
Yang Wang

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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The Presence of Weather in Wallace Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": Images of Water, Air, and Light, and a "Poem of Pure Reality"

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Wang Yang
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Author

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John H. Willis, Jr.
William F. Davis
Kevin J. McManus
ABSTRACT

Stevens has long been regarded as a philosophical poet whose major poetic works seem to owe their eloquence and distinctiveness more to his ideas than to his images. Critics tend to trace the metaphysical threads in these works so that whenever the metaphysical connections are not readily discernible they turn to emphasize the referents outside the works to comprehend the cohesion of Stevens' poetic ideas.

For this reason, critics may "diverge absolutely," as one critic has pointed out, on some of Stevens' longer philosophical poems. For many, the problems of meaning and structure are most acutely felt in Stevens' second longest poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." The poem is often considered improvisational and unstructured. The theme on the interdependence of reality and the imagination is expressed in a long series of variations which, as the poet himself seems to acknowledge, "diffuse and casual."

However, it is possible to argue that the poet has employed three clusters of images of weather in the poem to provide some cohesion and texture. These images not only help to integrate the bare, dark, and desolate autumnal scene into a glittering rock-firm landscape but also help to transform the thirty-one "diffuse and casual" cantos into one unified vision of "pure reality." In the light of this reading, it seems clear that the poem is philosophically more resolved and tonally more positive than the critics have assumed.
THE PRESENCE OF WEATHER IN WALLACE STEVENS’ “AN ORDINARY EVENING IN NEW HAVEN”: IMAGES OF WATER, AIR, AND LIGHT, AND A "POEM OF PURE REALITY"
When the editors of *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* say that they regard Stevens essentially as a "philosophical poet,"¹ their voice is not unrepresentative of the primary assumption of Stevens criticism. Hi Simons calls the poet "one of the originators of the metaphysical trend in the poetry of our time."² R.H. Pearce considers Stevens' poetry to be written in an expository, dialectical mode in which the poet can "get at the problem of reality and imagination directly, not through a dramatic situation."³ Randall Jarrell, on the other hand, harshly criticizes the anti-imagistic traits in Stevens' later poetry, saying that the author of *The Auroras of Autumn* was not Peter Quince at the clavier but "G.E. Moore at the spinet."⁴ Later critical reactions are almost unanimous. Stevens' poems, especially the long poems of his later period, owe their sonority and eloquence mainly to his poetic ideas, very often like epithets in his book *Adagia*. So often images seem to be sought largely to present and expound certain philosophical postulates that one begins to wonder whether or not it is only the metaphysical threads that compose the texture of his work. Whenever the metaphysical connections are not readily discernible, one begins to wonder whether the work is a structureless shambles composed of discrete images and dangling ideas, revolving unevenly around certain emotional axes.

For many, the problems of meaning and structure are most acutely felt in Stevens' second longest poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." "There is hardly an argument here - only blandly repeated insistence on
one truth," Joseph N. Riddle comments in his analysis of the poem. "The mind moves at will among the familiar things and ideas which have long since become a habit for it." The one truth that Stevens is concerned with here is the truth of reality. For Helen Vendler, "the impossible task the poem sets itself is to account, in terms of consciousness, for a depression which is overwhelmingly physical - the metabolic depletion in age of the body's responses." She also says that "Poetry, as we can tell from The Rock, had not deserted Stevens, nor he it, but in taking the commonplace for 'reality' he was repressing too much, as he comes to realize in the course of the poem. . . . An Ordinary Evening is, in short, almost unrelentingly minimal, and over and over again threatens to die of its own starvation." To counterpoise Vendler's criticism, Harold Bloom holds that the poem is "not threatened by its own starvation but by its own copiousness, its abundance of invention that varies the one theme, which is the problematic Stevensian image that he unhelpfully always called 'reality'." Critical opinions towards the major themes of the poem may vary, but towards the form or structure of the poem they are always consistent. Many would agree readily with the poet himself that the entire poem "seem diffuse and casual" and be content with discussing the thematic unity of the poem in light of philosophical, biographical, or psychological referents outside the poem. "Critics can diverge absolutely on this poem," Bloom says, "because the text is almost impossible to read, that is, the text keeps seeking 'reality' while continually putting into question its own apotheosis of 'reality'."
Indeed, one may well notice that the thematic concerns of the poem are not expressed in an architectural unity of elaborated ideas. They occur in the course of the poem discursively and intermittently. Each canto begins with a thematic statement of its own and is meant to be a single analogical effort to explain what reality is and what it is composed of. Each canto, as Stevens hints to his publisher, may well stand on its own. For this reason, the poem is often considered improvisational and unstructured. Yet it is possible to argue that Stevens has employed three clusters of images of weather in the poem to provide some cohesion and texture. These images not only help to integrate the bare, dark, and desolate autumnal scene into a glittering rock-firm landscape but also help to transform the thirty-one "diffuse and casual" cantos into one unified vision of "pure reality." In the light of this reading, it seems clear that "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is philosophically more resolved and tonally more positive than the critics have assumed.

