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## "Credences of Summer": Wallace Stevens' Concentric Search for Reality

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**"CREDENCES OF SUMMER":  
WALLACE STEVENS'S CONCENTRIC SEARCH FOR REALITY**

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**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts**

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**by**

**Hilary W. Holladay**

**1987**

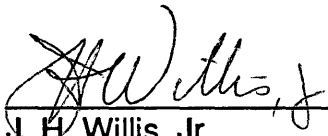
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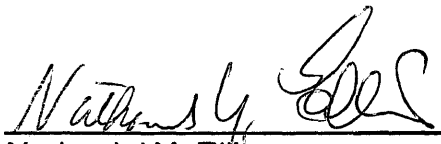
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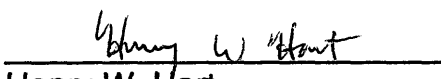
Master of Arts

  
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Approved, November 1987

  
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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

Wallace Stevens spent much of his poetic career trying to grasp the essence of reality. In "Credences of Summer," which he wrote nine years before his death, he depicts the search for reality as an inherently imaginative process. This search becomes a significant end in itself as the poet's desire to apprehend an independent reality grows increasingly ambivalent.

In the course of 10 cantos, reality and imagination gradually emerge as concentric circles of both the world we live in and the individual self. These concentric circles evoke some of Coleridge's ideas about imagination and reality. Stevens read *Coleridge on Imagination* by I. A. Richards several years before writing "Credences" and cites passages from it in his essays. While he disputes the possibility of a direct influence by Coleridge or any other poet, the implicit Coleridgian legacy in "Credences" creates a new way to approach the poem.

This essay suggests that "Credences of Summer" is much stronger than Helen Vendler believes it to be and, further, that Stevens's inspired re-imagining of Coleridgian concepts is central to its meaning. Like Coleridge, Stevens views reality and imagination as integral parts of a paradoxically indivisible whole—the whole process of perception. In "Credences," Stevens creates his own concentric circles of reality and imagination around a Coleridgian core of ideas.

**"CREDENCES OF SUMMER":  
WALLACE STEVENS'S CONCENTRIC SEARCH FOR REALITY**

The portrait of reality in "Credences of Summer" (*Collected Poems* 373-78) has caught the imagination of Wallace Stevens's foremost critics. Of all the commentary the poem has received, Helen Vendler provides the most thorough and thought-provoking interpretation. She likes much of the poem but considers it flawed, if not a complete failure, because it creates expectations in the beginning which it cannot justify in the end:

Its initial impetus of praise and involvement, resolutely kept in the original moment, is maintained through the first three cantos, but from then on the oneness with the here and now diminishes, until by the end of the poem Stevens is at an inhuman distance from his starting point. (Vendler 234)

She suggests that he is not entirely convinced by his own arguments in the beginning of the poem; "inhuman distance" betrays a mind at odds with itself. The trouble may be rooted in claims he makes for reality in canto IV: "He is never more uneasy than when he is trying to claim some autonomy for haymows in Oley, as he does earlier in the poem; it forces him into his concluding evocation of a disembodied and inhuman author as proper counterpart to the irremediably obdurate hay" (245). For her, the balancing effect does not hide the poet's own lack of resolution.

His lack of resolution may be seen in the conflicting aspects of his personality surfacing in the poem, "his wish to bask in the present and of the forces working against it, chiefly his natural asceticism and his equally natural intellectuality" (Vendler 234). When his intellect takes over in canto V, "a simple ease of landscape is never regained.... [T]he human effort to rest in the present is predestined to collapse, at least for Stevens, who never was a poet formed to chant in orgy to the summer sun" (235-36). In



Vendler's eyes, Stevens sets himself up for an inevitable fall, both figuratively and seasonally. Despite the poem's buoyant beginning, autumn and doubts about reality's supremacy cannot be staved off in the end. Stevens's deep ambivalence toward the poem's main premise weakens what might have been a strong statement of self-affirmation.

Harold Bloom is more convinced of the poem's success. For him, it is the "most beautiful" of the long poems in *Transport to Summer* (1947), a poem tinged with sadness "where the rapture of the destination has been attained and begins to be modulated into loss" (Bloom 219). He argues that it is more celebratory than Vendler believes it to be, though "it would like to be rather more celebratory than finally it was" (244). After the first three cantos' praise for the fulfillment implicit in the present moment, he observes that the poem "grows more and more dark from its fourth on to its final canto" (244). The concluding section casts a long shadow of poignancy over the whole poem, in his opinion, because its scene of youth and happiness inevitably prefigures age and sadness (252).

Both Vendler and Bloom label the poem Keatsian. Alluding to Keats's poem, "To Autumn," Vendler says the whole poem "may be seen as a meditation on that Keatsian moment in which the bees find that summer has o'erbrimmed their clammy cells" (Vendler 242). Bloom agrees, calling it "the most naturally Keatsian of Stevens's poems" (Bloom 244). Both critics view Keats as the source for the poem's celebratory yet contemplative mood. Vendler claims, further, that Stevens's attitude toward summer's ripeness is the same as Keats's in "To Autumn": "Direction must either stop at the plenary season, or it imperceptibly conveys excess and decay, and Stevens' response is exactly that of the humanized bees: to think that warm days will never cease, or to follow a devious logic of wish" (Vendler 242).

