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# "The vernacular of light": Wallace Stevens' Constructions of Belief

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“The vernacular of light”: Wallace Stevens’ Constructions of Belief

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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*Introductory Notes*

Many thanks to the Beinecke Library at Yale, the Houghton Library at Harvard, the Special Collections of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, and the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago for permission into and help with their archival collections; to the Charles Center and the English Department for facilitating the former trips through the Dintersmith and Shrieves Fellowships; and to my advisor, Professor Christopher MacGowan.

Throughout this paper, I will use the following abbreviations for frequently used texts:

<i>CPP</i>	<i>Collected Poetry and Prose</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>The Letters of Wallace Stevens</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Souvenirs &amp; Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie</i>
<i>SPBS</i>	<i>Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book</i>

The quotations in the title and each section heading were derived from the following sources, respectively: “Delightful Evening,” *CPP* 131; “Architecture,” *CPP* 66; a letter to Elsie, 28 February 1909, *L* 133; “A Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror,” *CPP* 393; “Two or Three Ideas,” *CPP* 845; and “A Primitive like an Orb,” *CPP* 378.

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*“Let us build the building of light”:  
Introduction*

Wallace Stevens explored imagination and meditation as inherent parts of the search for what he called, from a notebook jotting in 1918 (“Schemata” 160), to his “Notes toward” the subject in 1942 (*CPP* 329-52), to letters sent in the year leading to his death in 1955 (*L* 820, *L* 863), the “supreme fiction.” Though many studies investigate the “supreme fiction” as a broad concept, my interest here is in the way this search for a sustaining—but, for Stevens, necessarily temporary—fiction in which to believe interrelates with and incorporates comparisons to traditional religious belief, love, and art.

Stevens was born on October 2, 1879, in Reading, Pennsylvania. He and his siblings were raised “Puritan” (Richardson, *Early Years* 38), and Bible readings and Sunday school made up a significant portion of their young lives (*L* 3-5). After his time at Reading Boys’ High School, Stevens entered Harvard as a non-degree-seeking student in 1897 (*L* 13). While there, he edited the *Harvard Advocate* (Richardson, *Early Years* 93) and became acquainted (and traded sonnets) with George Santayana (*L* 481-2), a prominent philosopher and professor who became integral to Stevens’ later poetry. After leaving Harvard in 1900 Stevens tried his hand at journalism in New York City (*L* 37), and worked at the *New York Tribune* (*L* 41) and several other publications before entering the New York Law School (now closed) on his father’s suggestion in 1901 (*L* 52-3, 57). Directly after being admitted to the bar in spring 1904 (*L* 79), he visited Reading and met Elsie Moll (*CS* 4), whom he courted by letter for four years before they became engaged in 1908 and married the following year (*CS* 11). Though his years in New York were full of hard work and characterized by shifting career goals, Stevens became a part of avant-garde society there (*L* 185), and in 1914 had his first poems accepted into *Poetry* (*L* 182-3). In 1916, Stevens and Elsie moved to Hartford so that he could work as an insurance lawyer at the Hartford Accident and

Indemnity Company (L 189). His first book of poems, *Harmonium*, was published by Knopf in 1923 (L 228). After *Harmonium* Stevens rather fell out of the poetry scene, partially due to the birth of his and Elsie's daughter, Holly Bright, in 1924 (L 243). In 1931, Knopf issued a revised and expanded edition of this first book, titled *The Whole of Harmonium* (L 259-60). His hiatus then ended, Stevens published three additional books of poetry in the thirties: *Ideas of Order*, *Owl's Clover*, and *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems*. He had also, in 1934, been appointed vice president of the Hartford Insurance Company (L 256).

The forties and fifties marked a period of great recognition for Stevens: he published *Parts of a World*; *Transport to Summer*; *Auroras of Autumn*; the essays of *The Necessary Angel*; and his *Collected Poems*, including an additional section of new poems called *The Rock*. He was elected a fellow of the National Institute of Arts and Letters (Richardson, *Later Years* 350), received seven honorary degrees (L 748, 749n6, 886, 887), and was awarded multiple prizes, including the Pulitzer and two National Book Awards (L 811). Having been diagnosed with stomach cancer during a surgical procedure in April (Richardson, *Later Years* 422), Wallace Stevens passed away on August 2, 1955, at seventy-five years old (L 812).

Helen Vendler points out Stevens' lifelong circling of belief:

Never was there a more devout believer—in love, in the transcendent, in truth, in poetry—than Stevens. And never was there a more corrosive disbeliever—disillusioned in love, deprived of religious belief, and rejecting in disgust at their credulousness the 'trash' of previous poems.... [A]lmost every poem describes yet again, from another vantage-point, the intractable appetite of desire, willing happiness for itself and thereby inviting unhappiness. (*Words* 41)

Throughout his poetic career, Stevens' concepts of the relationship between life and fiction shifted with his poetic and philosophic interests. He traveled most often through the three categories I isolated earlier—comparison to traditional religions, love, and finally art—though the categories can hardly be demarcated, but rather flow into and alter one another.

I locate the first category I'll address, comparison to traditional religious belief, as growing from Stevens' staunch Presbyterian upbringing into his poetic apprenticeship period in the early years of the twentieth century, particularly those spent in New York, and extending even into the twenties and thirties. Vendler calls the movement from his upbringing to his adult life "the first imaginative vacancy" in Stevens' life; in losing traditional faith, Stevens also lost "the attendant literature ... and the aura of theological imagination that surrounds that" (qtd. *Voices and Visions*). Stevens' habit of recasting and engaging with the religious traditions he then regarded as "souvenirs" (*CPP* 30, 218, 386) lasted until the end of his life, though it was then informed in greater part by the beliefs and ideas he himself had developed.

The second category is love, and focuses particularly on Stevens' courtship period with Elsie, 1904-9, and then on the joint life they formed over the next half-century. His relationship with love emerges in various ways in his poetry, especially in that he recasts the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition to widen love to something less idealized; my category, too, then broadens to include marriage, family, couples and doubles (even coupled images or symbols), desire, and sex. Though his relationship with Elsie continued to the end of his life, as did her importance to his imaginative world, I have chosen to end this category with the mid-thirties, though with some consideration for his late poems of love and desire. These works, though ostensibly about coupled love, extend metaphysically to my final and perhaps most important category: art and poetry as means of new and modified belief.

Beginning with his engagement with painting, music, and poetry from his twenties onward, art became more and more a part of Stevens' concept of the world itself. Poetry, he believed, was the art form most important to a formulation of a supreme fiction (although he also widens the category of poetry by stipulating, on the book flap of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*

in 1937, that the poet is “any man of the imagination” [Berg Collection]). This idea of poetry becomes the “supreme fiction” itself, a fiction which one with the “instinct of belief” (*L* 86), as he called it, can take on as his own.

In his essays on Paul Valéry, Stevens wrote that to compose poetry is “to put oneself in the most natural way in the very lace of the God” (*CPP* 883). He created a similarly transcendental image in his essay “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet”: “The acute intelligence of the imagination, the illimitable resources of its memory, its power to possess the moment it perceives—if we were speaking of light itself, and thinking of the relationship between objects and light, no further demonstration would be necessary. Like light, it adds nothing, except itself” (*CPP* 681). He writes, more and more towards the end of his life, of poetry as holy and plain, concrete and spirit—as necessary light.

*“The peculiar life of Sundays”:  
Stevens’ Relationship with Traditional Religious Belief*

Toward the conclusion of the nineteenth century, Stevens found himself (along with many in the western world) grappling with religious ennui—a loss of the ability to believe in what he had inherited. “Stevens is one of the last of our writers,” in fact, “to experience fully the nineteenth-century crisis of the death of God” (Vendler, *Words* 30) As he later put it in a letter to Hi Simons of January 9, 1940: “My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe” (*L* 348). Throughout his poetic career, he continued to refer to the stiff system of “relic” (*L* 139) with which his Puritan roots had furnished him, though his relationship with traditional religion altered often from his



apprenticeship period to the end of his life. Some of these references simply re-cast religious language to serve Stevens' own purpose, as in the appropriations of "communion" (*CS* 31), "anchorage" (*L* 27), "sanction" (*L* 299 and 600, *CPP* 804), "catechism" (*L* 302), "priest" (*CPP* 792 and 908), "redemption" (*CPP* 917), "heaven" (*L* 360), "piety" (*L* 473), "reconversion" (*L* 516), "prayer" (*L* 580), "saints" (*CPP* 674), and other terms to describe the practitioners and creations of poetry and other arts. Other references (particularly during Stevens' apprenticeship period in New York City) compare poetry, a burgeoning belief in its own right, to the traditional religions it threatens to supplant in usefulness.

The first extant documentation of the importance of religious instinct to Stevens' thinking comes from his journal in 1899, in the August before his final year as a special student at Harvard. He wrote, "The feeling of piety is very dear to me.... I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force" (*L* 32). The nature of this force, however, is vaguely palpated rather than defined; assuming that his religious questioning roughly parallels his time at Harvard (cf. *L* 58, where he spoke in 1902 of the "old argument" with himself regarding belief), this would indicate an inability—indeed, unwillingness—to delineate any specific deity. Stevens does, however, differentiate between the presences he senses in what he regards as the two arenas of divinity—the church and the world. In a journal entry of August 1902 (*L* 58-9), after experiences with both "the dark transept of St. Patrick's Cathedral" and one of his weekend walks in the countryside surrounding New York City, Stevens wrote, "[T]here is no conflict of forces but rather a contrast," and goes on:

In the cathedral I felt one presence; on the highway I felt another. Two different deities presented themselves... In the shadows of the church I could hear the prayers of men and women; in the shadows of the trees nothing human mingled with Divinity. As I sat dreaming with the Congregation I felt how the glittering altar worked on my senses stimulating and consoling them; and as I went tramping through the fields and woods I beheld every leaf and blade of grass revealing or rather betokening the Invisible.

Soon after, Stevens conceded favor to a religion of “the world itself” (*L* 58) in the tradition of the nineteenth-century Romantics: though he continued to attend church on occasion (see *SP* 112–13, *L* 82, *L* 176, etc.), he wrote in his journal and to Elsie of his developing dissatisfaction in formal religious worship. “It was from the worn, the sentimental, the diseased, the priggish and the ignorant that ‘Gloria in excelsis!’ came,” he wrote in his journal on April 30, 1905 (*L* 82); and then on February 5, 1906: “Impossible to be religious in a pew.... I wish that groves still *were* sacred—or, at least, that something was” (*L* 86).

Perhaps in an effort to unearth a new and more sufficient sense of sacredness, Stevens significantly spent much of his poetic apprenticeship in study of his religious roots and their implications. In his letters to Elsie in the years before their engagement, he noted religious holidays (such as All Saints’ Day in November of 1904, *CS* 32) and referred to multiple Christian texts, including various books from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible (Proverbs in 1906 and 1907, *CS* 34 and *L* 98; Matthew, Mark, and Luke in 1907, *CS* 39; Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs in April 1907, *CS* 86; and Psalms in May 1909, *L* 139). There is evidence that Stevens was looking at them not as religious texts, however, but as mythical and literary ones; he wrote to Elsie in May 1909,

I have a chapter or two to read in that thrilling book “The New Testament.” That is my latest hobby. Extraordinary things like casting out demons, raising the dead, turning two fishes and five loaves of bread into enough to feed a multitude, and so on.—I know of nothing like this even in Jules Verne or the Arabian Nights. (*CS* 196)

A little earlier that month, too, he wrote to Elsie that he had been “digging into the Psalms—anything at all, so long as it is full of praise—and rejoicing” (*L* 139); his copy of the Psalms is indeed “heavily annotated throughout” (Edelstein 57). These evidences of study are interspersed by visits to various churches, first mentioned in his notebook in September 1900 (*SP* 86) and

from there continually mentioned both in his personal journal and in his letters to Elsie (*L* 58-9, 176, 235; *SP* 112-13; *CS* 198, 327-8; etc.). Once again, Stevens reveals his artistic awareness of these structures, noting “a great nave, quiet lights, a remote voice, a soft choir and solitude” (*L* 86); “the bells on Sunday morning” (*L* 117); “the wealth of symbols” which cause him to drop “into a church for five minutes, merely to see it, you understand” (*L* 139); that a church in St. Paul which he finds too “sophisticated” to move him is “architecture and that is something” (*CS* 357). Despite his clear aesthetic interest in the texts, spaces, and rhetoric of traditional religion, Stevens also studied them for a sense of their services and traditions, as far as one can tell from the extant documents, from 1900 to 1913—a large portion of his time spent living and working in New York.

This pattern of study for both content and aesthetic served, perhaps, to offset Stevens’ need for faith. In May 1907, he wrote to Elsie, “—I say my prayers every night—not that I need them now, or that they are anything more than habit, half-unconscious” (*L* 96). Stevens turned to reject patterns of vestigial belief when, in April 1907, he threw out his adolescent Bible:

Last night was house-cleaning night with me. I went through my things ... and threw away a pile of useless stuff.... One of the things was my Bible. I hate the look of a Bible. This was one that had been given to me for going to Sunday-school every Sunday in a certain year. I’m glad the silly thing is gone. (*L* 102)

Despite these instincts to devalue Christian belief to the position of either a thoughtless pattern or an ascetic object of study, the crux of Stevens’ early religious questioning falls in his very “instinct of faith” (*L* 86). At the turn of the twentieth century, the twenty-one year old Stevens wrote in his journal, “I was trying to say a prayer but could not” (*L* 50). Later, in March 1907, he writes to Elsie of the human limitation of chapels (in contrast to nature, which “makes a god of a man”) and then goes on to present a wistful symbol of what he feels he is missing:

But in Spain, in Salamanca, there is a pillar in a church (Santayana told me) worn by the kisses of generations of the devout. One of their kisses are [*sic*] worth all of my prayers. Yet the church is a mother for them—and for us. (*L* 96)

These writings, early in Stevens' poetic career as they are, inform the conception and execution of his poetry as it interacts with traditionally religious ideas and Stevens' own recapitulations and creations of belief over the next half-century. "Sunday Morning" (*CPP* 53-6), which I (as well as Holly Stevens; see *SP* 261 and her placement of the poem at the beginning of *The Palm at the End of the Mind* [5]) put at the beginning of Stevens' mature writing, significantly marks an ending to this period of mere prescience. It is the first of Stevens' poems to put forth some personal system in which he could believe, at least for the time being. In this and other early poems of the *Harmonium* period, he probes issues of archetypal belief and myth, initially without any hope for alternative but ultimately shading into belief in his own practical fictions for a greater number of people. The poem in its entirety plays on contrasts: from strings of difficult questions to tentative answers; from "a history of divinity," as Sukenick calls it (64), to a reasserted celebration of life's physicality and transient presence; from Sunday as space of Christian worship to Sunday as "day of the sun" itself (Cook 64). Stevens gestures at his poetic lineage by his choice of blank verse (Litz 51), and risks a Romantic earnestness; as Riddel writes, he was in this poem "a poet who was willing to chance all the mistakes of his romantic heritage" (79). He is willing, though, to keep parts of his informing traditions without necessarily taking them all at face value—by reclaiming the imagery that, Riddel argues, "was aesthetic (imaginative) before it was Christian" (80), as well as subconsciously expressing a more primordial form of belief. (As he writes to L. W. Payne, Jr. in March 1928, "The poem is simply an expression of paganism, although, of course, I did not think that I was expressing paganism when I wrote it" [*L* 250].)

The poem begins with a periodic sentence emphasizing the sensuous presence of the secular moment—and, fittingly, the present itself—over the distant prayers of past tradition:

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late  
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,  
 And the green freedom of a cockatoo  
 Upon a rug mingle to dissipate  
 The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

The woman of the poem, however, has her present “encroach[ed]” upon by “that old catastrophe” so that even the sensory attachments of her “pungent oranges and bright, green wings” become a part of traditional religion’s “procession of the dead”: its dominion, its “sepulchre” (presumably Christ’s), its Palestine. Despite the “dark / Encroachment” and “wide water, without sound,” this overpowering dark will not last unabated, challenged as it is by the parrot’s green wings. As the color continues to recur in Stevens’ poetry, notably in poems such as “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” (*CPP* 190) and “The Candle a Saint” (*CPP* 205-6), it becomes symbolic of something secular in which one can believe, and echoes a letter he wrote Elsie, concerning New Orleans and the surrounding area, in February 1906: “One noticeable thing down there is that, at early twilight, colors—green, I am thinking of—do not become obscure but stand out of the darkness” (*L* 84).

Section II, then, offers one of the poem’s lattices of question and answer, and one which seems to resolve in favor of the secular constellation of change and openness; as Bates writes, the stanza “has embraced a wider range of experience.... Divinity is ... equated syntactically with both pleasures and pains, grieving and elations; these in turn correspond to summer and winter, making the seasonal cycle the ‘measure’ to which the woman must attune her soul” (113). The “pungent fruit and bright, green wings” return and are equated with “any balm or beauty of the earth”—those things which the woman must realize as divine, though secular and

of reality, and hold “within herself” despite their transitory natures and vast range of emotional possibility. These are “All pleasures and all pains,” and as such, being of reality, are “the measures destined for her soul”—a soul not concerned with its after-death existence, but with the plain ground of what is now. This concept of plainness and presence, which continues to develop in the third stanza, is what is missing in a system of religions unconnected to reality, for, as Stevens wrote in “Imagination as Value” forty years later, “the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written” (*CPP* 730). In “Sunday Morning,” Jove serves as representative of a class of gods born from men and yet unrepresentative of them; he is a “mythy mind” moving “as a muttering king, / Magnificent, would move among his hinds.” Stevens suggests, as alternative, a consciousness wherein “the earth / Seem[s] all of paradise that we shall know,” and through which

The sky will be much friendlier then than now,  
A part of labor and a part of pain,  
And next in glory to enduring love,  
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

This vision is, essentially, the way Hi Simons suggested it might be in a letter of April 1944: one of “a naturalistic religion as a substitute for supernaturalism” (*L* 464).

In stanza IV the woman speaks for the first time and, fittingly, it is to question. She acknowledges that her contentment with reality is true in seeing life in its “June and evening,” yet asks: “But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields / Return no more, where, then, is paradise?” The speaker answers with a “topoi” (Cook 64) of oft-intoned paradises now lost, reminders of both Romantic and religious souvenirs:

There is not any haunt of prophesy,  
Nor any old chimera of the grave,  
Neither the golden underground, nor isle  
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,  
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm

Remote on heaven's hill[.]