In a letter to Bernard Heringman, Stevens says that his intention in writing the poem is "to get to as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false. . . . This is not in any sense a turning away from the ideas of Credences of Summer: it is a development of those ideas. That
sort of thing might ultimately lead to another phase of what you call a seasonal sequence but certainly it would have nothing to do with the weather: it would have to do with drift of one's ideas." The poem "Credences of Summer" deals with a time when the insight into the nature of things is heavily aided by imaginative figurations - "the mind lays by its troubles and considers." In the full lushness of the mind's own creation, the poet longs for a clarity of sight through which he may see things as they are and describe them ingenuously. The natural process is observed: after the physical exuberance of summer comes the barrens and austerity of autumn, in which the poet's concern with the "res" or the "plain thing" becomes paramount. Collected in the volume The Auroras of Autumn, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" reveals itself to be part of the poet's continuous vision and meditation on reality, but now in a grand metaphor of the dessicated landscape of autumn. The poet does not evade using metaphor. He simply chooses to use the plainest and most elemental metaphor to organize his drift of thought.

Sitting at the window of his hotel room in New Haven, the poet observes the desolation of the landscape in the rain and contemplates the nature of reality. His pen, in the shade of his hand, diligently records what he apprehends into a poem of "pure reality." As he describes it near the end of the poem:
The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen.
The robins are la-bas, the squirrels, in tree-caves,
Huddle together in the knowledge of squirrels.

The wind has blown the silence of summer away.
It buzzes beyond the horizon or in the ground:
In mud under ponds, where the sky used to be reflected. (XXX, 1-9)

The physical locus of the poem is composed of concrete images that range
from the squirrels "in tree caves" to the "lone wanderers"(XXII, 12) of
the New Haven streets, from the carpenter's tool box (XVII, 17) to the
architects' "chapels and schools" (XXVI, 10), from "five-six cornered
leaves" (VIII, 5) to the lineaments of the earth (XXVI, 10). In the eye of
poet, these images make up the object of his observation and meditation.
They are all caught in the flow of more elemental images of weather in
the poem such as air, wind, and rain, and drift along with the latter. In
the poem there are three clusters of elemental images, each bearing a
distinct feature of the weather and each playing a significant part in
transforming the landscape. They may be grouped into water, air, and
light.

1) The water image progresses from the beginning section of
"down-pouring, up-springing" movement to the "fire-foams
in the motions of the sea" of the last section, from reverbera-
tions of the water-spout (XIV) to the "gold easings and
ouncings and fluctuations of thread" (XVII). The most dominant
is the presence of rain. It is the rain of autumn that
dissolves and cleanses the lush appearances of summer and
empties the sky of its cloud statues. The rain transforms
the landscape and creates a "new resemblance of the sun" (I).
2) The element of air is embodied in a series of images suggesting either a moving ambience such wind, inhalations (XXII), and exhalations (XVI), or an unmoving ambience such as the glass-like transparency of space, in addition to "the boom clouds" (XXIV), and the sound-ridden atmosphere of the town. Very often the image drifts between the perceiving eye and the object as cloud or cloudy transcripts (XX). The air, in a pure state, represents a visibility of thought - the eye's plainest view of the thing as it is (XXX).

3) They are two kinds of light in the poem: natural and artificial. Considering the absence of the sun and the moon in this rainy evening, the actual light mostly man-made. Its embodiments range from candles and electric lamps, to the insubstantial "moonlit extensions of the mind" (V) and the visionary light from man's worshipping soul (III). Unlike sunlight, man-made light is weak in resisting the prevailing atmosphere of darkness and chaos. Such light drifts and changes. The dead candles, the dim electric light at eaves, the confused illuminations of the mind, all may reach the point of being "snuffed out / By the obese opiates of sleep" (IV). To counterpoise the dark, man must cultivate the "inner light, that shines / From the sleepy bosom of the real" (XXII).