While Keats may partially account for the poem's mood, his influence does not shed any light on Stevens's view of reality and

imagination, which is at the heart of "Credences of Summer." Rather than truly Keatsian, "Credences" seems more Coleridgian. We know that Stevens read Coleridge throughout his life (*Letters* 82, 121, 792) and that he read *Coleridge on Imagination* by I. A. Richards five years before writing "Credences" in 1946 (Bates 259). He read the book in preparation for his lecture, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in which he quotes both Coleridge and I. A. Richards several times each. His copy of *Coleridge on Imagination* contains numerous annotations (Bates 259), and he declared in a letter dated July 8, 1941: "No one would be likely to suppose from that paper what a lot of serious reading it required preceding it" (*Letters* 392). Later references to Coleridge in his essay, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," and the Coleridgian references in "Credences" suggest that his serious reading of *Coleridge on Imagination* made a lasting impression on him. Meeting I. A. Richards the summer before he wrote the poem may have rekindled his interest in the book (*Letters* 508), which seems to be the point of departure for the Coleridgian terms and ideas permeating the poem.

A consideration of Coleridge's theories as presented in Richards's book helps illuminate some of the ideas crucial to the overall sense of "Credences" and provides a fresh approach for discussing theory often attributed to Stevens alone.<sup>1</sup> Richards identifies the main concern of Coleridge's critical writings as "the behaviour of words in poetry" (Richards xii). He goes on to suggest that "a further development of Coleridge's method would fundamentally change current conceptions of the relation of Poetry to Life" (xii-xiii). Poems such as "Credences of Summer" and *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* and essays such as "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" show Stevens's own preoccupation with the relation between poetry and life—as well as his heightened awareness of the behavior of words in poems.

Coleridge's concepts of primary and secondary imagination and

"subject-object machinery" seem especially pertinent to "Credences of Summer" (Richards 50). Stevens appears to agree with Coleridge's definitions of imagination, and the poem's approach to the relation between self (subject) and the surrounding world (object) parallels much of what Coleridge says. A couple of otherwise opaque cantos seem especially indebted to Coleridge. Canto VII may be viewed as a miniature representation of the earlier poet's theory of the perceiving process, and canto VIII's "trumpet of morning" recalls and re-invents Coleridge's "eolean harp."

The poem is much larger than the sum of its parts. Each of the ten, fifteen-line cantos has its own distinctive tone and direction. Taken together, they form a complex, multi-faceted whole which may strike one differently on each reading. The subtle connections between cantos contribute to this complexity. While the first canto asks us to celebrate the timeless quality of a summer day, the last attempts to freeze a scene which we know will change. The eight sections in between do not lead us directly to this nostalgic conclusion. Along the way, the tone shifts from conviction to ambivalence, from commanding seriousness to gentle irony. The cast of characters changes as well. Still, there are unifying images which hold the poem together. The hayfield in canto IV, embodying both barrenness and fulfillment, is the dominant landscape. It is prefigured in the first canto's "soft dry grass" and recalled in the conclusion's "blue meadows." Likewise, the characters encountered throughout the poem (from the fathers, mothers and lovers in the first canto to the "personae of summer" of the conclusion) may all be taken as aspects of reality as perceived by the "thrice-concentred self" in canto VII. In different ways, all of the personae complement the self, which is trying to determine its relationship to reality.

On the surface, the poem is about fruition. Its images of sunlight, roses and humming insects evoke natural fulfillment, with the hayfield being

an especially vivid indication of the poet's desire to be at one with nature. The hayfield is nature's poem ("Pure rhetoric of a language without words"), and Stevens seems willing to defer to nature's superior talent ("The utmost must be good and is"). But the poem's view of natural fulfillment is tempered from the first canto on by the mind's "trouble"—all past and future imaginings. Stevens, who admitted that his "feeling for the necessity of a final accord with reality was at its strongest" when he wrote the poem (*Letters* 719), cannot come to terms with reality without also coming to terms with imagination. "Credences" is a carefully conceived meditation on the interaction between mind and reality; it is about the process of perception as much as it is about the fulfillment one may experience on a midsummer day. Seen in this light, it is a much stronger poem than Vendler believes it to be.

For Stevens, the process of perception comes down to a struggle for dominance between reality and imagination. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he writes:

In its ultimate extension, the truth about which we have been insane leads us to look beyond the truth to something in which the imagination will be the dominant complement. It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential.

*(The Necessary Angel 33)*

Even so, he never seems certain whether imagination is indeed the "dominant" complement of the two. His vacillation on this subject is readily apparent in "Credences." What is certain, however, is that he believes reality and imagination are inseparable; in "Credences," they are like endlessly concentric circles of equal significance. Reality seems to encompass the mind which, in turn, encompasses reality. In canto VII, this paradox evolves into a full-scale identity crisis: the "thrice-concentred self"

is poised either to "subjugate" reality or "yield to subjugation," but the outcome is left unresolved, and the self remains in limbo. This absence of resolution is characteristic of the poem, a study in crafty paradox. Given that its author determined that "poetry and reality are one, or should be" (*Necessary Angel* 81), perhaps it is no surprise that "Credences" creates more knotty issues than it resolves.

