for both is irony. In "Esthetique du Mal," (CP, 313) Stevens writes: "This force of nature in action is the major / Tragedy." By "force of nature," he means the constant change that robs one of his univocalities or instant salvations. Tragedy, though, is elevation, as the recognition of one's poverty, and reminds one, or informs one, of his limits.¹²⁴ Speaking of Stevens's work, Fuchs remarks:

[Stevens] is saying that in recognizing tragedy as inextricably bound with the human condition, in recognizing the pervasiveness of mal, we are making a truthful assertion of consciousness which will result in a happy, if humble, conclusion.¹²⁵

Riddell notes as well, that ". . . evil like death is of the essence of vital things, of the imperfect which is our paradise."¹²⁶ Fuchs observes, also; "Rejected by the sky, by the promise of a cosmic plan and poetic justice, man sees pain not as an anomaly but as a norm."¹²⁷

Stevens's tragedy, or evil, is that of self-consciousness, in the pejorative sense: the attempt to make this a what, to

¹²⁴Fuchs, op. cit., p. 161.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 186.

¹²⁶Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 161.

¹²⁷Fuchs, op. cit., p. 173.

objectify the self and divide it from all else, to make it univocal and unchanging. It is an attempt to separate oneself from one's surroundings, because of pride, fear, ignorance, or whatever motivation. This is the fall, for Stevens, that one can redeem only in imagination, the passion for yes.¹²⁸ The imagination must discover that, far from man's limits being only a problem and a concern for the imagination, they are also its center.¹²⁹ To be self-conscious is to divorce oneself from the human situation; it is to escape into the mind, through self-pity, rather than to recognize, or discover, through the relating of the self to the world, where one actually is, as opposed to where one has arbitrarily placed himself in his mind. This effort of facing up to oneself in time, Lynch calls a form of death:

But there is another form of death, which is the most positive and creative of all the moments of life, a communication of self to self to the last drop.¹³⁰

This communion is what one might call a loss of self, implying that one takes his idea of self from his mind, and relates it to the world; he ceases to hold to the fallacious dichotomy between self and world. Oedipus experiences such a loss, finally, when he is forced to give up his univocal idea of

¹²⁸ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 210.

¹²⁹ Lynch, op. cit., p. 162.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 190.

self by the events of the "outside" world. Stevens's protagonists, like Oedipus, are forced from their pretensions by the working of the imagination in its endless relating of self to the world around it, and in it, and in which it is. They are eventually forced to discover their true place.

In just this sense of the discovery of tragedy, Lynch speaks of tragedy as a "gate":

But the weakness is permanent, and hence a permanent gate, not to be discarded in the name of some fraudulent and cheap leaping out of the skin of our helplessness into the arms of God.¹³¹

Lynch is, here, referring to the existential "leap," a credo that he feels to be bogus, because it ignores the necessity of the act of discovery's taking place only through time. It is for this reason that he criticizes the recent American theatre (particularly the work of Eugene O'Neill) on the grounds that it fails to achieve tragedy because of ". . . our hidden abandonment of the finite."¹³² He cautions that "In tragedy the spectator is brought to the experience of a deep beauty and exhaltation, but not by way of beauty and exhaltation."¹³³ The definition of good and evil is not "given" in tragedy; rather, it is a discovery that can be earned only through the

¹³¹Ibid., p. 89.

¹³²Ibid., p. 77.

¹³³Loc. cit.

process of the working out of the action.¹³⁴ Were the audience informed of the "point" of Oedipus the King, before the action of the play begins, the play itself would be irrelevant, and only exemplary of some "idea" of good and evil. There would be no "proof" provided by the play by means of its action; the play would be simply illustrative. The time necessary to perform the play would be irrelevant, since ideas are not in time, but outside of it.

Tragedy, as opposed to comedy, implies the defeat, by the inevitability of time, of a protagonist whose preconceptions prove to be inadequate to the situation. The imagination's salvation in time, by means of an acceptance of man's finitude, is comedy. As Lynch says of comedy, "It seems to be the most confident rung of the finite."¹³⁵ It is completely human, and the one offense, therefore, which comedy cannot endure, is that a man should forget that he is a man.¹³⁶

As opposed to tragedy, then, comedy is the next experiential step; rather than being overwhelmed by the limits of the self, the comic hero (Lynch cites Sancho Panza and Falstaff as model examples) accepts his humanity wholeheartedly; it is the angelic in man that is always the victim in

¹³⁴Warren, op. cit., p. 102.

¹³⁵Lynch, op. cit., p. 99.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 105.

comedy.¹³⁷ Stevens's romantic-scientific Crispin in his "The Comedian as the Letter C" is comic because of his pretensions.¹³⁸ He is, therefore, a matter of ironic treatment. On the other hand, however, in "Le Monocle du Mon Oncle," the uncle recovers by discovering the affirmation of comedy in loss.¹³⁹ As Stevens says in "Adagia," "Life is the elimination of what is dead." (OP, 169) The dead can only be that which is out of time, as the self that one loses by accepting the world, a self which is an idea--the comic is never out of time; it is completely human and alive. Buttell comments:

For all his debt to the Symbolists . . . Stevens did not pursue an occult, mystical union with the absolute. He could strongly regret that the blue of the sky was a barrier to any final revelation, but when he says "Death is the mother of beauty," he is not, like Mallarmé, longing for a death-like perfection; rather, he is accepting the natural life cycle.¹⁴⁰

Indeed, in Ideas of Order, one finds a prevailing theme of death. Death is that which modifies and conditions "ideas of order."¹⁴¹ The comedic accepts life as a conglomeration of limitations; the comedic believes. One could well say of

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

¹³⁸ Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Wallace Stevens: The Sundry Comforts of the Sun," Four Ways of Modern Poetry, p. 20.

