

THE "WAR BETWEEN THE MIND AND SKY": THE POET,  
THE SOLDIER, AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE EPILOGUE TO  
*NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION*

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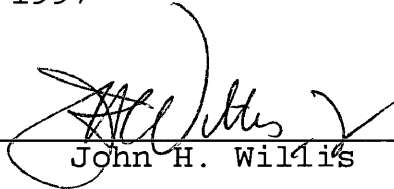
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## ABSTRACT

This study argues that the epilogue to Wallace Stevens's *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, viewed by most critics as an afterthought only marginally related to the poem itself, is in fact central to an understanding of the poem as a work very much conditioned by the context of its inception during the Second World War.

Drawing on the poem's wartime context, and Stevens's more overtly political wartime writings, particularly the 1939 poem "Life on a Battleship" and "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," an essay originally delivered as a lecture at Princeton University in 1942, this study argues that the epilogue is an integral part of the poem that emphasizes the heroic element in *Notes*, the martial aspect of the ephebe, and Stevens's view of the relevance of poetry in a time of war.

To demonstrate this, this study focuses primarily on the first section of *Notes*, "It Must Be Abstract," because it is in this section that the epilogue is most clearly relevant. Like the epilogue, "It Must Be Abstract" marks the poem's wartime context as the essential ground from which the poem springs. These cantos provide the foundation for the later sections and are an essential aspect of the balance that characterizes the poem as a whole.

By balancing the prologue to peace with the epilogue to war, Stevens frames the entire work within the context of war and peace. While the epilogue acknowledges the war, Stevens also reminds the soldier that "your war ends" (coda 12). It is a temporary condition and not the measure of all things as it often appears in a time of war. Thus, while the epilogue helps to frame *Notes* in a broader context, the poem itself also serves to frame the epilogue. The most important martial elements of the poem, the ephebe, the MacCullough, and the major man, are emphasized in the opening section, "It Must Be Abstract." As the poem progresses, however, it moves increasingly away from such concerns, emphasizing union, integration, multiplicity, diversity, discovery, and epiphany. It is the ordinary pleasures of peace, of which poetry is one, that ultimately determine the importance of war. As such, Stevens acknowledges the soldier's sacrifice, but he also sees beyond the war, acknowledging that its ultimate significance lies in the peace it seeks to preserve, rather than in the harsh reality of war itself.

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Few of Wallace Stevens's poems have been judged as harshly as the epilogue to *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. Critics have dismissed it as "mawkish, self-conscious shades of what was once a noble breed of straightforwardly patriotic poetry" (Rosenthal & Gall 363), and denied its significance, proclaiming that it "is not the true ending of the poem," and "perhaps would not have been appended to *Notes* if war had not made some external justification of poetry seem necessary" (Vendler 205). This critical dismissal of the epilogue may have unwittingly engendered subsequent attacks on Stevens's politics, most notably by Marjorie Perloff, who, paying careful attention to the epilogue, has written an influential indictment of the political irrelevance of *Notes*, characterizing the poem as, "a kind of anti-meditation, fearful and evasive, whose elaborate and daunting rhetoric is designed to convince both poet and reader that, despite the daily headlines and radio bulletins, the real action takes place in the country of metaphor" (Perloff 42).

Although Perloff's indictment is more extreme than most critical commentaries, and *Notes* clearly has its enthusiastic supporters, few have supported it on political grounds. Indeed, as Melita Schaum has recently observed, "Critics have long seen in Wallace Stevens the epitome of the modernist

poet's removal from political engagement" (Schaum 183). In fact, until the 1980s many critics seem to have at least tacitly shared Perloff's interpretation, viewing the epilogue as an afterthought, a guilty, half-hearted justification of a poem that seems escapist in a time of war. This sentiment may, however, have, as John Timberman Newcomb has suggested in *Wallace Stevens and Critical Canons*, as much to do with the apolitics of post-war criticism as it does with the nature of Stevens's poetry itself. But if the criticism of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s tended to obscure the political element in Stevens's poetry and the political context of his writing, criticism in the 1980s and 90s has shifted its focus toward such concerns. One of the clearest trends in the Stevens criticism of the 1980s and 90s has focused on situating the work within its political context, particularly during the Second World War. Marjorie Perloff, Alan Filreis, James Longenbach, John Timberman Newcomb, and Melita Schaum have all made important contributions to this aspect of Stevens criticism.

In light of the criticism of Perloff, Filreis, Longenbach, Newcomb, and Schaum, the epilogue deserves further consideration. Though to many critics the epilogue to *Notes* has seemed incongruous with the subjective lyricism of the poem as a whole, it is, I will argue, an integral part of the poem which emphasizes the heroic element in *Notes*, the martial

aspect of the ephebe, and Stevens's view of the relevance of poetry in a time of war. To demonstrate the epilogue's centrality, I will first establish similarities between *Notes* and Steven's most overtly political wartime poem, "Life on a Battleship," which demonstrates Stevens's conception of poetry as a pluralistic alternative to the dogmatic authoritarianism of the Nazis. Second, drawing on both *Notes* and "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," I will show how the epilogue emphasizes the martial aspect of the ephebe, a composite poet-soldier, and a version of Stevens's "figure of youth as virile poet" (NA 37). Third, I will show how the address to the soldier emphasizes Stevens's wartime concern with the hero, a concern emphasized in *Notes* in cantos VIII, IX, and X of "It Must Be Abstract."

Throughout my argument, I will focus primarily on the first section of *Notes*, "It Must Be Abstract," because in this section the epilogue is most clearly relevant. Like the epilogue, "It Must Be Abstract" marks the poem's wartime context as the essential ground from which the poem springs, the reality that conditions the poem's later imaginative cantos. If *Notes* were limited to the heroic projections of "It Must Be Abstract," it certainly would not have the status it currently holds in the Stevens canon; however, these cantos provide the foundation for the later sections, and are an essential aspect of the balance that characterizes the poem as

a whole. Just as the virile ephebe of the opening canto of "It Must Be Abstract" is balanced by the fat girl in the concluding canto of "It Must Give Pleasure," so too the epilogue's emphasis on war and reality balances the prologue's emphasis on peace and imagination. Indeed, these balances between the abstract and the physical, reality and imagination, order discovered and order imposed, and war and peace provide the central tension of the poem as a whole, and this effect would be greatly diminished if the epilogue had not been appended to *Notes*.

Though to some readers the epilogue may seem misplaced at the end of a long, meditative poem like *Notes*, it seems less so when viewed against the backdrop of much of Stevens's writing during the late 1930s and early 1940s. As early as 1939, in "Life on a Battleship," Stevens was clearly writing about political engagement, explicitly equating fascist militarism and rhetoric. John Timberman Newcomb has recently read this poem as an example of Stevens's response to political conditions and his growing interest in confronting them. Indeed, Newcomb's reading and the political import of the poem as a whole hinge upon the political context of its composition:

Presumably written soon after the October 1938 Munich accords which represented Fascist militarism at its most intimidating prewar moment, "Life on a Battleship" first appeared in the spring of 1939 in *Partisan Review*, a choice of venue which itself reflected Stevens's growing interest in political issues (Newcomb 104).

It is in this politicized context that Stevens contrasts the reductive rhetoric of authoritarianism with a more expansive and inclusive, democratic rhetoric.

As a politicized critique of reductive, absolutist rhetoric and ideological manipulation, "Life on a Battleship" suggests the political resonance Stevens wrote about later in *Notes*. After "the rape of the bourgeoisie" (OP 106), at the beginning of "Life on a Battleship," which Newcomb equates with the diplomatic collapse of the allies at Munich, the captain of *The Masculine* sets forth his plan to dominate the world. Through a divisive politics, "the war between the classes" becomes "the war between individuals" and eventually, "a paradise of assassins" (OP 106), a world of antagonistic solipsism without communal values. In this element of antagonism, the captain will take over:

...Suppose I seize  
 The ship, make it my own and, bit by bit,  
 Seize yards and docks, machinery and men,  
 As others have, and then, unlike the others,  
 Instead of building ships in numbers, build  
 A single ship, a cloud on the sea, the largest  
 Possible machine, a divinity of steel,  
 Of which I am captain (OP 106)

The captain's plan to reduce a multiplicity of ships into a single "divinity of steel" (OP 106), reflects the nature of his megalomaniacal authoritarian thinking as he reduces the entire world to himself:

Given what I intend,  
 The ship would become the center of the world.  
 My cabin as the center of the ship and I  
 As center of the cabin, the center of  
 The divinity, the divinity's mind, the mind  
 Of the world... (OP 106-7)

As the captain proclaims his megalomaniacal aims, Wallace Stevens deliberately has him use the language of fascism, language that emphasizes force, coercion, and power. The captain subjects the entire world to his intentions and imposes those intentions back on the world through sheer force of arms as he, "fired ten thousand guns" in order to "make the word respected" (OP 107) and through a series of rules or "grand simplifications" (OP 107) which he imposes "as apprentice of/ Descartes" (OP 107).

"Life on a Battleship" introduces, in a more political context, important motifs that will return in *Notes*. It introduces the theme of imposing order in an overtly political context, and within that context, introduces the figures of both Descartes and the ephebe, both of whom will return in *Notes*. "As apprentice of/ Descartes," (OP 107) the captain imposes "grand simplifications" (OP 107) which are opposed by the ephebi. In response to the captain's assertion that "The part/ Is equal to the whole" (OP 108), which leads eventually to the association of himself with the part, "I or one or the part is the equal/ Of the whole" (OP 108), "The ephebi [in "Life on a Battleship"] say there is only the whole/ The race, the nation, the state" (OP 108). The ephebi in "Life on a

Battleship," as the politicized predecessors of the ephebe of *Notes*, embrace the whole plurality rejected in the captain's simplifications. They are one with the voice that rejects the captain in the end:

The good, the strength, the scepter moves  
 From constable to god, from earth to air,  
 The circle of the scepter growing large  
 And larger as it moves, moving toward  
 A hand that fails to seize it. High captain, the grand  
 Simplifications approach but do not touch  
 The ultimate one, though they are parts of it (OP 109).

Here, the flow of power moves from the bottom up in a democratized rejection of the captain's authoritarianism. The circles expand outward toward an inclusive whole. The flow of power moves "from earth to air," and "from constable to god," from experience to abstraction in an explicit rejection of the captain's authoritarian rhetoric.

"Life on a Battleship" is an early suggestion of the nature of Stevens's later wartime proclamations, one that draws a sharp distinction between the divisive political rhetoric that promotes war and the violent physical acts that constitute the "reality" of war. The former is the field in which both the poet and the politician struggle. As Melita Schaum has recently suggested, "Politics is a cultural image-making which directs, interprets, rationalizes and abstracts the events of (in this case) military action" (Schaum 177). Stevens feels comfortable countering political rhetoric and image-making with

a rhetoric and image-making of his own, recognizing that, "in its most basic sense, the theatre of war has always been a 'Theatre of Trope'" (Schaum 177). About direct military action, however, Stevens was much more reticent. Having had no experience in war, he was reluctant to make cavalier proclamations about the soldier's experience. As James Longenbach has suggested, "Throughout the First World War, Stevens was excruciatingly aware of his distance from the violence of a soldier's life, and during the Second his distaste for the ease with which some writers aestheticized violence increased" (Longenbach 201).

Though the epilogue comes close to aestheticizing the soldier's struggle, it is predicated, nonetheless, on the clear distinction between poetic and military struggle. It is in this light that Stevens felt the epilogue was central to a lyrical and rhetorical poem such as *Notes*, a centrality that is, I think, evident in the prominence he gave it in the poem's first edition. In a letter to Katharine Frazier, his publisher at Cummington Press, Stevens made the following request regarding the publication of *Notes*:

Let me say that I have been thinking that it might be nice to have on the back outside cover of the book a border consisting of a line or two of the poem beginning "Soldier, there is a war" etc: enough to state the idea. This is to be entirely as you wish; if you don't like the idea, don't give it a second thought. If you like it but don't like the expense, let me know how much it will cost and I shall no doubt be glad to pay it myself. In short,

I am sufficiently interested in this as a book to contribute, if necessary, a little something in addition to the poems themselves (L 408).

In addition to indicating, as James Longenbach has recently observed, that Stevens "wanted readers who picked up the first edition of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' in the autumn of 1942 to approach the poem through these lines" (Longenbach 249), it also shows that Stevens shared his critics' uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the matter. He thinks "it might be nice" and is even willing to pay for any added expense, yet he is also willing for Frazier to dismiss the matter "without a second thought" (L 408) if she dislikes it. He wants the idea expressed on the cover, yet he would like it placed as a border on the back. This ambivalence is typical of Stevens's attitude toward political disclosure. On the surface, he is among the least overtly political of twentieth century poets, one who dislikes making political concessions and overt political statements in his poetry. For him, the relationship between poetry and politics is neither overt nor explicit, but he clearly felt that his poetry, however personal, was engendered by political conditions.

When the lines from the epilogue appeared on the cover of the first edition of *Notes* in 1942, they were, as James Longenbach has pointed out, the one aspect of the poem about which Stevens later expressed doubt. In a letter to Harry Duncan, who became manager of the Cummington Press after

Katherine Frazier's illness, Stevens wrote that "the lines on the back" were "the only thing I have ever felt any doubt about" (L 442). Despite Stevens's characteristic regrets about political disclosure, he intended his readers to begin the poem with the epilogue in mind. In the first edition of *Notes*, the border on the back cover contained the following lines:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind  
And sky, between thought and day and night.

It . . . never ends.

How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,  
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech  
(Coda 1-2, 6, 20-1).

Though an incomplete quotation, these lines are enough to state the epilogue's central metaphor. The poet is metaphorically, for Stevens, a martial figure, embattled in a cosmic struggle, a struggle for what Stevens calls nobility, a struggle for meaning, for belief, for human dignity in the face of what, in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he would later call the "pressure of reality" (NA 20). When Stevens resolves the epilogue's various dichotomies, the opposition between the mind and sky, thought and day and night, the sun and moon, and the imagination and reality, by stating that "the two are one" (Coda 7), he is also clearly implying that the same resolution also applies to the opposition between the poet and the soldier. Even if their overt connection is shadowy, meeting only in "a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay" (Coda 11),

ultimately "the soldier is poor without the poet's lines" (Coda 15). Without the consolations of the imagination, the bold assertions of human nobility and dignity, the soldier's struggle becomes meaningless carnage. It is the sound of words, "the bread of faithful speech" (Coda 21) that inspires the soldier and ennobles his sacrifice.

Although the comparison of the poet and the soldier has seemed excessive to many contemporary readers, it was commonplace in the cultural and critical milieu of the home front during the Second World War. In addition to military and economic mobilization during the war, there was a concurrent effort to mobilize writers and artists under a new aesthetic nationalism, spearheaded by Archibald MacLeish who, in his 1940 essay "The Irresponsibles," asserted that the value of art be tied directly to its relevance to the war effort. It was MacLeish who, "first as Librarian of Congress and later as chief of the wartime Office of Facts and Figures (a vehicle for government propaganda) was swiftly becoming the most prominent voice of America's literary conscience" (Longenbach 251). Liberally quoting MacLeish, Alan Filreis describes the rise of this "new nationalism" as follows:

The new nationalism in writing began as a negative campaign--namely, in MacLeish's attack on "the irresponsibles," first in an essay and then in a small book going under that title. But the chief characteristic of MacLeish's jeremiad was to advocate what Van Wyck Brooks characterized as a positive and constructive American Literature--and

what Brooks's and MacLeish's detractors mocked as a "Chamber-of-Commerce spirit." . . . He reminded writers that the destruction of "the integrity of words" was a greater crime against the state than the destruction of a machine or manufacturing plant. He attacked writers who insisted on presenting "the point of view of the defeated man." After Pearl Harbour, he insisted that as "the American mentality" was changing "from defensive to offensive," so should that of American writers and critics. "What is true of the people as a whole in the war fought for the domination of the world should be true as well of the intellectuals--the writers and the scholars and the librarians and the rest--in the war fought for the countries of the mind" (Filreis 61).

In this highly politicized context what is striking about *Notes* is not the epilogue, which reiterates many of the themes expressed by MacLeish, but the fact that the poem as a whole tends to avoid such overt wartime proclamations.

The epilogue seems to respond directly to MacLeish's critical mandates. MacLeish's "wars fought for the countries of the mind" are strikingly suggestive of Stevens's "war between the mind/ And sky" (Coda 1-2), but the similarity hardly suggests an affinity between Stevens and MacLeish. Stevens, who "is reported to have turned 'purple with rage' at the mention of MacLeish's name" (Longenbach 252), was placed in a difficult situation when faced with MacLeish's popular political pronouncements. As Alan Filreis asks, "what writer could disagree with the new nationalism without seeming to oppose the war to save culture or, worse, to be soft on fascism?" (Filreis 61). Through the epilogue, Stevens

addresses wartime concerns of life and death, victory and defeat, while at the same time effectively marginalizing MacLeish's dogmatic version of these issues within the broader movement of the poem as a whole. The epilogue is balanced by a prologue emphasizing "peace" (CP 380), and while there are clearly heroic and martial elements in the poem, the poem's ultimate insights transcend its concessions to its wartime context.

While Stevens acknowledged the special conditions brought about by the war, he was also aware that wartime conditions at home fostered what Dwight MacDonald, in a 1941 response to MacLeish and Brooks, called, "authoritarian cultural values," which he characterized as "an attempt to impose on the writer from outside certain socio-political values, and to provide a rationalization for damning his work esthetically if it fails to conform to these values" (MacDonald 450-51). If in "Life on a Battleship" Stevens described fascist militarism as a threat to pluralism, he must also have seen a similar tendency at home, for as James Longenbach has suggested, supporting MacDonald's assertion:

MacDonald was not indulging in hyperbole. Brooks had suggested that communities organize committees to collect objects made in Germany and destroy them in public bonfires. In the same month that France fell to the Nazis, the Supreme Court upheld the right of a Pennsylvania school system to expel students who refused to salute the flag; the following month Roosevelt signed the Smith Act, requiring 3,500,000 aliens to be fingerprinted and

stipulating legal penalties for any spoken or written word that provoked "insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty by any member of the military or naval forces" (Longenbach 252).

It is in this context that Stevens framed the soldier's struggle within the broader context of *Notes*. Stevens, as I will show later, ultimately rejects the soldier as a possible hero since he too is implicated in an authoritarian system, even if it is one which exists in defense of pluralism and democracy. In addressing the soldier, Stevens declares that "your war ends" (Coda 12), and it is this realization that the war was a temporary condition which defended democratic values, but which did not always reflect those values, that marks the distinction between *Notes* and the dogmatic wartime views of writers like MacLeish and Brooks.

In a 1939 response to a *Partisan Review* question regarding the writer's responsibility in a time of war, Stevens wrote,

The question respecting the responsibility of writers in war is a very theoretical question respecting an extremely practical state of affairs. A war is a military state of affairs, not a literary one. Conceding that the propagandists don't agree, does it matter that they don't agree? The role of the writer in war remains the fundamental role of the writer intensified and concentrated (OP 310).

Indeed, Stevens's later doubts about the epilogue reflect his sense that he had given in to "the propagandists," but *Notes* emphasizes that even in a time of war "the role of the writer...remains the fundamental role of the writer" (OP 310).

It is somewhat erroneous, then, to suggest as Marjorie Perloff has, that the relatively scant attention paid to the war in *Notes* is evidence of its political irrelevance. On the contrary, by acknowledging the war and at the same time marginalizing its role, *Notes* is clearly political, even if its political message is one with which Perloff does not agree. Perloff's attack on *Notes* is based in part on a list of battles fought between 1939 and 1942, battles conspicuously absent from *Notes*, which for her suggest the political irrelevance of the poem. What she misses, however, is the rhetoric of war, a rhetoric that I believe Stevens does address and that marks the political context of *Notes*. In addition to the physical war, the war was a war of values, an ideological war, a propaganda war, a conceptual war that pitted authoritarianism against democratic pluralism. For Stevens there was a clear relationship between the political and cultural aspects of the war. As John Timberman Newcomb has suggested, authoritarian governments were maintained and bolstered by authoritarian cultural values, and for Stevens, any system that posits value as an ontological absolute presents precisely the sort of indefensible, dogmatic tyranny that engenders authoritarianism, and which the poet is bound to resist or evade (Newcomb 103). It is in this light that he conceives of the poet metaphorically as a martial figure.

Stevens's conception of the poet as a martial figure is

explicit in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," an essay originally delivered as a lecture at Princeton University in 1942, the year of publication of *Notes*, and it stands as his clearest defense of his wartime poetic practice. In "The Noble Rider," Stevens says he "is trying to think of a whole generation and of a world at war, and trying at the same time to see what is happening to the imagination" (NA 20). It was in this overtly political context that Stevens conceived of "the pressure of reality" as the chief factor influencing the imagination in any age: "By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of external events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA 20). The persistence and immediacy of events crowded the imagination, denying the artist the distance he needed to create. Though it was not uniquely modern, in Stevens's age, the pressure of reality was more intense and pervasive than it had ever been. It was intensified, for example, by the intrusion of the media, as Stevens noted in his address:

For more than ten years now, there has been an extraordinary pressure of news--let us say, news incomparably more pretentious than any description of it, news, at first, of the collapse of our system, or, call it, of life; then of news of a new world, but of a new world so uncertain that one did not know anything whatever of its nature, and does not know now; and could not tell whether it was to be all-English, all-German, all-Russian, all-Japanese, or all-American, and cannot tell now; and finally news of a war, which was a renewal of what, if it was not the greatest war, became such by this continuation. And for more than ten years, the

consciousness of the world has concentrated on events which have made the ordinary movement of life seem to be the movement of people in the intervals of a storm. The disclosures of the impermanence of the past suggested, and suggest, an impermanence of the future. Little of what we have believed has been true (NA 20-21).

The immediacy, ubiquity, and intrusiveness of "the pressure of reality" (NA 27) was heightened by the media and its effect was to deny the certainty, order, permanence, and belief upon which we base our lives. In this context, "the war [was] only part of a war-like whole" (NA 21), one that upset not only political order, but the order and certainty of "what we have believed" (NA 28).

The inescapable news of the First World War, the Depression, and the Second World War (which Stevens saw as a continuation of the first) was pervasive and debilitating. Though Stevens remained outside of the events, he could not avoid their repercussions, for the violence was not only physical:

in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive (NA 27).

"The pressure of reality," the violence and chaos of a world at war, made inescapable through the media to those not directly involved, leads to spiritual violence, a breakdown of order and

certainty on a more personal level. It is this that the poet must resist. Like the resistance in Stevens's beloved France which was a violent response to the oppressive force, both physical and spiritual, of the Nazi occupation; the imagination, while it could not stop the physical violence, could resist the spiritual violence by providing order and certainty on a personal level. In this way, it could, "help people to live their lives" (NA 29).

"War," as Stevens noted in "Adagia," "is the periodical failure of politics" (OP 191), and it is not politics as such, but the chaos resulting from the breakdown of political order that leads to both physical and spiritual violence. Thus, Stevens concludes "The Noble Rider" by defining the imagination in terms of the metaphorical violence he had introduced earlier in speaking of the spiritual impact of the Second World War:

It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of words, helps us to live our lives (NA 36).

By describing the imagination as a violence from within pressing back against the spiritual violence of a war-like world, Stevens accentuates the parallel between the poet and the soldier that he develops in the epilogue to *Notes*. Like the soldier fighting for the allied cause, the poet, through

the imagination, is involved in a violent struggle for "self-preservation" against an aggressive pressure which threatens to undermine on a spiritual level the order and certainty of our lives. Indeed, by defining the imagination in these terms, Stevens clearly emphasizes the political ground of what is too often read as an apolitical rhetoric and suggests the significance of the epilogue to *Notes*.

In "The Noble Rider," he acknowledges the conditions brought about by war and defines the imagination as a response to those conditions. Amidst the clamor at home for "war poetry," he acknowledges, as a public speaker, the special conditions imposed by war while at the same time resisting the pressure to write the more overtly political sort of poetry promoted by MacLeish. Indeed, the central metaphor by which Stevens defines the relation between imagination and reality in "The Noble Rider," one of competing pressures adjusting to establish equilibrium, suggests the aesthetic that is central to *Notes*. In *Notes* Stevens opts for balance rather than extremes. He addresses the soldier in the epilogue and even gives that address considerable prominence by placing part of it on the back cover of the volume, yet the conditions of war are never allowed to dominate *Notes*.

The epilogue emphasizing war and the social function of poetry is balanced by a prologue emphasizing peace and the personal function of poetry. In contrast to the formal public

address to the soldier, the prologue is addressed to the interior paramour, the "you" of the prologue, the Stevensian muse, the imagination itself. While some critics have argued for other addressees, the interior paramour seems to be the most likely alternative given the prologue's placement and its focus as a traditional invocation. Frank Lentricchia has seen it as too personal to qualify as a muse in any traditional sense (Lentricchia 220) and Harold Bloom has gone as far as to suggest that, "the 'you' is simply the text, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*" (Bloom 168) and that "the 'you' must be a synecdoche which includes all familial passions yet transcends them" (Bloom 167). Despite the possible personal sources from which Stevens may have modelled his interior paramour, I believe Stevens intended the prologue as an invocation of the muse, of the imaginative "violence from within" (NA 36) to which he refers in "The Noble Rider." Though intensely personal in contrast to the more public address to the soldier in the epilogue, it clearly responds to the uncertainty and impermanence that Stevens described in "The Noble Rider." "Single, certain truth" exists only in an "uncertain light," and the peace which is central to the passage lasts only "for a moment" (CP 380). Indeed, the uncertainty of "single, certain truth" (CP 380) and the momentary and provisional nature of belief are foundational elements of the supreme fiction, elements that Stevens develops in the first and second

sections of *Notes*, "It Must Be Abstract" and "It Must Change."

While Stevens clearly intended his readers to approach *Notes* through the prologue, he also wanted that reading tempered by the address to the soldier in the epilogue and the "war between the mind and sky" (Coda 1-2). By placing lines from the epilogue on the back cover of *Notes* and in a sense bringing the reader to the prologue through the prism of the epilogue on war, he highlights the prologue's emphasis on peace:

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?  
 In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,  
 Equal in living changingness to the light  
 In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,  
 For a moment in the central of our being,  
 The vivid transparence that you bring is peace (CP 380).

In a time of war the "you" of the prologue, poetry and imagination, brings peace; it provides the imaginative consolations without which we could not live. While the poet and soldier lead metaphorically parallel lives, the prologue places us clearly in the realm of the poet. The "peace" to which Stevens refers is not the simple absence of war, the soldier's peace, but a profounder peace, analogous to the peace of a Christian benediction. It is a response to a spiritually violent world. It is a peace that passes understanding and the essential imaginative counterbalance to the terrible reality of a world at war. Though the imagination cannot bring peace in

the sense that it can stop the fighting, it can bring a sense of order, insight and consolation that can, even if only momentarily, help us find peace.

As James Longenbach suggests, the central tension of the body of the poem takes place between the antithetical extremes of war and peace:

More than the address to the soldier as such, it is the tension between explicitness and reticence--between the need to acknowledge the special imperatives of war and the desire to return to the humdrum world of peace--that marks "Notes" as the product of the world as Stevens found it in 1942 (Longenbach 251).

Yet, Stevens did not see his particular brand of lyricism as necessarily irrelevant in a world at war. Though the war may condition the poet's imaginative projections, it did not qualitatively change their nature. Indeed, in a politically and socially chaotic world, the consolations of the imagination are needed more than ever. Stevens's task throughout *Notes* is to find the proper balance between the imaginative "violence within" and the "violence without," to find what Helen Vendler has termed, in a less politicized context, "the proper poetry of the middle term" (Vendler 172).

The balance that is evident between the prologue and epilogue is typical of the poem as a whole. In stark contrast to other modernist poetic sequences, particularly *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, *Notes* is meticulously ordered. It is

composed of three sections of ten cantos, each canto composed of twenty-one lines in seven tercets, and the three sections balanced on either end by a prologue and an epilogue. Within this framework we have not only the balance between the prologue and epilogue, war and peace, reality and the imagination, but a continual series of balances between contraries, the ephebe and the fat girl, the mind and the sky, Adam and Eve, the captain and the maiden Bawda, Ozymandias and Nanzia Nunzio, and the Canon Aspirin and his sister. Indeed, this emphasis on balance, moderation, and integration seems to reflect Stevens's resistance, through order and moderation, of a world of chaos and uncertainty. Though this struggle to balance or resolve binary terms is not unique to Stevens, since many modernist poets, especially Yeats, seek to do the same, in the case of *Notes* Stevens clearly frames the entire work within the central opposition between the prologue and epilogue, and it is the binary oppositions at the heart of these poems, those of peace and war, the private and the public, the spiritual and the physical, and the imaginative and the real, that mark *Notes* as a meditation in a time of war.

The balance that is evident in *Notes* is true of its rhetoric as well as its conceits. Helen Vendler has seen in the sequences of *Notes* a rhetorical movement away from extremes and toward moderation, that "is reflected in the tendency, more visibly present in *Notes* than ever before, to close his poems

on a mitigation, a minor key, rather than on declaration or outright dismissal" (Vendler 171). Indeed, Stevens's voice throughout *Notes* is a voice of moderation in an immoderate age, one that seeks balance and union, rather than extremes and confrontation.

As the prologue and epilogue frame the text within the context of war and peace, both the soldier's and the poet's, the figure of the ephebe in the opening canto draws these elements together succinctly and extends the analogy between the poet and the soldier. In Greek, ephebe means simply "youth," yet it also refers to members of the ephebia (or ephebic college) in Athens in the fourth century BC, as defined in the *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*:

Founded c. 335 following the defeat of Athens by Macedon at Chaeronea in 338, this institution gave young men of 18 to 20 a compulsory and efficient military training, and spread rapidly throughout the Greek world. During their training the youths were excluded from the law courts, paid an allowance of four obols a day, and subjected to strict discipline by their trainers and teachers. They ate together in barracks and carried out guard duties along the coast and the frontiers...With the end of compulsory military service in about 300 BC and the abolition of the allowance, the *ephebia* became a largely educational institution for a wealthy elite and by the end of the second century BC it had been remodeled into a school especially of literature and philosophy ("Epheboi").

The ephebe in ancient Greece began as a conscripted soldier, but by the second century BC he had become a scholar of literature and philosophy. It is this evolution that Stevens

adapts to his own wartime poem. Stevens's modern ephebe is both the soldier in training and the poet in training, the writer of the "book in a barrack" (Coda 11), listening to a lecture concerning the "war between the mind and sky" (Coda 1-2). Stevens's ephebe is an intelligent yet inexperienced and naive poet in training, the "possible poet" to whom he refers in "The Noble Rider," as one "who must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree [spiritual violence], with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow" (NA 27). He undergoes a rigorous, disciplined education as indicated by the lecturing tone that pervades the first canto, a tone of imperatives and commandments, a sort of boot camp of the imagination.

The speaker in the opening canto, the ephebe's initial instructor, is in a sense a surrogate for the voice of Stevens, but since Steven's process in writing is to explore contrary hypotheses, it would be a mistake to confuse the voice of the speaker with the convictions of the poet. The speaker in the first canto of "It Must Be Abstract" is a staunch realist, one who demands that the ephebe perceive the world in its essential barrenness, stripped of all illusion, and with it all imagination and metaphor. The ephebe must "Begin...by perceiving the idea/ Of this invention, this invented world" (CP 380). He must "become an ignorant man again/ And see the

sun again with an ignorant eye." (CP 380) Only then can he "see it clearly in the idea of it" (CP 380). He must discount even the idea of God as an illusory metaphor, and:

Never suppose an inventing mind as source  
Of this idea nor for that mind compose  
A voluminous master folded in his fire (CP 381).

Since "The death of one god is the death of all" (CP 381), and "Phoebus is dead, ephebe" (CP 381), the ephebe is left by the opening speaker in a stark and godless universe, a world without illusion, but also without imagination or metaphor.

In his 1942 "Prose Statement on Poetry and War" that immediately precedes *Notes in Holly Stevens's* chronological anthology of her father's poetry, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Stevens writes that:

The immense poetry of war and the poetry of a work of the imagination are two different things. In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination. And consciousness of an immense war is a consciousness of fact. . . .

It has been easy to say in recent times that everything tends to become real, or, rather, that everything moves in the direction of reality, that is to say, in the direction of fact. We leave fact and come back to it, come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it was, not to what it has too often remained. The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact. It goes on everywhere, even in periods we call peace. But in war, the desire to move in the direction of fact as we want it to be and to move quickly is overwhelming (PEM 206).

The first canto of "It Must Be Abstract" illustrates this "fundamental and endless struggle with fact." The ephebe's instructor is grounding him in the factual reality which dominates the wartime world, both at home and abroad. He is taking the extreme realist position that Stevens establishes in his "Prose Statement." Yet, as in many of Stevens's binary oppositions, neither extreme can stand alone. Reality, or fact, cannot exist without imagination anymore than imagination can exist without reality.

Thus, the speaker's propositions in the opening canto are undermined. In denouncing all metaphorical representation for "The inconceivable idea of the sun" (CP 380), the speaker rejects the idea of Phoebus and god as illusory metaphors, declaring:

. . . The sun  
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be  
In the difficulty of what it is to be (CP 381).

Yet, the admonition against naming is followed immediately by the very act of naming that it rejects, and while the name "gold flourisher," is less divine than "Phoebus," it is no less metaphorical. What Stevens suggests here is that pure realism is impossible.

In "Adagia," Stevens declares that "Realism is a corruption of reality" (OP 192), and it is this sense that

poetry can never completely reproduce reality, anymore than abstraction can avoid all referentiality, that marks the significance of the title of the first section of ten cantos, "It Must Be Abstract." By "It Must Be Abstract" Stevens means that it cannot be otherwise; abstraction is fundamental to the nature of representation. Harold Bloom reads the term abstract etymologically, maintaining that abstract "is not as opposed to 'concrete' but means 'to separate out from'" (Bloom 173), a meaning that Stevens clearly suggests in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

His own measure as a poet, in spite of all the lovers of truth, is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination (NA 23).

Elsewhere, however, Stevens uses the term in its more conventional sense, suggesting that abstraction is non-representational, that it is a formless alternative to definitive concreteness. In a letter to Henry Church, he writes:

I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. The Notes start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract (L 430).

Yet, as Stevens suggested in "Adagia," realism and abstraction are tendencies in art, but neither pure realism nor pure

abstraction is ultimately possible. Even in the strictest realism, there is an element of abstraction, the denial of which renders its representation a misrepresentation. Likewise, even the most abstract, non-representational work cannot wholly avoid representation. Realism and abstraction exist on a continuum, either extreme of which is an impossibility. So, when Stevens states that "It Must Be Abstract," he is not suggesting that it should be completely non-representational, but that it should tend toward abstraction rather than realism.

Because of Stevens's use of the term abstract to suggest both withdrawal and formlessness, I am inclined to view the Stevensian abstract as a form analogous to abstract painting. Glen MacLeod and Charles Altieri have argued for the influence of abstract art in Stevens's poetry, and while the sort of extensive analysis they provide is not within the scope of this paper, I will venture a brief explanation of the significance of the abstract as it relates to the epilogue.

Stevens was intensely interested in abstract painting, and in *Notes*, he contrasts it with realism and draws on its most striking feature. Abstract art refuses to provide the viewer with a preconceived pictorial representation of reality. It requires the viewer's participation in constructing its reality. Through abstraction, Stevens invites his readers to participate in the creation of a supreme fiction, leaving room

for them to read themselves and their concerns into the text. While we may believe in fictions, we are much more likely to believe in those we participate in creating than those imposed by others, and Stevens's evasive, vague and deliberately abstract rhetoric invites the reader's participation in the construction of meaning to a greater extent than traditional art. To replace God with another dogmatic construction is an exercise in futility since "the death of one god is the death of all" (CP 18), and Stevens proposes instead an abstraction that must change precisely because it incorporates the reader into its dynamic.

It is only by incorporating the reader in this way that Stevens can avoid playing the role of the captain in "Life on a Battleship" and imposing his own series of "grand simplifications" (OP 107). The abstract invites readers to embark on a collaborative journey toward meaning and provisional belief. In a sense, the reader becomes the ephebe and is asked to co-author a text that becomes uniquely his own. In *Notes* the abstract refusal to impose a definitive, concrete, pictorial representation of reality results in a myriad of tentative fictions as unique as each reader, and as variable as the context of each new reading. Indeed, the very dynamic of Stevens's abstraction provides a pluralistic alternative in an age when propagandists on every side sought to impose their views on readers and audiences.

To declare that "It Must Be Abstract" is inherently political in an age when propagandists like MacLeish and Brooks were demanding that writers speak to the reality of war. Instead of giving in to his potential detractors, Stevens speaks instead to the ultimate simplicity of their demands. In a poem that will ultimately champion the discovery of order over the imposition of order, Stevens leaves room for discovery on the part of the reader, and resists the impulse to impose an ordered series of truths on his readers. As he wrote in a letter to Henry Church, "It is only when you try to systematize the poems in *Notes* that you conclude that it is not a statement of philosophical theory" (L 430).

This is why Wallace Stevens's title is *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. The poem is a series of suggestive "notes" which the reader can arrange, interpret and construct for himself or herself. It is a movement "toward" that which is as inconceivable as the sun, a continuously unfolding, dynamic process that revels in the process of creation, a process which may itself be the "supreme fiction." As such, it requires a degree of participation and engagement on the part of the reader. That readers are reluctant to engage themselves in this way is suggested when Stevens writes to Hi Simons that "People never read poetry well until they have accepted it; they read it timidly or they are on edge about it, afraid that something is going to go wrong with the sentence after next" (L

436). Such timid reading suggests a willingness to submit wholly to the authority of the poet without engaging one's own imagination as an essential part of the poetic exchange, an engagement that the abstraction of the supreme fiction demands of the reader.

The term "supreme fiction" first appears in Stevens's poetry in the early anti-Christian polemic "To a High-Toned, Old Christian Woman," a poem which, along with the more developed though rhetorically and thematically similar "Sunday Morning," marks one of the earliest instances of Stevens's rejection of dogmatic absolutism. As challenges to rhetorical and dogmatic authoritarianism, these early iconoclastic assaults on Christianity as a static idealism positing value as an absolute are clear precursors of *Notes*. It is my belief that Stevens chose to revive this concept in 1942 precisely because he saw in fascism a political correlate to Christianity. For Stevens, if we are ever to transcend authoritarianism, we must rid ourselves of those absolutist habits of mind that serve as paradigms of authoritarianism. It is thus with renewed urgency that Stevens recast his earlier struggle in "Sunday Morning" against "this dividing and indifferent blue" (CP 68) as "a war between the mind/ And sky" (Coda 1-2).

The reemergence of the term "supreme fiction" in 1942, despite Stevens's suggestion that it refers to poetry in

general, refers more specifically to a specialized conception of poetry that retains the trappings of its original usage in "To a High-Toned, Old Christian Woman." The supreme fiction is poetry, but it is poetry which, in a secular age, would fill the void left by religion. Such a conception is explicit in Stevens's explanation of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* to his Harvard classmate, Gilbert Montague:

Underlying it [Notes] is the idea that, in the various predicaments of belief, it might be possible to yield, or to try to yield ourselves to a declared fiction.

This is the same thing as saying that it might be possible for us to believe in something that we know to be untrue. Of course, we do that every day, but we don't make the most out of the fact that we do it out of a need to believe, what in your day, and mine, in Cambridge was called the will to believe (L 443).

The supreme fiction is poetry that grandly aspires to become the object of belief in a secular age, a concept that conflates the traditional conception of faith with something like the Coleridgean "willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge 314), or perhaps more accurately, in Stevens's own phrase, the Jamesian "will to believe."

As the object of belief, Stevens prefers that the supreme fiction remain vague, abstract and undefined, and it is in this way that he defines it to Hi Simons:

I ought to say that I have not defined a supreme fiction. A man as familiar with my things as you are will be justified in thinking that I mean

poetry. I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean. The next thing for me to do will be to try to be a little more precise about this enigma. I hold off from even attempting that because, as soon as I start to rationalize, I lose the poetry of the idea. In principle there seem to be certain characteristics of a supreme fiction and the NOTES is confined to a statement of a few of those characteristics (L 435).

Though perhaps characteristically evasive, Stevens's definition of a supreme fiction emphasizes the fact that if it is too precisely defined it will "lose the poetry of the idea" (L 435).

Just as the prologue and epilogue of *Notes* frame the poem within the context of war and peace, the body of the poem is framed within the context of a lecture. It begins with a lecture and ends with a "return at twilight from the lecture/ Pleased that the irrational is rational" (CP 406). Like Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," the poet leaves the lecture, ultimately embracing "the mystical, moist night air" (Whitman 215), rejecting the dry, rational imperatives of the lecture. But, Stevens's lecture is not nearly as straightforward as Whitman's. It is a lecture that ironically calls into question its own process and its own validity.

The first canto of "It Must Be Abstract" begins paradoxically in the imperative mode with an instructor who teaches ignorance. The ephebe, who will become a composite soldier and poet and a version of Stevens's "Figure of Youth as

Virile Poet" (NA 37), is commanded to "begin...By perceiving the idea/ Of this invention, this invented world" (CP 380), an injunction that begins as the problematic premise of *Notes*. The foundation of the poem is the acknowledgment that there are no foundations, that there is no direct apprehension of reality, and that the world we perceive is always already invented, covered with thick layers of interpretation. It suggests what J. Hillis Miller calls "*mise en abyme*" (Miller 420), the notion that all foundations lead inevitably to other foundations which, in turn, lead to others *ad infinitum*. The very ground of *Notes* is the recognition of groundlessness.

The motif of lecturing that begins in canto I continues throughout "It Must Be Abstract" although it becomes increasingly diminished throughout part I of *Notes*. The early cantos present a series of poetic exemplums on the nature of poetry and the supreme fiction, which serve as the ephebe's education and emphasize the value of epiphany. Stevens explicitly contrasts orders discovered with orders imposed, emphasizing his belief that authentic poetic insight, the insight of the supreme fiction, consists of the imaginative discovery of order rather than the imposed order of reason, a sentiment that Stevens will state directly in canto VII of "It Must Give Pleasure" when he rejects the Canon Aspirin's imposition of order. The Canon "imposes orders as he thinks of them,/As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair" (CP 403).

Stevens's rejection of the Canon's "orders" (a martial pun implying military commands) is not based solely on the fact that he imposes them, but on the fact that he imposes them "as he thinks of them." What the poet discovers is, for Stevens, felt, not thought, and as Stevens continues canto VII, this distinction between felt discovery and imposed reason becomes more clear:

Next he builds capitols and in their corridors,

Whiter than wax, sonorous, frame as it is,  
 He establishes statues of reasonable men,  
 Who surpassed the most literate owl, the most  
     erudite

Of elephants. But to impose is not  
 To discover . . . (CP 403).

Here the "statues of reasonable men," "establishe[d]" in the "corridors" of "capitols" suggest the appropriation of artistic order in the establishment of political order, and while many of Stevens's earlier illustrations of these contrasting orders are less explicitly political, orders imposed are not without their political correlates, both at home and abroad, in 1942, and they sound particularly ominous against the backdrop of European fascism. In fact, Stevens's rejection of orders imposed, though explicitly poetic and rhetorical, has clear political resonance even in a canto as seemingly apolitical as Canto IV of "It Must Be Abstract."

Through the exemplum of Adam and Eve in canto IV, Stevens

revives the motif of biblical beginnings with which he opened the poem. Just as "Begin, ephebe" (CP 380) echoes the biblical "In the beginning" (Gen. 1.1), so the exemplum of Adam and Eve brings us back to the fictive beginning of history. Here we learn that "Adam/ In Eden was the father of Descartes" (CP 383), an insight Stevens glosses in a letter to Hi Simons as follows:

Descartes is used as a symbol of reason. But we live in a place that is not our own; we do not live in a land of Descartes; we have imposed the reason; Adam imposed it even in Eden (L 433).

Like the captain in "Life on a Battleship," who "as apprentice of Descartes" (OP 107) imposed an explicitly fascist order through a series of "grand simplifications" (OP 107), Adam imposes reason. He makes his thought, his reason, the paradigm of the world. The logical extension of Descartes's *Cogito ergo sum* might be expressed here as "I think, therefore, the world is as I insist it is." Adam's reductive thinking is an example of the way in which egocentric orders imposed deny the rich diversity and ambiguity of experience. Eve, likewise, though more physical and earthy than Adam, imposes order by making "air the mirror of herself" (CP 383). The order she imposes is not that of reason, but she, none the less, sees the cosmos as a reflection of herself. She and her descendants "found themselves/ In heaven as in a glass; a second earth" (CP 383). She, like Adam, imposes herself on the world by humanizing

nature, just as we might do by calling the sun Phoebus. The problem is "that we live in a place/ That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves" and it is "From this that the poem springs" (CP 383). "There was a muddy center before we breathed" (CP 383), a Darwinian origin, as Daniel Schwarz has suggested (Schwarz 163), that predates Genesis and all our humanizing of the cosmos. The impulse to impose ourselves on nature and to make ourselves the order of the world is as old as humanity, and perhaps an innately human impulse.

The exemplum of Adam and Eve is an important lesson for the ephebe who is as yet still a youth in training as canto V makes clear. If he is ever to become a poet, and a metaphorical soldier, the ephebe must learn to impose himself on nature, not through reason or the vanity of seeing the world as a reflection of himself, but through the imagination. Here Stevens acknowledges that, ironically, what the poet discovers is in a sense imposed. What the poet discovers is not an order inherent in nature, but order perceived and shaped by the imagination. It is, as the poem's title acknowledges, a fiction, a construct of his own mind, and so in order to discover, the poet must be capable of imposing himself on nature.

In canto V, "The lion" that "roars at the enraging desert," "The elephant" that "Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares," and "the bear" that "snarls in his mountain/ At

summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow" (CP 384) are presented as a series of natural images that sharply contrast the image of the ephebe. They are images of power, passion, and force:

But you, ephebe, look from your attic window,  
Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie

In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner  
Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press  
A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,

Yet voluble dumb violence. You look  
Across the roofs as sigil and as ward  
And in your centre mark them and are cowed...  
(CP 384).

The ephebe is, as yet, still a timid parody of the "virile poet," clutching the corner of his pillow in his attic loft, cowed into submission by the forces of reality. If, in fact, he is to become that "virile poet," he must learn to impose himself on nature through his imagination, shaping and changing it. He must "lash the lion,/ Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle" (CP 385).

Stevens's reference to Ceylon in canto V is also a subtle suggestion of how pervasive the war had become, how much it was "only part of a war-like whole" (NA 21). Stevens maintained a long time correspondence with a resident of Ceylon, Leonard Van Geyzel, and for Stevens, Ceylon was always "a place symbolizing dislocation" and a "severance from history" (Filreis 4). Indeed, Stevens suggested his sense of Ceylon's removal from

world events when, discussing the outbreak of the war, he wrote Van Geysel that "I hope that this war will not affect you in your far-off home" (L 342). By 1942, however, Stevens realized that detachment was impossible even in Ceylon as Japanese troops invaded.

In a world in which the "pressure of reality" (NA 20) and the "violence without" (NA 36) are so pervasive, it is imperative that the poet learn to marshal the forces of the imaginative "violence within" (NA 36). Indeed, as Stevens suggests in "The Noble Rider," it is the imagination that may provide the only solace in a world of political violence and social chaos. While the ephebe has, as yet, been too inexperienced to emerge as anything more than a poet in training, the change of tone in canto VII away from the imperatives and exemplums that begin "It Must Be Abstract," and the introduction of epiphany and the discovery of order rather than the earlier emphasis on orders imposed, suggest that canto VII is, if not a turning point, at least a welcome respite from the incessant lecturing that has thus far composed the ephebe's education. While Harold Bloom believes that "the fifteen or so fables...are the true glory of *Notes*" (Bloom 180), I am inclined to see the true glory of *Notes* in the spontaneous moments of heightened awareness, the moments of epiphany and discovery of which canto VII is a supreme example. The repetition of the term "perhaps" distinguishes the tone of



The canto suggests possibility but refuses to impose order. Indeed, the canto introduces a discovery of order, an epiphany in which the academies that structure and organize learning and represent order and perfection are seen in mist in what is the first such vision in the poem.

Canto VII is the essential conduit between the ephebe's early education as poet/soldier and the heroic projections that conclude "It Must Be Abstract." It is only after the ephebe has experienced this epiphany, after he has discovered order, that Stevens can move toward the heroic projections that conclude "It Must Be Abstract." After canto VII, the tone shifts to one that includes the ephebe (and the reader) in a way that the earlier cantos did not. Rather than being told or shown as in the earlier cantos, the ephebe is asked, however rhetorically, "Can we compose a castle-fortress-home. . . ?" (CP 386). This shift is both an indication of the ephebe's growth and, as I will show later, an important indicator of the pluralistic nature of Stevens's heroic projections.

Only by coming to terms with the rhetorical complexity of *Notes* can we do justice to its significance, political or otherwise. As readers and ephebes, we must judge the text on its own rhetorical foundations, which compose the lessons of the early cantos of "It Must Be Abstract." These lessons are the basis upon which the later projections of the hero in "It Must Be Abstract" emerge, and it is precisely these lessons

that Marjorie Perloff rejects, leading her to a reading of the MacCullough in canto VIII as a sort of fascist Aryan. While I reject her conclusion, Perloff does ask important questions regarding Stevens's major man. She rightly sees the major man as a figure with clear political implications when she asks: "What does it signify, in the middle of World War II -- when the real major men included such names as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin -- to posit the desirability, however fleeting, of Major Man?" (Perloff 59).

Perloff, however, seems to miss what she tacitly acknowledges in her indictment. Major men have been with us from the beginning, and whether their names are Achilles and Odysseus, Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini, or Christ, Mohammed and Buddha, they seem, for Stevens, to fill some basic human need. The question for Stevens is not whether major men exist; they do. The question, rather, is how we will conceive our relation to them. Are they to be fictive, tentative, abstract projections of ourselves, or are we to be serviceable projections of their authority? For Stevens, since "No man is a hero to anyone who knows him" (OP 199), all heroes are ultimately abstractions. The question is whether, as in "Life on a Battleship," we move "from earth to air," from experience to abstraction, or in the opposite direction as the captain of the *Masculine* would have us do. For, the captain, like Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini, is clearly an example of the anti-hero.

Whatever the hero of cantos VIII-X of "It Must Be Abstract" is, he is something other than the fascist major men of the thirties and forties. When Stevens asks, "Can we compose a castle-fortress-home. . . And set the MacCullough there as major man?" (CP 386), the driving force behind the abstraction is the collective "we." This is not the authoritarian poet imposing an order on us as in the lecture of canto I. Rather, we are invited to participate in this fictive creation, asked to project ourselves and our concerns into the text and the hero, who will become a "crystal hypothesis" (CP 387), "an expedient,/ Logos and logic" (CP 387), and "a form to speak the word/ And every latent double in the word" (CP 387). The "crystal" will return at the end of *Notes* as a central image of multiplicity and plurality (CP 407), with its multiple refractions that contrast the singularity of the mirroring trope introduced in canto IV of "It Must Be Abstract," but in this case, it appears as the momentary crystallization of an expedient and tentative hypothesis that embraces the diversity and even ambiguity of "every latent double in the word" (CP 387).

It is, in fact, only by isolating the major man cantos from the movement of the poem as a whole that Perloff can maintain her indictment of Stevens's hero. For her reading clearly ignores the eventual rejection of the MacCullough as a hero and the relation of the final cantos of "It Must Be

Abstract" to the preceding canto in which we are reminded that "It feels good without the giant" (CP 386). As James Longenbach points out, "Stevens will want to remember how pleasant the everyday world seems without this giant, because here again the danger is to become content with any single idea--to allow the giant to become our master rather than the vehicle of our mastery" (Longenbach 258).

Stevens chooses the MacCullough as a possible heroic projection not because, as Perloff suggests, "he connotes racial purity" (Perloff 59), but because as *the* MacCullough, as head of his clan, he is the single manifestation of a collective group, "This MacCullough is 'the' MacCullough in the sense that Yeats writes of 'the' O'Rahilly (marking that particular O'Rahilly as the head of his clan)" (Longenbach 259), and despite Stevens's disclaimer that "MacCullough is any name, any man" (L 434), the MacCullough is clearly more than that. Harold Bloom has observed that "MacCullough was the name of a hardheaded clan, producing eminent political economists, geologists, and even an American Secretary of the Treasury when Stevens was at Harvard" (Bloom 189), and this projection seems more in line with Stevens's gloss on the MacCullough:

The problem with humanism is that man as God, remains man, but there is an extension of man in fiction a possibly more than human human, a composite human. The act of recognizing him is the act of a leaner being moving in on us (L 434).

The MacCullough is a heroic composite of human potential, an abstract mentor for the ephebe. James Longenbach has even suggested the possibility that the "MacCullough is a grown-up ephebe: a responsible citizen, a poet only in the limited sense in which Crispin, having returned to social nature might be said to be a poet" (Longenbach 259). In light of the hero's ultimate form in "It Must Be Abstract", this is consistent with Stevens's statement in "Adagia": "The poet is a god or The young poet is a god. The old poet is a tramp" (OP 198).

Stevens was concerned with the hero throughout his poetic career, but this interest took on a renewed urgency during the Second World War. In 1940 he quoted Henry Adams in his *Commonplace Book* under the heading "Of humanism, heroes...":

I need badly to find one man in history to admire.  
I am in peril of turning Christian, and rolling in  
the mud in the agony of human mortification" (WSCB  
71).

Particularly in times like those of World War II one needed an ideal, someone to admire. The real heroes of Stevens's age, military heroes such as Eisenhower, MacArthur, Nimitz, and Halsey, were clearly not what Stevens was after. Beyond the question of whether wartime heroism translates into a heroism that can sustain us in times of peace, these heroes were heroes of fact, not fiction. Stevens, through his heroic projections, seeks a hero who embodies human potential in a way that no actual man can.

It is for this reason that he must be abstract. We must avoid the concrete particulars of a specific hero, while at the same time maintaining the idea, the feeling of the heroic. We must "look not in his colored eyes. Give him/ No names" and "Dismiss him from [our] images" (CP 388) so that the particular manifestation does not overtake the idea, the feeling that is its source. Like "the hermit in a poet's metaphors" (CP 381), he is the impalpable force that drives particular poetic elaborations, "The hot of him is purest in the heart" (CP 388).

The hero, for Stevens, was always a paradoxical abstraction, a sort of transparency in which we see ourselves or our potential. In "Asides on the Oboe," a poem written a year before *Notes*, Stevens introduces the idea "that final belief/ Must be in a fiction" (CP 250). He projects his fictive hero as "the central man" (CP 251) or "the glass man" (CP 251), who "is the transparence of the place in which/ He is and in his poems we find peace" (CP 251). He is "the sum of men" (CP 251) and not a particular personage. As an abstract and illusive hero, he is distinct from "the metal heroes that time granulates" (CP 250).

In "Asides on the Oboe," Stevens presents the hero as an empowering fiction in a time of war. In the absence of belief in God, the mind turns to its own figurations, what Stevens, in "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," calls "a speech of the self that must sustain itself on speech" (CP 247), and by the

end of canto IX of "It Must Be Abstract", we realize that *Notes* up to this point has been an example of just this sort of speech. By this point, *Notes* has come full circle from the opening canto, and the hero or major man has become a new Phoebus whom Stevens revived while maintaining the earlier admonition against naming. He is an abstract hero of whom we are told, "Give him/ No names. Dismiss him from your images./ The hot of him is purest in the heart" (CP 388).

Stevens, through his hero, MacCullough, and major man, seems to be striving to revive an epic hero within a lyric paradigm, and it is this that saves the hero from becoming an order imposed. The hero still serves as a model or paradigm of virtue, but his source is "an heroic part of the communal" (CP 388). And this may, perhaps, explain the final transformation of Stevens's hero in canto X of "It Must Be Abstract" as a revival of "the old fantoche" (CP 181) from "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

. . . . . Who is it?

What rabbi, grown furious with human wish,  
 What chieftain, walking by himself, crying,  
 Most miserable, most victorious,

Does not see these separate figures one by one,  
 And yet see only one, in his old coat,  
 His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town,

Looking for what was, where it used to be?  
 Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man

In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,  
 It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect  
 The final elegance, not to console  
 Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound (CP 389).

In this last metamorphosis of the hero in "It Must Be Abstract," we arrive at a composite upon which both the rabbi or contemplative man and the chieftain or war-like man of action can agree. In fact, the dichotomy between the rabbi and the chieftain restates the central dichotomy between the poet and soldier that frames the poem as a whole. Here we have what seems to be a sort of diminished hero, a beggar, much like those employed by Yeats. In this last transformation, the hero is less aloof than the MacCullough. He is a democratized, common hero as "the vagabond in metaphor" (CP 397) who returns in canto X of "It Must Change." Though less the martial hero than his predecessors, he is a humanized, democratic figure and he maintains, to a greater degree than the MacCullough, the capacity to adapt and change.

In its rhetoric, Stevens's elaboration of the hero is consistent with the pluralistic anti-authoritarian rhetoric of the poem as a whole. Throughout all the particular manifestations of the hero in "It Must Be Abstract," the nature of heroism flows from the reader to the hero rather than from the hero to the reader, and rhetorically, it is this inversion of the traditional heroic paradigm that distinguished Stevens's

abstract hero. Also, in seeking balance and moderation, it is Stevens's movement beyond the heroic projections of "It Must Be Abstract" that marks *Notes* as Stevens's greatest wartime poem. In fact, if *Notes* were limited to the heroic projections of "It Must Be Abstract," it certainly would not have the status that it currently holds in the Stevens canon.

Another of Perloff's objections to the heroic projections of *Notes* is that the MacCullough "connotes masculinity" (Perloff 59). While this is a valid point, it clearly discounts the broader movement of the poem as a whole. As the poem progresses, it moves increasingly away from the masculine hero, ultimately embracing the feminine and physical as well as the masculine and abstract. It is not a movement from the masculine to the feminine, so much as a union of the two, in a poem in which the governing motifs become increasingly those of union, marriage, and integration (which are themselves arguably political in an age dominated by violence, opposition, and confrontation).

Through the second and third sections of *Notes*, "It Must Change" and "It Must Be Abstract," Stevens focuses tangentially on political issues, though the poem as a whole moves increasingly away from the heroic concerns of "It Must Be Abstract." In canto II of the second section of the poem, "It Must Change," for example, Stevens presents a fable in which "The President ordains the bee to be/ Immortal" (CP 390). Like

the captain in "Life on a Battleship" who attempts to impose a "grand simplification" (OP 107) on the rich diversity of experience, the President attempts to impose permanence and stasis on nature. But the order of nature cannot be imposed by mandate or ordination, and the President, a metaphysician, whose "barefoot servants . . . adjust/ The curtains to a metaphysical t" (CP 390), cannot control the forces outside. As "the banners of the nation flutter, burst/ On the flag-poles in a red-blue dazzle, whack/ At the halyards" (CP 390), they explicitly contrast the metaphysically adjusted curtains. Even the lines which end with the strong verbs "burst" and "whack" provide a dynamic contrast to the tame inadequacy of their adjusted counterparts.

Canto III of this section develops the earlier motif of the hero through the familiar image of the statue, a recurring image in Stevens's work representing the inadequacy of a static ideal, "a permanence, so rigid/ That it made the General a bit absurd" (CP 391). Permanence and stasis reduce the potentially heroic figure of the General Du Puy to nothing more than, "a setting for geraniums" (CP 391). He is at best a vestige of a lost ideal, no longer valid because the statue cannot accommodate change, so that:

. . . the General,  
The very Place Du Puy, in fact, belonged

Among the more vestigial states of mind.  
Nothing had happened because nothing had changed.

Yet the General was rubbish in the end (CP 391-92).

With the figure of the General as a martial hero, Stevens continues the meditation he had begun in "It Must Be Abstract." Through a negative example of stasis, he illustrates the central theme of change as it applies to the recurrent image of the hero.

Yet these images quickly modulate in canto IV into the union of contraries and integration of extremes that come increasingly to characterize *Notes*. It is, in fact, precisely because of this that readers should be wary of regarding Stevens's more extreme propositions as expressions of his opinion. As early as "The Comedian as the Letter C," he was correcting himself, testing out opposing hypotheses, moving from "man is the intelligence of his soil" (CP 27) to "the soil is man's intelligence" (CP 36). We should, therefore, keep in mind that opposition and change is central to Stevens's poetry. It is, after all, the marriage of opposites which for Stevens "is the origin of change" (CP 392):

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

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

In canto IV of "It Must Change," the oppositions of "winter and spring," "music" and "silence," "morning and afternoon," "North and South," and "sun and rain" which Stevens describes

variously as "cold copulars," "an intrinsic couple," and "a plural, like two lovers" show "the origin of change," not as "a violence from within" (NA 36) pressing back against the violence of a war-like world as he had described it in "The Noble Rider," but as an "embrace" (CP 392), a union, an integration. The origin of change is in the union of contraries, an embracing of opposites, of which love, the union of male and female, is the central paradigm.

This paradigm is explicitly developed in canto IV through synecdoche and metonymy, terms which etymologically reinforce the central themes of the canto, derived as they are from the ancient Greek for "taking up together" and "name change," respectively. Thus, the origin of change, both literally and linguistically, is a "taking up together" or a union of self and other:

The partaker partakes of that which changes him.  
 The child that touches takes character from the thing,  
 The body, it touches. 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 (CP 392).

Here metonymy which explicitly relates the part and the whole, is shown not only as an essential element of change, but also as a foundational element of Stevens's heroic formulations. As "The captain and his men/ Are one" (CP 392), so the abstract hero is a reflection of men in the aggregate. Likewise, as

"the sailor and the sea are one" (CP 392), so too the hero "is the transparence of the place in which/ He is" (CP 251). Here Stevens compounds the confrontational model of change ("a violence from within that protects us from a violence without") of the masculine, heroic figure with a more empathic notion of change, and it is this sort of integration that comes increasingly to characterize *Notes*.

The motif of marriage or integration is perhaps most clear in canto IV of the third and final section of "It Must Give Pleasure," in which the captain, a potential martial hero, engages not in a confrontational struggle, but in "a mystic marriage in Catawba" (CP 401), a marriage which I read as a union between the masculine abstract hero and the feminine "maiden Bawda" (CP 401), who represents the opulent physicality which the earlier manifestations of the hero denied:

The great captain loved the ever-hill Catawba  
 And therefore married Bawda, whom he found there,  
 And Bawda loved the captain as she loved the sun.

They married well because the marriage-place  
 Was what they loved. It was neither heaven nor hell.  
 They were love's characters come face to face.

Here Stevens presents a marriage of earth and sun, abstraction and physicality, imagination and reality. The binary oppositions that structure Stevens's verse are merged in a union, in an integration and balance that seeks an inclusive whole rather than the limitations of any one extreme. Like the

Canon Aspirin from canto VI of this third section, Stevens:

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

Between, but of. He chose to include the things  
That in each other are included, the whole,  
The complicate, the amassing harmony (CP 403).

Stevens modulates between extremes, settling ultimately on an inclusive whole that integrates oppositions, moving away from the abstract soldier as hero, and toward the earthy, physicality of the "Fat girl terrestrial" (CP 406) in canto X of "It Must Give Pleasure."

The realization of the need for integration and inclusion in canto VI of "It Must Give Pleasure" leads in canto VII to an explicit statement about discovering order rather than imposing it. In this canto, which I discussed earlier, Stevens emphasizes that, "to impose is not/ To discover" (CP 403). This insight, which the poem implies as early as canto V of "It Must Be Abstract," becomes explicit as the poem progresses toward its conclusion. "The whole,/ The complicate, the amassing harmony" (CP 403), with its understanding of the rich diversity, ambiguity and complexity of reality, suggests the necessarily reductive nature of orders imposed. They can only be partial, limited simplifications of reality. Stevens seeks, instead, the more intimate and inclusive insight of epiphany and discovery, and in his defense of it at the end of canto VII, he is more insistent than he has been throughout the

entire poem:

. . . 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. It must be that in time  
 The real will from these crude compoundings come  
 (CP 403-4).

The insistence on the possibility of such discovery, shown in the repetition of "possible" four times in the space of two lines, emphasizes Stevens's faith that through insight and epiphany one can apprehend reality without imposing reason.

The image of the "Fat girl, terrestrial" (CP 406) in canto X of "It Must Give Pleasure" is Stevens's attempt to capture in a single image, "the whole,/ The complicate, the amassing harmony" (CP 403). As he stated in a letter to Henry Church, "The fat girl is the earth" (L 426), and as such, her image stands as an inclusive counterpart to the poem's earlier heroic projections which, despite Stevens's struggle to democratize his hero, remain examples of orders imposed. She embodies change more than Stevens's earlier figures, and thus he sees her "In a moving contour, a change not quite completed" (CP 406). She is an image of kinetic energy, revolving in a universe in motion, though Stevens, in describing "the fiction that results from feeling" (CP 406), clearly puns on his sense that this is emotionally "moving" as well.

The use of pun in the address to the "fat girl" occurs also when he asks "How is it that I see you in difference" (CP 406). While Stevens suggests that he sees her through contrast, he is also suggesting the earth's indifference to us. This use of pun is important because, as in the opening canto of "It Must Be Abstract," this canto returns to the question of naming, and though Stevens states that "I should name you flatly, waste no words,/ Check your evasions, hold you to yourself" (CP 406), he also seems to understand the impossibility of doing that. In contrast to the opening canto's minimalist aesthetic, with its admonition against naming, the fat girl can be described "as strong or tired,/ Bent over work, anxious, content, alone" (CP 406) and still "remain the more than natural figure" (CP 406). Instead of rejecting metaphor and naming, this canto opts for the profusion of meaning and the continual description and renaming of the "fat girl."

With this insight, the body of *Notes* ends with the very act of naming that the poem's opening rejected. As Stevens concludes "It Must Give Pleasure," he writes as its final lines, "I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo. / You will have stopped revolving except in crystal" (CP 407). The trope of naming is ultimately captured in the final image of "It Must Give Pleasure," that of the revolving crystal, with its myriad refractions, multiple perspectives, and perpetual

change. In an image that sharply contrasts with the singularity of the earlier trope of mirroring (CP 387), the revolving crystal reflects the multiplicity, variety, complexity and change that Stevens increasingly emphasizes as the poem progresses.

As much as any image in *Notes*, the image of the "fat girl" (CP 406) in the final canto reflects the three central imperatives that structure the poem. It is abstract; it is a fictionalized personification of that which we could never adequately and inclusively describe literally. It changes; it is constantly in the process of "a change not quite completed" (CP 406) and can absorb descriptions as various and antithetical as "strong or tired,/ Bent over work, anxious, content, alone" (CP 406). And it gives pleasure, which is essentially the pleasure we get from the sensual images and sensuous language of poetry.

By embodying the central themes of *Notes* and balancing many of the motifs introduced in the opening canto of the poem, canto I of "It Must Be Abstract, canto X of "It Must Give Pleasure" provides a fitting conclusion to *Notes*. Just as the opening canto began the poem by naming the sun, the final canto ends the poem by naming the earth. Likewise, the trope of lecturing that began the poem is revived in canto X of "It Must Give Pleasure" as we "return from the lecture/ Pleased that the irrational is rational" (CP 406). The lecture, as an order

imposed, is a trope we must move beyond in light of the emphasis on discovery and inclusion with which the poem ends. Like Whitman in "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," Stevens rejects the dry, rational imperatives of the lecture, opting instead for "the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling" (CP 406).

Although canto X of "It Must Give Pleasure" provides closure by reviving many of the tropes introduced in canto I of "It Must Be Abstract," Stevens chose to end the poem with the epilogue to the soldier, which contrasts with the prologue and frames the entire work within the context of war and peace. In the epilogue, Stevens provides what has been seen by many as a weak defense of poetry in a time of war. It reminds us that while *Notes* is principally a meditation on poetry, it is, none the less, a meditation on poetry in a time of war. The epilogue's central metaphor equating the poet and the soldier reiterates the earlier emphasis on the martial aspect of the ephebe, and likewise, the depiction of the poet's "Virgilian cadences" (coda 5) recalls the poem's earlier emphasis on the hero. Stevens justifies poetry as "a war between the mind / And sky" (coda 1-2), a struggle that gives meaning to everything, including the soldier's struggle. It is for this reason that "The soldier is poor without the poet's lines" (coda 15). It is the abstract attitudes, values, and ideals, for which the soldier struggles, and it is the poet who brings

them to life. Thus, "the fictive hero becomes the real" (coda 19), and "with proper words the soldier dies, / If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech" (coda 20-21).

Yet, by ending with the epilogue, Stevens does not simply assert the relevance of poetry to war. By balancing the prologue to peace with the epilogue to war, Stevens frames the entire work within the context of war and peace. While the epilogue acknowledges the war, Stevens also reminds the soldier that "your war ends" (coda 12). It is a temporary condition and not the measure of all things as it often appears in a time of war. Thus, while the epilogue helps to frame *Notes* in a broader context, the poem itself also serves to frame the epilogue. The most important martial elements of the poem, the ephebe, the MacCullough, and the major man, are emphasized in the opening section, "It Must Be Abstract." As the poem progresses, however, it moves increasingly away from such concerns, emphasizing union, integration, multiplicity, diversity, discovery, and epiphany. It is the ordinary pleasures of peace, of which poetry is one, that ultimately determine the importance of war. As such, Stevens acknowledges the soldier's sacrifice, endowing it with redemptive significance through eucharistic images such as "six meats and twelve wines" (coda 13) and "the bread of faithful speech" (coda 21), but he also sees beyond the war, acknowledging that its ultimate significance lies in the peace it seeks to

preserve, rather than in the harsh reality of war itself.

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