Cantos IV and VII were Stevens's favorite sections (*Letters* 782), possibly because they are the most individually complete depictions of the poem's main paradoxes. Paying especially close attention to these sections is useful because they are like poles supporting the rest of the poem. The first three cantos build toward the lyrical description of a mentally stultifying landscape in canto IV. The references to "secondary" sounds in this section call to mind Coleridge's notions of primary and secondary imagination— notions which seem to parallel some of Stevens's own. After this pivotal section, Stevens digresses in canto V to consider the passage of time in terms of concentric circles, just as he compares one's identity to concentric circles of imagination and reality. Having made this comparison, he returns in the following section to the dichotomy of reality and imagination. In the seventh canto, the poem's other pole, the focus is now on the "self," with the implication that the mind's pursuit of reality is both endless and an end in itself. This section also has Coleridgian overtones, especially the lines addressing the relation between the self and the world around the self. Canto VIII further develops Stevens's idea of interdependence by showing that reality must be perceived by imagination in order for it to exist. The ironic denouement in the penultimate canto reveals the downside of midsummer's ripe reality. The section's images of decay suggest that reality and imagination are constantly changing each other. At the end of the poem, however, Stevens returns to the idea of fulfillment.

The first canto introduces elements that are important throughout the poem: reality, imagination, time and the mind's preoccupation with time. Stevens refers to the latter three in a negative way, championing the present moment of midsummer at the expense of the past and future. Twice he insists that the mind sets aside its "trouble" when fully occupying the here and now. The mind at one with reality seems to escape the debilitating consequences of time and imagination. The first two stanzas show time and imagination as functions of each other:

Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered  
 And spring's infuriations over and a long way  
 To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods  
 Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight  
 Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.

Now the mind lays by its trouble and considers.  
 The fidgets of remembrance come to this.  
 This is the last day of a certain year  
 Beyond which there is nothing left of time.  
 It comes to this and the imagination's life.

The fidgeting, troubled mind is ready for summer vacation. It takes solace in summer's wholeness: the full-blown roses and broods in the grass foreshadow the glimpse of Eden in the next canto. Meanwhile, the past is a blur of April fools and infuriations, and the future is abstract to the point of being meaningless. "Midsummer," furthermore, describes the solstice when the present day is at its longest. Here, midsummer appears to be the culmination of nature's attempt to express itself, and the mind is content to bask in the reflected glory of nature's success.

"Imagination's life" is paired with the reality of midsummer, but it is not included in this celebration, which rallies around satiation and stasis. Imagination, with its penchant for trouble and change, is like a party-crasher rattling the door. The mind does not want to admit imagination at the

moment. Nature's evocation of fulfillment is a completely satisfying thought in itself, as the section's last stanza indicates: "There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt / And this must comfort the heart's core against / Its false disasters ...." It follows that a mind troubled by imagination would fall prey to imaginary or "false" disasters. But at the end of time, there is no reason to anticipate danger. The occupants of midsummer assume benevolent postures: "these fathers standing round, / These mothers touching, speaking, being near, / These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass." Along with the young broods, this assembly belongs to the landscape of fruition. They form a close circle around the heart; their presence helps ward off one's own worries or "disasters." Furthermore, each represents a different aspect of fulfillment: the fathers, protection; the mothers, emotional support; the lovers, sexual satisfaction; and the young broods, the fruits of that satisfaction. Seen in this light, they are indeed a comforting group. The "self," comprised of mind, heart and body, perceives them as part of the fragrant, blooming landscape. Midsummer emerges as a time of equilibrium: nature and the self have reached an accord with each other. The passage of time or the introduction of new, subversive thoughts would throw off the balance; thus, time and imagination are rejected.

To reject them, however, is not to do away with them altogether. Once their authority has been challenged, in fact, they take on the force of worthy opponents. In the second canto, Stevens commands us to perceive reality without the distorting lens of time and imagination. Within the imaginative construct of a poem, of course, this is a paradoxical command. He goes so far as to dismiss the tools of his craft: "Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky / Without evasion by a single metaphor." As a metaphor itself, the sun conjures up a powerful reality which we cannot stare at for long. Stevens declares: "Let's see the very thing and nothing else. / Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight. / Burn everything not part of it to ash." But

that is more easily imagined than accomplished. Thus, Stevens positions himself on both sides of the struggle. His lines imaginatively argue on behalf of reality. The peacefulness of canto I seems to depend on reality's dominance, and Stevens seems willing, at least on the surface, to preserve that peacefulness at any cost. Perhaps reality is the innermost circle of the self:

Look at it in its essential barrenness  
 And say this, this is the centre that I seek.  
 Fix it in an eternal foliage

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,  
 Joy of such permanence, right ignorance  
 Of change still possible. Exile desire  
 For what is not. This is the barrenness  
 Of the fertile thing that can attain no more.

Stevens conjures up reality via metaphor: a midsummer day seems as peaceful and permanent as the Garden of Eden. As long as we banish imagination or "desire for what is not," the dangers of "change still possible" can be ignored. This garden of reality is a paradox in itself—so complete that it must be declared barren. Reality's supreme power is also its supreme weakness: without the transforming power of imagination, it is an abstract center around which nothing revolves. Stevens makes a similar point in the sixth canto of "Sunday Morning" in which he declares that "Death is the mother of beauty" (*Collected Poems* 66-70). The apparent fullness of paradise, where "boughs / Hang always heavy in that perfect sky," is devoid of the transient beauty we recognize on "our perishing earth." In both "Credences" and "Sunday Morning," paradise (an unchanging, independent reality) is essentially too good to be true: we may be able to conceive of an unchanging landscape, but its perfection is meaningless to us as long as we determine the value of things in terms of the ways in which



they change.