Under the influence of these elements of water, wind, and light, the autumnal landscape is bound to drift and change. The fallen leaves whirl in the wind; the rocks glitter in the rain and light. The houses of the town seem dilapidated. The once sunlit and lush landscape is reduced to an almost bare and desolate state. However, this is precisely the physical matrix Stevens needs for his poem. It is purged of all the figurations of summer and allows a plain visibility in which "hundreds of eyes can, in one mind, see at once" (XXX).
II

The desolation of the actual landscape of autumn is due to the dominant element of water. For the poet, the presence of water imagery ranges from flowing and cleansing, to dilapidating and reflecting. Throughout the poem it is for the most part represented by the down-pouring of autumnal rain. It flows, cleans, distills, and transforms what seems to be a static architectural cityscape of New Haven. In the first canto, the impact of the rain is felt in the physical dissolution of the houses.

These houses, these difficult objects dilapidate
Appearances of what appearances,
Words, lines, not meanings, not communications,

Dark things without a double, after all,
Unless a second giant kills the first -
A recent imagining of reality,

Much like a new resemblance of the sun,
Down-pouring, up-springing, and inevitable
A larger poem for a larger audience,

As if the crude collops came together as one,
A mythological form, a festival sphere,
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age.

The dark rain shatters the old sun-reality of the physical town and negates its sunlit cohesion. The crumbling appearances of these houses fall like disparate words that fail to communicate. Certainly, the gradual dissolution of the town's physicality and form in the rain implies an imminent bodily disintegration. Likewise, the killing of the first giant by the second implies the same kind of physical negation which the poet seems
eager to sanction. However, this negation does not seem to carry within itself symptoms of "exhaustion and despair," as Helen Vendler says. It is permeated instead with elemental power and spiritual vigor. The first giant, the old imagining of sun-reality, is negated by the second, the recent imagining of sunless-reality. Things do seem to fall (dilapidate) in the "down-pouring, up-springing" forces of the rain. But they fall together and eventually come to compose themselves again in a more volatile mythological form. Such a "larger poem" takes the dark rain as an invigorating force in place of the sun; it conceives, nourishes, renews and deifies its own life.

The rain kept falling loudly in the trees
And on the ground. The hibernal dark that hung
In primavera, the shadow of bare rock,

Becomes the rock of autumn, glittering,
Ponderable source of each imponderable. . . .(XV, 10-14)

In the dark evening in New Haven, the rain is real. The poet does not evade it. He braces himself up against it and integrates it into his poetic vision, discovering in it a dark solidity that is beyond destruction. The rain does not fall like a "robe of rays" (XVII, 15) in

Gold easings and ouncings and fluctuations of thread
And beetling of belts and lights of general stones,
Like blessed beams from out a blessed bush (XVII, 10-12)

as if to imitate the sun. The rain has its own glittering and invigorating aspect and is in itself a life source. Significantly, the poet depicts the
dark sphere of New Haven as the womb whose rhythm of life is constantly heard in the rhythm of the rain.

If, then, New Haven is half sun, what remains,

At evening, after dark, is the other half,
Lighted by space, big over those that sleep,
Of the single future of night, the single sleep,

As of a long, inevitable sound,
A kind of cozening and coaxing sound,
And the goodness of lying in a maternal sound,

Unfretted by day's separate, several selves,
Being part of everything come together as one. (XXIII, 7-14)

The poet sees that the town of New Haven in the dark is lighted not by the sun but by the space - "the hibernal dark" (XV, 11) of the rain that hangs over the town. In place of the sun, the rain unifies and revitalizes an otherwise disintegrating world. As described in the first canto, the rain-ridden cityscape of New Haven crumbles only in light of the old form of reality; In light of the new imagining of reality it recomposes its parts (collops) and stirs to be born into one "mythological form."

The elemental water imagery seems to contribute to the thematic unity of the poem in several significant aspects. First, it reduces the landscape to an utmost bare and desolate state so that the ugly and commonplace becomes visible. In the absence of the sun, it makes possible a new imagining of reality. Second, the water does not simply dilapidate or destroy; it invi-
gorates and revitalizes as well. It helps to compose the second giant and
deify the mythological form - "beard and being, alive with age" (I, 18). In
the light of the rain, the poet sees not only the dark dilapidations of
land but also the possibilities of resurrection of life. He sees not only
the fateful evasions of reality in the water, as in the case of Professor
Eucalyptus (XIV, 16-18), but also the indissoluble foundation of pines and
rocks and lineaments of the earth (XXX, 11-12). And finally, the water
imagery helps to integrate rain-ridden images into the poet's new imagining
of reality and into the poem's general movement towards an affirmation
of life. It progresses from the "down-pouring, up-springing" of the first
canto to "flickings from finikin to fine finikin" of the last canto, from
the dilapidations of the town houses to the volatile "motions of the sea" (XXXI).
The water element both decomposes and integrates, negates and affirms,
darkens and brightens, always exerting itself to become "a new resemblance
of the sun" (I, 13).