And yet it is not just that these heavens are insufficient to the modern age; it is that these heavens have not “endured / As April's green endures”—that is, as the earth and the eternity it keeps through change itself. In the next stanza, however, she protests again: ““But in contentment I still feel / The need of some imperishable bliss.”” This is much like Stevens' own comment in his February 1906 letter to Elsie (mentioned above), in which he spoke of the trials of possessing the same elemental “instinct of faith” (*L* 86). In the poem, though, he finds death to be an answer—in contrast to its common identification as a question—which in itself allows the same renewals as traditional religions' ideals of an afterlife. “Death is the mother of beauty,” he writes, and continues at the end of the stanza: “She causes boys to pile new plums and pears / On disregarded plate.” In June 1915, Stevens found it necessary to explain the metaphor to Harriet Monroe so that she would not cut the lines from the poem, and wrote,

The words “On disregarded plate” in No. 5 are, apparently, obscure. Plate is used in the sense of so-called family plate. Disregarded refers to the disuse into which things fall that have been possessed a long time. I mean, therefore, that death releases and renews. What the old have come to disregard, the young inherit and make use of. (*L* 183)

Stanza VI, too, echoes the necessity of death as a concept which gives meaning to life, being a “principle of change” ensuring the “continuation which is mortality's only memorial” (Sukenick 65). A so-called paradise—that is, a world without mortality—is even, Stevens implies, a world of permanently unfulfilled desire, in which “rivers like our own ... seek for seas / They never find.” Death as concept and future allows “continuation of the transitory process of desire and the satisfaction of desire” (Sukenick 65), which paradoxically establishes permanence in impermanence itself. This, being the characteristic of the world itself, is followed by a stanza which asserts an idea of some such “great poem of the earth” (see above; *CPP* 730) by a Whitmanian “ring of men” chanting “in orgy on a summer morn / Their boisterous devotion to

the sun”—a sun which is “Not as a god, but as a god might be, / Naked among them, like a savage source.” What these men intone is “a chant of paradise,” but one from their very blood, evoking “the heavenly fellowship” of transitory life itself—something “Of men that perish and of summer morn.” Litz, in keeping with Stevens’ own pattern of positing multiple answers around one center or question, asserts this stanza’s world as an evocation of indefinite possibility:

This imagined world in which the myth lives on our pulse, and the vitality moves from earth to heaven rather than from heaven to earth, gives full range to Stevens’ speculative imagination. It is but one schema, one “scenario” for the future, but in a pluralistic universe anything is possible. (49)

The stanza’s final lines invoke ephemerality and impossibility: “And whence they came and whither they shall go / The dew upon their feet shall manifest.” In March 1928, Stevens wrote on these lines that “Life is as fugitive as dew upon the feet of men dancing in dew. Men do not either come from any direction or disappear in any direction. Life is as meaningless as dew” (*L* 250). However, Stevens’ letter neglects to mention the alteration of the dew by the men—kicked and moved as it is in their dancing—and its similar effect to the dew’s slow melting as the sun becomes more and more present. It is the transitory earth itself, transformed by men and thought and yet transforming itself likewise. Additionally, the two lines echo the solemnity and concision of Biblical language, particularly recalling John 3:8, “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” In its embrace of mystery and ambiguous “Spirit,” this verse—though “Sunday Morning” as a whole rejects Biblical assumptions—mirrors Stevens’ own tentative beliefs.

Stanza VIII, the poem’s last, culminates in the same resolution of finding order in disorder that characterizes the rest of the work. In completing what Cook calls the “contrasting



diptych” of the first and last stanzas (64), the woman returns to the “wide water” of stanza I and realizes there that Christ’s “tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering. / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.” In adopting Christ for its own ranks, Litz suggests, the poem “affirms the immortality of Jesus in the poem’s special terms: by dissolving the Incarnation and transforming Jesus into one who lived and died, the poem restores him” to Stevens’ idea of meaning in mortality (49-50)—and, thus, the particular paradise of the poem. “We live,” the speaker goes on, unsettleable,

in an old chaos of the sun,  
Or old dependency of day and night,  
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free  
Of that wide water, inescapable.

The “wide water” is the fluid fabric of our lives, changing yet constant, as existence itself—wrapping and unwrapping the world. The starred *ors* of the passage, in addition, recall Keats’ “To Autumn” (a poem often cited as ancestral to the final stanza of “Sunday Morning”; see Cook 64) where Keats writes “borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies” (323–4). Where Keats has “full-grown lambs” Stevens gives us “Deer”; where the former has “Hedge-crickets,” the latter has quail that “Whistle about us their spontaneous cries”; where one has the “red-breast” and “gathering swallows,” the other has pigeons—a bird for America and for the modern age. Each poet uses animals of both fall and spring, both dark and light, which allows him to focus on yearly time as cyclical rather than terminal, for indeed all life does not end with winter or darkness. It waits.

Stevens completes the poem by using these “casual flocks of pigeons” to offer the changing world as material for imaginative order: “At evening” they “make / Ambiguous undulations as they sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings.” If it came from another poet, this passage may seem indefinite to a fault; however, in Stevens’ oeuvre, it is close to hope.

“Evening” or dusk recall a time often associated in Stevens with the sort of magical thinking necessary to senses of belief and possibility—as in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” in which “It was evening all afternoon. / It was snowing / And it was going to snow” (*CPP* 76); in “The Auroras of Autumn,” wherein “It is evening. The house is evening, half dissolved” (*CPP* 356); or in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” which allows its content by “a dwelling in the evening air” (*CPP* 444). The birds are also “on extended wings,” as Sukenick notes, which poses them “as if in knowing acquiescence to that destiny” which by necessity remains uncertain (67). If we have lost the “providential God directing our lives,” Vendler points out, “neither do we have a judging God deciding on our lives. Instead we live in iron solitude, unsponsored, free” (qtd. *Voices and Visions*).

Despite its ambiguity, “Sunday Morning” remains one of the clearest assertions of alternate belief in Stevens’ early-to-middle career—in fact, I would argue, until the composition of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942; *CPP* 329-52). Stevens’ early oeuvre, instead, more commonly rejects traditional religious belief without a clearly stated alternative, particularly in the years up to *The Whole of Harmonium* in 1931.

“Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb” (1921; *CPP* 45), one of these poems with only small alternatives proffered, was first published in *Poetry* as part of the “Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile” cluster, which included a number of so-called “companion poems” (such as “The Snow Man” [*CPP* 8] and “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” [*CPP* 51]). Chris Beyers explains the group’s title:

“Sur Ma Gruzzla Gracile” is a sequence of poems by Stevens pretending to be Merimeé pretending to be an Italian translating into French prose the ballads of a Serbian *guslar* who is himself transmitting original and traditional folksongs that express the spirit of the people.... The poems are spoken by a variety of narrators, yet they spring from a single passionate yet repressed consciousness. (317)

In short, the group is an effort of translation between different offshoots of the same mind: that is, potentially, individuals of some collective human mind. The principle holds up in light of “Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb” and its companion poem (as identified in Litz 101 and Schulze 186) “Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds” (*CPP* 44-5), in which alternate ideas are expressed and probed by Stevens’ speakers without either necessarily being chosen as a definite answer. Instead, as Schulze writes, they imply an “endless intellectual cycle,” continually changing and being changed, both within and without (187).

“Of Heaven” directly addresses the “interpreters” of “Of the Manner”—that is, those who feel out the myths we have accepted from our fathers and find them still sufficient—and in doing so offers converse views of the “same sky” (Schulze 186). Stevens’ skepticism in “Of Heaven” undermines the dominion of both manmade gods and the men who continue to remake them; he writes of “our old comedy” and the “dark comedians” who compose it, and of “the one abysmal night” which is inevitable despite the myths offered as flimsy screens. Stevens implies, however, empathy for hopeful believers who must search so ardently for some “steadfast lanterns across the dark.” Indeed, the speaker falls away from mere inquisition of the men who make: though the first three sentences of the poem question, the final is an imperative whose antecedent seems to be the gods and spirits themselves, the “darkened ghosts” that we have noticed and created in paradoxical conjunction. Stevens’ speaker implores them to “Make hue”—which, in an archaic sense, means an apparition or phantasm with form and shape—and “Halloo” among we who need them, even “in the topmost distances / For answer from their icy Élysée.” Sukenick pessimistically implies, “That they will not answer is our answer” (62), though his antecedent is in my view incorrectly identified as the “dark comedians,” the men who create the comedy. Though the response man receives will be dark, quiet, and cold, I believe that there is an

answer—one which is necessitated by the poem having itself posited the word “answer” in language. The response, Stevens asserts, may not be the one they expected: it may be a poem, a language, an art, rather than a god. His entreaty on others’ behalf implies understanding for those who have the “instinct of faith” (*L* 86), as quoted above in reference to his own religious need. The primal character of asking and seeking answers affects Stevens too, and as such “Of Heaven” implicates himself, in addition to those still in the traditional church, as equal “interpreter.” Whereas “Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds” describes religion, “Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb” addresses religious need itself; it is, essentially, the *why* to the former’s *what*.

“A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (1922; *CPP* 47) offers a form of congruent expression in acknowledging the overarching similarity between religious tradition and modern poetic constructions. Though the phrase “supreme fiction” used in conjunction with poetry was introduced in Stevens’ notebook “Schemata” in what George S. Lensing estimates to be 1918 (160-63; also estimated at 1918 in *CPP* 900), the first line of “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” marks Stevens’ first usage of the phrase in a poem (Lensing 163): “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.” The effects of the poem’s “offhand address” (Litz 116) and imperatives—a combination which causes Riddel to hastily conclude that the speaker of the poem is “defensive, ... urged self-consciously to taunt his antagonists with derisive irony” (245)—serve not to divide the woman and the speaker but to set up the way that poetry links them (and thus make a subtle argument for poetry as connective element in itself). “We agree in principle. That’s clear,” Stevens explains. Longenbach convincingly extends this explanation in saying that, while the Christian woman “begins with a ‘moral law’ and from it builds ‘haunted heaven,’ the speaker begins with the physical world to build his ‘hullabaloo among the spheres’”

(80): that is, in essence, that their methods are parallel if superficially oppositional. Stevens supports the parallelism, too, by his use of “we” and “our” throughout the poem (and, except for two respectful addresses to “madame,” in making no mention of the divisive “I” or “you”).

That fictive things’ “Wink,” then, materializes not as sardonic mockery but rather as a sensual (primarily visual and musical) distortion of the same general elements of the construction of belief. Where the woman has her “nave,” “citherns,” and ceremonial “palm” the speaker has his “solid peristyle,” the “jazzy vitality of ‘Squiggling ... saxophones,’” and the palm of Stevens’ own Floridian symbolic system (reappearing throughout his career in “The Comedian as the Letter C” [1923; *CPP* 22-37], “Description without Place” [1945; 296-302], “Of Mere Being” [1955; 476-7], etc.) (Riddel 73). The fictions of both parties are “equally converted into palms,” and, “palm for palm, / Madame, we are where we began.” Both figures of the poem are equally in need of a fiction, and, though Stevens does not denounce the woman’s belief outright, his speaker recommends the greater modern sufficiency of the poem as supreme fiction. He invites her, then, “to regard an article of dogma as hypothesis and then to consider what sort of religion might be built on a contrary and equally plausible hypothesis” (Bates 208). “Allow, / Therefore,” he asks her, to think of people creating from themselves and from reality a “jovial hullabaloo among the spheres”—a poetry, an art, that rings alone and is sufficient there.

The “Botanist on Alp” pair, including “No. 1” (*CPP* 109) and “No. 2” (110), were published after Stevens’ nearly ten-year hiatus, and together suggest the track his mind took in relation to traditional religion throughout his time of relatively sparse publication. The first of the pair, “Botanist on Alp (No. 1),” was published in 1934 in *Direction*, a full year before the second, as a complete poem in itself. Left alone, it is “petulantly political” (Litz 197), offering scenes from Claude (whom Stevens confirms to be “the painter and not the musician” [*L* 293]),

now “dead a long time,” having been ruined by Marx “For the moment.” Claude’s paintings juxtapose southern European landscape with classical rubble—marble pillars and aqueducts crumbling towards the sea—which echo the space of Stevens’ poem: in which “a world that was resting on pillars, / That was seen through arches” becomes one defined by human ideological ruin against a backdrop of “adriatic *riva* rising, / Statues and stars.” Despite the given scene, Stevens argues that the world itself, even lacking a durable manmade fiction (here, the pillars, arches, and hotel), necessitates joy: “Yet the panorama of despair / Cannot be the specialty / Of this ecstatic air.”

“Botanist on Alp (No. 2),” then, provides a companion piece when printed alongside “No. 1” in *Ideas of Order* (1935 and 1936), and the resultant order “provide[s] a long perspective for the original” (Litz 197). Whereas “No. 2” questions the creation of manmade fictions in the first place (“Why should the future leap the clouds / The bays of heaven, brighted, blued?”) it ends similarly to “No. 1” by affirming the importance of *some* fiction. The poem questions the coexistence between two essential poems: the first “that poem,” representing the traditional Christian story of “long celestial death” belonging to “ye faithful” and congruent to the “crosses on the convent roofs” and their attendant imagery; the second “An earthier one,” which, rather than seeking symbolic meaning in the Christian array of objects and imagery, finds more to believe in their physicality and bare beauty: “As of those crosses, glittering, // And merely of their glittering, / A mirror of a mere delight.” (In fact, a journal entry of 1907 connects similar crosses with the nature-religion the young Stevens felt, in which “every leaf and blade of grass reveal[ed] or rather betoken[ed] the Invisible” [L 59; quoted above]. “In the mornings I walk down to the Viaduct,” he wrote that September, “and in the evenings I walk home from there. In the evenings the gold crosses on the churches shine in the high sunlight” [SP 182].) As in “A

High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” each “poem” is presented as an equal alternative—the speaker asks, “For who could tolerate the earth / Without that poem [of ‘long celestial death’], or without // An earthier one [...]?”—and yet the supreme fiction as poetry rather than as religion is affirmed by its placement, reverberating, at the end of the rhetorical question the speaker offers.

Stevens’ personal rejection of Christianity does not reject an entire array of faiths, however; in “New England Verses” (1923; *CPP* 87-9) and many other poems, he presents aspects of ancient eastern belief adapted to a modern American time. Stevens was not the only modern poet to do so; he himself noted some of Ezra Pound’s work with Chinese translation in 1919 (*L* 215), though he also admitted to having consciously avoided Pound’s influence (*L* 813). Pound was one of the first to “find in foreign literature the ‘pure colors’ out of which a new poetry ... will arise” (Martz, “Early Pound” 38), and wrote in 1915 that, while “[t]he last century rediscovered the middle ages,” his would “find a new Greece in China” (qtd. Martz 40).

Since his own early twenties, Stevens had studied eastern—usually Chinese or Japanese—art, thought, and belief. His study seems to have reached its nexus in 1909, where many personal notes and letters display Stevens’ absorption in eastern thought as Romantic variant and artistic means of understanding the world. In March of that year, he wrote to Elsie that “They understand the senses better in the orient (and hence, understand Spring better)” (*CS* 170), and announced his intention to “poke around more or less in the dust of Asia for a week or two” (*L* 138). His May 1909 journal, as printed in *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, presents pages of notes taken at the Astor Library over the preceding months—from meditations on Chinese flower arrangement and landscape gardening to jottings on ukiyoyé, “the Japanese equivalent of genre,” and the Buddhist concept of art as “Pictures of the fleeting world,” and finally to a Chinese proverb regarding poetry: “The sound stops short. The sense runs on” (221-2). Years

later Stevens continued to study the east, with a growing focus on Chinese art and poetry in particular. In 1922, he wrote Harriet Monroe that “For a poet to have even a second-hand contact with China is a great matter,” and around 1936 or 1937 he copied a line from W. B. Honey’s “The Eumorfopoulos Collection Apollo” into his commonplace book: “It would be truer to say that Chinese painting is a branch of poetry and that calligraphy is the medium of both” (*SPBS* 51).

He had also, from 1937 to 1954, corresponded with Leonard C. van Geyzel, “a poet and translator of poetry from the Singhalese” who lived on an estate in Ceylon (*L* 323n2). Stevens received many items from van Geyzel over the years—from a wooden Buddha (*L* 328) to shipments of local tea. Stevens was fascinated by Ceylon, and wrote to van Geyzel that, imaginatively and earthily, “It is like Florida” (*L* 353)—that is, a place which to Stevens was something “alive” and of the sun (*L* 191-2). Census surveys of Colombo and the surrounding region, where van Geyzel lived (*L* 328), indicate a largely Buddhist population—over seventy percent—with the Hindu population rounding to a mere two percent (“Population”). Even so, in 1940 van Geyzel sent Stevens the *Gita Govinda*, a tenth-century work of poetry describing the relationship between Krishna and the female cowherds of his birthplace, Vrindavan (Melton and Baumann 3043). Stevens noted that, despite his study in other areas of the east, he “was not familiar with it” (*L* 380) but upon further reading found it “of the greatest interest in connection with the poetic side of humanism” (*L* 381)—that is, as Stevens described a humanistic time in “Two or Three Ideas,” “an age of disbelief” in which “it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief” (*CPP* 841).

Though his connection with Hindu theology was tenuous at best, many of Stevens’ lines mirror the relationship between *brahman*, the concept whose etymology “provides two allied



meanings: ‘the greatest’ and ‘the root of all things’” and which designates, in the *Upanishads*, “the cause of the origination, sustenance, and destruction of the world” (Borchert 681), and *atman*, an ancient Indian philosophical term denoting “the self or subject encountering a world of objects” (Borchert 717). In Indian philosophy and Hindu religious practice, *brahman*, the god-principle, is intimately “identifi[ed] ... with the inner sprit (*atman*)” (Borchert 681). Each is part of the other, and everything is therefore divine in the most primal form; where *brahman* is the divinity of everything, *atman* is the spark or scrap it gives to each self. From the time of the *Upanishads*, dating between 800 and 400 BCE, *brahman* has been associated with the sun; for example: “The face of truth remains hidden behind a circle of gold.... O life-giving sun, offspring of the Lord of creation, solitary seer of heaven! Spread thy light” (*Upanishads* 50). Like the sun, what is in its light is somehow part and parcel of the sun itself. A similar principle is applied to the relationship between *brahman* and *atman* in Hindu theology, and Stevens explores a suggestive parallel in his essay “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet”:

The acute intelligence of the imagination, the illimitable resources of its memory, its power to possess the moment it perceives—if we were speaking of light itself, and thinking of the relationship between objects and light, no further demonstration would be necessary. Like light, it adds nothing, except itself. (*CPP* 681)

In “New England Verses,” too, Stevens writes, “Widen your sense. All things in the sun are sun” (*CPP* 87). Sun abounds as both spiritual source and plain-earth symbol in Stevens’ entire oeuvre—in the aforementioned double use of “Sunday” in “Sunday Morning”; in “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu”: “Ever-jubilant, / What is there here but weather, what spirit / Have I except it comes from the sun?” (1935; *CPP* 104); and in “The Planet on the Table”: “His self and the sun were one / And his poems, although makings of the self, / Were no less makings of the sun” (1953; *CPP* 450).

“Evening without Angels” (1934; *CPP* 111-12) mirrors the simplicity of this sun-point, particularly its epigraph, attributed to Mario Rossi: “the great interests of man: air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking.” Hi Simons asked Stevens in 1940 of the direct source of Rossi’s words. Stevens replied, “I don’t remember where I picked up the quotation; as you will see from his letter, Rossi is a bit uncertain.... [I]t may come from LIFE AND LETTERS, as he says” (*L* 347). Lensing found that Rossi was correct. In Rossi’s 1932 “Essay on the Character of Swift,” Lensing notes that Rossi “deplore[d] ... [Jonathan] Swift’s inability to escape the ‘wretched sorrows’ and ‘spiteful pleasures’ that had nurtured his art” (215) and describes Swift as relinquishing the content of the epigraph, above. Litz finds the epigraph more appropriate to Stevens’ poems of *Harmonium* than *Ideas of Order*, and argues that it does not begin this poem quite so well: “But for the mind of *Ideas of Order* ‘Bare night’ and ‘Bare earth’ are the best environment” (182), he points out. Litz’s view may come from assuming that the epigraph expresses a hedonistic principle; however, I think Stevens would argue that this pleasure is necessarily part of the bare earth itself. It is no extrapolation, is no fairy construction without foundation; it is based on day itself and its simplest connective components.

Hindu elements and images crop up elsewhere than the epigraph. “Evening without Angels” posits various ideas of belief mirroring *brahman*, particularly in relation to *atman*: “Air is air,” Stevens writes; “we are men of sun / And men of day”; “it is because the wind / Encircling us, speaks always with our speech”; and finally, “Light, too, encrusts us.” This preference for light and bareness leads Sukenick to quickly summarize the poem’s argument: that we are “not of night, of the moon and the imagined meanings of night” (81). It is clear where he derives this assumption; Stevens writes midway through the poem:

Let this be clear that we are men of sun  
And men of day and never of pointed night,

Men that repeat antiquest sounds of air  
 In an accord of repetitions.

In Stevens' phrasing, however, it is only the "pointed" night, one unconnected to reality (cast here as "air"), which is not ours; the symbolics of the poem allow evening to be itself a manifestation or descendant of day, and something which still allows reality over the angels which have no connection to it. Sukenick goes on, though, to make a more convincing point: "though we repeat these manifestations of reality in our poems"—through our "accord of repetitions"—"they are to begin with native to us, in our own language, are natural expressions of our selves. We are of the nature of the reality we imitate, and it is of ours" (81).

In fact, Joseph Carroll argues that Stevens dichotomizes poetry based on reality with that based on its ethereal opposite by responding "directly, polemically, to Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'" ("Teaching" 252), a traditional capitulation of the Romantic sublime. There, Carroll points out, Shelley describes "'The everlasting universe of things' as 'Now dark—now glittering'": as a place in which reality and "things" are no longer sufficient; Stevens, on the other hand, "counters Shelley's transcendental vision by declaring that 'Air is air. / Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere'" (254). Carroll goes on to assert that, by the end of the poem, "Stevens reverses his antiromantic stance" (254), although I wouldn't consider it a reversal so much as an acknowledgement of the uses of a truer and more reality-based Romantic sublime in creating something in which we can believe:

Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare,  
 Except for our own houses, huddled low  
 Beneath the arches and their spangled air,  
 Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire,  
 Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,  
 Where the voice that is great within us rises up,  
 As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.

Though the “arches and their spangled air” and “rhapsodies of fire and fire” may seem to fall counter to “Bare earth,” they represent a transcendence that is reality itself—perhaps even an early use of the aurora borealis, such an indispensable feature of Stevens’ poems of the early 1950s (see *CPP* 355-63 in particular), as an element representing both reality and its subtle sublime and which creates within us a “true response” eliciting a human voice. By this stratification of bare earth and aurora, Stevens crafts a composite, a Romantic sublime without the Romantics’ spiritual illusions; it is, paradoxically, a true fiction.

*“Suppose this was the root of everything”:  
Love as First Fiction*

After passing his bar exams in New York in June 1904, Wallace Stevens visited his family home in Reading. There he met Elsie Moll (*L* 77), a woman who would become “the most important person or reality in his life for the next fifty-one years” (*CS* 4). His and Elsie’s physical distance, however, necessitated a long-distance courtship carried out primarily by correspondence, and so, “for the first five years of their relationship”—until their marriage in September 1909 (*L* 78)—“Elsie is primarily a verbal reality” (*CS* 24), one which must be somewhat conjured though based in physical truth. That necessity acts as a seed for the idea that love is, as I define it, Stevens’ “first fiction,” one which ultimately dovetails into his final supreme fiction (that is, something which is based in reality but necessarily alters it). Vendler asserts a related point, particularly in connecting love to belief in religion:

Anyone who singles out, by desire, some one man or woman as a singular valued object, creates by that act a fiction, an idealized image in which desire finds, or thinks to find, its satisfaction. Anyone who has ever believed in a cause or in a God creates in the same

way an idealized image—the perfect state, the Messiah, Paradise—which is also one of those supreme fictions, a Platonic form. (*Words* 29)

“We do it every day,” Vendler says later in *Voices and Visions*. “Everyone does it every day in making up the things they love, people they love, things they value.” Stevens developed a similar idea of love-composition himself in a letter to Elsie in 1904 or 1905: “I thought today that our letters were like some strange instrument full of delicate and endearing music—music just a little haunting, on which we played for each other in turn” (*L* 81). He cast love, here, as a sort of art, thus implying both something necessarily created and a fuller, though composed, means of representing truth. Together, these—the fully created phantasm and the merely modified reality—accompany Stevens’ ultimate idea of supreme fiction, and seem to have been first theorized in connection with his courtship. Other letters to Elsie of the same time period further the concept of non-present love as a reality necessarily altered by art; their letters “have wrought changes” and created “two new persons,” he wrote (*L* 79), for each is “one person on paper and another in reality” (*L* 80).

Love is also set as an element which allows a change in one’s self-perception through lattices of action and reaction to the loved one, just as religious faith would allow a person some role and belief to inhabit. Many of Stevens’ letters to Elsie presented a persona changed, willfully or accidentally, as a result of love’s catalyst. In 1906, he wrote, “I should come to you clapping my hands, because you have made me feel so much the lover” (*CS* 35), and in 1908, “Even if I did not know you, I should always find myself in what you are. I should be dreaming of some such—Elsie” (*CS* 47). Love twined itself to Stevens’ poetry (his primary method of self-examination), too, where he cast Elsie as parallel artist: “You must be my poetess,” he writes in March 1907, “and sing me many songs. I shall hear them in strange places and repeat them afterwards as half my own” (*CS* 72). The books of poetry he wrote for Elsie (“The Book of

Verses" [1908] and "The Little June Book" [1909]; *SP* 190-6 and 227-34), were half-imagined, based only tenuously on physical reality. In May 1909, Stevens wrote of their own past experience as poetry in itself, and finished with the parenthetical reality: "(I called you Bo-Bo when that was written. You had pink cheeks and light brown hair and soft hands. You were twenty two)" (*CS* 187).

Stevens' love-fiction is complex enough, in fact, to necessitate its own shared and sacred geography, one analogical to the crucial imaginative overlay asserted in "The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet" in 1944: "we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there" (*CPP* 684). In the letters of his and Elsie's first few years of courtship, Stevens referred multiply to the world created between them—as "a world of our own" (*CS* 30), as a shared "Solitude" regarded "as a new world" (*CS* 31), as "Elsie's world" (*CS* 72). He went on, in December 1908, to expand the metaphor and thus incorporate Elsie as a conglomerate of climate, substance, and space: "—I want to steep myself in you," he wrote, "if I may use so extraordinary a term—as if you were a South wind" (*CS* 116). Not a month later, he stretched his concept of shared geography to its full—to a place foreign and unearthly and yet something to which one can become "native": some "*Terra Incognita*, where only Elsie lives always, and where I visit and have become half-native with her" (*L* 116).

Stevens' correspondence-courtship also seems to have been influenced in some part by Keats' letters to Fanny Brawne. In 1907, Stevens bought Keats' *Letters* (Bates, "Stevens' Books at the Huntington" 53) and wrote to Elsie: "I read the 'Letters of John Keats' until early this morning... I have been wanting to read Keats' letters ever since I knew there were such things" (*SP* 176). Keats' poetry and correspondence were evidently still in Stevens' mind in 1909 and later. In one letter of October 1819, Keats famously proclaimed, "You have absorb'd me.... I

have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion—I have shudder'd at it. I shudder no more—I could be martyr'd for my Religion—Love is my religion—I could die for that. I could die for you” (*Letters* 310-11). In a similar manner, Stevens’ love progressed as if it were in itself a replacement for art, history, and religion as a bundle; in January 1909, he wrote (using a similar constellation of dashes to Keats’), “I do not attempt history. I shudder at Art.—I only write turbulently to say that I am back again—and that I wish you were with me—wish it intensely” (*L* 115). Stevens also proclaimed a Keatsian yearning for love and summer in concert, even to the point of offering years of commoner life in return. Keats wrote, in July 1819, “I almost wish we were butterflies and liv’d but three summer days—three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain” (*Letters* 245); and Stevens, in July 1909, mirrored this: “I would give a year of life to spend this summer at home with you” (*CS* 232). Even Stevens’ manner of address followed Keats’ mold. Where Keats used “My sweet Girl,” “My dear Girl,” and other endearments to begin his letters to Fanny (*Letters* 248, 252; 255, 258, 270), Stevens began an August 1909 letter to Elsie with “My own Girl:—” (*CS* 269).

Perhaps the most important expressions of love, in Keats’ vein, reflect a religion made of the connection itself. As early as 1906 Stevens told Elsie that she and her letters were “the only haven” he had “ever known” (*CS* 38); in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” he used “haven” again in concert with heaven itself: as “heaven-haven” (*CPP* 345). In a letter to Elsie of April 1907 he described art he has bought—“a large photograph of one of Rembrandt’s paintings. It is a portrait of himself and his wife Saskia—and *she is sitting on his lap!*”—and goes on to compare the print, presumably “The Prodigal Son in the Tavern,” to a religious image: “I might just as well have chosen a Madonna” (*CS* 88). Even his private writings presented an early god-

system made more complex by love; in “From Pieces of Paper” (1918[?]), he wrote, “La dées[s]e Imagination, le dieu Amour”—that is, “The goddess Imagination, the god Love” (Lensing 169). In a later Stevensian sense, too (in which art and religion are similar components of a whole), love and art become equated; in a letter of January 1909, Stevens described his use of art as an uneasy placeholder for a faraway love:

Once more I wanted intensely to see you last night. I wanted to send you a telegram at the last minute that you would get at your supper time, when you would have no time to get ready. But I didn't start. Instead, I passed a reckless afternoon at the Library and an even more reckless evening at the Museum. (CS 142)

As a broad category in Stevens' poetry, though, “love” goes much further than its customary implications, and much of its use as a category comes in implying its necessary connection with peripheral terms as part of “the protean versatility of eros” throughout Stevens' work (Fisher 135). Stevens evokes not only the traditional elements of marriage and sex, but also doubles (even just double images and figurative terms of coupling), desire as an abstract concept not always allied with the loved one, the family unit, and what I've chosen to call the “ur-mother” in Stevens' poetry—that is, an image of primal maternity allied with or even married to a more traditional masculine god of sorts, particularly in his later poems, and in which Stevens indicated an early interest in “Schemata” as “The mother, the one unknown” (Lensing 159).

The first of Stevens' mature love poems, “Peter Quince at the Clavier” (1915; *CPP* 72-4), encompassed most of these subsets of love as broad category, particularly desire, coupling, art as analogue, and traditional religion as contrast. The poem as a whole is modeled on musical structure, which Riddel identifies as a “sonatina framework of exposition, development, and recapitulation with coda” (73), thus squaring with Stevens' own vague statement on the poem: that it sought only to think, as Bernard Heringman reported, “*in terms of musical movements—sort of libretto*, he said” (qtd. Brazeau 200). In its musical development and overlapping form,



both replying to and rhyming with elements previous and to come, the structure “acts out the fundamental theme of permanence within change” (Litz 43). The poem’s musical elements also allow continual indications of its mood, from the “pizzicati” which suggests “a feeling of alien passion” in the elders (Riddel 74) to the dissonance of sound at the end of Part II, which “fixes the attempted rape as a violation of beauty by an unnatural sense” (Riddel 75).

The poem begins with a sort of syllogism, one representative of those in the essays of Stevens’ later career:

Just as my fingers on these keys  
 Make music, so the self-same 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,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,  
 Is music.

This logical progression of abstract ideas reflects the clearness of their connection to Peter Quince, Stevens’s speaker—who serves, in fact, as “an eminently proper mask” (Riddel 74) for Stevens himself, and allows that the desire described here is at least parallel to Stevens’ for Elsie. Quince’s role is indispensable, too, for his position as a “mechanic” (Litz 43) in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, by which he represents “the lumpy reality without which imagination is mere moonshine” (Litz 43), a concept which becomes imminently important to Stevens’ later capitulations of supreme fiction.

Peter Quince’s role as stage director marks that of the poem itself. Ultimately, “Peter Quince at the Clavier” is both a “speculation on the nature of desire” (Sukenick 70), represented by Susanna and her analogical relationship to desires of the present, and an assertion for poetic over religious forms of immortality—immortality being, of course, a permanence paradoxically

couched in the necessarily transitory nature of things, what Litz calls “the unchanging patterns of a changing world” (44), an order created through disorder. Sukenick addresses this point as well; in pointing out the transitory elements of the final section (the body, evening, waves, gardens, maidens) he acknowledges that “bodily beauty lives on in new embodiments” (71) in a manner reminiscent of Keats’ “To Autumn” and reflected just months later in Stevens’ own “Sunday Morning.” However, I see love and desire here as elements which both enable and necessitate art: a love without which art would be unnecessary, without which music would be merely “sound.” Love, in this case, is the mother of art and the processor of art’s beauty; poetry, in turn, is in its service. The possible alternative to traditional religion is not just poetry, as Litz (44) and others have it—it is love wrapped in poetry, neither separable from the other, having risen from the sea together, Venus-like, such that our “thin blood” will “Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.”

“Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (1918; *CP* 10-14) ultimately finds a similar affirmation in love at middle age. Stevens wrote to L. W. Payne, Jr. in 1928, “I had in mind simply a man fairly well along in life, looking back and talking in a more or less personal way about life” (*L* 251). From his placement in the sky’s “high west,” in close proximity to neither dawn nor dusk, Stevens’ speaker finds middle age imperfect but necessarily so, something expressed first of all by Stevens’ usage of formal—yet skewed—modes of poetry. The poem consists of twelve stanzas of eleven lines each, with each line in loosely kept blank verse. In his inconsistent manipulation of blank verse into anapestic meter or correct iambic meter with the occasional syllable added or absent from the line, Stevens mirrors both the chiefly iambic manner of usual human speech and the many ways in which life is individualized and imperfect. The same follows for his use of eleven-line stanzas, occasional alliteration, and randomly rhymed couplets; by using an odd number of lines and erratic stylistic elements, Stevens creates a tension

mirroring that of a life ordered only by its disorder. The twelve stanzas, in turn, recall time and the speaker's place in the middle of it. The Chinese zodiac has twelve signs, the Gregorian calendar has twelve months, the contemporary clock's twelve Roman numerals match those of the stanza titles, and, in keeping with the concept of middle age, the day's twenty-four hours can be perfectly divided by twelve into two halves—the first of which, here, has already been lived.

Stevens' speaker is as aware of the second half as of the first. The poem often questions, thus hinting at the unclear nature of what is to come, as well as places emphasis on conclusions through punctuation. The lines and sentences are declarative, terse, and often end-stopped. In stanza VIII, for example, ten of eleven lines are punctuated by either a period or comma, emphasizing endings and the idea of mortality; the stanza's subject matter also mirrors time's passing by describing its lovers as fruits "Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque" and soon to be "Washed into rinds by rotting winter winds." In addition to and in concert with the rotting rinds, the poem brims with images of past fertility. In the same stanza, Stevens writes, "Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof," thus asserting the liminal nature of no longer growing and not yet dying. Stanza III, too, examines the implications of binding—and thus wasting—fertility. Stevens writes of age and its stillness, of the "old Chinese" as well as the Japanese painter Utamoro's "beauties" who "sought / The end of love in their all-speaking braids"; the women are stuck, both by their stillness in being captured in a painting and by the binding of hair which so overtly symbolizes fertility in its natural state. "Have all the barbers lived in vain," Stevens asks, "That not one curl in nature has survived?" In stanza VI, the speaker presents another scenario of loss: "When amorists grow bald," he writes, "then amours shrink / Into the compass and curriculum / Of introspective exiles, lecturing," thus calling attention to the trap of old age—to speak, merely, rather than to do. He contrasts this image to one of Hyacinth, the

boyish lover of Apollo killed by Hades while still in the bloom of youth—and yet both images are subject to the inevitable movement from sun to dark earth, from life to a place after.

Perhaps the most representative thread of imagery in “Le Monocle” refers to Stevens’ fear of the slow and representative leak of color from life. His speaker associates warm colors in particular with passion and youth in the same way that Yeats did in his later poetry (for example, “Sailing to Byzantium”)—“the red bird” that “flies across the golden floor,” the “silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion fruits” of “magic trees.” He fears that middle age will puncture his stores of color and vitality: “If men at forty will be painting lakes / The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one, / The basic slate, the universal hue.” This loss can cause an overcorrection into false and synthetic color, into “a pool of pink, / ... with lilies scudding the bright chromes.” The “ephemeral blues” which Stevens’ speaker so admires for their saturation return in the “blue pigeon ... that circles the blue sky, / On sidelong wing, around and round and round,” tireless in its exploration of the life given; however, the color drains: “A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground, / Grown tired of flight.” The speaker regrets that he spent his youth as a “dark rabbi” observing “the nature of mankind, / In lordly study” and not understanding the blessing of its ordered imperfection. “I found / Man proved a gobbet in my mincing world,” he admits, a mere bit of flesh in something he would rather have kept refined. Now the middle-aged speaker attempts “Like a rose rabbi” to understand “the origin and course / Of love” and cannot reach the full measure he used to hold (seen in the fact that he “pursued, / And still pursue[s]”). However, there is comfort in the celebration of all that remains and the growing wisdom with which he can appreciate its nuance: “until now,” he reflects, “I never knew / That fluttering things have so distinct a shade.”

After initially yearning for stillness and eternity, after having proclaimed, “I wish that I might be a thinking stone,” Stevens’ speaker realizes the absolute importance of life as it stands presently through his examination of life’s nuance and variation, only perceivable through the lens of “forty.” Even though the “sea of spuming thought foist[ed] up again” only what Botticelli’s Venus (Litz 85) “was,” the speaker still possesses images and realities comparable to her beauty when it was present, particularly the “furious star” burning in the west—Venus in another incarnation, the morning star, a “measure of the intensity of love” and of new beginnings despite advancing age. Four years before *The Waste Land*, Stevens presaged its Hyacinth Girl (Eliot 66) and her damp hair in another image of continuing fertility and physicality: “Why,” he asks, “without pity on these studious ghosts, / Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?” In this vein, he asserts in stanza VII that he prefers a physical, earthly reality to a paradise that is a feeble simulacrum of earth:

The mules that angels ride come slowly down  
 The blazing passes, from beyond the sun.  
 Descensions of their tinkling bells arrive.  
 These muleteers are dainty of their way.  
 Meantime, centurions guffaw and beat  
 Their shrilling tankards on the table-boards.  
 This parable, in sense, amounts to this:  
 The honey of heaven may or may not come,  
 But that of earth both comes and goes at once.

This stanza and others run counter to Litz’s claim that the poem itself is “almost a surrogate for the sexual passion that it treats in elegiac fashion” (84); if this is elegiac, it is only that insofar as our entire lives are elegies lived. A later stanza, the tenth, counters Litz’s reading further by perhaps the most clearly phallic imagery in all of Stevens’ poetry. After describing the “fops of fancy” who plant in their poems remnants of mysticism, Stevens’ speaker admits that he is “a yeoman, as such fellows go. I know no magic trees, no balmy boughs,” and yet,

after all, I know a tree that bears  
 A semblance to the thing I have in mind.  
 It stands gigantic, with a certain tip  
 To which all birds come sometime in their time.  
 But when they go that tip still tips the tree.

Sex is not “all,” as his next stanza points out—yet it is something; it is “that first, foremost law.” Litz posits, presumably negatively, that “the simplicity of devotion to this ‘first, foremost law’ ... of sexual reality is also an illusion” (89). However, as Stevens wrote in 1928 of “To the One of Fictive Music,” “the imaginative world is the only real world, after all” (*L* 252). That it must be an illusion makes it no less true. This bedrock of belief in fabrication—beginning, for Stevens, with love—ultimately provides a foundation for the successful arrival of Stevens’ later ideas of a supreme fiction.

In its affirmation of imagination as necessary mate to reality, “To the One of Fictive Music” (1922; *CPP* 70-71) is simultaneously invocation and “secret conclusion to *Harmonium*” (Litz 117), serving as “apostrophe and prayer” (Vendler, “Teaching” 15) by its central metaphor of interaction, both romantic and familial, with a female muse figure. Its four nine-line stanzas “actually break down into Stevens’ favorite tercets,” Litz points out, “and the pyramiding of three-part and nine-part units adds to the ‘sacramental’ tone of the poem” (119). The “pyramiding” effect is further compounded by a telescopic, erratic rhyme scheme, through which each stanza echoes itself and overlaps with its surroundings in the looping-through of long vowel sounds. (The third stanza, for example, has the rhyme scheme ABCDBDECF.) These sacraments are those given to earth and imagination, as well as to the derivation of art from their intersection. The importance of that intersection is particularly evident in light of an undated early typescript, rescued from Stevens’ trash at Farmington Avenue in Hartford by his landlady

and now housed at the Beinecke Library at Yale, with the typed title “To the Fictive Virgin” and an array of alternative titles in Stevens’ hand:

Souvenir of the Muse of Earlier, Simpler Earth  
 Souvenir of a Muse  
 Souvenir of the Muse of Archaic Earth  
 Souvenir of the Archaic Muse  
 To the ~~Fiction~~ One of Fictive Music

When I reviewed the typescript at Yale the sixth alternative was illegible to my eye, but Martz suggests a French option, “De la Terre Belle et Simple” (52)—that is, “Of the Earth Beautiful and Simple.” Regardless of the degrees of subtlety and meaning in each, the titles taken together very clearly set up a symbiotic and necessary relationship between reality (*earlier, simpler, earth, archaic*) and the imagination (*muse, fiction, fictive music*). As Stevens reflected in 1928, “after writing a poem, it is a good thing to walk round the block; after too much midnight, it is pleasant to hear the milkman” (*L* 251-2).

The muse figure, who occupies the multiple female roles of “Sister and mother and diviner love,” is the “you” of the poem and a possible predecessor to the “Interior Paramour” of 1951 (Bates 78). Her presence acts as a balm on stark reality, though both extremes—bare earth and pure poetry—are necessary for some sort of balance. To fulfill her role, “She must give us that element of unreality, the imagination, which makes reality so alluring” (Sukenick 69). She is invoked as more than muse, however; Litz points out that she is a compound figure representing a single concept (“the naked imagination, pure and simple, a figure compounded of Muse and Virgin and earthly woman” [118]), and in 1935 Stevens himself noted, “I don’t think that I meant anything definitely”—that is, no pure muse or muses’ sisterhood—“except all the things that live in memory and imagination” (*L* 297). He meant only, as he clarified in a following letter, that

those of the “sisterhood” “are figures *of that sort*” (L 298; emphasis mine): not muses, but something alike, some fictive projection which he could address.

The icon Stevens creates in “To the One of Fictive Music,” then, is a vestige of something we need but have spurned. Her image in the final stanza is “strangely bloodless,” Litz points out, “‘pale,’ ‘fatal,’ ‘Unreal.’ Living as we do in a time between mythologies, we must woo the ancient muse of earth’s embracing rhythms through a ‘fictive’ image of herself” (119). Riddel, too, notes her placelessness: “It is a poem Stevens needed very much, to reaffirm the importance of poetry in a time when the muse had become anachronistic, not to say unreal” (69). Her figure remains somewhat accessible, however, for her capability is implied in “us.” Whereas the printed final lines read “Unreal, give back to us what once you gave,” the manuscript conflates the second and first persons: “Unreal, give back to us what *we* gave: / The imagination that we spurned and crave” (qtd. Longenbach 80; emphasis mine). The imaginative source, in this draft, “is not imagined as something other than the self,” Longenbach goes on to point out, for “*we* give what *we* once gave” (80). What is necessary is also attainable, for it was ours to give as well as it is now ours to claim. In this sense, the muse of imagination and the presumably male seeker of reality are merged; they are married, in a sense, by their symbiotic capabilities and by the necessity of one to the other.

For Stevens’ poetry, Elsie remained necessary—as Henry Church wrote in 1943, “I am convinced that Mrs. Stevens has had an important part to play in the poetry of Wallace Stevens” (qtd. Ford 53)—and yet somewhat demarcated from his inner life. After the birth of their daughter, Holly, on August 10, 1924 (L 243), Stevens did not publish anything at all; indeed, despite the fact that he published nine poems in periodicals in 1922 and seven in 1923 (not to mention *Harmonium*), he published only two in 1924 and after that none at all until April 1930



(Morse, Bryer, and Riddel 55-6). These years seem to have been composed primarily of quiet family- and career-building, though the exact cause of Stevens' hiatus is still unclear. In Holly Stevens' 1971 essay "Bits of Remembered Time," she remembered her parents' separate bedrooms (654), noted that they "rarely entertained at home" (654), and wondered whether her father "missed an active social life at home and, if he'd had it, whether he would have written the poems he did" (655). A Hartford Insurance colleague quoted Stevens in the same vein: "Mrs. S and I went out for a walk yesterday afternoon," Charles O'Dowd reported. "We walked to the end of Westerly Terrace, and she turned left and I turned right" (qtd. Brazeau 43-4).

"Red Loves Kit" (August 1924; *CPP* 556-7) was the last poem Stevens published before his hiatus, and takes a different path than many of his previous love poems: here, love is influential not as a positive and creative element but as a negative and "decreative" one (see Vendler, *Words* 31). In keeping with other love poems of Stevens' middle period, "Red Loves Kit" uses people, rather than muses or paramours, as symbols in themselves, and keeps in its adherence to personhood some distance from the ideal. Its title, possibly derived from contemporary "graffito" (Bates 76), is "deliberately trivial," such that it intends "to point up ironic resemblances" between the ordinary couple and the ideal (Litz 143); its subject matter, in turn, seems to be derivative of some "general sense of injury" (Bates 76) in Stevens' own life with Elsie. The male speaker of the poem addresses himself ("you") in an attempt to work through the germ and import of the lovers' quarrel, which seems to hinge on the woman's accusation of "adulteries" that the speaker defends as "metaphysical." As Litz points out, utilizing the Stevens' lives as potential models for the poem, "the writing of poetry may have qualified in Elsie's eyes as metaphysical adultery" (77), an interpretation which also squares with

Holly Stevens' assertion that Elsie thought Stevens' poems, particularly those written to or about her, should be hers—that is, should not be published or shared with the world:

When I was growing up my mother did not read my father's poems, and seemed to dislike the fact that his books were published. Questioning her about this after my father's death, she told me that he had published "her poems"; that he had made public what was, in her mind, very private. (*SP* 227)

(This attitude also explains Elsie's drastic cutting of Stevens' letters of their courtship [*CS* xi].)

The poem's speaker goes on to probe his counterpart's lack of responsiveness as source for his metaphysical "adultery," but settles in the final stanza on a "meager consolation" (Bates 78): in answer to the metaphorical "eclipse" that the woman invokes in the first stanza, Stevens' speaker offers one made of crows, "an unbroken mat" to "Spread over heaven shutting out the light."

No hope for reconciliation is mentioned, though some may have surfaced if, as multiple scholars have suggested, "Red Loves Kit," "Good Man, Bad Woman" (*CPP* 558-9), and "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard" (*CPP* 559-60) are indeed chipped-off fragments from some longer and abandoned venture (Litz 170, 296n13). Litz finds "Red Loves Kit" unsuccessful, citing Morse's point that its "bitterness was 'personal' in precisely the way [Stevens] thought poetry ought not to be" (qtd. 170), and I agree: in attempting to make an even case for a speaker of a very similar point of view as Stevens himself, in clumsily echoing past successes (for example, compare "It will be fecund in rapt curios" with nearly any line in "The Comedian as the Letter C" [*CPP* 22-37] [Litz 143]), and in having its personae be such thinly veiled simulacra of Stevens and Elsie themselves, the poem does not achieve much beyond its haunting final image—a sky carpeted by crows and punctured by "spiral eyes" turned back towards the viewer as if in silent interrogation.

"Re-statement of Romance" (1935; *CPP* 118), on the other hand, proves a far more successful effort in its illumination of self and ideas through the love of another person. Stevens'

comfort with its form—his preferred loose blank verse tercets—is evident in the ease with which he tackles the poem’s complex metaphysical concepts. By proliferating images of (and variants of the very word) “self” alongside images of another, and by a constant and lacelike interplay of singular and plural first-person pronouns, “Re-statement of Romance” inhabits a Stevensian (and initially Shelleyan—see “Epipsychidion,” particularly its last stanza) paradox of at once melding with and remaining separate from the loved one. This is clearest and most compressed in the lines “Only we two are one, not you and night, // Nor night and I, but you and I, alone,” in which the phrase “we two” emphasizes the couple’s togetherness and “twoness” simultaneously, and where the often-used “and” and “two” contrast with the sprinkling of “Only,” “one,” “you,” and “I.” In this paradox, it is a possible predecessor of “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” (1951; *CPP* 444) and to many of Stevens’ late love poems of desire, belief, and transcendence, mingling. The final stanza (particularly by its nighttime setting) recalls two moons, reflecting one another’s light as Earth’s does the sun, yet with no definite source—rather, with an extension of continual and silver light seeming to emanate from the moon-lovers’ bodies themselves.

That night is only the background of our selves,  
Supremely true to each separate self,  
In the pale light that each upon the other throws.

By 1942, Stevens had developed another perspective on love in “Arrival at the Waldorf” (*CPP* 219), in which he contrasts the fierce and actual landscape of Guatemala with the clean-lined Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York, wherein he must inhabit a “wild country of the soul,” not of actuality, and

Where the wild poem is a substitute  
For the woman one loves or ought to love,  
One wild rhapsody a fake for another.

“You touch the hotel the way you touch moonlight / or sunlight,” Stevens writes, addressing some unknown “you” who reduces the world to something artificially containable, some synthetically rendered “verse,” something “sealed,” “invisible,” “remoter than mountains.” Whereas poems like “Re-statement of Romance,” above, allow love to catalyze some greater understanding or reaction, “Arrival at the Waldorf” conveys the opposite: a situation in which love (or what “ought” to be love) stuffs the lushly “alien, point-blank, green and actual” tangle of reality into a space far too small.

“Montrachet-le-Jardin” (1942; *CPP* 234-7) is a poem of the same period that, while not about love in any traditional sense, also depends upon doubled and reactive images for its effectiveness. The work is another of Stevens’ assertions of the absolute necessity of commingling reality and the imagination, and is made of equations which reinforce this coupling: first, the title links Montrachet (a fine white burgundy) with the more common “Jardin” (the French term for garden or enclosed yard) by the “the” (“le”) between them and the hyphens equating the phrase to an integrated term, to a created wholeness. These phrasings become more contradictory as the poem develops and as Stevens emphasizes the alternately paradoxical and impossible natures of the coupled images: the “cricket-impresario,” “blue bulls,” “players of aphonies,” “the cell / A hero’s world,” “bezeled plain,” “the root-man and the super-man,” and “Terra Paradise,” for example. He asks, “What more is there to love than I have loved?”—and finds an answer in the question’s ambiguous phrasing, which allows both the subject of love and the statement “I have loved” to be loved, with the latter as a separate action in itself. He posits love as a form of worship or sacred belief parallel to the marriage of imagination and reality:

But if there be something more to love, amen,  
Amen to the feelings about familiar things,

The blessed regal dropped in daggers' dew,  
 Amen to thought, our singular skeleton,  
 Salt-flicker, amen to our accustomed cell,  
 The moonlight in the cell, words on the wall.

As the poem ends with its climactic catalogue (“Item:”), it seems that Stevens will ultimately choose to rely on his own imaginative superstructure, one which serves not to cloak but rather to enhance and contour reality in a merging between the two:

Bastard chateaux and smoky demoiselles,  
 No more. I can build towers of my own,  
 There to behold, there to proclaim, the grace

And free requiting of responsive fact.

In his second-to-last stanza he proclaims, “But let this one sense be the single main.”

The other half of another of his perpetual couplings, however, returns; in the last stanza of “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” the illusion slips, and the doubt creeps in as part of its parallel relation to belief. The cat—possibly symbolic of belief due to its similar significance in “The Candle a Saint” (1939; *CPP* 205-6) and “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” (1937; *CPP* 190)—“Leaps quickly from the fireside” at midnight, the temporary belief now taken from the nurturing fire after its speaker’s premature affirmation. Particularly due to its relatively late position in Stevens’ poetic career, the poem represents a more abstract relationship with love, desire, and coupling than the earlier poems do, and inhabits more fully the crossing-point and marriage space of Stevens’ early and late theories of belief.

In the later poems of Stevens’ life, love becomes more and more inseparable from art as final fiction; in fact, many of the poems to follow could serve nearly as well for my final category of art. Their language of marriage and doubling, however, along with the more brazen nature of Stevens’ love poems in the traditional sense (such as “The World as Meditation” [*CPP*

441-2]), continue to mark them as works belonging to the category of desire, love, and lineage from first mother. Several sections of “The Auroras of Autumn” (1948; *CPP* 355-63) for example, mark the maturation of the ur-mother figure from earlier poems. In one such mid-career poem, “The Woman That Had More Babies Than That” (1939; *CPP* 201-3), Stevens presents humanity—that is, “those / That question”—as children of “a woman,” presumably some singular and secular Eve. Even the “old men, the philosophers, are haunted by that / Maternal voice, the explanation at night” due to the inadequacy of their own answers, a position that is made clear by Stevens’ personal position on philosophy as an inadequate form of essential discourse; as he marked by a penciled line in his copy of Leon Roth’s *Descartes’ Discourse on Method* (1937),

There are sentences in the writings of the poets more serious than in those of the philosophers. The reason is that the poets wrote through enthusiasm and power of the imagination. There are in us, as in a flint, seeds of knowledge. Philosophers adduce them through the reason; poets strike them out from the imagination, and *these are the brighter*. (48; at the University of Massachusetts Amherst)

In any case, these old philosophers are hardly separate even from poets in their questioning. An answer is something all need “in solitude,” and they desire a “fiery lullaby,” presumably originating from the mother, which will both incite them and allow them to rest against the curvature of their own lives. Stevens concludes, after the rejection of an image of the ur-mother as cracking, material statue (“If her eyes were chinks in which the sparrows built; / If she was deaf with falling grass in her ears—”), in favor of a natural construction of light, an infused rendering of the everyday art:

But there is more than a marble, massive head.  
They find her in the crackling summer night,  
In the *Duft* of towns, beside a window, beside  
A lamp, in a day of the week, the time before spring,  
A manner of walking, yellow fruit, a house,  
A street.

In this marriage of “supernatural head” and more literally natural light, Stevens expresses belief in the mother figure, where “familiar words become the words / Of an elevation, an elixir of the whole.”

In canto III of “The Auroras of Autumn,” however, the ur-mother seems to have lost her effectiveness, and rather than answering human questions has become only small comfort, merely making tenderer what will still be inevitable.

She makes that gentler that can gentle be.

And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed.  
She gives transparence. But she has grown old.  
The necklace is a carving not a kiss.

The soft hands are a motion not a touch.  
The house will crumble and the books will burn.

This is Stevens’ “Farewell to an idea,” the seeing-off of an image that was once as lit as a summer lamp, as yellow fruit, as sun in “The Woman That Had More Babies Than That” and which now has become hollow: “Upstairs / The windows will be lighted, not the rooms.” She has outlived, in the modern age, her own late Romantic position as “mythic feminine figure” (Carroll, “Teaching” 249). And yet, in Section VIII, the mother creates an innocence despite all, in which some thing itself “exists, it is visible, it is, it is,” and which the people of the poem

partake thereof,  
Lie down like children in this holiness,  
As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep,

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark  
Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,  
Created the time and place in which we breathed...

Section IX purports a hope for some such innocent, “nurturing[,] and pre-Oedipal” place defined by motherhood (Dickie 281) or any relationship between genders, called here and elsewhere the

“rendezvous,” the paradoxical “isolation which only the two could share.” It is the sort of hope which suffuses Stevens despite his bleaker expectations:

It may come tomorrow in the simplest word,  
Almost as part of innocence, almost,  
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part.

Stevens’ poems of the ur-mother inhabit this “almost” place. Something returns there; parts of him wait there; potential lives there. Though his later poems of belief depart for something of art rather than of origin, the mother stays there as lineage or immovable stone, something given by birth itself.

“A Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror” (1949; *CPP* 393-4), by contrast, presents a female figure as potential rather than starting place. The poem posits the existence of a female “mistress of the world” as the image which “turned out to be or ... touched” some “this”: “the root of everything.” Stevens’ use of “this” without antecedent here presages phrases such as “the thing itself” (1954; *CPP* 451), a means of addressing some figment or reality without enclosing it by definition or overspecific term. The female connotations of “mistress,” “Salon,” “belle Belle,” the jewelry of the fifth stanza, and the reference to “the most beautiful maid / And mother” are set in an opposition resembling romantic love to “Abba,” or some god as father. Even though “dark death is the breaking of a glass” in relation to this god, causing the disappearance of reality’s reflections of oneself (perhaps life stages or years), the imaginative projections and the self which makes them, tied to the vague female figure, remain:

But the images, disembodied, are not broken.  
They have, or they may have, their glittering crown,  
Sound-soothing pearl and omni-diamond.

The female figure is reemphasized by her connection to a male godhead in the last stanza. “How long have you lived and looked,” the speaker asks his audience, “Ababba”?—one away from



god, “expecting” the apparition of the “king’s queen,” inexorable from the thing itself: not exactly it, but married to it.

“Study of Images II” (1949; *CPP* 396) marks another use of contrasts in order to reaffirm a final continuity. The poem presents the theoretical marriage of reality and imagination as our aim in finding some sustaining belief. The “pearly women that drop / From heaven and float in air, like animals // Of ether” are contrasted to the real animal, “brown, the ice-bear sleeping in ice-month / In his cave ... without a dream.” The images that follow allow the coexistence of the two (presumably representing imagination and reality, respectively) in surreal paradox: the “shadowless moon” that is wholly shade, the other lives in women’s living hair, the integration of the “disparate halves / Of things.” The language emphasizes the need for merging, particularly coupling—Stevens speaks of “half-fishes,” “espousal,” “betrothal,” “halves,” and “right joining”—and the poem ends with a climactic music and string of consonance (particularly of initial *b* sounds) symbolizing the merger of opposing elements into the birth of a singular truth:

a music of ideas, the burning  
And breeding and bearing birth of harmony,  
The final relation, the marriage of the rest.

The final years of Stevens’ life, as well as his and Elsie’s shared one, allowed him to conceive his final fiction. Though “the imaginary element was more important than in many marriages,” Blount points out, Stevens’ and Elsie’s “continued life together was not an accident” (*CS* 424)—and indeed, Stevens would not have found the imaginative and so-called “real” elements of his life to have been so distinct. They meld to form his sufficient belief, just as elements of what is known and what must remain unknown do. The same is true, even after forty years of marriage, with Elsie; in discussing Giorgione with Thomas McGreevy in a letter of July 1948, for example, Stevens wrote, “What particularly interested me in him was the fact that for a

good many years my wife has had a photograph of one of his portraits hanging up at home and this of itself made me want to know more about him” (*L* 608).

The dynamics of known and unknown, reality and imagination, and dream and waking—as well as the marriages possible between them—become integral in “The World as Meditation” (1952; *CPP* 441-2). The theme is a career-long one for Stevens, and where the poem fuses sun and Ulysses for a waiting Penelope it recalls a letter Stevens wrote Elsie in 1908: “I should rather have your letter than the sun every morning. It is true, it is true, it is true—but you won’t believe it” (*CS* 49). “The World as Meditation” is set up by both its title and epigraph; as Georges Enesco wrote, “*Je vis un rêve permanent, qui ne s’arrête ni nuit ni jour [I live a permanent dream, which ceases neither night nor day]*”—which is echoed by the syntactic linkage of “world” and “meditation” in the title. The poem begins with the question of Ulysses’ return, emphasizing the complete alteration Penelope’s expectation has wrought on her, as well as hinting at the love which caused it. The world is moved from winter to spring in his imaginative arrival—“The trees are mended. / That winter is washed away”—and Ulysses’ image is a “form of fire,” a “savage presence” which mirrors and ultimately becomes the sun. Ulysses’ absence has allowed Penelope to render not only an imaginative image of him, but also of herself; in the third stanza, for example, Stevens crafts an ambiguous phrase in which either party could be the imagined part (“his self for her, which she imagined”). By these imaginings, of him and her and of their coupling, what does not happen becomes what *is* regardless, and Penelope inhabits the merging of reality and imagination:

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[.]

Penelope lives in a continuous present based on both the realities of Ulysses' absence and the equally impactful imaginings of his arrival; she occupies the *gerund*, in which he "kept coming constantly so near," and lives her own marriage of imagination and reality.

Penelope's patience becomes an element integral to the redesiring of desire, a process which Vendler asserts as necessary to its persistence. "To create the new we must first de-create the old," she writes, "and the reality of decreation (as Stevens called it, borrowing the word from Simone Weil) is as strong as the reality of creation" (*Words* 31). She goes on to point out the necessity of the *Penelopiad* to the poem itself; her tapestry, unraveled nightly, "becomes for Stevens the very image of human desire: woven afresh every day, it is unraveled again every evening; and each exhilaration of possession is followed by the despair of disbelief" (31). Riddel calls this "the proximate, never the ultimate, satisfaction" (247), an element of desire unfulfilled which is necessary to its very continuation. Bloom, too, cites hope for some new arrival as a major point in the identifications between Stevens and Penelope, as well as being a constant state of their beings; Penelope is only able to suspend and augment her desire by its long deferral, and Stevens' is held by the impossibility of his wish—not just for the "returning sun of spring," but a new sun altogether, an answer unforeseen (363). Even the syntax finds a way to suspend, drop, and renew desire eternally; the poem maps strata of long sentences with the interstices dappled by short declarations, causing a wave motion defined by expectation, an almost-reaching, and a subsequent loss. The same element of suspension proves necessary for the continuation of Stevens' paradox, derived from Romantic roots, through which an interplay of the desire for singular identity and the desire to merge remains in shifting balance, thus preserving both the "alterity of the other" and the "dream of identification and fusion" (Beehler 276).

The closest, indeed, Stevens comes to Beehler's "fusion" is within his "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (1951; *CPP* 444). Cook sees the interplay between soliloquy and techniques of address or plurality (for example, use of the first person plural, as well as the opening imperative) as proof that "the paramour is interior, a muse figure, a crucially enabling part of one's own self. Stevens defined earlier 'paramours' as 'all the things in our nature that are celestial' (*L* 367, 1940)" (292). Leggett, in turn, believes that the paramour speaks throughout *The Rock*, such that the poetic persona of the book is both agent and recipient of Stevens' current conceptions of belief. Though the paramour may be a projection of himself, it is certainly informed by the image of Elsie that he created during their five year long-distance courtship: a space in which he could create an ideal figure based on reality. The "we" of the poem implies the necessity of coupling as a provider of voice and place: "we collect ourselves, / ... into one thing: // Within a single thing." The first person plural also allows a delicate interplay of belief necessary to the poem. Bates points out, "The 'We say' which precedes this proposition"—that is, "God and the imagination are one"—"signals its status as myth rather than empirical fact or logical deduction; but it is a myth to live by, one that identifies the world imagined with the Goodness Personified of religion" (299-300). Poverty makes its appearance, as it often does in Stevens' late poetry, as a condition of reality ("since we are poor") which allows some imaginative godhead to come into being as light and warmth, candle and shawl.

Just after the midpoint of the poem, simultaneously separating and linking the two halves in another nod to the paradox of desire within the individual, Stevens writes, "Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves," and then enacts a marriage of sorts, in which the order of selves and of wholes becomes "obscurity" because of the impossibility of separating—or of completely merging—the two in this "rendezvous." "This same light," that which is lit when the speaker and

his or her paramour posit that “God and the imagination are one,” creates a dwelling in the “evening air” of searching for fictions, “In which being there together,” in some love, “is enough.” Little physical is needed, and so this is material lack; yet “If this is poverty,” Bates writes, it is nothing compared to what *is* had. It is “the poverty of the Book of Genesis, with whose Creator Stevens could affirm, on the seventh day of his poetic enterprise, it is good, it suffices, it is enough” (302). The space of being “together” becomes enough.

*“as my poem is, so are my gods and so am I”:  
The Final Fiction in Art*

As early as age nineteen, Wallace Stevens had already denounced the value of what he saw as insular creation, of “art for art’s sake,” in favor of an intimate connection between life and imagination. “Art must fit in with other things,” he wrote in a journal entry of March 1899; “it must be part of the system of the world” (*L* 24). After moving to New York in June of the following year (*SP* 71), Stevens’ sense of the artistic as a microcosmic representation of the world itself expanded further. He spent much of his time there immersed in painting, music, theatre, poetry, and other art forms; his journals of the period crest with notes and extracts, and the books he acquired during his years in New York attest to an artistic foundation of primarily Greek, Biblical, Romantic, and Victorian texts (Bates, “Stevens’ Books at the Huntington” 53-4; Edelstein 57-9). He engaged most often with those of a similar aesthetic to himself—that is, with classical poets and philosophers (a journal entry of July 1906 reads, in full, “Sappho is like apples” [*SP* 169]) and with Romanticism both in its nineteenth-century English incarnation and as it shaded into French Romanticism and Symbolism. In August 1906, for example, Stevens

copied from Gérard de Nerval's *Le Rêve et la Vie*, a French Romantic text, "j'ai pris au sérieux les inventions des poètes [I took seriously the inventions of poets]" (*SP* 170). Stevens' connection with poetry as an art form began to inhabit a nearly mystic space; in January 1909 he wrote to Elsie, "But books make up. They shatter the groove, as far as the mind is concerned. They are like so many fantastic lights filling plain darkness with strange colors" (*L* 123). The image is remarkably similar to that he develops in "The Auroras of Autumn" (1948; *CPP* 355-63) forty years later, wherein the aurora borealis indicates the augmentation of plain reality by imagination, itself a form of art.

Much of Stevens' relationship with art and its implications emerged from English Romanticism as influence and foundation for his mature poetry. During his years in Cambridge and New York, Stevens acquired and read texts by Blake, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Hunt, and Lamb at the very least (Bates, "Stevens' Books at the Huntington" 50-4). As Burton Hatlen has argued, Stevens (along with Williams, H.D., Pound, and other contemporaries) worked through his

relationship to a poetics of the Sublime that had evolved through the nineteenth century... [T]he arts had offered themselves as, in effect, an alternative to religion: a way of engaging a transcendent spiritual dimension within human experience... I use the term "Sublime" as a shorthand term to denote the search for a specifically artistic revelation ... of an ineffable dimension of existence beyond the power of the human mind to grasp and control or even to name, so that even the word "God" comes to seem reductive. (126)

Inspired by such a Wordsworthian pantheism, perhaps, and by its means of organization through art, Stevens ultimately "both breaks with and attempts to recuperate Romanticism" (Hatlen 128) along with his poetic age. He emerges as a Late Romantic, essentially, and his "supreme fiction" is in itself a fundamentally Romantic idea. In both responding to and echoing the Romantics throughout his career, from the early "Sunday Morning" to the late "Auroras of Autumn"

(Carroll; “Teaching” 247, 252-5), Stevens rewrites the Romantic for himself and for his age. In one notebook entry, most likely from the mid-thirties, Stevens identified the modern mode as one belonging to the “contemporary romantic,” whom he identified as “a revolutionist” (“From Pieces of Paper” 169); as late as September 1948 (*L* 613), in his essay “Imagination as Value,” he referred to the “imagination itself” as “the irrepressible revolutionist” (*CPP* 736). These parallel constructions, each depending on the linking verb “is” to connect the subject with the revolution, solidify what for Stevens is the inextricable connection between the Romantic and the imaginative faculties.

Stevens’ responses to and assertions of the Late Romantic crop up most explicitly in short essays of the early thirties. “Williams” (*CPP* 768-71), published in 1934 as a preface to William Carlos Williams’ *Collected Poems 1921-1931*, depends on a universalizing statement of atemporal Romanticism: “All poets are, to some extent, romantic poets” (770). Williams, however, is “rarely romantic in the accepted sense” (769); rather, he is realistic in reaction to the imagined, is anti-poetic and sentimental both, and lives perched on the knife-edge between these divergent concepts. Stevens uses this very tension to define his own opinion on the necessity of oppositions in poetry: “how often the essential poetry is the result of the conjunction of the unreal and the real, the sentimental and the anti-poetic, the constant interaction of two opposites” (770). He goes on to define the modern Romantic, with Williams as example, in a manner remarkably similar to his own poem “The Man on the Dump” (*CPP* 184-6):

He happens to be one who still dwells in an ivory tower, but who insists that life there would be intolerable except for the view that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider’s Catsup, Ivory Soap and Chevrolet Cars; he is the hermit who dwells alone with the sun and moon, but insists on taking a rotten newspaper. (770)

In another parallel phrase-making, “life there would be intolerable except for the view that one has” presages two constructions of later essays: first, from “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” (delivered in 1943; *L* 452), “we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there” (*CPP* 684); and second, from “Relations between Poetry and Painting” (delivered in 1951; *L* 705), “The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us” (*CPP* 747). In these constructions, both reality and imagination are integral to a final and sustaining tension, as with the two forces Stevens identifies as Williams’: Laocoon, “the realist struggling to escape from the serpents of the unreal” (770), and Diogenes, the philosopher preferring action and simplicity to theory.

In a letter to T. C. Wilson of March 1935, however, Stevens identified Williams as representing “a somewhat exhausted phase of the romantic,” in comparison to Marianne Moore, whose poetry endeavored “to create a new romantic... a fresh romantic” (*L* 279) and who was “not only a complete disintegrator; she is an equally complete reintegrator” (*L* 278). (Williams wasn’t ecstatic about Stevens’ essay either; in his own copy of his *Collected Poems*, Williams wrote in the margin: “Not so hot” [MacGowan 17].) By these assertions, Stevens identified Moore as a poet who could both break down the old myth and build up a new one, and his essay “A Poet That Matters” (1935; *CPP* 774-80) isolates how “Miss Moore *donne dans le romanesque*” (776)—meaning both *gives the romantic* and *gives the novel*, and by the multiplicity of the French term *romanesque* inhabiting both realms simultaneously. Stevens writes that Moore’s concept of the Romantic is new by its commitment to wit and to hybridization, and describes her image of moon vines and fishing twine in “The Steeple-Jack”: “They are an intermingling. The imagination grasps at such things and sates itself, instantaneously, in them” (777). He goes on to compare the old and alternative senses of the



Romantic; whereas the nineteenth-century Romantic “in the pejorative sense merely connotes obsolescence” (777), the “new romantic” (*L* 279), “meaning always the living and at the same time the imaginative, the youthful, the delicate and a variety of things which it is not necessary to try to particularise at the moment, constitutes the vital element of poetry” (778). Recalling his assertion in “Williams” that “All poets are, to some extent, romantic poets” (770), Stevens writes, “It is absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet. Unless one is that, one is not a poet at all” (778).

As Stevens concludes “A Poet That Matters,” the Romantic expands telescopically to include much of what he discerns in true poetry and art. “It must also,” he writes, “be living. It must always be living. It is in the sense of living intensity, living singularity that it is the vital element in poetry” (778). It is an offshoot, simply, of wanting to understand; it is neither the true nor the false, but both (780). It is relevant for the modern age; it is even a replacement for God. A few years later, Stevens read F. C. Green’s *Stendhal* (1939; now housed at the University of Massachusetts Amherst), and marked the following passage by a vertical line penciled softly in the margin: “Romanticism is, therefore, an awareness of the contemporary soul” (163).

Stevens directly addresses the Romantic most often in his poetry of the mid-to-late thirties, beginning with *Ideas of Order* (1936). “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz” (1935; *CPP* 100-1), for example, depicts a time in which music of “motionless sound” and the measured and restrictive “waltz” represent vestigial religions and beliefs turned static, a place in which “the old music played in the old way will no longer suffice” (Longenbach 154). (The waltz is mirrored stylistically by Stevens’ tercets and his method throughout of repeating phrases and formats, particularly in parallel constructions.) Even Hoon—representing “form and order in solitude,” possessing a conception of order marked by the absence of outside influence, and connoting

individualistic imagination in “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” (1921; *CPP* 51)—has been “chastened” (Bloom 66) in the modern time of stale order. Mobs of men are freed from the “immense suppression” of organized religion, yet find that they need an “imposing” form nevertheless: an inhuman order. The speaker offers, then, an alternative in the artistic elegy itself: “Yet the shapes / For which the voices cry, these, too, may be / Modes of desire, modes of revealing desire.” Secular salvation through art belongs to “Some harmonious skeptic” who can unite men by his shadowed, dynamic music alone; “soon in a skeptical music” he

Will unite these figures of men and their shapes  
 Will glisten again with motion, the music  
 Will be motion and full of shadows.

This mobile image of chiaroscuro contrast proves a more realistic and sufficient order than the shadowless inertia that came before as part of traditional religion; the means of realizing it must, then, be the new romanticism of a “contemporary soul,” one which realizes the impossibility of relying still on the old myths, though they served for our fathers.

Stevens’ favorite poem from *Ideas of Order*, though, was “How to Live. What to Do” (1935; *CPP* 102-3), “because it so definitely represents my way of thinking” (*L* 293). The poem makes an art in escaping current civilization and depicts the “cold wind and the sound / It made, away from the muck of the land / That they had left.” Not only is the art of the cold wind’s composition present, but also the arrangements of Stevens’ own poetic device. The “measured quatrains, formal and serene,” Litz points out, “make the poem a kind of secular hymn” (185), a work of decidedly personal (and thus paradoxically able to be communal) art separate from souvenir beliefs. This is another raw romanticism, an “American Sublime” (Bloom 108) which is possible only upon the “rock” of stark reality (here in its first appearance as part of Stevens’ symbolics, and still to be used in the same capacity as late as 1954 [*CPP* 445-7]). The poem

dichotomizes civilization's bright day and the subtly modulated evening of personal arts and beliefs; it cleaves the "flame-freaked sun" of popular myths from that "of fuller fire," analogous to the escape the speaker and his companion make under evening and by means of the wind's music, its "heroic sound / Joyous and jubilant and sure."

"The Idea of Order at Key West" (1934; *CPP* 105-6) imposes a similar order through sound. The poem emphasizes the transformative, even transcendent power of its singer's music, which reaches "beyond" even the *genius loci* implied by the title (Bloom 96), and which loosens everything to be "more than that, / More even than her voice, and ours, among / The meaningless plungings of water and the wind." The poem fills with verbs of finding and ordering—"made," "sought," "measured"—and of the woman singing as "single artificer of the world / In which she sang," thus changing and ordering reality. Stevens' webbing of gerunds and comma-starred clauses suspends the woman's magic, present, for the moment of her song, and thus mimics the need for art as continual present within as well as in experiencing poetry:

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.

This art is an order, and the woman—the "maker"—"charts the world for us, just the way geographers chart the world by making up imaginary lines"; suddenly, here, "the whole night seems to be charted as by new lines" (Vendler, qtd. *Voices and Visions*). The woman's art-order belongs, for this arrested minute, both to "the fragrant portals, dimly-starred" and to something else, both "of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." She is connected by spilling notes following one another through the poem—*she* with *sky*, *sea*, *sound*, and *sing*.

Of Ramon Fernandez's appearance in "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens wrote friends that he merely meant to choose "a Spanish name" at random (*L* 798, 823), yet Fernandez's ideas mirror Stevens' own aesthetic. Riddel describes Fernandez's philosophy as "a precursor of recent phenomenological criticism... He called it 'philosophical' criticism and his favorite term was 'impressionism'" (117). He then quotes Fernandez's book *Messages* to stress its ideological symmetry to Stevens' own theories:

Impressionism sets us afloat, suppresses the artificial intermediaries between reality and ourselves, and by maintaining us constantly in the presence of life makes us forearmed against the sophism of cause and fact. Further, because it brings us back to the hither side of common-sense perception, and as it were to its source, it invites us to a revision of the ideas guiding us; but this latter task becomes possible only if first this world of sensibility with its mirror-like facets is integrated by intelligence. Note that the required effort is not superhuman.... Through the concentration of impressionism reality is translated into human tendencies and these in turn have to be treated by analysis. (qtd. Riddel 118)

(Longenbach, conversely, sees Fernandez's writing in the *Partisan Review* and the *Criterion* as precisely counter to Stevens' own [161-2].) Stevens' own impressionism, both within and outside "The Idea of Order at Key West," tempers the ocean itself, and in so doing "allows the sea its immensity and vitality but nevertheless brings it within sensible proportions. The song, indeed, is an impression" (Riddel 118). Stevens' letters confirm the impressionistic parallel that Riddel draws between Stevens and Fernandez: "It may be," he wrote to Ronald Lane Latimer in November 1935, "that every man introduces his own order into the life about him and that the idea of order in general is simply what Bishop Berkeley might have called a fortuitous concurrence of personal orders. But still there is order" (*L* 293).

Litz finds a similar suspension of "personal orders" in the poem's title itself: "this 'idea' of order is not a permanent paradigm," he asserts, "but a momentary product of one time and one place" (193). Longenbach, too, proposes that the poem's answers are "provisional" and that Stevens spends the following years rewriting them as a multitude of other poems, including "The

Man with the Blue Guitar” (163). In its moment, however, the poem is a strong claim for artistic order in the mode of the “new romantic.” Many scholars connect it to “the Wordsworthian crisis-poem” (Bloom 93)—for example, “Solitary Reaper,” for which Litz provides a workable parallel: “in Wordsworth’s poem the Highland Lass is the poet as sayer, singing a ‘melancholy strain’ out of her own feelings; in Stevens’ poem the singer is a maker, building a verbal artifice out of the sound of the sea” (195-6). Bloom finds a subtler echo in the introduction of artistic witness; like Dorothy Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey,” Ramon Fernandez’s late introduction, for Bloom, is late enough to “startle” the reader (96). Even if the poem is an innately temporary recapitulation of the Romantic, an “idea” by definition, and specific to a place and time, it is (as Litz suggests) no mere saying but a making, a setting out of another idea of order and a fully spoken answer for the moment—however personal the answer may be, however ephemeral that moment may be. Poetry, after all, is for Stevens “the order of an imaginative self whose words attach to the world but are forms of his mind” (Litz 120).

“The Man on the Dump” (1938; *CPP* 184-6), in turn, creates an order from the parts and detritus of reality. Holly Stevens recalls a true man on the dump, one who lived for several years during the Depression in a “glorious shack, made of all the appropriate junk that could be found,” which Stevens passed daily on his walks to work (652; see also *L* 266*n*). Stemming from this use of reality to inform poetry (and vice-versa), “The Man on the Dump” is a poem of the between; it begins, fittingly, with the liminal time of dusk, which draws the usual Stevensian associations of day as communal space of civilization and evening as individual period of art. The first stanza begins a free-associative method of transformation parallel to the artistic instinct: the sun is a shield of flowers, days are newspapers, newspapers wrap bouquets, newspapers end up in the dump, and what is in the dump makes up “the janitor’s poems / Of every day.” Stevens

then examines the “purifying change” of realizing the circularity of time—that the relics of spring, “(azaleas and so on),” are on the dump and will continue to be. He then writes, “One rejects the trash,” which is not a refusal of the worth of what is on the dump but rather an unwillingness to believe that it is trash alone. Even when “Everything is shed,” the art of the scene lies outside of imaginative ordering: the addressed “you” sees “As a man (not like an image of a man)” and yet the moon is still “bassoon”; the tires are “elephants.” The associative power of imagination is not merely ours, then—it is something of the world, and something integral to it.

Stevens begins his final stanza:

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.  
 One beats and beats for that which one believes.  
 That’s what one wants to get near.

The passage recalls one in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, which Stevens purchased soon after his move to Hartford as part of twenty-one volumes of Flaubert (Bates, “Stevens’ Books at the Huntington” 57):

the truth is that fullness of soul can sometimes overflow in utter vapidness of language, for none of us can ever express the exact measure of his needs or his thoughts or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars. (180)

Stevens surely means something more optimistic than Flaubert: though, by Stevens’ admission, one “beats and beats,” one also makes art of searching, and in the end only wants to “get near” what one believes. No expectation of reaching or examining the belief is expressed—it could be, after all, “merely oneself.” Stevens continues questioning the very composition of what it is to believe or to find something on the dump, but expects no universally satisfactory answer to his lofty questions. Indeed, the only answer offered him is an unspecific article repeated, a small mote of truth—“The the”—which achieves more through the art and noise of the search than any

breadth of certainty or overarching order could. It is a “unanimous if always hesitant ‘yes’” (Bloom 147); the “American high Romantic perpetually at work reconstructing itself” (Bloom 148); a flake of “the world of parts” as well as “what the imagination can make of it” (Riddel 155); “the thinnest *mi* of idea” (Frankenberg, “Theories of Resemblance” 237). After all, “It was a mess and an eyesore,” as Holly wrote of the dump, “but it glittered here and there on days when the sun shone” (652).

Though some of Stevens’ poems of the thirties were written in dialogue with a long-past Romantic tradition, many also responded to contemporary art. Glen MacLeod addresses the critical blind spot in many discussions of Stevens’ knowledge of modern art:

To suggest that there is a direct relation between Stevens’ poetry and the *contemporaneous* development of the visual arts in the United States challenges the prevailing view. Stevens’ interest in ‘the relations between poetry and painting’ has never been questioned. His 1951 essay of that title is only the most sustained treatment of a theme that occupied him throughout his career. But most critics have focused on Stevens’ relation to impressionism, fauvism, and cubism—the major French movements that antedated his mature poetic utterances. (xiii)

MacLeod argues that the artistic movements of the thirties and forties were parallel to Stevens’ development of “his own poetic theory in response to the highly politicized atmosphere of the time” (xxvi), and explains that Stevens’ “self-transformation” (xxvi) was catalyzed by and in continual dialogue with the art of its time.

“The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937; *CPP* 135-51) uses contemporary artistic movements (particularly Surrealism) as a mode with which to address Stevens’ mid-career conception of what he called, in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, “the relation or balance between imagined things and real things which, as you know, is a constant source of trouble to me” (*L* 316). Though he sometimes seems to value the artistic imagination over bare reality—“In short,” he wrote to Hi Simons, “the dull world is either its poets or nothing” (*L* 363)—Stevens

understands the necessity of each to the other in making the world in which we live and can believe in: “Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality. Here is a fundamental principle about the imagination: It does not create except as it transforms.... Imagination gives, but gives in relation” (*L* 364).

In a letter to Renato Poggioli, who translated Stevens’ poems in the early fifties, he wrote, “The general intention of the *Blue Guitar* was to say a few things that I felt impelled to say 1. about reality; 2. about the imagination; 3. their inter-relations; and 4. principally, my attitude toward each of these things” (*L* 788). It was also, as Riddel points out, Stevens’ “search for a new myth for the age, the myth of man to replace the myth of God,” in which order man would be “both creator and creation” (135). The best way to address this simultaneity of purpose was, for Stevens, to make a poem “not circular but spiral” (Riddel 137), one which Goldfarb notes as in line with Valéry’s philosophy of form:

Valéry writes, “My philosophic point of view is the diversity of points of view’ (*Cahiers I* 494). Valéry here invites the poet, and I cannot help but think of Stevens as that poet, to compose poetry that experiments with such different viewpoints. Elsewhere, writing admiringly of the musical form of theme and variations, Valéry suggests that this form, above all others, would enable the poet to enact philosophy. (165)

Bloom, too, connects “Blue Guitar” with the nineteenth-century Romantic, and argues for Whitman’s “Song of Myself” as its ancestor (115), and for much of the poem itself as an “American elegy, a study of the nostalgias” (132). Riddel points out, however, that its body is wholly Stevens’, with “no apparent formal ancestor” (147). By strata of couplets and repeated phrases, what Bates compares to “trying to wring a tune from a handful of notes” (189), Stevens creates a sense of musical variation on a single theme:

The monotonous continuo of a strumming guitar appears in the repetitive downbeat of “things as they are” and “the blue guitar” (with all their variation) as well as in the insistent resurgence of other talismanic phrases.... There is an insistence here on the single word, unadorned, as sufficient: what varies is the position or relation of the



word.... Now the canvas has been greatly simplified: here is the monster and there is myself. Or there is the sea and there is myself. (Vendler; *On Extended Wings* 124-5, 127)

In the poem, both the artist and “they” (humans as a whole) admit the impossibility of playing an exact replica of life. The artist must, though, play a tune “beyond us, yet ourselves” in the essential and inherent paradox of poetic explanation, and “It is this demand that poetry must not detach itself from reality, but present a credible version of it, which initiates the endless complications of creating a fiction that we know to be a fiction and yet believe in willingly” (Litz 239). “The day was green” (canto I), here, which comes to signify an atmosphere of suspended belief in Stevens, as in his later poem “The Candle a Saint” and its refrain, “Green is the night” (1939; *CPP* 205-6). Made things do not often achieve their original aims, particularly in human attempts to depict the intersection of imagination and reality: the world not changed but “patch[ed]”; the hero’s head “not a man” (II), which Stevens described in a letter: “One strives to create man number one ... but one never gets more than ‘a hero’s head’ for one’s efforts. It is never possible for the artist to do more than approach ‘almost to man’” (*L* 789). This approach is preferable, however, to the attempt to “play man number one,” which devolves quickly into a parody of the violent deconstruction of meaning into irrelevant components—“To lay his brain upon the board / And pick the acrid colors out... To strike his living hi and ho, / To tick it, tock it, turn it true” (III)—as well as the near-taxidermic preservation which devalues the original thought and parallels a practice Stevens witnessed in New England: “a bird is ... likely to be nailed up merely as an extraordinary object to be exhibited” (*L* 359).

Stevens questions an assumption of reality integral to the poem (“So that’s life, then: things as they are?”) and circles around to an acceptance of the intersection of the artistic imagination and reality: “And that’s life, then: things as they are, / The buzzing of the blue

guitar” (IV). After the loss of the structural belief that religious tradition, here written as “shadow,” was, the world is circadian and uncovered:

There are no shadows in our sun,  
  
Day is desire and night is sleep.  
There are no shadows anywhere.  
The earth, for us, is flat and bare.

Art is the replacement; “Poetry // Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns” (V). This suffices, though, only for a time, even in an age in which “The thinking of art seems final when // The thinking of god is snowy dew” (VI). Dew, used before in Stevens’ “Peter Quince at the Clavier” and “Sunday Morning,” is as usual something beautiful yet ephemeral, gone with the sun and incompatible with day.

The alternative, found in art, must not be detached but rather part of the world, and the poem’s speaker cannot bear a place in which he is “Not ... part of the sun”; he cannot “stand // remote and call it merciful” (VII). As Stevens wrote, “my imagination grows cold at the thought of such complete detachment” from the sun (*L* 362). The imagination necessarily makes use of its containing reality, “The weather of [its] stage” (IX), and “brings the storm to bear” through its art: the guitar has control “like the reason in the storm.” The world, after this, paradoxically unites and becomes differentiated simultaneously in the chord’s discord. Time “grows upon the rock,” life on the world (*L* 363), and this is “living alive” (XI). It is the inseparability of the elements of existence which is then restated as “Tom-tom, c’est moi. The blue guitar / And I are one” (XII)—a Romantic mode of paralleled self and art recalling Flaubert’s famed syllogism “Madame Bovary, c’est moi” (qtd. Shapiro 275; compare to echoes of Flaubert in “The Man on the Dump”). This parallel allows abstracted art to evoke reality:

Be content—  
Expansions, diffusions—content to be

The unspotted imbecile revery,  
The heraldic center of the world

Of blue, blue sleek with a hundred chins,  
The amorist Adjective aflame. (XIII)

The small artistic reality is something more effective than the excesses of science in determining a world as it is (*L* 363): in contrast to rational thought's overwrought "German chandelier," imagination's "candle is enough to light the world. // It makes it clear." The interplay of the imagination's candle with the "essential dark" of reality becomes the artistic "chiaroscuro" necessary, the space of clear tonal contrasts in which "One sits and plays the blue guitar" (XIV).

Not all art necessarily suffices, however; neither Picasso's painting (presumably "Old Guitarist," 1903-4) nor the popular song "Good-bye, Good-bye Harvest Moon" (identified in *L* 783) serves to "picture ... ourselves" (XV), for neither connects adequately with reality; Picasso "has divorced the guitar from its usefulness (MacLeod 72) and the song invokes the harvest moon "Without seeing the harvest or the moon." This static, inadequate art is paralleled to the souvenirs of the old ritual—namely, Communion—with which one cannot identify:

Am I a man that is dead

At a table on which the good is cold?  
Is my thought a memory, not alive?

Is the spot on the floor, there, wine or blood  
And whichever it may be, is it mine?

MacLeod finds a suggestive alternative to Picasso's "Old Guitarist" in Breton's 1936 article "Picasso poète," which he argues Stevens had read in the periodical *Cahiers d'art* (67) and which offers an image of the later, surrealist Picasso more fully aligning with Stevens' revisionary aesthetic. Breton wrote,

Several days ago I saw Picasso give, as a present to a woman who had just given birth, a miniature guitar; then, only after he had given it to her, he had the idea of writing a poem that he could pin on this guitar. At this instant, this is how he conceived of such a poem, before it had taken shape; the important thing is that his conception required that the poem be placed very precisely between what looked like a toy and what was the beginning of life. (qtd. 69)

MacLeod asserts that, “while Picasso’s poem is only ‘potential’ (and is in fact never written), it takes on fully the significance of a concrete object... Such transformations of reality into imagination, and of imagination into reality, are the essence of ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’” (72). While Picasso’s first guitar of 1903-4 is insufficient for Stevens, his second may have itself provided the impetus for “Blue Guitar” by imparting “the surrealist idea” (75) that Stevens addressed as the irrational in art: “for the poet,” he wrote in 1936 (and after the appearance of Breton’s article), “the irrational is elemental” (*CPP* 792) and entirely necessary.

Stevens then invokes images of the spirit’s formlessness (compared to the body’s form) in order to highlight their simultaneous necessity and difference. The spirit is an animal substance for which only the blue guitar of art and imagination can suffice: “The blue guitar— // On that its claws propound, its fangs / Articulate the desert days” (XII). The effect of this mixture of reality (animal) and the imagination (music) allows ascension, a “dream ... in which / I can believe ... Rising upward from a sea of ex” (XVIII). “The imagination takes us out of (Ex) reality,” Stevens wrote, “into a pure irreality” (*L* 360)—that is, into some higher hybrid of both. The monster, which Stevens defined as nature (*L* 790), engages equally and in parallel phrasing with the self, “Being the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone” (XIX). Stevens wrote more of this match in 1940, illustrating the lion in stone as a reality “(life) which one wishes to match in intelligence and force, speaking (as a poet) with a voice matching its own” (*L* 360). His explanation of 1953 was nearly identical, though more closely explicatory:

I want, as a poet, to be that in nature, which constitutes nature's very self. I want to be nature in the form of a man, with all the resources of nature = I want to be the lion in the lute; and then, when I am, I want to face my parent and be his true part. I want to face nature the way two lions face one another... I want, as a man of the imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. I want man's imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality. (L 790)

In such a meeting, imagination alone is insufficient: Stevens wants something of belief in his confrontation with reality (L 793): "Good air, my only friend," he implores, "believe, // Believe would be a brother full / Of love, believe would be a friend, // Friendlier than my only friend, / Good air" (XX). In finding a friend somewhere in belief, the existing faith in art is both pale and entirely necessary—"Poor pale, poor pale guitar"—as catalyst allowing the self to be "substitute for all the gods... / Without shadows, without magnificence, / The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone" (XXI).

Stevens, here and stretching through the end of "Blue Guitar," comes to the suggestion of poetry as primary art and imagination by mirroring Biblical pronouncement. "Poetry is the subject of the poem," he writes, "From this the poem issues and // To this returns" (XXII); the statement runs syntactically parallel to Genesis 3:19, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return" (King James Bible). This complement casts poetry as both the stuff of the divine and of the bare earth, as both animator of dust and dust itself. Poetry is classified as both reality and godlike force, is life itself, and gives something integral in "the universal intercourse" (XXII). Stevens aims for the

poem like a missal found  
In the mud, a missal for that young man,  
  
That scholar hungriest for that book,  
The very book, or, less, a page

Or, at the least, a phrase, that phrase,  
A hawk of life, that latined phrase:

To know (XXIV);

he wants his poem “to mean as much, and as deeply, as a missal. While I am writing what appear to be trifles, I intend these trifles to be a missal for brooding-sight: for an understanding of the world” (*L* 790). The specific hunger Stevens seeks to alleviate in himself and others parallels his reference to the “hawk of life” that seizes “the joy of it” (XXIV), the knowledge of a thing (*L* 360). Anyone is then open to this knowledge; the “He” of “He held the world upon his nose” could be “Any observer: Copernicus, Columbus, Professor Whitehead, myself, yourself” (*L* 790). His cyclical beat, his music of imagination, directs the world as a whole. Even the “fat thumb,” implying those who enjoy the “spectacle of life ... but do not understand” (*L* 361), “beats out ay-yi-yi” (XXV). This composition of both imagination and reality, alternating and washing the same shore, allows a simultaneous presence and absence in the fluctuations of imagination’s tenuous cover of reality, particularly by blending gerund and infinitive phrases: “A mountainous music always seemed / To be falling and to be passing away” (XXVI).

Everything of this music, of the melding of reality and the imagination, is as multiple and all-encompassing as the sea (XXVII). Man is allowed to take part, being “as one of the jocular procreations of the dark, of space” (*L* 364)—that is, as part of everything. This everything is not something one finds by “tour[ing] to shift the shifting scene” (XXVII), and moves around one as part and parcel of the world itself: “Why traverse land and sea, when, if you remain fixed, stay put, land and sea will come to you. See what winter brings. See what summer brings” (*L* 790). This “everything,” though, made of imagination and reality as one, cannot be named. In opposition to others’ theories, Stevens takes on his own overloud music as imperfect but precise expression of personal belief:

The shapes are wrong and the sounds are false.  
The bells are the bellowing of bulls.

Yet Franciscan don was never more  
Himself than in this fertile glass. (XXIX)

The “glass,” here, may be used in its archaic form (last recorded in the *Catholicon Anglicum* of 1483 [*OED*): “a resounding noise.” This glass is nothing still or easily contained; rather, it is the dynamic movement of a noise exceeding its boundaries, its very air.

“It must be this rhapsody or none,” Stevens writes, “The rhapsody of things as they are” (XXXI). This music, though imperfect, is what we have, and it must be ineffable in its communion with the self:

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

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

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

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

Between you and the spaces you take  
When the crust of shape has been destroyed. (XXXII)

One last time, Stevens shatters the relics of “That generation’s dream” (XXXIII), old myths and religions, in favor of the new. Their bread was symbolic where ours will be itself, representative of reality (“The bread / Will be our bread”); our imagination will turn “the stone” to “Our bed.” Stevens’ concluding symbolic reassignment attests to his movement from “Owl’s Clover” (1936, *CPP* 567-91; 1937, *CPP* 152-70) to “Blue Guitar”; as Vendler notes:

The myths in *Owl’s Clover* taken all together compose a pantheon and a cosmos: Ananke the god above, the Subman the god below, the Portent in the sky, the Hades at the end of the world, the group of ineffectual angels, and the vast Greenest Continent. In the *Man*

*with the Blue Guitar*, the gods are annihilated, and the third dimension which they represent is eliminated. A strict two-phase system is all that remains, as the mind alone confronts the world alone, without any sacred parental presences. (*On Extended Wings* 120)

Imagination and reality together form an everyday and artistic possession of divinity, a divinity forgotten in the throes of reality until we choose art as its expression—“when we choose to play / the imagined pine, the imagined jay”—forever in balance, each entirely necessary to the ineffable import of the other.

In describing the sales of 354 of Stevens’ books, carried out in spring 1959 by the Parke-Bernet Galleries (63), Edelstein notes Stevens’ particular interest in art:

The largest part of Stevens’s books in this sale [March 10, 1959] were art books; again I will not list them here; suffice it to say that they show quite clearly Stevens’s studious interest in the history of art. Here are the *catalogues raisonnées*, the *oeuvres* catalogue—all the materials, in short, required for intense and scholarly study on the part of a true *amateur* of painting and decoration. (67)

Indeed, Stevens’ evident love for art and its incarnations explains much of its import on his theories of belief. Much of his correspondence, too (particularly with his Parisian art dealers, Anatole Vidal and his daughter Paule), reveals his active interest in incorporating art into his life. After requesting a catalogue of a Vanessa Bell Exhibition from Alex Reid & Lefevre, Ltd. in March 1934 (University of Massachusetts Amherst), for example, Stevens received—and preserved—the booklet, which included a foreword by Virginia Woolf, Bell’s sister. Much of Woolf’s prefatory note could have been written by Stevens himself, particularly in its attention to color and movement and its separation of criticism from the exact and full human experience of art:

Let us leave it to the critics to pursue the exciting adventure which waits them in these rooms; to trace the progress of the artist’s brush beginning... For us this experience has its excitement too. A meaning is given to familiar things that makes them strange... Where does the man end and Buddha begin? character is colour, and colour is china, and



china is music.... A plant bends its leaves in the jar and we feel that we too have visited the depths of the sea.... [W]e have been blown over the boundary. (1)

Much of Stevens' greater engagement with art comes through *Parts of a World* (1942), whose supporting poems—such as “The Poems of Our Climate” (*CPP* 178-9), “Study of Two Pears” (180-1), “The Glass of Water” (181-2), “Dry Loaf” (183-4), and much of the “Illustrations of the Poetic as a Sense” sequence, published as a group in *Poetry* in 1939 (*CPP* 204-8)—often depend on images culled from still life. “More than landscape or portraiture,” Costello points out,

still life is a threshold genre, between nature and culture, vital and morbid, private and public worlds. Indeed, in choosing still life Stevens insists on preserving an individual human scale of contemplation, a sense of the personal and the intimate with its accompanying desires. (151)

Stevens' still lifes are distinguished from those which are actually static, however, by their implications of motion. Many of Stevens' poems of the period create a locus in which “the space of still life and the space of real life (read as *parergon* and *ergon*) have converged in the poem” (Costello 153) and ultimately depict “a swirl of parts that do not make a whole, a flux of states without equilibrium where container dissolves into contained” (153). Stevens expresses this mixture of dynamism and stasis in “The Glass of Water”:

That the glass would melt in heat,  
That the water would freeze in cold,  
Shows that this object is merely a state,  
One of many, between two poles. So,  
In the metaphysical, there are these poles.

Here in the centre stands the glass. Light  
Is the lion that comes down to drink. There  
And in that state, the glass is a pool.  
Ruddy are his eyes and ruddy are his claws  
When light comes down to wet his frothy jaws

And in the water winding weeds move round.  
And there and in another state—the refractions,

The *metaphysica*, the plastic parts of poems  
 Crash in the mind—But, fat Jocundus, worrying  
 About what stands here in the centre, not the glass,

But in the centre of our lives, this time, this day,  
 It is a state, this spring among the politicians  
 Playing cards. In a village of the indigenes,  
 One would have still to discover. Among the dogs and dung,  
*One would continue to contend with one's ideas.* (CPP 181-2; final emphasis mine)

As Costello interprets the poem, “we are not indigenes of any center” (154). Paradoxically, the poems’ specific localities enact cosmic engagements of “human conciliation with total reality” (Costello 156); their art, in being small and still, enables movement on the scale of “the refractions, / *The metaphysica.*”

Stevens’ concept of art eventually grows to incorporate its means of providing order. In his copy of Henri Focillon’s *The Life of Forms in Art* (1942), now at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Stevens underlined the indicated portions of the following passage: “A work of art rises proudly above any interpretation we may see fit to give it; and, although it serves to illustrate history, man, and the world itself, it goes further than this; it creates man, creates the world, and sets up within history an immutable order” (1; Stevens’ emphasis). Later in the book Stevens marked a line applicable to the previous passage: “A new order is established” (38). Both echo the June 1955 inscription he wrote to Elias Mengel in his *Collected Poems*: “When I speak of the poem, or often when I speak of the poem, in this book, I mean not merely a literary form, but the brightest and most harmonious concept, or order, of life” (qtd. Brazeau 288). Following this, in Stevens’ conception, art is not only an order but also an action on a cosmic scale. He bracketed another passage in Focillon’s book—

One is tempted to conclude that, in the former case, a work of art suddenly and with great power promulgates a necessary actuality which had long been seeking with feeble, rudimentary movements to define itself, and that, in the latter case, a work of art eventually overtakes its own actuality, and forestalls the moment of taste. But in both

cases, a work of art is, at the very instant of its birth, a phenomenon of rupture." (75; emphasis Stevens')

—and wrote in its margin "art as event." The notation of the art-action as "event" recalls Valéry, for whose *Dialogues* Stevens wrote two prefaces in 1955; Valéry wrote in "Dance and the Soul" of the dancer who—dancing, making—"feels in herself that she is becoming some event" (40).

Poetry becomes the node—and poets the stewards—of Stevens' concept of art, order, and event from the mid-thirties to his death. By poets Stevens does not mean those who wrote verse alone; he means, rather, "any man of imagination" (front flap of *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems*, first edition; Berg Collection). The imagination, as Stevens theorizes in "Imagination as Value" (1948; *CPP* 724-39):

is part of our security. It enables us to live our own lives. We have it because we do not have enough without it... It is the moderator of life as metempsychosis was of death. Nietzsche walked in the Alps in the caresses of reality. We ourselves crawl out of our offices and classrooms and become alert at the opera. Or we sit listening to music as in an imagination in which we believe. If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man. (*CPP* 735-6)

The "idea of God" for Stevens "is a poetic idea" encompassing "everything on 'that' side" (qtd. Brazeau 203). He acknowledged its primordial importance and belief-basis in annotating his copy of H. P. Adams' *Life and Writings of Giambattista Vico* (1935; at the University of Massachusetts Amherst): "Poetry, because it is the earliest form of utterance, belongs to the category of what is necessary. It is prior historically to the merely convenient ornamental. It was early man's only way of speaking of the highest things" (128). He addressed the idea further in "Imagination as Value" (1948; *CPP* 724-39), in which he defines the artist's imagination in particular as one "that seeks to satisfy, say, the universal mind, which, in the case of a poet, would be the imagination that tries to penetrate to basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world" (*CPP* 732).

Stevens casts poetry as the simultaneous god, believer, and space of belief. We write poetry “to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God” (“The Irrational Element in Poetry,” *CPP* 786). (Stevens’ phrasing here recalls a letter van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, which Stevens may have read due to his interest in van Gogh [Bates, “Stevens’ Books” 57]: “Now call it God or human nature or whatever you like, but there is something which I cannot define systematically, though it is very much alive and very real, and see, that is God, or as good as God” [288].) Poetry and its poets in Stevens’ work are often portrayed, both by parallel constructions and by explicit definition, as “the peers of saints” (“The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” *CPP* 674), as priests of the unknown: “I go upstairs nowadays,” Stevens wrote, “and work over my chore like one of the holy fathers working over his prayers” (*L* 580). Poetry is the very air in which we live; it is “the only possible heaven” (*L* 360). Indeed, as Baudelaire wrote and Stevens copied in his commonplace book, “*la grande poésie est bête: elle croit* [great poetry is stupid: it believes]” (*SPBS* 105).

As his life and career came to a close, Stevens’ thought began to center upon a telescopic treatment of creation, by which “[t]hat which makes and that which is made are indivisible” (“Two Prefaces,” 1955; *CPP* 883). The argument echoes Shelley’s conflation of creator and created in “A Defence of Poetry,” wherein he writes of poetry as inherently encompassing both sides of creation itself:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and the blossom of all other systems of thought: it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed... It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of things. (531)

Shelley’s phrase “centre and circumference” is explained further in his essay “On Life,” in which he describes “the character of all life and being” as “at once the centre and the circumference; the

point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things are contained” (507). It is, in sum, all; the poet and the life he contains within his work are both the vehicles and the containers of theophany through a system in which, as Stevens said, “[p]oetry is a revelation in words by means of the words” (*CPP* 633). Poetry is an act by which “you can rejoin the grand design and undertake the imitation of that which has made all things,” and in such mimesis it is possible “to put oneself in the most natural way in the very lace of the God” (*CPP* 883). It is simultaneity and eternity, maker and made, creator and created, at once.

In light of this element, B. J. Leggett’s theory of a controlling and necessarily outer imagination granted in Stevens’ late work takes on a possible new dimension of meaning. In *Late Stevens*, Leggett distinguishes two phases in Stevens’ body of belief-work: the first, made up of “specifications, definitions, or speculations in regard to a supreme fiction,” and the second, in which the poems hinge on the “assumption of its actual presence, a fiction now functioning paradoxically as the belief or ‘reality’ that lies beyond the poems” (4-5). By his late work Stevens articulates, in Leggett’s argument, a “reality independent of the observer’s mind” (6). If Leggett means to imply an outer imagination separate from creation (that which is imagined), Stevens’ late Romantic coupling of maker and made cannot apply. If, however, Leggett’s theory can include an analogue to the Hindu concepts of *brahman* and *atman*, by which the created is from birth a part of its overarching creator (see religion section, above), it becomes more compatible with Stevens’ later canon. Much of Stevens’ prose writing allies with this idea of an outer imagination of which the poet is somehow a part. In “Effects of Analogy” (1948; *CPP* 707-23), for example, he writes that the poet “comes to feel that his imagination is not wholly his own but that it may be part of a much larger, much more potent imagination, which it is his affair to try to get at” (*CPP* 712). In “Imagination as Value” (1948; *CPP* 724-39), in turn, he quotes

Ernst Cassirer's *An Essay on Man*: "The true poem is not the work of the individual artist; it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself" (qtd. *CPP* 726)—and, it might be added, perfecting itself through the creation of mimetic creators, poets imitating "the universal mind," which is in itself "a fundamental poetry" (*CPP* 726).

"To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (1952; *CPP* 432-4) explores old age as it waits on the "threshold" of this very concept of final arrival. In particular, the poem encompasses the poverty and potential of old age considered as a liminal space. Stevens uses the poem's subject, George Santayana, to connect the widening poles of humanity with the extremity of spirit, the "extreme of the known" with "the presence of the extreme in the unknown." Leggett's idea of Schopenhauerian micro- and macrocosmic presences (representing reality and something else beyond human understanding, respectively) (Leggett 46) appears in the second stanza: "The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome / Beyond... Two parallels become one, a perspective of which / Men are part both in the inch and in the mile." Santayana, here, is the embodiment of liminal space: in the "profound poetry of the poor and of the dead," in his time as "master and commiserable"—presumably a blending of *commiserate* and *miserable*—"man." His room by itself is "memorial" to a personage nearly out of life, neatly paralleling Edmund Wilson's depiction in "Santayana at the Convent of the Blue Nuns" (1946), which multiple sources (Leggett 73; Litz 277; Longenbach 299) explain that Stevens read:

It was at the same time respect-inspiring and disturbing to one's recent preoccupations to find this little husk of a man, at once so ascetic and so cheerful, sustaining at eighty-one so steady an intellectual energy, inhabiting a convent cell, among the layers of historical debris that composed the substance of Rome, intact and unmoved by the tides of invasion and revolution that had been brawling back and forth around him; and when he talked about these outside occurrences, it was as if he attached them to history: the war had been an event like another which would presently belong to the past. (58)

Rome itself serves as analogue to a final and sacred space, and in this way strengthens the sense of Santayana's liminal role as "citizen of heaven though still of Rome"; as Wilson pointed out, "Someone had said about him, Santayana, he remarked in the conversation that followed, that he himself was a Catholic in everything but faith" (59-60). In this way, Rome becomes an indefinite but divine macrocosm—even as it is microcosm for some overarching imaginative order—for the human life in Santayana's room: "It is part of the life in your room. / Its domes are the architecture of your bed."

Santayana's space imparts the "solitude of self" which allows him to believe in "his own thought as a personal, self-contained system, and in his life as a work of art" (Wilson 61). Stevens echoes the concept of "art-as-life" in "Imagination as Value," in which he presents the idea that, "[i]n spite of the prevalence of the imagination in life, it is probably true that the discussion of it in that relation is ... not for the purposes of life but for the purposes of arts and letters" (*CPP* 733). Santayana, however, receives an exception, for his is one of those rare lives "which exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them" (*CPP* 733-4): that is, his is an art as well as a life. Indeed, his is the only example Stevens finds necessary:

To use a single illustration: it may be assumed that the life of Professor Santayana is a life in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters. We have only to think of this present phase of it, in which, in his old age, he dwells in the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent, and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so much to make any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher. To repeat, there can be lives in which the value of the imagination is the same as the value in arts and letters[.] (*CPP* 734)

Santayana was, in a phrase, "a man whose conduct both intellectually and morally was an applied act of imagination" (Riddel 252).

For Stevens, poverty seems to be a necessary condition for the concept of "art-as-life," and in his final years, he made several pithy pronouncements on the essential integration of

poverty and art. Richard Wilbur recounts a postcard from Stevens, which included “some splendid sentence about Bachelard is wrong, most art is created out of a condition of winter” (qtd. Brazeau 170) in a clear refocusing of the central imagery of “The Snow Man” (1921; *CPP* 8). (A letter to Renato Poggioli of 1953 reveals Stevens’ fondness for winter as an imagistic parallel to art and poverty: “Winter really ridicules the wanderer. It says: Why do you voyage around your room? Here I am” [*L* 790].) At their first meeting, in fact, Stevens advised Wilbur to stop publishing in *The New Yorker*, despite its wide readership and good pay: “That doesn’t matter,” he said. “Money doesn’t matter. If you’re a poet, you must be prepared to be poor, if that’s necessary. You must be like a monk. You must sacrifice yourself to your work” (qtd. Brazeau 197). Even earlier in his career, Stevens jotted in a notebook that “One Must Sit Still To Discover The World” (Lensing 188). Riddel points out that “[o]ne does not discover Stevens’ world on a trip to Florida or on a Guggenheim to Paris,” after all, “but within the confines of the mind which has learned to explore its own loneliness” (254).

Thus Santayana lives in a space of “shape within the ancient circles of shapes,” a room of “portent” and “moving transience”—that is, imagistic and spiritual fullness in an ascetic setting. The candle, often symbolic of belief in Stevens (see “The Man with the Blue Guitar” [*CPP* 135-51], “The Candle a Saint” [205-6], “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” [*CPP* 444], etc.) and a probable parallel to Santayana, inhabits a space of gerund, infinitive, and general suspension of the present in its desire to leave creation for its creator, enabled by the poverty which in turn enables a concept of life as art:

A light on the candle tearing against the wick  
 To join a hovering excellence, to escape  
 From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.



Stevens seems, here, to describe himself as much as Santayana, and Santayana as much as ourselves (often invoked in the poem by Stevens' use of "we"). José Rodríguez Feo compared the two in a letter of 1945: "I regard his [Santayana's] excitement as a strange and lovely thing. I think you share with him that rediscovery of the supreme beauty that small, every-day objects have for the poetic eye" (*Secretaries of the Moon* 36). Both Litz and Leggett also pick up on the conflation of Stevens and Santayana; they term Santayana an "alter ego" (279) and "Stevens surrogate" (76), respectively. Randall Jarrell noted the syllogistic connection of personages in his review of Stevens' *Collected Poems*, and wrote that, in the poem, "we feel that Santayana is Stevens, and Stevens ourselves—that, stopping upon this threshold, we are participating in the grandeur possible to man" (343).

Stevens' portrait, while not overwhelmingly positive, clearly respects Santayana's remarkable choice of life-end and death. Longenbach, however, argues that "Santayana's life, so narrow and so pure, represents a negative ideal for Stevens," and defends his point by isolating the word "total," used three times in the final two stanzas, as a "measure of Stevens's distance from Santayana" (300). "For Stevens," Longenbach asserts, "Santayana had no thoughts that were not 'final'" (302). Stevens remarks, however, that the "Total grandeur of a total edifice"—that is, Santayana's room and life—were deliberately "Chosen by an inquisitor of structures / For himself." Such totality is no restrictive space, but rather the provider of "form / And frame" for Santayana's thought. Stevens himself, in his final years, began to conceive of artistic effort as a final point of arrival. In his essay "Raoul Dufy" (1953) Stevens wrote, "The lithographs leave us feeling that the dissipations of life inevitably arrange themselves in a final scene, a scene that fills us with optimism and satisfaction as the characters leave the stage with all the lights burning" (*CPP* 870). In a telegram to the editors of *Poetry* in February 1955, too, he wrote,

“POETRY IS A KIND OF HEARTH” (Regenstein). Stevens hopes, as Santayana has by the end of “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” to “*realiz[e]* an imaginative projection to the extent that he is able to live within it and find solace” (Leggett 76). In his concluding emphasis on finality and place Stevens reveals a new means of religious thought, defined by an end achieved or reached toward, a final space—as he termed it in “Local Objects” (1955; *CPP* 473-4), “an absolute foyer beyond romance.”

“The Rock” (1950; *CPP* 445-7) is one of Stevens’ final collected articulations of the “final full” (*CPP* 201). In the first section of the poem, Stevens conceives that one’s own past becomes foreign and remote as a result of age: the poems seem irrelevant, “The sounds of the guitar // Were not and are not. Absurd”; “It is not to be believed.” However, in each singular “queer assertion of humanity” one assumes (“vital[ly]”) that “nothingness contained a *métier*” in which one gains sight and “an incessant being alive.” Stevens then examines the necessity for a poetry to “cure” the rock of reality. Cure, here, could mean a care or spiritual charge; a choice; to care for; to cover—and all, here, are appropriate as exponents of the relation of poetry to reality, in particular as they accumulate like the leaves (imagination) on the rock (reality): “the leaves, if they seem inconsequential when considered one by one,” Bates argues, “might amount in sum to a curative fiction or icon” (293). In fact, Riddel asserts, “The icon or poem ... is a ‘cure’ in the sense that it resolves divisions inherent in life itself” (249). The poet’s “words are both the icon and the man,” the liminal space between belief and believer. Stevens, in fact, as Leggett points out, becomes both part and “content of a mind or imagination” (102), one that is outer, greater, encompassing, nonhuman.

The poem’s final section depicts reality, the rock as “gray particular of man’s life,” being changed by the “silent rhapsodist” of man’s eye and attached imagination. The rock, then, is

“origin” in conjunction with the imagination which is its “cure”: it is “the main of things, the mind // The starting point of the human and the end.” They are the same, in essence, for “the ground of being is in his [the poet’s] mind” (Riddel 250). In his address upon receiving an honorary degree from Bard College Stevens integrated truth and art in much the same way:

In all [the poet’s] poems with all their enchantments for the poet himself, there is the final enchantment that they are true. The significance of the poetic act then is that it is evidence. It is instance and illustration. It is an illumination of a surface, the movement of a self in the rock. Above all it is a new engagement with life. It is that miracle to which the true faith of the poet attaches itself... at least for this generation, it is a new way through reality. (*CPP* 838)

That ultimate reality is a truth created, an imagined real.

Stevens’ final poems—especially “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” (1954; *CPP* 451-2), which he chose as the final poem of his *Collected* volume, and “Of Mere Being” (1955; *CPP* 476-7), commonly regarded as the last poem of Stevens’ life (Leggett 139)—examine in close particulars the possible achievement of a concluding space. “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” depends on its liminal placement “At the earliest ending of winter” and “at daylight or before” to both mediate and specify the distance between the “cry from outside” and its seeming status as “a sound in his mind.” “The struggle of the poem is to push it outside,” Leggett points out, “in an attempt to grant external reality—here only the faintest of sounds—an independent existence, free from his own mind” (20):

It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism  
Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché . . .  
The sun was coming from outside.

The sun is the “mutual origin” of the “thing” and the mind (Riddel 275), marking the two as “of the same *nature*” or mystical makeup (Leggett 26). They are, significantly, of similar form: the

“thing” is a cry merging on song, a “c preced[ing] the choir,” and the mind is mimetically expressed by the poem itself. Both, in short, are art.

This is all Stevens’ final attempt to find “it,” repeated six times in the poem and recalling “The the” (*CPP* 186): a simple truth, a final place. Leggett describes the poem as “Stevens’ final version of the final fiction, a supreme imagination that awakens at the end of winter to imagine spring” (21), which casts the poem in the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition of cyclical time and season, and which recalls the enormous potential of before-spring expressed in “Long and Sluggish Lines” (1952; *CPP* 442-3):

. . . Wanderer, this is the pre-history of February.  
The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.

You were not born yet when the trees were crystal  
Nor are you now, in this wakefulness inside a sleep.

The potential is not realized and perhaps never will be—perhaps isn’t meant to be—and in fact this action of reaching without finding seems to be the hope. The witness of some “Thing Itself” is only “*like / A new knowledge of reality*” (emphasis mine), yet it is in this way intimately connected with art. The “thing” is art, is metaphor, is the imaginative projection of a space in which one can believe, and “part of the colossal sun” in the way Stevens often uses “part”: to cast us and our art as immediate components of “it,” even in our lifelong attempts to find. We are *already* “it,” Stevens seems to say, as part of the art we make in searching.

“Of Mere Being,” fittingly, begins with a “Beyond,” a word which Bloom considers at length:

Emerson once quoted a lady of his acquaintance as saying that, for her, Transcendentalism always meant “a little beyond.” “Beyond” is a peculiarly haunting word throughout Stevens’ poetry. His aim always is to play “a tune beyond us, yet ourselves,” and to teach us, somehow, to “bear brightly the little beyond.”... [A] reader can chart the whole progress of a lifetime’s poetry in those persistent “beyonds.”... [W]e have an almost obsessive pattern of a poet constantly willing more than a little beyond,

endlessly striving to transcend the given, the “reality” that he asserts so often yet so self-deceivingly. We can summarize by saying that “beyond” in Stevens is where the self must go to find itself more truly and more strange, and we can venture the formula “beyond” means “beyond the First Idea.” (98)

At the end of this relentless human thinking-past, Stevens encounters the scene of “Of Mere Being,” which utilizes a remarkably late-Yeatsian Byzantine bird (Litz, “Compass and Curriculum” 241; Leggett 139) as “icon of the ultimate mystery of what lies beyond” (Buttel 12)—beyond death; beyond reason; beyond religion. “You know then,” after all, “that it is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy.” It is something separate from syllogism and logic and something closer to the exquisite unknown. It is that palm “on the edge of space,” and, it can be argued, poetry is itself the liminal palm at the margins of “beyond.” The “end” which the palm marks is not simply, as Leggett argues, “the end of the mind’ in death” (141); it is also an “end” as an edge, a place of between which mediates the here and the “beyond,” and which, in Stevens, is poetry.

To all of this boundary, though, there is a breadth; the edge, in fact, is nothing less than our lives. As Buttel points out,

The word mere in the title is an ironic understatement on the one hand and, on the other, a stressing of the idea of fullness: that’s all it is, and it’s all that, nothing but. To be alive and human is to be ambiguously unhappy-happy, able to conceive an inhuman perfection we can never achieve, divorced from complete knowing, and facing oblivion. Yet there’s a plangent splendor in how far our minds can reach. (13)

Our minds are, indeed, on this threshold with Stevens’. The final fiction—the final poetry—is both known and theologized. It is the paradox of Stevens’ poetic career, between what can be recognized and what cannot, between reality and imagination at their most basic cores. “And his poems, although makings of his self, / Were no less makings of the sun” (*CPP* 450) as Stevens’ art mediates the two into one whole, one space, one order.

*“The lover, the believer and the poet”:  
Conclusions*

Stevens’ most comprehensive and simultaneous treatment of traditional religious belief, desire, and art comes in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942; *CPP* 329-52), which forms a node of his theories and beliefs both at the time and leading to his final poetic works. Carroll argues that “Notes” is “not itself the total building; it is a collection of materials” (*Supreme Fiction* 160). “Notes” is, rather, an ordered anthology of Stevens’ present ideas, in which his past and present concerns join and merge in an articulated argument for the “supreme fiction.”

Stevens returns throughout “Notes” to traditional religious belief—specifically, here, Christianity—and the insufficiency of its myth to his ideas of the modern age. He criticizes the overrational system of Christian origin, by which Adam is the “father of Descartes” (I.IV): “we have imposed the reason,” Stevens wrote; “Adam imposed it even in Eden” (*L* 433). This imposition is the naming of the species, presumably, in opposition to Stevens’ usual dictum of belief, “do not use the rotted names” (“Blue Guitar,” *CPP* 150). There is an alternative myth, one uncreated and unconceptualized by men:

The clouds preceded us.

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

“The mind,” as Bates points out, “moves impulsively toward mythology and metaphor. Nor is this a degenerative movement, if the fiction is to be an object of belief” (219). Stevens’ chief issue with Christianity, then, seems to be that it is paradoxically a too-rational myth.

He examines the myth further in his “study of deity in decline” (Vendler, *Extended Wings* 175) by presenting, in “It Must Give Pleasure” (canto III), a fire-and-brimstone image of vestigial religious tradition—complete with a “lasting visage in a lasting bush” (III.III), about

which Stevens explained that “the elementary idea of God is a face” (*L* 438); the “unending red” that, in an earlier typed draft was a “rod” implying Christ as shepherd (Houghton Library); serpents standing in for the mouth of God; and other “Red-in-red repetitions never going / Away, a little rusty, a little rouged, / A little roughened and ruder.” After a sixteen-line sentence—one, notably, without an organizing verb or any implication of dynamism—Stevens breaks the vestigial trance with a snap: “That might have been,” he says, with the implication that it is different now. Rather, the modern age for Stevens is one of human iteration of the “first idea.” He writes, directly paralleling God’s syntactically balanced “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14, King James Bible),

And if there is an hour there is a day,  
  
There is a month, there is a year, there is a time  
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:  
I have not but I am and as I am, I am. (III.VIII)

In contrast, Christianity is

One voice repeating, one tireless chorister,  
The phrases of a single phrase, ké-ké,  
A single text, granite monotony,  
  
One sole face, like a photograph of fate,  
Glass-blower’s destiny, bloodless episcopus,  
Eye without lid, mind without any dream— (II.VI)

Ultimately, “It is / A sound like any other. It will end”—and will end because it cannot change.

Desire is, in its element, one conduit of such necessary change. In the human theorization of some “first idea,” which Stevens described as “the world without its varnish and dirt” (*L* 426-7), the element of wanting what is not or will be is integral. After all, as Vendler extends it, “All human beings engage in poesis in constituting an imagined world to live in; and the engagement

with poesis is coterminous with life. To be alive is to desire” (*Words* 32). Desire catalyzes the meeting of life and “first idea”:

The monastic man is an artist. The philosopher  
Appoints man’s place in music, say, today.  
But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.

And not to have is the beginning of desire.  
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.  
It is desire at the end of winter...

... it hears the calendar hymn. (I.II)

Traditional coupled love, too, has its place in “Notes,” for “We have not the need of any paradise, / We have not the need of any seducing hymn” (III.VI), but only a changing passion paralleled by the lover’s:

For easy passion and ever-ready love  
Are of our earthy birth and here and now  
And where we live and everywhere we live[.]

Such experience of love and change is separated by preposition upon preposition from scholarship; where “the courage of the ignorant man” in love is “hot for another’s accessible bliss,” unchanging reason is “the change / *Of degrees of perception in the scholar’s dark*” (emphasis mine). Later in the poem, a female proxy for Stevens, Nanzia Nunzio, also desires a life stripped of reason and dark logic in a song deriving from and diffusing the Song of Solomon (Cook 226):

I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,  
The spouse beyond emerald or amethyst,  
Beyond the burning body that I bear.

I am the woman stripped more nakedly  
Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible  
Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.

Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me  
In its own only precious ornament.



Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.

Clothe me entire in the final filament,  
So that I tremble with such love so known[.] (II.VIII)

The “final filament,” parallel to the supreme fiction, is something that never abandons the clear and naked form that loves it: “the bride / Is never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.” The imagination clothes too-bare reality and too-rigid religion.

It does this, as is usual in Stevens, through art. Poetry, by its elements of abstraction and irrationality, “refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea” (I.III). The poem, godlike, resurrects a frank veracity, a “candor”:

We move between these points:  
From that ever-early candor to its late plural

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

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

Art's truth, too, stems from its mimetic treatment of the already-mystic. In contrast to Adam's naming (see above), we, as artists,

are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues.  
The air is not a mirror but bare board,  
Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

And comic color of the rose, in which  
Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips  
Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them. (I.IV)

Human music is something of the ultimate good as pips of a pomegranate, as parts we have made to hold up to a whole. These are “False flick, false form,” perhaps, “but falseness close to kin” (I.VI): the microcosmic simulacrum, something like the thing itself, unnamed.

The hope, for Stevens, is that language will come close. The usual trying for the “crystal hypothesis” through inadequate, static “Logos and logic” (I.VIII) seems to make any attainment impossible, and tensions of paradox are created in some final enunciation of “greater aptitude and apprehension,”

As if the waves at last were never broken,  
As if the language, suddenly, with ease,  
Said things it had laboriously spoken.

Artists’ small pieces can be more than logicians’ arguments. Even in a tropical sense of homeland, wherein some “great banana tree” here “pierces clouds and bends on half the world” (II.V) and in the typescript “pieces” the clouds (Houghton Library)—both piecing and piercing, both putting together and pulling apart, as integral elements in change—the canto’s subject sighs “that he should leave the banjo’s twang.” “[F]or all the changes, for all the increases, accessions, magnifying,” Stevens wrote, “what often means most to us, and what, in a great extreme, might mean most to us is just as likely as not to be some little thing like a banjo’s twang” (*L* 435). It is, significantly, music that we might miss: not paradise itself, but our theories and makings of it.

The most important makings of “Notes,” though, are in its blendings of religion, love, and art. The sequence, in fact, begins this way:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?  
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man  
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?

The syntactic ambiguity of the “you” loved, particularly coming just after the title, implies both the supreme fiction itself and the notes working toward it—that is, the very art of attempting

some summation of the supreme fiction. This love for imaginative theory is contrasted to the repudiation of the old myths by the “extremest book of the wisest man,” invoked as a means of comparison to this more-sufficient fiction which rests “For a moment in the central of our being.” Stevens puts down strata of such composites throughout “Notes.” He implies that the “music of the machine,” recalling the ancient idea of the heavenly spheres’ music, “Sets up its Schwärmerei” (I.VII)—a word implying both religious zeal and erotic attachment. He connects “apotheosis,” the act of ranking the gods, with the gentle abstraction possible in treating the “major man” in poetry:

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

Yet look not at his colored eyes. Give him  
No names. Dismiss him from your images.  
The hot of him is purest in the heart. (I.IX)

Often, Stevens’ aggregates portray the dependence of the equal and opposite, paralleling reality and abstraction through gender, time, and the space between reality and imagination:

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

On the real . . .

Music falls on the silence like a sense,  
A passion that we feel, not understand.  
Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple  
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers  
That walk away as one in the greenest body. (II.IV)

These connections—phrased as “copulars,” implying general connection, musical progression, and erotic attachment at once—as Stevens posits them are “the origin of change.” The particular

canto ends with a strongly Whitmanian (for example, “O Captain! My Captain!” and “Song of the Open Road”) assertion of connection and balance in merging such difference:

The captain and his men

Are one and the sailor and the sea are one.  
Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,  
Sister and solace, brother and delight.

Metaphor, image, “saints,” “upper air,” “suitable amours,” and even Stevens’ edits to the typescript (reproduced below, with brackets around words added to an empty space, initial typed words crossed through, and penciled corrections in italics), merge to exemplify that the final fiction must be dynamic, “Must Change”:

A bench was his [catalepsy], Theatre  
Of Trope. He sat in the park. The water of  
The lake was full of artificial things,

Like a page of music, like an upper air,  
Like a [momentary] ~~solar~~ *color*, in which swans  
Were [seraphs], were saints, were [changing] essences.

The west wind was the music, the motion, the force  
To which the [swans curveted], a will to change,  
A will to make [iris frettings] on the blank.

There was a will to change, a necessitous  
And present way, a presentation, a kind  
Of volatile world, too constant to be denied,

The [eye] of a vagabond in metaphor  
That catches ~~one~~ *our* [own]. The casual is not  
Enough. The freshness of ~~transportation~~ *transformation* is

The freshness of a world. It is our own,  
It is ourselves, the [freshness] of ourselves,  
And that [necessity] and that ~~present action~~ *presentation*

Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer.  
Of these beginnings, gay and green, propose  
The suitable amours. Time will write them down. (II.X, Houghton Library)

The untitled final section sums up these opposing and merging forces of fiction. These opposites—“the mind / And sky,” and so forth—

are one.  
They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,  
Two parallels that meet if only in

The meeting of their shadows or that meet  
In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.

This is a pairing of parallels, a balance, that becomes necessary for the final communion or “bread” of poetry:

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;  
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,  
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

“Notes” may be “myth rather than empirical fact or logical deduction; but it is a myth to live by” (Bates 299-300), and all that follows the poem “in Stevens’ ensuing thirteen years is the refinement and subtilizing of ‘Notes’ into a natural mode, into an ‘act’ that is also a habit of mind” (Riddel 165). Riddel’s point mirrors Stevens’ own: “The next thing for me to do,” he wrote on contemplating “Notes” in 1943, “will be to try to be a little more precise about this enigma” (*L* 435)—and he was, in writing within that possibility. The potential, for Stevens, became more important as residing-place than the actual or imposed:

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

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

It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
Be possible. (III.VII)

\* \* \*

Stevens spent the last summer of his life suffering from cancer, and, “sometime between his readmission to the hospital on July 21 and his death on August 2” (Bates 296), 1955, Father Arthur Hanley apparently baptized Stevens and gave him Communion (Bates 296*n*30). However, the significance of the baptism (and even whether it occurred) is contested among scholars and Stevens’ family; Holly Stevens herself “vigorously denies that her father was converted to Catholicism during his last illness. While at St. Francis Hospital, she recalls, Stevens complained of visits by clergy but he said he was too weak to protest” (Brazeau 310*n*6). Several testimonies from Father Hanley confirm the baptism, which remained unrecorded “lest people think that Saint Francis Hospital actively sought to convert non-Catholic patients” (Bates 297*n*30). Stevens “believed strongly in God,” if in a decidedly abstract fashion: “I think he had such a marvelous idea,” Father Hanley said to Peter Brazeau, “of what God was. The absolute idea of God. ‘Everything,’ he said, ‘has been created. There is only one uncreated.’ And that was God” (qtd. Brazeau 294). Father Hanley met with Stevens “9 or 10 times” over the course of his second stay at Saint Francis Hospital (qtd. McCann 5), and noted that “One day he had a bit of a spell. He called for me, and he said, ‘I’d better get in the fold now.’ And then I baptized him, and the next day I brought him Communion” (qtd. Brazeau 295). The induction seems to have brought Stevens relief; though he passed away only days after his baptism, he “seemed very much at peace, and he would say, ‘Now I’m in the fold’” (qtd. Brazeau 295).

Much of what Father Hanley discussed with Stevens reveals that Stevens did indeed speak candidly with him, despite Holly’s claim of interference. Father Hanley mentioned “the peace and tranquility that [Stevens] experienced in going into a Catholic Church and spending some time. He spoke about St. Patrick’s Cathedral in N.Y.” (qtd. McCann 5). Unless Elsie or Holly told him, there would have been no way for Father Hanley to know of Stevens’ love for St.

Patrick's Cathedral; though the *Letters* refer to it, they were not published until 1966. The only source of that information, then, must have been Stevens himself, and indeed much of Father Hanley's testimony recalls Stevens' wry speech: "He said if he got well, we would talk a lot more and if not—he would see me in heaven" (qtd. McCann 5).

All of the testimonies pit the words of those closest to Stevens in his final months against one another without any final determination being possible. Though we have no direct account of the event from Stevens himself, several extracts from his letters of 1955 indicate a growing sympathy with Christianity. "There are not many signs" of the coming of spring, he told Barbara Church in February, "[y]et the sun begins to seem a Christian" (*L* 874). Stevens also recast the transformation of water into wine as an analogue to poetry: "Anyhow," he wrote to Peter H. Lee, "a man whose life is devoted to the study of poetry is as fully a specialist as a man whose life is spent in an effort to find a way of changing sea water into champagne" (*L* 873). Our only other clue is in what seems to be the final book purchase of Stevens' life: "the four volumes of the Anvil Press edition of the Gospels," with a laid-in invoice dated July 15, 1955 (Edelstein 61). After discarding the Bible so gleefully in his youth (see *L* 102), Stevens repurchased it in a limited edition even before July 21, the first possible date for his baptism according to Father Hanley's account that it occurred during Stevens' second stay at St. Francis Hospital.

In a nearly contemporaneous review of Stevens' work, Lloyd Frankenberg wrote that Stevens' poetry "does not supplant the religious impulse. It *is* that impulse, faithfully directed: directed in the direction of faith" ("The Grandest Metaphor" 267). This potential faith was immensely important to Stevens, though it sometimes had to remain unconsidered due to the demands of everyday living. As Stevens wrote to Henry Church in 1942:

I have a genealogist in New York working on my family of Dutch farmers. This morning I received a letter from her written in a state of great excitement because she had just

made another discovery. It is the same thing with an idea like the idea of a supreme fiction. When I get up at 6 o'clock in the morning (a time at which you are just closing your novel, pulling the chain on the lamp at your bedside) the thing crawls all over me; it is in my hair when I shave and I think of it in the bathtub. Then I come down here to the office and, except for an occasional letter like this, have to put it to one side. After all, I like Rhine wine, blue grapes, good cheese, endive and lots of books, etc., etc., etc., as much as I like supreme fiction. (*L* 431)

The supreme fiction is that which was, for Stevens, “always beginning, over and over” (*CPP* 449) in a space in which the fiction is coterminous as part of “this beginning” (*L* 434), and in which “this beginning” is one with “this end” (*CPP* 430). The fiction-paradise is, at last, something desired as a man desires a woman and something recalled as if heard before:

the desired  
Reclines in the temperature of heaven—

Like tales that were told the day before yesterday— (*CPP* 430)

Like the “Old Philosopher in Rome,” Stevens inhabits the “total grandeur at the end...

Total grandeur of a total edifice” (*CPP* 434). Yet even here

his mastery

Left only the fragments found in the grass,  
From his project, as finally magnified. (*CPP* 437)

Asking whether Stevens attained some final fiction, the passage seems to say, is useless. We would only see the shards, his poems; what we see is, in fact, the very impossibility of telling. Death is, at the end, a “River of Rivers in Connecticut” (*CPP* 451), and it is in this the same as belief.

Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing,

Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore  
Of each of the senses; call it, again and again,  
The river that flows nowhere, like a sea.



“The miles of distance away / From everything would end,” somehow: “It would all meet” (*CPP* 469). It would, potentially, some day, merge. It would become whole. “It must be possible” (*CPP* 349). And we, then, would be part of it; “We are part of a fraîcheur,” a freshness, a coolness, “inaccessible / Or accessible only in the most furtive fiction” (*CPP* 457), untellable, unimparted, indispensable nevertheless.

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