¹³⁹ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 92.

¹⁴⁰ Buttell, op. cit., p. 123.

¹⁴¹ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 111.

Stevens, as Thompson does of Eliot, that he could not see the comedy of it all if he were not standing outside the context of unbelief.¹⁴² Yeats, in his Autobiography, remarks that one is never satisfied with the maturity of those whom he admired in childhood, and that insight is the ironic outcome of this development.¹⁴³ The poet can control, as far as his imaginative process of discovery will allow, the fate of his persona or protagonist; the poem can be comic or tragic. Whichever it is, irony is the controlling force.

Poets have always tried hard to say what they mean and prove it. They try by submitting their vision to the fires of irony.¹⁴⁴ Fuchs remarks about Stevens:

His wit thrives on the deflation of conventional ways of feeling and writing when the convention has little to do with the way things are.¹⁴⁵

When Oedipus is proved to have been wrong, to have been helpless in the light of the movement of events, the result is tragic and ironic. When Crispin tries not to accept his shortcomings, and persists in his romantic ways, the result is comic, and irony has been the poet's means of bringing about Crispin's realizations.¹⁴⁶ As Lynch observes: "God is ironic, and He

¹⁴²Thompson, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁴³Harold Bloom, "Yeats and the Romantics," Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism, p. 501.

¹⁴⁴Warren, op. cit., p. 103.

¹⁴⁵Fuchs, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., p. 30.

will not be beaten at His own game, and His game is time."¹⁴⁷

In "To the One of Fictive Music," (CP, 87), Stevens's persona tries many masks and voices; he sees the world, first, as pure object; then, he pretends that the world is all his making--he discovers, ironically, that it shapes him.¹⁴⁸

Buttell remarks:

When successful with irony, Stevens brought the actual and the imagined into a counterpoise that gave his poetry a new intensity. At the same time he moved rapidly toward his comic vitality and brio. Also, by an increasing use of the irrational element--of bizarre situations and points-of-view, of fantastic personae--he more pointedly revealed the beauty or grotesqueness of the actual world and the power of the imagination.¹⁴⁹

Stevens's high level of consciousness, which became increasingly acute with each poem, is a result of his absolute honesty in submitting his ideas to the fire of poetic experience, the irony of time. Rejecting the romantic, egoistic sanctity of the Platonic, romantic univocal, he attempts to expand his own consciousness, as well as that of his readers, by travelling the narrow route of the details of the Finite, human existence. His high degree of consciousness makes it possible for him to create this necessary immediacy of experience, because of the great complexity of the awareness of self manifest by his personae.

¹⁴⁷Lynch, op. cit., p. 174.

¹⁴⁸Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 56.

¹⁴⁹Buttell, op. cit., p. 202.

CHAPTER III

WALLACE STEVENS: THE CREATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Stevens's value lies in (1) his consciousness of himself as an artist, (2) his consciousness of his artistic method, and (3) his consciousness demonstrated in his poems. He was a poet who knew what his poetry was for, and one who was involved in a never-ending search for reality, for a vision that would enable him and, absolutely necessarily, his reader truly to see the world in which he lived and of which he was a part.

One must keep in mind, when dealing with Stevens, that no standardized symbolic system can be drawn from his work; every poem is a different attempt to move closer to reality.¹⁵⁰ To attempt to generalize about the "message" of his total work is futile, because each poem has form, and can be explained only in terms of itself.

Stevens's penchant for the bizarre, the unusual, may account for his great wit. As with Donne, he relies upon the juxtaposition and the union of "opposites." It is by means of juxtapositions that he attempts to create immediate experience by forcing the mind of the reader to exert the energy necessary to follow the working out of the action of the poems.¹⁵¹ As

¹⁵⁰ Enck, op. cit., p. 141.

¹⁵¹ Buttell, op. cit., p. 191.

O'Connor states, poetry ". . . is a means of making us see, with a freshness, as though the world were new and we could view it newly."¹⁵²

However, Riddell offers a word of caution:

The feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verbality. Comment puts the verbality back in; the clearer the explanations, the falser they are likely to be.¹⁵³

It is with this cautionary note that one must view some of Stevens's poems.

"Anecdote of the Jar," although an early poem, is an anecdote of all of the other poems in a great many ways:

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, 75)

The jar, inanimate, makes one look at life, and see it more clearly by its juxtaposition; the jar gives shape to what is around it, and it, in turn, becomes more clearly visible. The

¹⁵²O'Connor, op. cit., p. 122.

¹⁵³Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 168.

poem demonstrates how art assembles its world around itself and gives order and an awareness, a way of seeing, that was not there before.¹⁵⁴ The entire poem could be taken as a discovery, and/or description of metaphor; the placing of one thing upon another so that each is seen more clearly in the light of the other. Stevens discusses this phenomenon most explicitly in "The Motive for Metaphor":

You like it under the trees in autumn,
 Because everything is half dead.
 The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
 And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
 With the half colors of quarter-things,
 The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
 The single bird, the obscure moon--

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
 Of things that would never be quite expressed,
 Where you yourself were never quite yourself
 And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
 The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
 The weight of primary noon,
 The A B C of being.

The ruddy temper, the hammer
 Of red and blue, the hard sound--
 Steel against intimation--the sharp flash,
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.
 (CP, 288)

The desire for the "exhilarations of changes," the "sharp flash" of the exercising of the imagination through the act of metaphor, is both vital and fatal; fatal because it causes the

¹⁵⁴Hopper, op. cit., p. 18.

death of the old self and vital because it takes one from the unconsciousness ("primary noon") that comes with lack of imaginative vision ("the half-colors of quarter things") produced by the wind speaking "words without meaning." Words take on meaning when they do so by the conscious act of imagination: "steel" applied to nature, nature which can only "intimate." The X is arrogant in the face of the immutability of nature, the world we live in ("The A B C of being"), but is human and reconciles the non-human by means of the imagination; and is, still, the "dominant X." It dominates, ironically enough, even when it works without one's knowledge. Stevens submits what one can only assume was a fiction that had failed him, through a persona, into the situation of a man who leads "A Quiet Normal Life":

His place, as he sat and as he thought, was not
 In anything that he constructed, so frail,
 So barely lit, so shadowed over and naught,

As, for example, a world in which, like snow,
 He became an inhabitant, obedient,
 To gallant notions on the part of cold.

It was here. This was the setting and the time
 Of year. Here in his house and in his room,
 In his chair, the most tranquil thought grew peaked

As the oldest and the warmest heart was cut
 By gallant notions on the part of night--
 Both late and alone, above the crickets' chords,

Babbling, each one, the uniqueness of its sound
 There was no fury in transcendent forms.
 But his actual candle blazed with artifice.

(CP, 523)

Unlike the crickets, the man has no "distinct voice"; rather, he has accepted the "gallant notions on the part of cold"--he is, he believes, finished, having "bought" a romantic "system," completed, as in death; changeless death, unlike the individual, vital, ever-changing process of life. He comes to his ironic realization by paying attention to what is around him, allowing his imagination to work, and the result is tragedy. It is a tragic result because, rather than being in a place which is not "anything that he constructed," he comes to the realization of his own self-defeat, his helplessness in the face of time and his changing consciousness, which, when goaded by boredom, must reach out; and his mistake is revealed, the mistake of unconsciousness, which, because of his lack of will, has left him with a place that he does not necessarily want. The quiet normal life is not enough for the human will that wants and needs change, and the imagination is relentless. He discovers that his imaginative powers were with him all along, because, even now, his candle is blazing with artifice--he becomes conscious of his own power, and experiences what James Joyce would have called an epiphany. His realization of his past refusal to enforce his will, through his imagination, is a tragic epiphany.

The imagination receives one of its most explicit treatments as the supreme force in Stevens's "Asides on the Oboe," in which it is revealed that one sees the good in life by knowing the bad:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
 Of final belief. So, say that final belief
 Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose. . . .
 That obsolete fiction of the wide river in
 An empty land; the gods that Boucher killed;
 And the metal heroes that time granulates--
 The philosophers' man alone still walks in dew,
 Still by the sea-side mutters milky lines
 Concerning an immaculate imagery.
 If you say on the hautboy man is not enough,
 Can never stand as god, is ever wrong
 In the end, however naked, tall, there is still
 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.

The killing of the old gods is not enough, a new consciousness
 being necessary, and the speaker, making the reader see this
 human manifestation of the new consciousness metaphorically,
 calls him the "glass man"; the man through whom one sees the
 world reflected, a world in which the reader is included.

He is the transparence of the place in which
 He is and in his poems we find peace.
 He sets this peddler's pies and cries in summer,
 The glass man, cold and numbered dewily cries,
 "Thou art not August unless I make thee so."
 Clandestine steps upon imagined stairs
 Climb through the night, because his cuckoos call.

Porgrammed for discovery, he knows his power, his conscious
 transparence; he is human ("cold and dewily numbered") and
 presumptuous with his "clandestine steps upon imagined stairs";
 he hears his "cuckoos," the metaphorical expression of the
 need for imagination, with their joke-like crying.

One year, death and war prevented the jasmine scent
 And the jasmine islands were bloody martyrdoms..

How was it then with the central man? Did we
 Find peace? We found the sum of man. We found,
 If we found the central evil, the central good.
 We buried the fallen without jasmine crowns.
 There was nothing he did not suffer, no; nor we.

It was not as if the jasmine ever returned.
 But we and the diamond globe at last were one.
 We had always been partly one. It was as we came
 To see him, that we were wholly one, as we heard
 Him chanting for those buried in their blood,
 In the jasmine haunted forests, that we knew
 The glass man, without external reference.
 (CP; 251)

Good in evil is the paradox; after his having apparently found an answer to the problem of self and world (the imaginative "man of glass" of Stanza I), the world intrudes upon his "answer" in most unpleasant ways: war and death. A deeper realization is prompted, and the glass man, rather than being a metaphorical wizard, finds, with others in the human condition, the central man as glass man "without external reference." The changing world, a world of time, overcomes even the most bold of "answers," which can be too little in the face of the world--the process of the discovery of the self is a never-ending one. The persona undergoes a change, and comes closer to the core of the condition of being a man; it is comic in that he accepts his man-ness. Having discarded a fiction that was failing him, he seems to have found a greater peace, a greater unity with the rest of mankind, than the poems of the glass man of the first two stanzas had provided.

By allowing actuality, no matter how horrible, to intrude upon his preconceptions, he is reborn, and receives a clearer

vision; the imagination, set free, even if at cost of pain for him, frees him, in turn.

The imagination in Stevens's poems can occasionally seem a muddled agent. One finds an extremely explicit treatment of the imaginative power in "The World as Meditation":

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.
That winter is washed away. Someone is moving

On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she
dwells.

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.

The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.
No winds like dogs watched over her at night.

She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone.
She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace
And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day.

It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement.
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.
(CP, 520)

With what appears to be, at first glance, a hyperactive imagination, Penelope fancies that the sun's rising is Ulysses, returned at last. As the poem continues, however, especially

when the reader learns that "she wanted nothing that he [Ulysses] could not bring her by coming alone," the reader must realize that her whole world is embodied in Ulysses, and that it is he who determines her self ("She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him"). What she wants, then, is the proximity of him, so that she may have a place, rather than the imaginative meanderings in which she indulges in his absence, wanderings of the imagination which have no final place; not one in which to rest, but a place to which to relate more concretely than she now can ("She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair"). His name has "patient syllables," because they are always ready to be attached to or identified with Ulysses, but they do not need him for their existence.

The imagination, then, when it is a matter of the absence of someone loved, can be very useful; that it is not enough, however, is best demonstrated in one of Stevens's poems entitled "As You Leave the Room":

You speak. You say: Today's character is not
A skeleton out of a cabinet. Nor am I.

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

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

I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,
As a disbeliever in reality,

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

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

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

And yet nothing has been changed except what is
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.
(OP, 116)

A very complicated action occurs in the fourth and fifth stanzas of this poem: as she, the speaker, refers to the hero of the imagination (the poem of the pineapple and summer, the credible hero), she wonders if she has lived a "skeleton's life" because of a disbelief in reality; yet, in the next line, she speaks of the snow that she "had forgotten," the coldness of the world which helps her see "a major reality," one which does not consist merely of poems, of the imaginative--she senses the tragedy (unnamed) between them, which is "an appreciation of a reality," and thus "an elevation." It is, then, as though this realization, this elevation, is something that she can carry away with her and "touch, touch in every way." Yet, she realizes that nothing has been changed; her feelings are not really assuaged in the light of the loneliness to follow; all that is changed is what is "unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all"; she is standing on the standpoint, that of discovery through immediate experience, but can only come to grips with it through the "unreal," her exploration by means of the reasoning power, the unit of which is words. Out of her world (a most unhappy one at the moment), she recreates

self by coming to grips with reality, and the result is place-- she must leave. That her realization is invention is realized, too, by the listener, with Stevens's very clever first two clauses: "You speak. You say." He, too, knows the limits of the human power.

"As You Leave the Room" is, perhaps, as far as one could get from Stevens's portrait of Penelope; yet, in both the protagonists stay within and must admit their limitations. The two poems could perhaps also stand as testimonial to the great variety of experience to which Stevens went in his exploration of the human condition. Yet the condition remains the same, even in the most variant of situations, or states of sentiment.

Stevens's most explicit treatment of the concept of reality, one which is remarkably close in many ways to Shelley's white radiance illuminating the dome, is painted in "Of Mere Being":

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 that 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.

(OP, 117)

The irony of the last line is that reality tantalizes man, even though it is not the world in which he lives ("it is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy"). As in Shelley's metaphor, light emerges as a symbol for reality, light reflected in various ways: the "bronze" of the distance, the "gold feathers," the "fire-fangled feathers"; all the images present shades of colors, yet changing, and nebulous--illusive, and unobtainable, but the final goal.

In the face of such illusiveness and the misery of the world, the comedic sense, although a cautious one, is necessary, if one is to survive; Stevens deals with this sense of comedy directly in "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters":

He is not here, the old sun,
As absent as if he were asleep.

The field is frozen. The leaves are dry.
Bad is final in this light.

In this bleak air the frozen stalks
Have arms without hands. They have trunks

Without legs or, for that, without heads.
They have heads in which a captive cry

Is merely the moving of a tongue.
Snow sparkles like eyesight falling to earth,

Like seeing fallen brightly away.
The leaves hop, scraping on the ground.

It is deep January. The sky is hard.
The stalks are firmly rooted in ice.

It is in this solitude, a syllable,
Out of these gawky flitterings,

Intones its single emptiness,
The savagest hollow of winter-sound.

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

The crow looks rusty as he rises up.
Bright is the malice in his eye . . .

One joins him there for company,
But at a distance, in another tree.
(CP, 294)

In the midst of misery, dryness, cold, and, especially, the loss of vision, good is all that is left. Good consists of continuing. The crow continues, but not without malice--he is vengeful, and crafty. One must, if the situation warrants, become crafty, but the crow is too inhuman; one can join him, but, to remain human, one must react with determination, although not with an animalistic hunger. Such a decision is the difference between acting (the human) and merely reacting (the basic, and animalistic); this human quality of acceptance, along with the drive for self-preservation, comprises the human sense, act, of the comedic. The persona makes a decision, a decision to endure.

"The Idea of Order at Key West" is probably Stevens's most all-encompassing poem that deals directly with the subject of his aesthetic. In "Key West," the speaker, along with Ransom Fernandez, a companion, hears the singing of a girl by the sea; the meditation (which comprises the action of the poem) of the speaker forms an order based on the observance of the order created by the girl's singing--it is a hyperconscious poem which abstracts, by means of the concreteness of metaphor

(as in all his poems) the action of the girl's singing into an intellectually-discernible theory of the working of the mind upon the senses, the receptors of the motions of the things of the physical world, which, for human beings, is all that can be directly known. Stanza I follows:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The "genius" of the sea lies in its reality, and its unknowability to the human consciousness. That the speaker is coming to consciousness of what is happening is made evident by the line, "Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry," in which one can see that sound becomes language in the mind, in the process of intellection; one could explain the dichotomy in this manner: the ear hears only "sound," but when sound reaches the intellectual process of the mind, "sound" becomes "cry"--it is a matter of language. It is language that one uses to order the chaos of the world that he senses. The second stanza:

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound,
Even if what she sang was what she heard,
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

The humanity of the girl imbues the sea with a humanly comprehensible life. The girl is not a mask, although her singing

might be; she is what is heard, and not the incomprehensible sea itself--the sound that is made by her word by word ("she") is what is heard; her identity, her being, is created, just as the sea is created, in her song. Stanza three:

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
 The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
 Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
 Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
 It was the spirit that we sought and knew
 That we should ask this often as she sang.

The song, totally her creation, brings them to self-awareness. The self-revelatory aspect of art is manifest in the song, and is something that they have known that they wanted. They are eager for the experience, and listen, in stanza four:

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
 That rose, or even colored by many waves;
 If it was only the outer voice of sky
 And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
 However clear, it would have been deep air,
 The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
 Repeated in a summer without end
 And sound alone. But it was more than that,
 More even than her voice, and ours, among
 The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
 Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
 On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
 Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made
 The sky acutest at its vanishing.
 She measured to the hour its solitude.
 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.

"Deep air" would have been result, only sensation ("sound alone"), if the song had not been of human origin; the result,

though, is communication--her voice makes "the sky acutest at its vanishing." They gain compassion for the girl, a human kinship, as a result of her singing; and, as her song creates and makes visible through form the world around them, so, too, they know that it does for her as well. They come to realize that her ordered world, as opposed to the chaos of reality, is the one she lives in. Stanza five:

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
 Why, when the singing ended and we turned
 Toward town, tell why the glassy lights,
 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.

The listeners begin to commune with one another, and the speaker notes the order imposed upon the sea by the lights on the fishing boats; even the night, "tilting in the air," becomes visible by contrast to the lights, and becomes ordered thereby. Night, become visible, is that much more mysterious, "enchanting"; although ordered, it is still not knowable except through the human imposition of order. The final stanza:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
 The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
 And of ourselves and of our origins,
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.
 (CP, 128)

At once, both a separation from, and a unity with, reality are portrayed. The fragrant portals to the sea are the minds which order it; they are "dimly-starred"; they do not quite penetrate

to reality, but approach "our origins." Yet, by transcending the senses by using the mind, they are both "ghostlier demarcations" and "keener sounds."

Of Stevens's poetic method, Riddell has written:

His most effective strategy is to begin with an illustration (like a sensation) and proceed inductively, with startling shifts and returns that distill the sentiment. The procedure is deliberately repetitious, wrapping a thought in qualifications and exempla, until, as in meditation, one arrives at the epigrams that are a kind of order--a balance of the real and the imagined.¹⁵⁵

It is this method that Stevens uses in a poem which is one of his most highly regarded: "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Buttell argues that, with "Peter Quince," Stevens reaches a more graceful, facile use of music, rhythm; that it is less mechanical than the earlier poems.¹⁵⁶ In it, Stevens follows the three-part sonatina framework of exposition, development, and recapitulation, with a coda.¹⁵⁷

I

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the selfsame sounds
On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,

¹⁵⁵Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 24.

¹⁵⁶Buttell, op. cit., pp. 109-110.

¹⁵⁷Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 73.

Thinking of you blue-shadowed silk,
Is music. It is like the strain
Waked in the elders by Susanna.

Of a green evening, clear and warm,
She bathed in her still garden, while
The red-eyed elders watching, felt

The basses of their being throb
In witching chords, and their thin blood
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

Music is feeling (just as was the "cry" in "Key West"), and, as such, can allow Peter Quince to create feeling on his clavier, feeling which recreates for him the feeling of the elders observing Susanna, and to recreate her feelings on "a green evening." The player is ordering his sensations on his clavier, and, by his meditation upon this ordering, he is, by the process of analogy, making his sensations discernible. The music is feeling, which then becomes words; he is exploring his own act of musical creation, while he is indulging in it. His imagination is hyper-active in his search for the meaning of his sensations, his further plummeting into his consciousness, his search for self-understanding and self-control. The story of Susanna is contained in The Apochrypha. Susanna, seduced by a group of aged men, is accused by them of enticing them, in an attempt to cover up their guilt. She is tried, and Daniel, the judge, finds her innocent and exposes the seducers.¹⁵⁸ Stevens is here adapting the story to his own uses, although depending upon the reader's knowledge of it.

¹⁵⁸ Encyclopedia International, XVII (1966), 402.

II

In the green water, clear and warm,
Susanna lay.
She searched the touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings.
She sighed
For so much melody.

Upon the bank, she stood
In the cool
Of spent emotions.
She felt, among the leaves,
The dew
Of old devotions.

She walked upon the grass,
Still quavering.
The winds were like her maids,
On timid feet,
Fetching her woven scarves,
Yet wavering.

A breath upon her hand
Muted the night.
She turned--
A cymbal crashed,
And roaring horns.

Because the reader knows that Peter Quince is occupied with his own reactions, which he feels as a result of his playing on the clavier, the reader knows that the feelings that Peter Quince creates for Susanna are analogous projections into a metaphorical situation. The winds, though "like her maids," are wavering. Susanna is destined for a rapid change in situation, one that comes with the cymbal's crash and the roaring of the horns (which, again, are sound which, for Susanna, are metaphors of feeling). The poem becomes more and more complex as the analogies become more and more tightly interwoven, as

Peter Quince's exploration of his own self goes deeper and deeper, both emotionally and rationally. Stevens, the invisible poet, is building metaphor upon metaphor, until the whole is blended into an immediate experience for the practiced reader who cannot but become wholly involved in the feelings which Stevens is creating by his analogous development, a development which he will conclude only in the coda.

III

Soon, with a noise like tambourines,
Came her attendant Byzantines.

They wondered why Susanna cried
Against the elders by her side;

And as they whispered, the refrain
Was like a willow swept by rain.

Anon, their lamps' uplifted flame
Revealed Susanna and her shame.

And then, the simpering Byzantines
Fled, with a noise like tambourines.

Peter Quince, by discovering the unfaithfulness, and ineffectuality of the "attendant Byzantines," absolves his own shame, and comes to a realization (more explicitly spelled out in Part IV) both of the immutability of human feeling (his is the same as Susanna's), and his helplessness, without imagination, before his own desires. He is absolved, however, by the infidelity of the attendant Byzantines. His "desiring you" is "the red-eyed elders," who seduced him, and caused the "you" of the poem to desert like the attendant Byzantines. He has mastered his desire, by placing it in perspective, metaphorically; by

employing his imagination to alleviate the rage for order which is the poetic impulse.

Peter Quince comes to his final realization in the coda.

IV

Beauty is momentary in the mind--
 The fitful tracing of a portal;
 But in the flesh it is immortal.
 The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
 So evenings die, in their green going,
 A wave, interminably flowing.
 So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
 The cowl of winter, done repenting.
 The maidens die, to the auroral
 Celebrations of a maiden's choral.
 Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings
 Of those white elders; but, escaping,
 Left only Death's ironic scraping.
 Now, in its immortality, it plays
 On the clear viol of her memory,
 And makes a constant sacrament of praise.
 (CP, 89)

The beauty of Susanna's body lives in the mind of Peter Quince, who invents that beauty imaginatively, by discovering its echoes in his own person, even though it can live but momentarily in the mind (the immediate experience which Peter Quince creates for himself on the clavier), intellectually (his meditations on his own feelings). As do evenings, the body itself dies. Time ("A wave, interminably flowing") continues; Susanna, too, who had brought about such music (fleeting) died. There is no choice but to praise, for the linking, the only connection of the dead with the living, the sharing of a common humanity of realized feeling.

That Stevens is a poet who is aware of what he is doing in his poetry is obvious. It is the intimations of his poetic

methods, strengthened by his successes with them, that must now become the concern of this discussion.

The intimations concern the creation of self, the concept of consciousness. These intimations (which are only two ways of naming the same thing), in turn, point up means whereby to look at the concept of literary tradition, which automatically requires at least a cursory look at the concept of history.

Since metaphysical poetry certainly did not originate with Stevens, a tradition is implied. This tradition is one of man's never-ending delvings into his consciousness, man's attempt to come ever closer to his origins, the reality that is behind man's existence.

CHAPTER IV

WALLACE STEVENS: THE CONTINUATION OF THE TRADITION OF DISCOVERY

It is obvious by now that what finally emerges in a Stevens poem is a voice, one that begins as an initiate and evolves, through self-discovery, into an "I."¹⁵⁹ Such a process is a matter of an expansion of identity brought on, as in "Peter Quince," by the desire to enter, in whatever way, the outside world (outside of self) more fully. Throughout Stevens's poems as well as those of other metaphysical poets, one finds portrayed the inner life of one man who can be understood from the poems alone.¹⁶⁰ By the ordering of the experience of one man (the persona) into a poem, Stevens, like Frost, Eliot, Donne, and many others, wishes to bring man full circle, back to whence he sprang and then defected.¹⁶¹ Each poem is an individual process; thus, each relation (or relating) of the imagination, each synthesis, is completed, then clipped at the end of the poetic experience. And the self grows on.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 184.

¹⁶⁰ Borroff, op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁶¹ Mills, op. cit., p. 100.

¹⁶² Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 101.

It is, again, unlike the univocal (the idea which precedes the act, in bogus art), in that a period of a life is discovered, although the life is not "caught," not defined. "An art that would catch life," Riddell writes, "would kill that life it caught."¹⁶³ It would remove it from a world of change, as death does to life; it would be to imply an "eternal time." And, again from Riddell, true art implies that "there is no eternal time, that reality is change and death, and that order involves the constant activity of self in its adjustments to both."¹⁶⁴ True art takes the human condition, not only into consideration, but into its very fibre of action. What emerges is a self stripped of everything but its ability to act and to choose.¹⁶⁵ Valid art begins with no preconceptions about the nature of things but seeks to discover that nature; and the word, "things," includes the self.

Stevens is a "philosophical" poet in that his personae are involved in philosophical problems; yet, he remains a poet because his poems tell a story; his imagination swings free between sensation and sentiment, [↑]feeling and form, fact and memory, and creates a self in the process.¹⁶⁶ What Stevens

¹⁶³Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., p. 20.

found, and what his personae, with their problems find, is a primal law working out its own destiny, indifferent to man's search for permanence.¹⁶⁷ The self emerges as the synthesis of the clash between the search for permanence and the changing world.

Stevens took as his theme the heightening of what he called "the vulgate of experience."¹⁶⁸ To succeed in such an endeavor in a manner of consciousness is, as has been before noted, the quality that makes Stevens unique. His poetry is a record from day to day of the life of a changing consciousness in a changing world.¹⁶⁹ In his Transports to Summer, for example, one finds a poetry called forth by a constant questioning of the very devices that it uses.¹⁷⁰ Fuchs has pointed out that ". . . consciousness alone can stand against the inevitable flux."¹⁷¹ The flux is the change that goads the consciousness into the demands placed upon it by the very nature of change, to react imaginatively. It is this fall into consciousness which is the fall of Adam, and it is father to

¹⁶⁷ Joseph N. Riddell, "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 33.

¹⁶⁸ Babette Deutsch, Poetry in Our Time, p. 23.

¹⁶⁹ Borroff, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁷⁰ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 189.

¹⁷¹ Fuchs, op. cit., p. 153.

Descartes. Poetry is born, although not completed, in this moment of awareness of self.¹⁷²

Eliot writes that consciousness is a state of relations between objects.¹⁷³ His statement makes sense in the light of the argument presented in this study, that one's self is inseparable from, although distinguishable from, the objects to which one is attentive. Metaphor again emerges as the self's means of relating the objects of his attention to each other for the purpose of gaining awareness of self, a heightened consciousness.

The charge often levelled against Stevens that there are "no people" in his poetry, must appear now to be patently ridiculous.¹⁷⁴ It is true, if, by "people," one means static "characters," such as a Tom Joad, a Tom Jones, a Wife of Bath, or any of a multitude of literary "characters," who, although they do go through "experiences," demonstrate, rather than a process of discovery, a suitable mask; a mask which is suitable for the polemical purposes of the author. Again, in the use of these "characters," one sees that they are for purposes of the illustration of an idea, rather than set loose in the world of fiction for the purpose of going through the process of discovery.

¹⁷² Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 176.

¹⁷³ Thompson, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁷⁴ Enck, op. cit., p. 230.

The stock literary "character" lacks the self-consciousness from which springs the realization, the new way of viewing oneself in the world, the purpose of true art. As Riddell writes: "Without self-consciousness there is no poetry, no need for the fiction which marries self with the world."¹⁷⁵

The problem of a literary tradition is made quite clear when one becomes involved with Stevens's poetic methods. In his use of language, his constant striving to reconcile self with that-which-is-not-self, he is a part of a tradition of exploration of consciousness in which might be included Shakespeare, Donne, Dante, Dostoevsky, Melville, James, Eliot, and many other who could be defined as metaphysical.

The world is constantly changing, in process. Enck writes about Stevens: "Unlike the Platonic motto which T. S. Eliot so poignantly reiterates, in my end is my beginning, Stevens forever sets his world to rolling to disclose still more permutations."¹⁷⁶ Enck's statement seems to make sense at this point in the study. It is significant, however, that the subsequent discussion will reveal that Eliot knew what he was talking about.

As opposed to science that tends to stabilize terms, poetry, by juxtaposition, tends to infuse new meanings; and,

¹⁷⁵ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 171.

¹⁷⁶ Enck, op. cit., p. 231.

in this sense, violates dictionary meanings--poetry keeps the language in flux.¹⁷⁷ Eliot points out:

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity.¹⁷⁸

With a poetic necessity for the presentation of the complex consciousness in a complex age by the means of a more varied, even startling, use of language, an increasingly acute consciousness is the inevitable and obvious result. This is the precise opposite of a "conventional literary language" in which certain words become sacrosanct, or "poetic." These words are then used for the prestige that they carry with them, rather than just for themselves or their meanings.¹⁷⁹ When such a language develops, there can be no poetic act of discovery, no expansion of the consciousness through the use of ordered language. However, for Stevens, as well as the others who belong in this same tradition, poetry is an epistemological adventure, because life is.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 70.

¹⁷⁸ T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 52.

¹⁷⁹ Rickword, op. cit., p. 80.

¹⁸⁰ Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 28.

Brooks explains that, unless one accepts paradox as the poetic medium, he remains stagnant, without imagination, like the scientists--one cannot rise up again like Donne's Phoenix.¹⁸¹ Paradox, as used by Brooks, means the union of apparent opposites, a union that is the subject of the poems that are called metaphysical; paradox is a matter of language, as when Peter Quince discovers that music is "feeling," and not "sound." Since metaphor, too, is a matter of language, the definition, here, is neither a divisive nor a vague one. Paradox makes the mind work, and thus "see," and this is Stevens's purpose. He is attempting in a poem to create a sensibility, not a protagonist, and to chart the evolution of a seedling self, rather than a "character."¹⁸² By doing so, he is creating immediate experience for the reader, by making the reader's mind work to follow the complexity of the language which comprises the action of the poems; thus, the reader's consciousness is expanded. Paradox, the use of language that challenges the very language as it works, must be the language of poetry. If it is not, literature falls into stagnation.

This tradition of language is that to which Stevens belongs. It implies a goal of its discoveries, its heightenings of the human consciousness. This goal has been referred to as

¹⁸¹ Brooks, op. cit., pp. 76-78.

¹⁸² Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 95.

reality, Shelley's white radiance, across which the self marks its path in an attempt to circumscribe the entire dome. All of the literary artists who belong to this tradition stand on the standpoint, implying a final, perhaps unreachable reality. Riddell writes: "The edges are never tucked in; always something posthumous to complete (or almost so), the circle left incomplete."¹⁸³ Yet, those who stand on the standpoint share a common humanity that denies and transcends the nineteenth-century concept of history, as does Peter Quince in his communion with Susanna. Stevens writes in "A Duck for Dinner":

[There] was born within us a second self,
 A self of parents who have never died,
 Whose lives return, simply, upon our lips,
 Their words and ours. . . .
 (OP, 60)

Whoever these parents are and whatever it is that links the writers of the metaphysical tradition, they all stand upon the standpoint, this common humanity, a sense of human helplessness, which, if denied, precipitates tragedy; when continually affirmed, as often happens in Stevens, it can be converted into human comedy.

If Susanna exists as an historical figure, she does so only in Peter Quince's mind; thus, it is with all history. And from this tradition of a common consciousness, an ever-expanding one, emerges a realization that history, like all else

¹⁸³Ibid., p. 7.

around one, is a product of the imagination. Ransom writes:

From the strict point of view of literary criticism it must be insisted that the miraculism which produces the humblest conceit is the same miraculism which supplies to religions their substantive content. (This is said to assert the dignity not of the conceits but of the religions.) It is the poet and nobody else who gives to the God a nature, a form, faculties, and a history; to the God, most comprehensive of all terms, which, if there were no poetic impulse to actualize or "find" him, would remain the driest and deadest among Platonic ideas, with all intension sacrificed to infinite extension. The myths are conceits, born of metaphors. Religions are periodically produced by poets and destroyed by naturalists. Religion depends for its ontological validity upon a literary understanding, and that is why it is frequently misunderstood. The metaphysical poets, perhaps like their spiritual fathers the mediaeval Schoolmen, were under no illusions about this. They recognized myths as they recognized the conceits, as a device of expression; its sanctity as the consequence of its public or social importance.¹⁸⁴

It is in this spirit that Stevens writes in the "Adagia": "All history is modern history." He is saying that it is man's invention of the imagination.

Religion, too, is a product of the intellectual imagination: it is a body of myth, which is a result of the working of the literary imagination. Religion is a transcendent body of myth that is the precise opposite of the nineteenth century's concept of history, a concept that is a matter of generalization, and, thus, not valid literature. Frye writes, about Stevens:

Poets ordinarily do not, like some philosophers, replace individual objects with their total forms; they do not,

¹⁸⁴Ransom, op. cit., p. 45.

like allegorists, represent total forms by individuals. They see individual and class as metaphorically identical: in other words, they work with myths, many of whom are human figures in whom the individual has been identified with its universal or total form.¹⁸⁵

History, then, does not fit into this definition because, rather than dealing with the particular, it is concerned with the general. A tradition of consciousness of the mythic foundations of a culture, however, is Frye's definition. Eliot's "In my end is my beginning" now makes sense. Man's origins are being approached whenever the metaphysical poet begins a poem that is a continuance of the tradition that attempts to discover the consciousness of reality; and is not reality that from which all things spring? Or, to use the mythic term, is it not "God"?

To delve further into the concept of myth would be to explore the obvious Jungian direction that has been implied by the preceding discussion. In terms of Stevens, however, it is enough to say that he was a poet with an acute and unique awareness. More importantly, however, he was able to transcribe this awareness into poetry, thus promoting the continuance of his tradition by creating immediate experience, realization, for his reader. In writing his poetry, Stevens had in mind the basic goals of his humanity; he achieved his success by means of the tools available to the poet: the "miraculism" of

¹⁸⁵Frye, op. cit., p. 278.

the metaphysical process. True to his tradition of the expansion of man's awareness of himself, his poetry reveals that the origin of everything is the word.

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