Like water, air is also prevalent throughout these thirty-one cantos.
The atmospheric condition of the town is consistently depicted by the
poet as an air-filled ambience. Canto one introduces it as "a festival
sphere, / A great bosom" (I, 17-18) in which lifeless things may become alive,
"broodingly abreath / With the inhalations of original cold / And of
original earliness" (XXII, 6-8). This airy sphere is described as "the sleepy
bosom of the real" (XXII, 17) to which all things may come as one. On the other
hand, the poet also sees the mind comprising an interior airy sphere. It is an
interiorized version of the external sphere. These two spheres are two
important conceptual images in the poem. New Haven represents the realm
of the real. It is physical, dark, and cold. The mind represents the unreal.
By itself, it is transparent, impalpable, and full of light and color:

... an impalpable town, full of
impalpable bells, transparencies of sound,

Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self,
Impalpable habitations that seem to move
In the movement of the colors of the mind,

The far-fire flowing and the dim-coned bells
Coming together in a sense in which we are poised
Without regard to time or where we are... (II, 2-9)

The internal sphere is symbolically permeated with a "fire-flowing" atmos
phere. The lack of tangible referents disorients and confuses the mind's
search for reality and ultimately suffocates its creative life. If the mind
denies the real town - the dark sphere of New Haven - it will certainly die
doing its own starvation. New Haven in the dark has to be faced and acknowledged
as the real, "the great bosom," which huddles and nourishes the life of the
mind and turns it into a "festival sphere."

... It is the philosopher's search

For an interior made exterior
And the poet's search for the same exterior made
Interior: breathless things broodingly abr...
Not the predicate of bright origin.
Creation is not renewed by images
Of lone wanderers. To re-create, to use

The cold and earliness and bright origin
Is to search. (XXII, 3-14)

Certainly, the outer and inner spheres are dependent upon as well as independent of each other. The philosopher conceives of reality as an essence or an absolute that is extracted from the objective world. The poet sees reality as the objective world that is integrated into the mind. The philosopher seeks to describe reality as it is whereas the poet seeks to describe it in "an and yet" (I, 3) metaphor. For the poet, creation involves mind's active search for ways of revealing and integrating the real. The mind starts with "inhalations of original cold" and searches for a new metaphor that promotes a new imagining of reality. Nothing seems minimal here. To embrace the real is to "inhale a health of air / To our sepulchral hollows" (VIII, 2-3) and make everything come together and breathe alive.

The element of air also suggests spherical transparency. The night air, for instance, is visually impenetrable. It represents the "hypnosis of that sphere" (XX) to which the mind, without exerting it inner light, may finally succumb. Semi-transparent are the imaginative transcripts of the real town. Embedded within certain imaginative and emotional content, they are cloudy and romantic. Like the two romanzas in the air (XXI), the transcripts originate from two different realms. One is the unapproachable center - the imagined land of Cythere - which is inhabited by "the black shepherd"
and his "black forms" (XXI). The other is the poet's sense of the "things around" (XXI, 12). The poet's search for an integration of the two romanzas creates a new form of reality:

... A celestial mode is paramount.

If only in the branches sweeping in the rain:
The two romanzas, the distant and the near,
Are a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind. (XXI, 15-18)

The interaction between the real and the imagination finds its perfect expression in the metaphor of the wind.

The cloudiness of one's transcripts of the real reflects the mind's normal quality of imagination and perception. However, at times, the poet has the intention to get rid of even this amount of cloudiness or romance from his vision. He describes the air in a pure state. The "glass of air" and the "visibility of thought" (XXX) are certainly among the most articulate images in the poem that demonstrate Stevens' deliberate and sustained effort to achieve a clarity of perception and poetic vision.

The glass of the air becomes an element -
It was something imagined that has been washed away.
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
It is a visibility of thought.
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once. (XXX, 13-18)

The sky is clear of cloud statues. It represents the eye's plainest view of
the thing as it is. It is therefore extremely unlikely that such a clarified condition for human perception and imagination mirrors, as some critics have suggested, Stevens' own physical dessication or his skeptical world outlook. For him, the air in its pure state actually represents a beginning for the on-coming renewal and staging of mind's undiminished creative energy.