Canto III continues to build the case for reality while simultaneously showing reality's dependence on imagination. Again, reality is portrayed as the center that Stevens seeks, in concentric circles of self-sufficiency. Now it is an old man standing on a tower on "the final mountain." The tower is "more precious than the view beyond, / A point of survey squatting like a throne, / Axis of everything, green's apogee." The old man, for his part, will never read "Credences of Summer" or anything else because he "reads no book." Like the blooming roses, he no longer requires nourishment of any kind. He and nature are equally full—and empty:

His ruddy ancientness  
Absorbs the ruddy summer and is appeased,  
By an understanding that fulfils his age,  
By a feeling capable of nothing more.

As in the first two cantos, reality appears to be the "dominant complement." It yields to no one in its finality and centrality. Still, a cloud of ambivalence hangs over the mountain-tower. What good is a tower if it doesn't in some way connect with the view beyond? What purpose does the old man serve now that he has no interest in the world around him? Like the paradoxically barren garden of fulfillment in canto II, the old man standing on the "axis of everything" is characterized by stasis, "a feeling capable of nothing more." His equilibrium no longer allows for "change still possible." Having exiled imagination, he renders his own mind obsolete. From the perspective of the poem's unifying "self," he represents an unquestioning accord with reality. But should it ever attain the same accord, the self would have nowhere to go, nothing to do. The old man is literally over the hill—and the self, sensing the old man's complete absence of direction, would hesitate to join him.

Stevens provides his strongest image of reality in the fourth canto, the culmination of the first three sections. Like the garden and the tower, the

sun-baked hayfield seems admirably independent. It seems to defy—indeed, to stultify—all powers of imagination. Imagination is secondary clutter, a distraction not to be tolerated. The first two stanzas integrate the tangible image of Oley into an abstract formulation:

One of the limits of reality  
Presents itself in Oley when the hay,  
Baked through long days, is piled in mows. It is  
A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.  
There the distant fails the clairvoyant eye

And the secondary senses of the ear  
Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,  
Not evocations but last choirs, last sounds  
With nothing else compounded, carried full,  
Pure rhetoric of a language without words.

Oley, a farming region in eastern Pennsylvania (*Letters* 719), is the poem's only proper noun. After three cantos in which Stevens insists on the finality of the present ("This is the last day of a certain year / Beyond which there is nothing left of time."), and the satisfactions of finality ("This is the refuge that the end creates."), the example provided by Oley comes as a relief. But after the initial pleasure of encountering this peaceful scene, we begin to wonder about Oley. The image takes up only two lines. The rest of the canto elaborates, paradoxically, on the beauty and significance of a land devoid of everything that would make it poetic. It lacks the enigma, the tension and, above all, the words we associate with poetry. The reality of Oley seems to leave no room for the powers of the creative or secondary imagination. The "secondary sounds" of words are supplanted by a powerful "language without words." The untranslatable "last sounds" underscore the finality of this mind-numbing reality. The canto suggests that imagination is truly secondary to such a supreme, primary force.

At this juncture, it is useful to consider Coleridge's definitions of

primary and secondary imagination, which Richards cites in *Coleridge on Imagination*:

The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.

The secondary [imagination] I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

(*Biographia Literaria* 167)

For Coleridge, reality and imagination are two levels of creation. Reality or primary imagination amounts to the power of being while secondary imagination is the power of change. The two are inseparable, the power of change "co-existing with the conscious will." Although Coleridge calls secondary imagination an "echo" of primary being, he also calls it the "vital" power of the two. Both Coleridge and Stevens appear preoccupied with the apparently inescapable interdependence of reality and creative imagination. It may be that the question of the "dominant complement" will never be resolved, since the two entities simultaneously form each other.

Canto IV recalls Coleridge's definitions, with Stevens's reality being equivalent to Coleridge's concept of primary imagination. The reality of Oley comes to us via the imaginative, "secondary" vehicle of a poem. Its dependence on the creative imagination seems to be another of the "limits of reality." Thus, the canto is more than Stevens's "beautiful and wholly momentary acceptance of, or resignation to, his defeat by nature" (Bloom 247). It is a tribute to the idea of primary imagination in nature. While he is in Oley, he may lose his poetic vision—"the clairvoyant eye"—but the canto itself is proof that the mind can transform the blandest landscape into an

enigmatic and provocative poem. The secondary imagination, with its capacity for verbal language, allows Stevens to embellish the idea of reality as it occurred to him in Oley. The canto's message may recognize the overwhelming power of being, but its form pays tribute to the mind's ability to re-invent and idealize perceptions, such as a hayfield in summer. The distinction between the real hayfield and the imagined one recollected in tranquility is hazy, since Stevens cannot convey the actual landscape to us. Thus, the poem's concentric pattern recurs. Our secondary imagination interprets Stevens's poem, a form of reality on the page. The poem, in turn, is an interpretation of Stevens's secondary perceptions of the primary hayfield in Oley.

The last stanza further implies that our perceptions of primary experience are always filtered through secondary imagination:

Things stop in that direction and since they stop  
 The direction stops and we accept what is  
 As good. The utmost must be good and is  
 And is our fortune and honey hived in the trees  
 And mingling of colors at a festival.

The idea of an independent reality is beyond our understanding because we need the direction provided by words. Since we cannot make the leap beyond words, we must view "what is" as the "utmost." We must use our minds to decide "what is"—and isn't. In the last two lines, Stevens shows how the mind inevitably translates perceptions into images. With money, honey and a blur of color, he celebrates reality as the utmost figment of the imagination.

After apprehending the utmost in canto IV, Stevens must take a different tack in order to continue the poem. The tack he takes does not satisfy Vendler, who views the fifth canto as proof that he is uncomfortable with his own argument:

The final resolution—that this midsummer day *contains* all the rest, but without souvenir (rather as a concept contains, virtually, all its instances)—is an ingenious but frigid appropriation from logical abstraction. Its weakness is betrayed as Stevens has to buttress it by his gaudy language, always produced in moments of strain: the soldier who bristles and looms comes in phrase not flesh but fustian. (Vendler 238)

Stevens does seem to be straining for effect in this canto, but the section has more merit than Vendler is willing to allow. It examines a concern important to the entire poem: the relationship of a part to a whole. From the first canto, we know that Stevens is focusing on "the last day of a certain year"—the tangible part of an intangible whole. Similarly, the reality of such a day is the tangible element in "the imagination's life." In canto V, Stevens compares the relationship between day and year, reality and imagination, to that of a man and his race and a queen and "her whole kin." As power figures evoking Adam and Eve and recalling the paradisaical garden of Canto II, the man and woman both strengthen the groups to which they belong and draw strength from them. It is impossible to say whether they are emblematic or derivative. In this respect, they are as ambiguous as the day, about which Stevens declares: "One day enriches a year," and then wonders three lines later: "Or do the other days enrich the one?" In the last stanza, he concludes that the relationship between the day and the year, like that of the man and his race, the queen and her kin, is a matter of mutual enrichment:

The more than casual blue

Contains the year and other years and hymns  
 And people, without souvenir. The day  
 Enriches the year not as embellishment.  
 Stripped of remembrance, it displays its strength—  
 The youth, the vital son, the heroic power.

The present day may not carry visible "souvenirs" of the past, but its existence and appearance still hinge on the past: blooming roses and hay in the field are the result of spring's "infuriations." Likewise, the year's existence depends on its component parts. The days do not embellish the year; they simply create it. Each day is a powerful force in the continuum of time, yet even if it is "stripped of remembrance," the present day is just the latest offspring ("the youth, the vital son") of the past. The first canto lays the groundwork: "The fidgets of remembrance come to this." The past essentially delivers us into the present.

Similarly, the reality of the present day belongs to a continuum of change, the imagination's shifting perspective. Like the day and year, reality and imagination define each other. The two cannot be split apart because they are mutually dependent. The reality of today is shaped and influenced by past imaginings. The imagination's life, furthermore, is the time frame in which "timeless" days of reality occur. Together, imagination and reality form the perceiving "self"—the combination of primary and secondary imagination. The self, as portrayed in canto VII, is constantly trying to differentiate between reality and imagination and to discern which is the dominant complement. The task proves elliptical and literally "self"-referential, however.

Canto V prepares us for Stevens's concentric pursuit of self-understanding while recalling the poem's main elements set forth in the first section: imagination, reality and time. As a consideration of the relation between part and whole, this canto makes an interesting contribution to the whole poem. Clearly, canto and poem are also mutually dependent; they shape and define each other. Each canto may be seen, in fact, as a representative moment in the "day" of this particular poem. Taken together, these static moments chronicle a growing awareness, a gradual maturation

occurring within the continuum of imagination's life. On the surface, the poem may concern a seemingly timeless day, but it also concerns the passage of time. Each canto contributing to the portrait of timeless reality also contributes to or "enriches" the portrait of imagination and change.

In canto VI, Stevens continues to explore the idea of imagination and reality forming an indivisible whole. He is not concerned with identifying the dominant complement in this section. Instead, he shows how imagination and reality together create "the truth," the essence of the self. For him, the truth comprises the known and unknowable, the visible and invisible. It has one end in reality, "the rock of summer," and the other end in imagination, "the extremest light / Of sapphires flashing from a central sky." He has come a long way from his view in the first four cantos in which he openly praises reality and only obliquely gives credit to imagination. Now he seems willing to admit that an accord with one necessitates an accord with the other:

The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.  
It rises from land and sea and covers them.  
It is a mountain half way green and then,  
The other immeasurable half, such rock  
As placid air becomes.

Thus, the mountain-tower in canto III is reduced to a "rock" which does connect with the "view beyond" after all. As in "Anecdote of the Jar," the connection is inescapable, since the rock and the air around it define each other, both visually and spatially. Stevens suggests, furthermore, that the truth may be considered either the final reality or the final image. The "mountain," as seen in canto III, is an emblem of reality, but here it also evokes imagination. In this way, Stevens nudges us toward the possibility that reality and imagination may be viewed as circles of the same size. Not only are they indivisible, they are also one and the same: the truth

perceived from different perspectives.

Like canto II, the last stanza of canto VI seems to contain a biblical allusion. The luminous mountain, with its "sapphires flashing from the central sky, / As if twelve princes sat before a king," brings the Book of Revelation to mind. Stevens's image recalls the description of Jerusalem as a heavenly city, glimmering like rare jewels and occupied by the twelve apostles (Revelation 21:10-14). Like Jerusalem, the vision of the truth in Canto VI is a revelation. The biblical allusion gives Stevens's secular vision the aura of holy truth: the poet emerges as prophet, imagining the final reality.

The struggle to apprehend reality is not over yet, however. Like Coleridge, Stevens views the tension between reality and imagination as a necessary force holding the mind together. The mind may try to divide and define the two entities, even though the two cannot be split apart. But these efforts may eventually precipitate an awareness of the whole process of consciousness: mind and reality constantly forming and influencing each other. I. A. Richards sums up Coleridge's view, which provides insight into the seventh canto:

Coleridge's *Subject* is the Self or the Intelligence, the sentient knowing Mind; his *Object* is Nature, what is known by the mind in the act of knowing. (Richards 51)

For Coleridge, a theoretically "separated Subject and Object cannot be put together again without the distinction between them lapsing" (Richards 51). Quoting from Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual*, Richards also notes Coleridge's awe of the "quiet objects" of nature, which, like Stevens's hay field, seem to possess power in their own right. Both Coleridge and Stevens are preoccupied with the relation between subject and object—the mind's struggle to understand itself in terms of the world it perceives.

The first half of canto VII recalls Coleridge's view as well as



commenting on the paradox of canto IV:

Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs,  
 Secure. It was difficult to sing in face  
 Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves  
 Or else avert the object. Deep in the woods  
 They sang of summer in the common fields.

They sang desiring an object that was near,  
 In face of which desire no longer moved,  
 Nor made of itself that which it could not find ...

Like Coleridge, Stevens divides the process of perception into subject (the singers) and object. The singers feel awe for the unidentified object, which possesses formidable, though nebulous, strength. Away from the object, however, the singers regain both the ability and the desire to sing in praise of the object. "Singing" or poetry is possible deep in the mind's woods. As in canto IV, the poem emerges as the secondary imagination's synthesis of the real and unreal. While it may seem that singer and object are at odds with each other, the further implications are that the tension between the two is inherent to the process of perception, Coleridge's "act of knowing," and that poetry is the inevitable, "unreal" byproduct of that tension. Paradoxically, the lure of the object is more conducive to poetry than the object itself. The poet figuratively hiking toward the "common fields" of Oley is better off, in terms of poetic creativity, than the one who is already there, gazing blankly at the hay. The difficult syntax of the line, "Nor made of itself that which it could not find ...," indicates that the poet has trouble accepting this paradox. The mind that truly grasps reality has reached its goal and has no place left to go. Discovery would put the explorer out of a job.

At the midpoint of canto VII, Stevens seems to weigh the value of the means against the value of the end. If confronting reality precipitates barrenness and ancientness, as it does in cantos II and III, then perhaps it is better to remain in the poetically fertile limbo of desire. We recognize along

with Stevens that the poem, "Credences of Summer," exists only as long as its purported directive—"to see the very thing and nothing else"—is acknowledged but not permanently achieved. Seeing the very thing, like following the sun's path in canto II, is best accomplished in glimpses. The "act of knowing" incorporates these glimpses into the larger truth, the whole of reality and imagination, held together by one's own consciousness.

In the second half of the canto, the struggle between reality and imagination is internalized. Stevens's "concentred self" openly seeks "the object"—a concentric circle within the truth. The syntax makes it apparent that the self cannot determine whether reality or imagination is the dominant complement:

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times  
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,  
Once to make captive, once to subjugate  
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim  
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,  
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.

While the lines have a rhythmic insistence, they are rife with ambiguity. The self seems intent on holding onto reality, "the hard prize" that keeps slipping away. Yet it is unclear whether the self, grasping reality, is capable of controlling it. Stevens leaves the issue up in the air: the self will either subjugate reality or be subjugated by it. Once again, he hints that the self's "concentred" circles of reality and imagination are the same size. Reality and imagination form a whole which is the "truth," the nature of the self. As Joseph N. Riddell observes, the poem illustrates "day or consciousness bringing us to an awareness of being, of 'division,' and thus to selfhood. Hence 'Credences of Summer' returns to the old task of affirming the self by affirming its primacy in a world which without it is unreal" (Riddell 221). But

the canto and the poem aim for and achieve much more than affirmation of the self's primacy. Canto VII, for all of its ambiguity, makes it clear that it is essential to believe that an independent reality, a "hard prize," exists, even though capturing it is an exhausting process requiring "savage scrutiny." Reality's elusiveness both confounds the self and provides the necessary catalyst for the secondary, creative imagination. The search appears to be more rewarding, in the end, than the discovery itself.

In canto VIII, Stevens expands on the idea of consciousness encompassing both reality and imagination. The "trumpet of morning" announces a new reality, the latest example of the end of time. Like the day in canto V, the trumpet evokes both the present and the past. Heralding judgment day for reality and imagination, it represents the interdependence of the two. It is a wind instrument which Stevens employs as an instrument of the imagination. This trumpet of reality depends on the shifting winds of imagination to make its proclamations. In this respect, it seems that imagination may be the dominant complement of the two. Yet it is also apparent that imagination needs an instrument, such as the trumpet or any "object" in nature, in order to express itself.

The canto bears a resemblance to passages of Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp," which is quoted in part in *Coleridge on Imagination*. The wind harp is a metaphor for the consciousness existing in all of nature. Coleridge suggests that, like the music created as the wind vibrates the harp, consciousness results when imagination brings reality to life:

O! the one Life within us and abroad,  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,  
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where-

\* \* \*

And what if all of animated nature

Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,  
 That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps  
 Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze  
 At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

*(Coleridge 29)*

Subject and object merge as consciousness infiltrates all of nature.

Like Coleridge's harp, Stevens's trumpet has no function until it is set into motion by an external force. In both cases, the external force of wind passes through the instrument in order to create something new. Literally, the creation is music. But figuratively, it is consciousness, the whole "truth" of reality and imagination. Stevens does not retreat from this position as Coleridge does in "The Eolian Harp." Instead, he focuses on the way consciousness-in-nature prepares us for a new reality: "It is the visible announced, / It is the more than visible, the more / Than sharp, illustrious scene." Together, the mind and nature create the latest reality, the last day of time. As canto V suggests, the "last day" always carries the invisible weight of past days. Here, Stevens makes the further point that reality defines itself in terms of imagination just as the "thrice concentrated self" tries to delineate itself in terms of reality:

The trumpet supposes that  
 A mind exists, aware of division, aware  
 Of its cry as clarion, its diction's way  
 As that of a personage in a multitude:  
 Man's mind grown venerable in the unreal.

Since reality and imagination coexist in consciousness, it seems that they may never "fully find" each other. But the awareness of a division or distinction between the two results in the necessary tension, the vibrations causing music or poetry. In relation to this, it is worth noting that Stevens re-imagines Coleridge's wind harp as a trumpet which in literal terms requires a musician in order to function. In the context of the poem, the

trumpet "supposes" or depends on the existence of a venerable "mind." Thus, Stevens again establishes the inextricable link between imagination and reality, in a way similar to the unifying motif of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." The music of consciousness depends on both musician and instrument; the trumpet of reality is useless without a trumpeter bringing it to life.

Canto IX colors the whole poem with irony. Its portrayal of a new reality—a garden gone to seed—mocks the opulent Eden depicted in the poem's beginning. As Vendler points out, canto IX reshapes the poem's earlier emblems of reality:

When we next see the tower, in the ninth canto, it has turned into a beanpole; the green mountain has been dwarfed to a weedy garden in decay, and the old man has degenerated into a cock robin perched on the beanpole, no longer garbed in a 'ruddy ancientness' which 'absorbs the ruddy summer' but instead huddled, waiting for warmth.  
(Vendler 240)

The images in canto VIII are decadent both in appearance and spirit; this glimpse of reality is accompanied by an awareness of change rather than one of fulfillment. Some emotional letdown seems inevitable after the feeling of completion evoked by summer. Midsummer, though it seemed like the end of time, has now become part of the past.

Returning to the imperative voice of canto II, Stevens tells a "cock"—and the reader—to notice the parallel changes in nature and the mind. Vendler's assumption that the cock is a robin suggests that, as the traditional bird of spring, the robin is an ironically chosen observer. While the robin's arrival has much to do with spring's "infuriations," its imminent departure is one of autumn's "inhalations"—and summer's last gasp. Interpreted as a rooster, however, the cock heralds the coming of a new season just as he would announce a new day. As the first creature to

awaken, a rooster would be naturally the first to observe change in a complex of emotions. There is also a biblical echo here of the cock crowing on the day Christ was crucified. On that occasion, the cock's cry announced both a momentous end and a momentous beginning. So it is in Stevens's poem, though in a secular light: together, the end of summer and the beginning of fall signify change both in the landscape and in the self's perceptions of the world in which it lives. New circumstances precipitate new interpretations: the sounds of the new season are "not part of the listener's own sense."

It is interesting to note that birds and a beanfield also appear in "The Eolian Harp." Stevens seems to be ironically revising Coleridge's images:

How exquisite the scents  
Snatch'd from yon bean-field! and the world so hush'd!  
The stilly murmur of the distant Sea  
Tells us of silence.

\* \* \*

And now, [the harp's] strings  
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes  
Over delicious surges sink and rise,  
Such a soft floating witchery of sound  
As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve  
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,  
Where melodies round honey-dropping flowers,  
Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,  
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untam'd wing!  
*(Coleridge 28-29)*

In contrast, Stevens's bird perches on a beanpole and passively receives the poet's instructions: "Fly low, cock bright, and stop on a bean pole. Let / Your brown breast redden, while you wait for warmth." Furthermore, the bean field in canto IX is neither quiet nor sweet-smelling, and Stevens's rooster is no bird of paradise but a barnyard fowl. It ruminates in a garden

changed by the "fall." While Coleridge rhapsodizes over a beautiful, blissful scene, Stevens takes a more ironic view. Though he seems to share Coleridge's concepts of primary and secondary imagination, he cannot resist skewing the earlier poet's imagery in order to construct a less grandiose vision of the world. In effect, he replaces Coleridge's softly vibrating wind harp with the loud bravura of a trumpet; the wild, presumably innocent birds of paradise give way to a knowing cock; and the once-quiet bean field resonates with new and disturbing sounds.

For Stevens, summer's aftermath means both decay and new growth: "The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone / And last year's garden grows salacious weeds." These images contrast sharply with the hovering fathers, mothers and lovers, the roses and young broods at the poem's beginning. The latest reality is a changed scene, and it reflects a changing mind: "A complex of emotions falls apart, / In an abandoned spot." This scene, too, is the truth as conceived in canto VI. The whole of life and death, of consciousness, is a "complex of emotions" shaping and reshaping itself in the mind and in nature. Like patterns in a kaleidoscope, the present scene grows out of the previous one, though it may appear completely new.

The latest in a series of complexes may seem isolated, but it is in fact inextricably connected to all others via the passage of time. It may be pleasing, as in the second canto, to "arrest" time and attempt to live solely in the moment. But emotions differs from day to day, season to season. In the penultimate canto, this point is made directly: "salacious weeds" are frankly sexual while the earlier blooming roses were only suggestively sensual. Still, the roses and weeds are equally real. The mind cannot choose its realities; it can only embrace them in the larger context of the self.

Having once again dashed the reader's—and his own—hopes for a perfectly satisfying reality, Stevens returns nostalgically to that possibility in the conclusion. Here we find the "personae of summer," nature's own

creations, taking a final bow. Reminiscent of the "twilight Elfins" in "The Eolian Harp," they are the work of "an inhuman author," the primary imagination of being. We can appreciate them for the fulfillment they represent, even if that fulfillment is ephemeral. They suggest the interdependence of mind and nature. As such, they are the closest Stevens seems able to come in this poem to an accord with reality: "Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry, / Complete in a completed scene, speaking / Their parts as in a youthful happiness." But these fat, "roseate characters" who evoke reality are actors after all. Though they wear elaborate, colorful garb, "appropriate habit for / The huge decorum, the manner of the time," they may well show up in autumn dressed in tatters, befitting the manner of another time.

With canto IX fresh in mind, the conclusion is both charming and disengenuous. The former because the ending allows for pleasure, a snapshot of complete satisfaction; the latter because Stevens has just told us that reality does not always bespeak of happy endings. Reality changes as we change our minds, and the passage of time is the impetus for the processes of vision and re-vision, primary and secondary imagination. Consciousness amounts to a collaboration of mind and nature, human and inhuman authors. The collaborators may clash, but they are in fact helplessly dependent on each other. Together, they create Stevens's concentric circles of truth.

While Vendler identifies the poem's inability to support its early expectations as its weakness, it is possible to view "Credences" as a strong, multi-dimensional portrayal of Stevens's growing awareness of the relationship between the real and unreal. The first four cantos imply that reality is the dominant complement, with the mind's goal being perfect communion with the reality of the moment. Yet the poem itself is evidence of a mind at work, the "imagination's life" churning out ideas about reality.



Stevens subtly implies throughout the poem that imagination is a powerful, inescapable force, made all the more powerful by the tension between it and reality. In the end, the mind's vision of reality appears to be just as valid as—and perhaps more dominant than—reality itself.

The poem's further implications, that reality and imagination are bound to each other and responsible for shaping each other, are Coleridgean concepts. The way Stevens uses the words "secondary" and "object" and his appropriation of images crucial to "The Eolian Harp" suggest that he had found ideas compatible with his own, though he re-invents Coleridge's wind harp and other images to suit his own secularized, gently ironic view. Stevens is not, as Vendler concludes, at an "inhuman distance from his starting point" at the poem's end, but rather he is now able to synthesize all of the concepts informing the poem. The scene in canto X is an openly staged event; its whimsical artifice implies that the earlier cantos are staged events as well. Each glimpse of reality depends on imagination's vision. Whether it is an "inhuman author," Stevens's persona for primary imagination, or Stevens himself, writing "Credences of Summer," the creator is essentially always at one with his creation. The self may try to break down its identity in terms of reality and imagination, but, in the end, those elements have no meaning except in relation to each other. The self's fruitless search is fruitful in and of itself because the lack of resolution is the source of creation, singing and poems.

"Credences of Summer" is a succinct and graceful depiction of Stevens's preoccupation with the relation between imagination and reality. It conveys a sense of longing for an independent reality accompanied by the gradual recognition that neither reality nor imagination can exist alone. Stevens, then, is not the wet blanket at his own party, as Vendler implies; nor is he the wise host of the celebration that Bloom wants to attend. Instead, he is the human author contemplating the mind's search for reality,

a search which inevitably leads back to the mind itself. As one "self" perceiving the world, Stevens cannot freeze time and capture a moment of reality. But he can capture images of the moment and freeze them on the page. In this way, he allows an infinite number of concentric circles to form around his poem: each reader adds additional circles of the real and unreal. Thus, the imagination's life carries on, long after the limits of an independent reality have been recognized and forsaken.

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> When asked about influences on his writing, Stevens gave a characteristically evasive reply:

While, of course, I come down from the past, the past is my own and not something marked Coleridge, Wordsworth, etc. I know of no one who has been particularly important to me. My reality-imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others.

*(Letters 792)*

Lucy Beckett argues, however, that Stevens's reading of *Coleridge on Imagination* influenced *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, which he wrote before "Credences of Summer," as well as "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

It is clear ... that [*Coleridge on Imagination*] was the most appropriate possible grist to Stevens's mill at this time, not so much for its analyses of Coleridge's abstruse disquisitions, which were probably quite unfamiliar to Stevens, as for the attention it drew to the poet's use of words in relation to the 'the truth' and for the vast breadth of the challenge it threw down for the modern poet.

*(Beckett 132)*

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