Light is a crucial weather image. The title of the poem indicates that in these thirty-one visionary cantos there is no actual presence of the sun or the moon. The occasion is entirely devoid of natural light. To some, the absence of the sun is almost fatal to Stevens' apotheosis of reality in this particular poem. For, in a more typical case, Stevens' sun represents reality, the first cause, and the virile realm of power in which things are seen as they are. The absence of the sun has therefore been invariably interpreted as the absence of that virile power, hence, indicative of exhaustion and despair. Indeed, the candles and the electric light in the eaves (XVI) seem weak and hardly capable of resisting the encroachment of the dark sphere of New Haven. The extinction of the artificial light, especially in the image of the dead candles (XXXI), may be regarded as one of time's images that symbolically point to the termination of life. Many have considered this the emotional pivot of the whole poem. The leafless bough (XVI), for example, is often seen as a metaphor for physical dessication and possibly an imminent death. Many perceive the bough hiding tragically the fact of its own "total leaflessness" in a weak artifitical light at the eaves. However, if one considers the way
Stevens handles different sources of light present in his visionary landscape, the case may be argued otherwise. It is fortunate that the poet, without the sun, explores two other significant sources of light. One is the radial aspect of the mind which serves as the spiritual axis, integrating and enlightening human experience. The other is the starlight which emits from the dark sphere of the real, subsisting human vision and desire. These two sources of light, like the two romanzas in the air, are significantly fused into one visionary light - a fusion of the distant and the near, the exterior and the interior, the real and the imagined:

The point of vision and desire are the same.
It is to the hero of midnight that we pray
On a hill of stones to make beau mont thereof.

...................

... It is desire, set deep in the eye,
Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene,
In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall,

Always in emptiness that would be filled,
In denial that cannot contain its blood,
A porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof. (III)

The visionary light integrates the dark, discrete, and fragmentary objects into a unified transcendent vision. The "hill of stones" thus becomes a beau mont. Misery turns into a "celestial ease." And the black night is "ablazed with ancientest truth."
The interaction of the visionary light with the real is a central theme of the poem. The landscape itself does not constitute a whole realm of reality. According to the poet, reality is defined as

... a thing seen by the mind,
Not that which is but that which is apprehended,
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,
A glassy ocean lying at the door... (V, 3-6)

Reality is inconceivable without the poet's visionary light. Between the thing as it is and the mind of man there exists a "dumbfounding abyss" over which imaginative jumps have to be made. Without such a visionary light, one is bound to succumb to the encroachment of the primordial darkness:

... the last plainess of a man who has fought
Against illusion and was, in great grinding

Of growling teeth, and falls at night, snuffed out
By the obese opiates of sleep. (IV, 2-5)

On the other hand, reality cannot be conceived solely in terms of the light of the mind either. The lunar world produces only "confused illuminations and sonorities" (II, 16) and the dwellers of this lunar world are more dead than alive (X, 7-8). Reality is that which resides in the inter-realm of things as they are and the vistas of the mind's visionary light. The poem of pure reality (IX, 4) is to be composed through "wholly an inner light,
That it shines / From the sleepy bosom of the real” (XXII, 16-17) and be invested with an enigmatic beauty "amassed in a total double thing" (X, 4).

Water, air, and light are the elemental images in the desolate scene of Stevens’ autumnal landscape. However, they are not merely attributive to the poet's sense of desolation. Stevens' intention is to deprive things of all their imaginative colorings and to see them in the plainest view. More importantly, the poet admits that things are to be recorded by both "sight and insight as they are” (XII, 7). Hence, every image is invested with a dialectical meaning. Water dilapidates the architectural enclosure. Air empties the sky of the cloud statues. Light scrambles upon a hill of rough rocks. Each image contributes to the poem a dark, bare, and desolate dimension. On the other hand, each element also helps to transform the whole scene of desolation into a firm, elementally structured landscape. The water washes away all the wasted figurations of the past season. The air clears the sky of its obsolete content and prepares for staging a new resemblance of reality. The radial aspect of the mind and the starlight in the deep bosom of the real combine to produce a visionary light that turns the "hill of stones” (III) into a beau mont. Indeed, the seemingly "diffuse and casual” thirty-one cantos seem to be pervaded by these dialectical elements. They seem to possess an elemental structure. Into the warmth of our subjective world we inhale the air of "original cold” (XII). Amid the savage cries of plain men resounds "a matching and mating of surprised
chords" (IV). From the dark sphere of the real shines an inner holy light. Through the solidity of the dust (rock) moves a shade (life) and through the shade an elemental power. Everything is capable of being conceived out of its opposite content. In the land of negation lie the seeds of affirmation.

The elements of water, air, and light exert their power not merely to reduce the landscape of autumn to a barest rock-like state of desolation, but to conceive out of this state a solid foundation upon which the poet may finally attain the plainest vision of things as they are and integrate such a vision into the realm of pure reality. They contribute significantly an elemental dialectics to the thematic scheme of the poem and, in the final analysis, to the poet's apotheosis of reality.

III

What is reality? Where does it reside? The poet's prolonged quest for the answer is reflected throughout the poem and becomes his "never-ending meditation" (I). However, such a meditation is neither "a supple sinuous improvisation, constantly generating itself out of its own annihilation,"¹⁷ as Miller says, nor a finely-schemed "dialectical struggle without a victory,"¹⁸ as Bloom maintains. It progresses from a land of dilapidations (I) to a land of pines and rocks (XXX), from the confused
illuminations and sonorities (II) to the hibernal dark (XXIII) and from there to the final clarity of perception and thought (XXX). The apotheosis of reality is attained as victory.

The human eye, as the poet vigorously maintains throughout the poem, is "inexquisite" (V, 10). The perceiving eye cannot capture the thing as it is. What is captured is an image or a series of images that the thing impinges upon the optic nerves. It is little wonder that from the very outset the poet contends that even the plainest view is but "a thing apart" (I, 1). Even when the eye seems to be cleared of uncertainty and sees "without reflection" (IX, 11), what it gets is no more than a view, a transfixed version of the object. When Professor Eucalyptus seeks reality in the object, his problem is partly a problem of vision. It is "the human grim / That is part of the indifference of the eye / Indifferent to what it sees" (XIV, 14-16). How can the professor prove that god resides in the object when he himself starts to doubt the authenticity and objectivity of his eye's version? The imperfect optic transparency must therefore be sanctioned as part of the "inescapable romance" (V, 1) that both separates and bridges the rift between the object and the human mind. Hence, for the poet, reality must reside in an inter-realm which he invariably calls man's sense of the world. To the poet, reality rests precisely upon his special sense of the world. As Stevens writes in his essay "Effects of Analogy":
This mode proposes for study of the poet's sense of the world as the sense of poetry . . . The corporeal world, the familiar world of the commonplace, in short, our world, is one sense of analogy that develops between our world and the world of the poet. The poet's sense of the world is the other sense. It is the analogy between these two senses that concerns us. 19

What Stevens seeks throughout the thirty-one cantos is the most ordinary of all human analogies. He takes the elemental "common denominator" 20 as the base for his vision and describes it ingenuously. The imperfect human sight is aided by the poet's visionary insight. The "poem of pure reality" (IX, 4) abstracts from the realm of the real a barrenness which underlies all modes of analogy, a blankness which prevails over all colors of the mind, and an emptiness which precedes and pervades all architectural enclosures of human imagination.

The barrenness that appears is an exposing.
It is not part of what is absent, a halt
For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrance.

It is coming on and a coming forth.
The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge,
Staked solidly in a gusty rippling with rocks. (XXX, 7-12)

The poet's sense of the world is firmly grounded upon the dark, barren, desolate autumnal land over which all imaginative figurations have been deliberately reduced to leaves, litter, pines, and rocks. It is land of negation, but for the poet, it is also the land of spiritual renewal and
affirmation. To integrate the desolate and disintegrating world is to search for a "possible" (XXII), to conceive life out of death, order out of chaos, solidity out of emptiness, and to write a "poem of pure reality" (IX) in which the elemental forces of rain, wind, and light compose themselves and orchestrate within the variegated texture a "savage and subtle and simple harmony" (IV).
NOTES


5 Riddle, Joseph N, "Wallace Stevens' 'Visibility of Thought',," PMLA, 77, 494-95.


7 Vendler, On Extended Wings, pp.269-70.


11 Stevens, Letters, p.662.


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VITA

Wang Yang

Born at Kunshan, Suzhou District, Jiangsu, November 1, 1955.
Graduated from Wujiang High School in Wujiang, Jiangsu, in 1974. Worked
Entered the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages, Beijing, in 1977
and received a B.A. in English in February, 1982. Entered the College
of William and Mary, through the sponsorship of the Chinese Government,
to study English and American literature in preparation for a teaching
assignment at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages.