Native of Earth:
The Growth of Wallace Stevens' "Fresh Spiritual"

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

University of Florida

1971

Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

In Memory of Jerry

PREFACE

The relationship between Wallace Stevens' poetry and his spiritual belief has frequently been noted over the years. Commentators' attitudes have varied widely, but in the earlier days there was at least one area of agreement: Stevens was viewed as a poet of the imagination and the senses standing over against the otherworldly aspects of traditional belief. In 1925 Gorham B. Munson asked: "Upon what . . . is this imaginative order of Wallace Stevens based?" He answered that it was not based on "humanism" or on "religion," but on "the discipline of one who is a connoisseur of the senses and the emotions."[1] In 1943 Yvor Winters observed that "he gives us . . . the most perfect laboratory of hedonism to be found in literature. . . . Stevens is released from all the restraints of Christianity. . . ."[2] The increasing tendency of later criticism, however, has been to find ways to link--not separate--the level of the poetry with the idea of religious belief. In 1949 J. V. Cunningham noted that the "central concern of

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[1] "The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens," The Dial, 79 (Nov. 1925); rpt. in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 43.

[2] "Wallace Stevens: Or the Hedonist's Progress," in On Modern Poets (New York: Meridian, 1959), p. 34. Article dated by Winters in postscript.

Stevens' poetry . . . is a concern to be at peace with his surroundings, with his world, and with himself. He requires for this an experience of the togetherness of himself and Nature . . . something to satisfy the deeply ingrained longings of his religious feeling."[3] In 1951 Roy Harvey Pearce advised: "Stevens is treating our problem of belief. Unlike an Eliot, he has refused to move out of our culture into another and to seek a solution for the problem in the discovery of a 'usable' form of belief. Rather, he has tried to create the object of belief rather than discover it."[4] Finally, in 1959 Michel Benamou observed: "What makes Stevens a modern poet . . . is this modern consciousness that the arts compensate for our lost belief." He then added significantly: "Understood as the poetic and moral principle of an order protecting us from chaos, art becomes more than a source of beautiful shapes and colors; it becomes a 'supreme fiction,' an inspiration tentatively analogous to the idea of god. . . ."[5]

The problem for criticism in this area for the past two decades has been to describe the "object of belief"

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3 "Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens," Poetry, 75 (Dec. 1949); rpt. in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, pp. 137-38.

4 "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination," PMLA, 76 (Sept. 1951); rpt. in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 112.

5 "Wallace Stevens: Some Relations Between Poetry and Painting," Comparative Literature, 11 (Winter 1959); rpt. in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 248.

which Stevens created, that is, the fiction of the poetry itself. What terminology can most fruitfully explain the level of Stevens' poetry and capture the atmosphere peculiar to his poems? As James Baird notes in his excellent recent study, the trend of late has been to approach Stevens from a philosophical perspective. Baird goes on to suggest limits to such an approach: "it seems to me more an imposition of the critic's will than an exposition of the poet at hand." His own aim is to become a "transparency" so that the "commanding design" can be the poet's, not the critic's. Baird sees Stevens' "encompassing subject" as the "poet's sense of the world"; his own purpose, then, is to trace the lines of the "total structure" of the poetry. But even after acknowledging the limits of the philosophical approach and after illustrating the design of Stevens' sense of the world, the critic still faces the problem of the spiritual dimension of the poetry. The level where the poetry and the belief unite is yet to be described. How is the sensory world of Stevens' poetry related to his belief? It is my conviction that they can be brought together only when we understand that Stevens' poetry is fundamentally "mythic." Baird himself asserts in the course of his study that for Stevens "the true poet in any age is a maker of a canon for the imagination at its highest reach. . . . The arc of the canon is, then, the major projection of a myth. . . ."[6] But

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[6] The Dome and the Rock (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), pp. xii-xiv, xvii, xxv, 221-22.

in what ways is Stevens' verse mythic, and just how are the belief and the poetry related?

Many critics have mentioned the mythic elements of Stevens' poetry. Cunningham, one of the first, wrote that Stevens "constructed a series of secular myths . . . that affirm the traditional religious feeling of nobility and unity of experience," but added that "the myths remain unconvincing and arbitrary. . . ."[7] Northrop Frye's essay on Stevens in 1957 demonstrated that Stevens' poetry as a whole could be seen as "mythic." Starting with a generously inclusive idea of myth, Frye is able to provide an indispensable insight into the relationship between the sensory world of the poetry and the abstract belief of the poet. He maintains: "Poets . . . see individual and class as metaphorically identical: in other words they work with myths. . . . Such myths . . . play a large role in Stevens' imagery." Frye goes on to quote the following lines from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

> Why, then, inquire
> Who has divided the world, what entrepreneur?
> No man. The self, the chrysalis of all men
>
> Became divided in the leisure of blue day
> And more, in branchings after day. One part
> Held fast tenaciously in common earth
>
> And one from central earth to central sky
> And in moonlit extensions of them in the mind
> Searched out such majesty as it could find.

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[7] "Tradition and Modernity," p. 138.

Frye observes: "Such poetry sounds religious, and in fact does have the infinite perspective of religion. . . . Such language may or may not go with religious commitment: in itself it is simply poetry speaking as poetry must when it gets to a certain pitch of metaphorical concentration."[8] For Frye, then, it is this level or pitch of the poetry which unites the individual and the class--and this level is mythic. I believe that in this dimension of Stevens' poetry can be found the record of his fresh spiritual, the point of contact between his devotion to sensory experience and his spiritual belief in the imagination of man.

My method throughout this study will be to concentrate, when feasible, on Stevens' longer poems, where the mythic elements are usually most conspicuous. My primary aim is to trace the main line of Stevens' spiritual development. But my final purpose is to provide a perspective for appreciating the significance of the poetry itself. Before launching into the study proper, though, I want to clarify further the idea of poetic myth. My Introduction surveys the mythic characteristics and the development of Stevens' poetry in order to establish a base for the detailed explorations of the subsequent chapters.

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[8] "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," The Hudson Review, 10 (Autumn 1957): rpt. in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 171, 173-74.

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June, 1971

Chairman: Gordon E. Bigelow
Major Department: English

Wallace Stevens proclaims: "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world." Yet his own poetry is unusually abstract; it rarely provides a sense of immediate experience. The point of this study is that Stevens' poetry functions primarily as myth, that is, as an abstract poetic environment creating the grounds for sacred experience of a physical world. It is mythic in largely three ways: it is a screen of language existing between the imagination and external reality; it resembles primitive myth in growing out of the natural elements and in its portrayal of the poet as magus; it reaches toward experience of presence, activated by love and by sensitivity to the mystery within and without.

My aim is to set the stage on which Stevens' poetry takes place, and then to track the growth of his fresh spiritual through readings of the major longer poems. The

dimensions of Stevens' stage are more than philosophical and more than aesthetic; his greatness as a poet derives especially from his courageous spiritual integrity and from the depth of his vision. His spiritual develops out of his faith in the immediate moment of sensory experience over against his inherited romantic myths, religious or aesthetic. As he decreates in his poetry these former modes of perception, in their place enter powerful presences of nature, fresh mythic forms creating a new mode of perception.

The physical earth, however, is in itself barren. Stevens guards against inclinations to find spirit in things outside of mind. For him it is the imagination of man which remains--God-like--the source of the sacred. The earth is barren without the mind's creative spirit, but the mind also is nothing without the content of earth. Only by rigorously separating mind and external reality can the basis of their momentary, sacred unions be maintained.

Viewed as spiritual growth, the stages of Stevens' poetic development emerge sharply. The story begins in his early letters and journal entries, which testify to a serious split between his sense of spirit (for instance, in the church, in literature, and in romanticized elements of nature) and his sense of reality (physical nature and the scientific and commercial world of man). Already evident, though, is his desire for accurate speech and his awareness of the significance of the massive forces of nature. The

poetry of his first volume, Harmonium, decreates romanticisms while bringing transcendent spirit into the "fluttering things" of earth, leaving him in a fresh and enigmatic space bounded by the frontiers of imagination and physical reality.

Ideas of Order enables Stevens to more clearly differentiate these two finalities and to explore the spiritual meaning of the imagination, a theme which The Man with the Blue Guitar continues. By this point, Stevens is also sensing the importance of the spontaneous moment and of the magus poet who speaks that moment into existence. Parts of a World and Notes toward a Supreme Fiction broaden his idea of the poet further, exalting him as hero, while Stevens imagines himself into the role of central poet. Meanwhile, his decreations have continued and the natural elements have increasingly permeated his poetry, culminating in the great mythic poems of Transport to Summer and Auroras of Autumn. Here, both his truths of summer and sorrows of autumn are writ large within a fresh spiritual environment, in the "things" of this world and the city of man. Stevens' very last poems record--with a surprising sense of personal immediacy--his child-like entrance into this space.

INTRODUCTION: THE "FRESH SPIRITUAL"

"It is a fresh spiritual that he defines . . ." ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven")

For Stevens, the "greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world. . . ."[1] Yet his own poetry rarely provides a sense of physical immediacy; instead, it is founded on a vast abstraction of nature.[2] Sun, moon, summer, winter, sea, sky, wind, rain, mountain, tree, rock, bird--all the basic natural elements are present but usually abstracted in an imagery that is remote from immediate, particularized experience, although it celebrates the spiritual potential of such experience for the imagination:

> The bough of summer and the winter branch.
> These are the measures destined for her soul. (67)

Stevens' poetry was instrument and product of his quest for spiritual meaning and for experience of the sacred, but its impetus developed out of experience of the

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[1] The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 345. Hereafter cited by page number alone. The following abbreviations will be used for Stevens' other writings: OP for Opus Posthumous, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957); NA for The Necessary Angel (New York: Knopf, 1951); L for Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966).

[2] The abstract quality of Stevens' poetry has frequently been noted. For instance, see J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), p. 231, where he discusses Stevens' "universalizing of particulars." In Stevens' poetry one seldom finds an image of an individual bird or specific tree despite numerous representations of birds and trees.

profane. Experience of the sacred for primitive man is generally understood as experience of that which embodies the "wholly other," ultimate reality. The sacred, then, as Mircea Eliade maintains, is "saturated with being."[3] Stevens' early letters testify to his sense of the unreality of modern life and the incapacity of his Christian heritage to sacralize his sense of the physical world.[4] The best example from his early poetry of his response to a profane world is "Domination of Black" (8-9). It is one of his few early poems with a sense of personal immediacy, and the experience portrayed is a whirl of turning leaves and colors subsumed by the blackness of the hemlocks and the screams of the peacocks. There is no ultimate reality in the sky which the physical things of earth can embody. The poem concludes:

> Out of the window,
> I saw how the planets gathered
> Like the leaves themselves
> Turning in the wind.
> I saw how the night came,

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[3] The Sacred and the Profane, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 12.

[4] For instance, at about age twenty Stevens wrote in his Journal: "The feeling of piety is very dear to me. I would sacrifice a great deal to be a Saint Augustine but modernity is so Chicagoan, so plain, so unmeditative" (J, 32). Three years later he added: "An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses" (L, 58). At twenty-six he wrote: "I wish that groves still were sacred--or, at least, that something was: that there was still something free from doubt. . . . I grow tired of the want of faith--the instinct of faith" (L, 86).

> Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks
> I felt afraid.
> And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

The once-fixed stars are turning in the wind, and the cry of the peacocks is also the poet's response to a profane universe.

Stevens found an answer to his spiritual dilemma in the rite of poetry. The unusually abstract fabric of his poetry functions as a mythic screen, a living conduit between sensory experience and the spiritual reservoir of the imagination. Here, in the environment of his elemental imagery, is the foundation of his fresh spiritual as well as the setting of his ideas. It is this level of "poetic mythology" which is, as Northrop Frye observes, the "concrete, sensational, figurative, anthropomorphic basis out of which the informing concepts of discursive thought come."[5]

In its close contact with sensory experience the spiritual dimension of Stevens' poetry points away from the realm of abstract ideas, while as mythic abstraction it resembles primitive myth in providing a framework for immediate experience. Frye also notes the "tendency of contemporary poets . . . to be attracted toward myth and metaphor, rather than toward a realistic emphasis on content. . . ." Elsewhere he relates this attraction to the influence of "primitive art, of whatever age or

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[5] "New Directions from Old," in Myth and Mythmaking, ed. Henry A. Murray (New York: Braziller, 1960); rpt. in Fables of Identity (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 56.

continent. . . . The primitive, with its immediate connexion with magic, expresses a directness of imaginative impact which is naive and yet conventionalized, spontaneous and yet precise."[6] The early poem, "Ploughing on Sunday" (20), provides a simple illustration of this primitive-like and abstract quality of Stevens' poetry.

> The white cock's tail
> Tosses in the wind.
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Glitters in the sun.
>
> Water in the fields,
> The wind pours down.
> The feathers flare
> And bluster in the wind.
>
> Remus, blow your horn!
> I'm ploughing on Sunday,
> Ploughing North America.
> Blow your horn!
>
> Tum-ti-tum,
> Ti-tum-tum-tum!
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Spreads to the sun.
>
> The white cock's tail
> Streams to the moon.
> Water in the fields.
> The wind pours down.

There is no attempt in the poem to describe an immediate experience. For example, Stevens does not picture a bent old man walking behind a wooden plow being pulled by a lame horse through the puddles. The "I" of the poem is ploughing North America, and not on a particular day in 1916, say, but

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[6] "Design as a Creative Principle in the Arts," in The Hidden Harmony: Essays in Honor of Philip Wheelwright (New York: Odyssey, 1966), p. 22; The Modern Century, The Whidden Lectures 1967 (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 95.

on Sunday. The poem's imagery deals in classes of things: white cock's tail, turkey-cock's tail, sun, water, wind, feathers, moon. If Stevens' mythic imagery unites the individual and the class, as Frye maintains, it does not do so in the course of the poems themselves. On the other hand, it is conceivable that Stevens' abstract imagery grows out of his own particularized experience and leads back into it, even though the immediate moments of experience are not captured in the poems. Although this poem portrays a physical world, the picture is as formalized as ritual. And it is these abstract forms of nature that loom large in Stevens' poetry. They do not function as conscious, realistic counters but as childlike pictures or primitive pictographs. I believe it is this fundemental characteristic of the poetry which Randall Jarrell has in mind when he says: "At the bottom of Stevens' poetry there is wonder and delight, the child's or animal's or savage's--man's--joy in his own existence. . . ."[7]

Joining with this primitive, abstract environment of the poetry to form the mythic level are Stevens' various representations of the poet as a magus. "Ploughing on Sunday," for instance, has the beat of a chant, and Uncle Remus is an early version of the chanting magician. Stevens' shamanistic poet figure, however, appears more

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[7] "The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens," The Yale Review, 44 (Spring 1955); rpt. in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 187.

clearly in later poems, such as in these lines from "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

> He held the world upon his nose
> And this-a-way he gave a fling.
>
> His robes and symbols, ai-yi-yi--
> And that-a-way he twirled the thing. (178)

Gerald L. Bruns has recently related this aspect of Stevens' poetry to the realm of myth. He maintains that "both Heidegger and Stevens attribute to poetry an ancient, originally mythic, function. . . . The power of the poet is once more the power of Orpheus, his ability to call up as from nowhere a world in which man may dwell."[8]

But the world that Stevens summons is a figuration of the mind; it is not the world man lives in, although it constitutes a way toward that world. Frye's comments on the modern writer's aversion to realistic content are well suited to Stevens--who largely does not capture in his poetry the sense of a particularized world. Rather, the elemental abstractions of his poetry are mythic to the extent that they function as a spiritual mode of perception. Philip Wheelwright observes that myth is not a "fiction imposed upon one's already given world, but is a way of apprehending that world."[9] What distinguishes the mythic side of Stevens' poetry from other forms of symbolic

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[8] "Poetry as Reality: The Orpheus Myth and Its Modern Counterparts," ELH, 37 (1970), 285.

[9] The Burning Fountain, rev. ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), p. 150.

activity is the degree to which it cleaves to the sensory world and results from an act of belief that transcends conscious distinctions between subject and object. Ernst Cassirer writes: "In the image myth sees a fragment of substantial reality, a part of the material world itself . . . [while] religion strives toward a progressively purer spiritualization." He goes on to separate these mythical and religious forms of consciousness from aesthetic consciousness, whose images "confess themselves to be illusion as opposed to the empirical reality of things . . ."; illusion, though, which can become "for the spirit a pure expression of its own creative powers." Elsewhere he adds that in "the mythical imagination there is always implied an act of belief."[10] The mythic dimension of Stevens' poetry grows out of a faith in the immediate moment of sensory experience, and a belief that man's word can speak that moment into being. Stevens claims that a "poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" (NA, 32). At the center of Stevens' poetry is a belief in the potential interrelationship of word and thing. His emphasis is neither toward the spiritual pole of religious consciousness nor toward the abstract illusion of the aesthetic. The expression of his own spirit is for Stevens finally a figuration of earth. A statement by Joseph

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[10] The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. 2: Mythical Thought, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955), p. 261; An Essay on Man (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1944), p. 75.

Campbell provides a pattern for the cardinal directions of Stevens' own thought: "the most vital, most critical function of a mythology . . . is to foster the centering and unfolding of the individual in integrity, in accord with himself . . . his culture . . . the universe . . . and that awesome mystery which is both beyond and within himself and all things. . . ."[11] It is time now to trace briefly the unfolding of Stevens' poetry and thought in accord with his idea of the nobility of the imagination (the self), his idea of living at the center of civilized good sense (the culture), his idea of opening himself to the declarations of the elements (the universe), and his constant orientation to the mystery within and without.

II

Although Stevens early recognized poetry as potential myth--"Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame" (59)--the physical world of his first volume of poems, Harmonium (1923, 1931), is as spiritually enigmatic as the "fluttering things" (18) of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" or the "insoluble lump" (45) of turnip in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Stevens' experience of the sacred continued to depend on his discovery of "Bravura adequate to this great hymn" (16). The real drama of his poetic development is reflected in a

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[11] The Masks of God: Creative Mythology (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 5.

gradually deepening spiritual suggestiveness in voice and imagery. Before experience of earth could be sacralized, the "great poem of the earth" (NA, 142) had to be under way. The "ring of men . . . [who] chant in orgy . . . Their boisterous devotion to the sun" (69-70) become eventually a "figure like Ecclesiast, / Rugged and luminous, [who] chants in the dark / A text that is an answer, although obscure" (479).

In Harmonium Stevens announces his quest of "the origin and course / Of love" (18). His poetry as a whole testifies to the centrality of this pursuit, which is in fact a search for "presence." Philip Wheelwright has observed: "To know someone as a presence instead of as a lump of matter or set of processes, is to meet him with an open, listening, responsive attitude; it is to become a Thou in the presence of his I-hood. . . . The sense of presence may be felt toward inanimate objects as well. . . . A presence is a mystery that claims our awe."[12] Stevens says that a poet "is intent on what he sees and hears and the sense of the certainty of the presences about him is as nothing to the presences themselves" (OP, 198). The fundamental drive of Stevens' poetry is toward a love relationship with the physical earth. He strives to become a Thou in the presence of its I-hood. His poetry both exalts man's

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[12] Metaphor and Reality (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1962), p. 155.

imagination as divinity and decreates[13] romantic modes of perception that interfere with the imagination's openness to the I of earth. Stevens asserts: "we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic" (NA, 138); the "world has been painted; most modern activity is getting rid of the paint to get at the world itself" (L, 402). It is in the vacant space left by his decreation of romantic modes of experience that the mythic elements of Stevens' poetry take root and grow.

All the while that Stevens' poetry decreates in order to expose the earth finally in its "essential barrenness" (373), the natural forces of earth enter the poetry as abstract forms which structure the grounds of Stevens' own perceptions. J. Hillis Miller claims that in Stevens' poetry there is "no rich echo of nuance and meaning from the poetic tradition, as in Eliot or Yeats. God is dead, and with him died the heaven of consecrated symbols coming down through the Christian or Platonic ages."[14] As we have observed, Stevens' elemental abstractions grow out of the earth in the way of primitive myth; they largely do not derive from literary tradition. Even the poetry of

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[13] Borrowing from Simone Weil, Stevens says: "Modern reality is a reality of decreation. . . ." He frequently stresses the positive results of negations. In this passage the idea of decreation is linked to the acknowledgment that modern man's "revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers" (NA, 174-75).

[14] Poets of Reality, pp. 230-31.

Harmonium is founded in a primitive-like environment centered in the "Timeless mother" (5) earth, who is also "Death . . . the mother of beauty" (68), and presided over by the giant tree of procreative life, "To which all birds come sometime in their time" (17). It is a naturalistic world typified by ravenous, "swine-like rivers" (78) of change and inhabited by blackbirds as well as doves. The poet enters this atmosphere as the rabbi guided by the "furious star" (14) of love, male consciousness responding to his woman imagination while they live through the changes of the seasons under the influences of sun and moon. Frank Doggett makes a firm case for the resemblance between these pervasive women figures and Jung's idea of the anima.[15] The spiritual level of Harmonium (and of all Stevens' poetry) can be more fully appreciated in view of Jung's following comments on the anima: "With the archetype of the anima we enter the realm of the gods, or rather, the realm that metaphysics has reserved for itself. Everything the anima touches becomes numinous--unconditional, dangerous, taboo, magical."[16]

The primary figures of Stevens' poetry are themselves mythic presences. They are the forms which stand

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[15] Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), Ch. III.

[16] C. G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed., Bollingen Series, No. 20 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 28.

between the light (the capacity and desire for love) of the imagination and the external world. They are the basis for presential experience. In "Poem with Rhythms" (245-46),

> The hand between the candle and the wall
> Grows large on the wall.
>
> The mind between this light or that and space,
> (This man in a room with an image of the world,
> That woman waiting for the man she loves,)
> Grows large against space. . . .

The mythic forms of Stevens' poetry, like the hand, measure the intensity of the light within and frame the experience of space without. In this sense, the poet's children are also his parents; the old man of Stevens' late poems is also a child. He has created the "pure perfections of parental space. / The children of a desire that is the will. . . ." The child is the "mind, among the creatures that it makes, / The people, those by which it lives and dies" (436).

This mythic level of Stevens' poetry provides an environment for experience of the sacred. For Stevens, poetry is an "art of perception" (OP, 191). A poem can provide an atmosphere capable of altering man's immediate sense of the physical world. As Stevens says, "Anyone who has read a long poem day after day, as, for example, The Faerie Queene, knows how the poem comes to possess the reader and how it naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there" (NA, 50). The nature of a particular poetic atmosphere is largely determined, according to Stevens, by the metaphors of the imagination: "Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance" (NA, 77), and

"Resemblance in metaphor is an activity of the imagination" (NA, 73). The metaphor fundamental to Stevens' own poetry fuses the human and the divine. "The brilliance of earth is the brilliance of every paradise" (NA, 77). His poetry helps to create "the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man" (NA, 150). The mythic aspects of Stevens' poetry provide an atmosphere wherein the imagination of man-God opens to allow earth-heaven to declare its presence. And it is especially this dimension which constitutes the spiritual thrust of the later poetry. In a letter to Henry Church, who was soon to become a close friend, Stevens wrote on June 1, 1939: "My own way out toward the future involves a confidence in the spiritual role of the poet" (L, 340).

III

The titles of Stevens' final three volumes of poetry speak for themselves: Transport to Summer (1947), The Auroras of Autumn (1950), and The Rock (in The Collected Poems, 1954). Basically these volumes accomplish just that: a spiritual transport into the auroras of a fresh sacred where the central symbol of the rock represents the incarnation of imagination and external reality.

Stevens' major prose--written roughly during the same period as his last three volumes of poetry--also centers on the spiritual capacities of the imagination.

Although Stevens claimed in "The Idea of Order at Key West" (1934) that "there never was a world for her [the imagination] / Except the one she sang" (130) and in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937) that "I cannot bring a world quite round" (165), by the time of his late poetry he clearly felt more confidence in the elemental world sustained by his own myth.

Such confidence is reflected in his attitude toward the imagination. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1942), he declares that "the imagination gives to everything it touches a peculiarity, and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility . . . which is our spiritual height and depth" (NA, 33-34). In fact, he endows his idea of nobility with much the same aura of mystery and power that Mircea Eliade associates with the primitive's sense of the sacred and Philip Wheelwright relates to the idea of presence.[17] Stevens writes: "Nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible [than nobility]. Nothing distorts itself and seeks disguise more quickly. There is a shame of disclosing it and in its definite presentations a horror of it" (NA, 34). Stevens' response to the mysterious nobility of the imagination leads eventually to his affirmation that "God and the imagination

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[17] The Sacred and the Profane, pp. 9-10; Metaphor and Reality, p. 158.

are one" (524; OP, 178).[18] But nonetheless, the mind as God is nothingness without the content of earth, and the earth barrenness without the mind. The act of perception remains uppermost: the imagination is the "necessary angel of earth . . . [through whose sight] you see the earth again" (496).

Integrally involved with the imagination's sense of reality is another fundamental idea of Stevens' poetry which is more explicitly developed in his prose. For Stevens, only the "central poet" is capable of providing "insights into reality."[19] His "ambition is to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization" (NA, 115-16). Stevens' confidence in the central poet explains why decreation is such a crucial part of his own poetry, for the good sense of civilization traces back, for Stevens, especially to the seventeenth century, "a time when the incredible suffered most at the hands of the credible" (NA, 52). The primitive-like relationship Stevens experiences with nature, then, is not a primitivistic turning away from the demands of consciousness; it is the result of decreations required of the centrally civilized mind. He says: "It is as if we said that the end of logic,

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[18] Cf. Baird, pp. 295-96, where he discusses and qualifies Stevens' assertion.

[19] See Joseph N. Riddel's more detailed discussion of Stevens' idea of "central poetry." The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 30-34.

mathematics, physics, reason and imagination is all one" (NA, 54). This, for Stevens, is "the intelligence that endures." And it endures because it is the spirit of man creating "out of its own self, not out of some surrounding myth" (NA, 52-53). Stevens himself created a myth out of his own imagination, facing both the demands of civilized consciousness and the declarations of the elements. Significant later developments in his poetry clearly illustrate this interrelationship between his spiritual belief in the imagination and his sensory experience of reality.

In "Credences of Summer" (from Transport to Summer, 1947), the sun ("the centre that I seek") descends to the "final mountain," the traditional meeting place of man and God, earth and heaven. The imagination and external reality become united in the "rock [which] cannot be broken" (373, 375). For Stevens this rock represents both the ultimate abstraction and the indivisible moment of concrete experience. It is the crux of his myth, hinged both to the imagination and the physical world. It is no surprise, then, that (as Helen Hennessy Vendler notes) "Credences" is the first long poem in which Stevens places "a lyric speaker firmly in a landscape of the present moment. . . ."[20]

In Stevens' last major, longer poem, "The Rock" (525-28), the "barrenness" of the rock of physical being is covered by the "leaves" of man's own consciousness, his

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[20] On Extended Wings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), p. 231.

poem, as if "nothingness contained a métier. . . ." But Stevens does not stop there. "It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves. / We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground / Or a cure of ourselves. . . ." A spiritual cure results when the leaves break into "bud," into "bloom," and bear "fruit," and man then eats of "the incipient colorings / Of their fresh culls. . . ." Man's poem, man's belief, and man become one.

> The fiction of the leaves is the icon
>
> Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness,
> And the icon is the man. . . .

The "illusion" (that nothingness itself "so desired") becomes the gate into a spiritual-physical world beyond the barrenness of the rock. Stevens' myth has been founded on the movements of the physical universe entering a mind creating "out of its own self, not out of some surrounding myth" (NA, 53). Stevens' leaves are of the sun itself:

> . . . The pearled chaplet of spring,
> The magnum wreath of summer, time's autumn snood,
>
> Its copy of the sun, these cover the rock.

Therefore: "They are more than leaves that cover the barren rock. . . ." Their colorings cure our perceptions of the physical world and make possible the experience through love of earth's presence:

> [The leaves] bud the whitest eye, the pallidest sprout,
> New senses in the engenderings of sense,
> The desire to be at the end of distances,

> The body quickened and the mind in root.
> They bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love.
> They bear their fruit so that the year is
> known. . . .

The rock's "barrenness becomes a thousand things [immediate experiences of the sacred] / And so exists no more. . . ."

Stevens' fresh spiritual is grounded in his mythopoeic style. He asserts: "I am my style . . . [and] as my poem is, so are my gods and so am I" (OP, 210-11). His fundamental metaphor linking earth and heaven, man and God, forms the grounds for and results from experience of earth-heaven created in the mind of man-God. As he says: "A celestial mode is paramount" (480).

But despite the fresh spiritual, or because of it, Stevens sees human experience pervaded with mystery. If the point of meeting between mind and matter is the sacramental center of Stevens' spiritual, it also represents the convergence of inner and outer mystery. The icon of man's poem is the evidence of a "mating and a marriage" (OP, 212) between imagination and external reality, but these ecstatic meetings are fleeting and ambiguous. The imagination "can never effectively touch the same thing twice in the same way." Mind-created reality continues to change--it is "that reality of which we never lose sight but never see solely as it is" (OP, 215, 214). In the late "The World as

Meditation" (520-21), Penelope awaits Ulysses, and the sun rises:

> But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of
> the sun
> On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her
> like her heart.
> The two kept beating together. It was only day.
>
> It was Ulysses and it was not. . . .

Desiring Ulysses' sacred presence, Penelope experiences the "savage presence" of the sun. The marriage exists only in the fleeting moments when Ulysses and the sun are one in the pulses of her own mind.

Records of such marriages in Stevens' own experience are rare in his poems. But especially in a few very late, short poems there are glimpses of an individualized, external world no longer carrying its abstract, mythic weight.[21] By this point, Stevens and his spiritual paramour have, momentarily at least, composed "a dwelling in the evening air" (524). The imagination and external reality having been bound together in a personal myth, Stevens' immediate experience can then become the direct cause of his poem's celebration.

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[21] I do not want to imply a cessation of the fluctuations between mind and external reality in Stevens' late work. That the mystery of human perception remains mystery is essential to his fresh spiritual. But there is an increased sense of particularization and personal immediacy in many of the very late poems, in, for example, "The Hermitage at the Center," "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," and "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination."

Compare to the early "Domination of Black" the final poem of the Collected Poems, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" (534):

> At the earliest ending of winter,
> In March, a scrawny cry from outside
> Seemed like a sound in his mind.
>
> He knew that he heard it,
> A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
> In the early March wind.
>
> The sun was rising at six,
> No longer a battered panache above snow . . .
> It would have been outside.
>
> It was not from the vast ventriloquism
> Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .
> The sun was coming from outside.
>
> That scrawny cry--it was
> A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
> It was part of the colossal sun.
>
> Surrounded by its choral rings,
> Still far away. It was like
> A new knowledge of reality.

The scream of the peacock in the face of blackness has become the cry of a bird no longer terrorized. The turning universe of the early poem has now been composed in choral rings. The poet hesitates to accept the experience: the cry "Seemed like a sound in his mind." But he believes that the cry of the bird, like the physical sun itself, is really coming to him from outside: "He knew that he heard it. . . ." The wind which causes vertigo and fear in the early poem has become a March wind heralding spring.

To say that Stevens' poetry is an act of the mind is misleading. The late poems, especially, record a living space that cuts between the dualisms of abstract thought.

It is infeasible and unnecessary to argue a case for Stevens' experience of the "thing itself" in his last poems.[22] What matters is that his abstract myth has functioned as a living dialectic, sustained by and aimed at experience of othemess. By allowing his imagination's spiritual desire only the satisfaction of the elemental forces remaining after his own decreations, Stevens was able to open the way for the declarations of the presences of earth. These presences, encouraged by the poet's primitive-like faith in the sense side of immediate experience, came to constitute a living myth, a growing window opening outward toward the thing and inward toward the source of love. The spiritual moment of immediate experience in Stevens' poetry perforce remains enveloped in presential mystery.

The body of this study follows the growth of Stevens' fresh spiritual, which is, as I will illustrate in more detail, the development of a modern mythic form. In most instances, I try to stay close to the poems themselves, aiming mostly at a "reading" of Stevens' poetry. Chapter II highlights the spiritual side of the concerns of Stevens' early manhood. Chapter III traces these concerns into his first volume of poetry, emphasizing the spiritual elements

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[22] The following discussions are especially persuasive on this point: Riddel, pp. 274-76; Roy Harvey Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Last Lesson of the Master," in The Act of the Mind, pp. 124-27; Richard A. Macksey, "The Climates of Wallace Stevens," in The Act of the Mind, pp. 218-21.

of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "Sunday Morning." Chapter IV explains the mythic dimension of Stevens' fundamental imagery (as seen in Harmonium). Chapters V and VI follow the thread of his spiritual growth through his transition period (requiring close readings of shorter poems), leading finally to the formulated assertions of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." The last two chapters offer detailed readings of Stevens' late longer poems, which can best be described as mythic achievements. The afterword records his relocation in the fresh living space made possible by his myth.

CHAPTER I

SAINT AUGUSTINE AND THE MUD OF BRAZIL: EARLY LETTERS

The first clear indications of Stevens' struggle for spiritual meaning and sacred experience are found in his early letters and Journal entries.[1] Here, during a time stretching from his college days until the writing of his first major poetry, were recorded the fundamental conflicts that arose from the absence of a sustaining belief. His sense of a sacred ideal was widely separated from his sense of the real, and the real was usually profane. Literature, art, music, and nature, as well as the church, could all offer forms of sacred experience to the young Stevens, but they were all too often distant from immediate life with its scientific truths and commercial realities.[2] Also clearly present in these early writings is the path leading to the poetry of Harmonium: a desire for accurate speech which gradually became linked with the idea of poetry and eventually with the "fluttering things" of the immediate world.

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[1] Stevens sporadically entered thoughts, poetry, and quotations in his Journal mainly from 1898 to 1908.

[2] For a short description of Stevens' activities during this period, see Robert Buttel, Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 48.

The sharp division between Stevens' sense of the spiritual and his experience of the modern world is already pronounced in a Journal entry for August 1, 1899 (L, 31-33), when he was not yet twenty: "The feeling of piety is very dear to me. I would sacrifice a great deal to be a Saint Augustine but modernity is so Chicagoan, so plain, so unmeditative." He goes on to associate piety with purity and beauty, and to express the conflict in terms of his inner and outer worlds:

> I thoroughly believe that at this very moment I get none of my chief pleasures except from what is unsullied. The love of beauty excludes evil. A moral life is simply a pure conscience: a physical, mental and ethical source of pleasure. At the same time it is an inhuman life to lead. It is a form of narrowness so far as companionship is concerned. One must make concessions to others; but there is never a necessity of smutching inner purity.

He concludes this entry, first, by accepting an enforced separation between inner integrity and an active life of the world:

> The only practical life of the world, as a man of the world, not as a University Professor, a Retired Farmer or Citizen, a Philanthropist, a Preacher, a Poet or the like, but as a bustling merchant, a money-making lawyer, a soldier, a politician is to be if unavoidable a pseudo-villain in the drama, a decent person in private life. We must come down, we must use tooth and nail, it is the law of nature: "The survival of the fittest"; providing we maintain at the same time self-respect, integrity and fairness.

He resolves the conflict, then, through a hardened acceptance of the factual together with an appeal to a spiritual

force beyond him:

> I believe, as unhesitatingly as I believe anything, in the efficacy and necessity of fact meeting fact--with a background of the ideal. [. . .][3]
>
> I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force. Don't, therefore, look at facts, but through them.

One of the directions that Stevens' thought was to take as he grew toward his first major poetry was a gradual obviation of this transcendent form of the spiritual in favor of a more complete and puzzling immanence--spirit not behind but in facts, and finally only in himself.

Stevens' move from Cambridge to New York City in June, 1900, aggravated the division between inner spirit and modern world. His Journal records this reaction to the sounds of the city welcoming in the new year, 1901: "Noise still great--noise within noise--noise--noise--noise--but it seems to be subsiding." Immediately following is this entry: "I was trying to say a prayer but could not" (L, 50). Stevens responded spiritually to the profane, modern city largely in three ways: he took long walks in natural surroundings; he occasionally went to church; he read, or went to concerts or art galleries.

Outside his business hours, Stevens apparently lived much to himself, often reading during the week and taking long, solitary walks on the weekends. The weekend of August 9 and 10, 1902 (L, 58-59), provides a view of Stevens'

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[3] The ellipsis in brackets is used by Holly Stevens to indicate material omitted from the published letters.

spiritual tensions during this period. On that Saturday he wrote:

> Oh Mon Dieu, how my spirits sink when I am alone here in my room! Tired of everything that is old, too poor to pay for what's new--tired of reading, tired of tobacco, tired of walking about town; and longing only to have friends with me, or to be somewhere with them: nauseated by this terrible imprisonment. Yes: I might put a light face on it and say it is merely a depression rising from lack of exercise, but from my present point of view I see nothing but years of lack of exercise before me. And then this terrible self-contemplation! To-morrow if the sun shines I shall go wayfaring all day long. I must find a home in the country--a place to live in, not only to be in.

Most of Stevens' mature poetry consists of this same "self-contemplation," indicating the extent to which the contemplation itself became his means of finding "a place to live in, not only to be in." This search for a spiritual living space becomes the central drive of his poetry, paralleling the primary desire of primitive man, which, Eliade observes, is "to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects. . . . [He] attempts to remain as long as possible in a sacred universe. . . ."[4] It was to be nearly fifty years until Stevens could write that he and his "Interior paramour" had composed "a dwelling in the evening air" (524).

The next day Stevens went on to describe his Sunday walk:

> I've had a handsome day of it and am contented again. Left the house after breakfast and went by ferry and trolley to Hackensack over in Jersey.

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[4] The Sacred and the Profane, pp. 12-13.

> From H. I walked 5½ miles on the Spring Valley road, then 4 miles to Ridgewood, then another mile to Hoboken and back towards town 7 miles more to Patterson: 17½ in all, a good day's jaunt at this time of the year. Came from Patterson to Hoboken by trolley and then home. In the early part of the day I saw some very respectable country which, as usual, set me contemplating. I love to walk along with a slight wind playing in the trees about me and think over a thousand and one odds and ends.

The length of the walk is typical of Stevens' weekend jaunts, although, as we shall see, they are sometimes portrayed with greater romantic fervor. In this entry, he goes on to relate the results of the prior evening's despair and to drew a contrast between church and nature:

> Last night I spent an hour in the dark transept of St. Patrick's Cathedral where I go now and then in my more lonely moods. An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses. What incessant murmurs fill that ever-laboring, tireless church! But to-day in my walk I thought that after all there is no conflict of forces but rather a contrast. In the Cathedral I felt one presence; on the highway I felt another. Two different deities presented themselves; and, though I have only cloudy visions of either, yet I now feel the distinction between them.

He then points to the church as a means of consolation and to nature as a source of his own sense of spirit:

> The priest in me worshipped one God at one shrine; the poet another God at another shrine. The priest worshipped Mercy and Love; the poet, Beauty and Might. In the shadows of the church I could hear the prayers of men and women; in the shadows of the trees nothing human mingled with Divinity. As I sat dreaming with the Congregation I felt how the glittering altar worked on my senses stimulating and consoling them; and as I went tramping through the fields and woods I beheld every leaf and blade of grass revealing or rather betokening the Invisible.

This tendency to see the church as a social institution and a consolation persisted throughout Stevens' life. For instance, contrasting this idea of the church to the problem of God or spirit, he wrote to Hi Simons, January 9, 1940:

> The strength of the church grows less and less until the church stands for little more than propriety. . . . I ought to say that it is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. I don't necessarily mean some substitute for the church, because no one believes in the church as an institution more than I do. My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe. (L, 348)

The Christian myth remained for Stevens throughout his life primarily a point of contrast to his own spiritual position.

Stevens' response at this time to the spirit in nature is crucial for our investigation of his fresh spiritual. His major poetry developed out of his rejection of this early desire to romanticize nature. His mature accomplishment resulted from his attempt to discover or create an abode of the spirit that was both credible and equivalent to the God of the church of his youth and the God of nature of his early manhood. More and more his focus came to center on the mystery of human perception and on the necessity of cleansing man's sight. At this stage, during his twenties, his sense of the sacred largely remained associated with the spirit revealed in nature and in his books. Only gradually did his concern for accurate speech combine with his idea of perception to unite at last in a recognition of poetry as a "means of redemption" (OP, 160).

During these pre-marriage days, Stevens repeatedly responded in his Journal with fervor to the divine spirit which he felt within and beyond nature. The following description testifies not only to the division between Stevens' sense of this mysterious spirit and his reaction to the modern city, but also to the demands of his own imagination, which here enforces itself momentarily on the immediate world, the park in the evening:

> The park was deserted yet I felt royal in my empty palace. A dozen or more stars were shining. Leaving the tower and parapets I wandered about in a maze of paths some of which led to an invisible cave. By this time it was dark and I stumbled about over little bridges that creeked under my step, up hills, and through trees. An owl hooted. I stopped and suddenly felt the mysterious spirit of nature--a very mysterious spirit, one I thought never to have met with again. I breathed in the air and shook off the lethargy that had controlled me for so long a time. But my Arbor-owl stopped hooting & the spirit slipped away and left me looking with amusement at the extremely unmysterious and not at all spiritual hotels and apartment houses that were lined up like elegant factories on the West side of the Park. I crossed to Eighth-ave., and in a short time returned to the house. (L, 50)

This description of the park reads like a medieval romance with its woods and grottoes. For our view of Stevens, the passage serves especially to underscore the problem of a modern romanticizer of nature who must confront a city world of "elegant factories."

Stevens' response to nature at this time has in it both a sense of the beautiful and of the mysterious and sublime, but either way it is usually presented with a background of the profane and ugly, everyday world. Note the

following response to the sacred arrival of nature's spring set in sharp contrast to his revulsion to the profane city world of man:

> Extraordinarily brilliant day. A day for violet and vermilion, for yellow and white--and everything of silk. Au contraire, people looked like the very devil. Men who'd been taking a drop of the Astor House Monongahela now and then through the winter, or else had been calling in at Proctor's for an olive or a fishball before starting up town, looked like blotchy, bloodless, yes, and bloated--toads; and many a good, honest woman had a snout like a swan. And this on a day when the rainbows danced in the basin in Union Square! Spring is something of a Circe, after all. It takes a lot of good blood to show on a day like this. Everybody's clothes looked intolerably old and beggarly. The streets were vile with dust. Personally, I felt quite up to the mark; yesterday, I walked a score of miles sloughing off a pound at every mile (it seemed). There were any number of blue birds afield--even the horizons, after a time, seemed like blue wings flitting down the round sides of the world.

Later in the same entry, after seeing a man from a romantic distance, he can describe him as "a wily shad-fisher feeding excelsior to his goats." At this stage in his development, the external profane becomes sacred for Stevens largely to the extent that it becomes the "wholly other," a world beyond the present ugly realities of time and space. He concludes this entry: "No doubt, if it had been a bit nearer sunset, the particular hills I gazed at so long would have been very much like the steps to the Throne. And Blake's angels would have been there with their 'Holy, Holy, Holy!'" (L, 70-71).

But the difficulty that Stevens increasingly recognized was that the imagination, sequestered in its

never-never-land of a nature seen only in its beauty and sublimity, was always subject to the encroachments of the profane immediate world and to the strictures of its own desire for a more realistic truth. Note the sudden interruption of the profane in the following description:

> Apollo & I tripped it through rainy woods yesterday afternoon. . . . Spirits seemed everywhere--stalking in the infernal forest. The wet sides of leaves glittered like plates of steel; night-birds made thin noises; tree-frogs seemed conspiring; an owl chilled the clammy silence. But pooh! I discovered egg-shells--sure sign of a man & his wife & a child or two, loafing in my temple. How fine, though, was the mystery of everything except the damn egg-shells! (L, 61-62)

Longing for sacred groves, Stevens can only more and more feel the inadequacy of his poetic response to the spirit of nature in the face of the demanding realities of the immediate world: "I wish that groves still were sacred--or, at least, that something was: that there was still something free from doubt, that day unto day still uttered speech, and night unto night still showed wisdom. I grow tired of the want of faith--the instinct of faith." And then the casual but anticipatory desire--"It would be much nicer to have things definite--both human and divine" (L, 86-87).

Over three years later, in a letter to his wife-to-be, Elsie Moll, Stevens confronted more fully this problem of the human and the divine:

> I dropped into St. John's chapel an hour before the service and sat in the last pew and looked around. It happens that last night at the Library I read a life of Jesus and I was

> interested to see what symbols of that life appeared in the chapel. I think there were none at all excepting the gold cross on the altar. When you compare that poverty with the wealth of symbols, of remembrances, that were created and revered in times past, you appreciate the change that has come over the church. The church should be more than a moral institution, if it is to have the influence that it should have. The space, the gloom, the quiet mystify and entrance the spirit. But that is not enough. --And one turns from this chapel to those built by men who felt the wonder of the life and death of Jesus--temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness--tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the noble depths of men familiar with Gethsemane, familiar with Jerusalem.

Apparently struck mostly by the actual life of Christ, Stevens comments: "I do wonder that the church is so largely a relic. Its vitality depended on its association with Palestine, so to speak." Already here in embryo Stevens was expressing primary elements of his later spiritual, in which eventually the human God of imagination was to stand before the ultimate mystery of life itself. He goes on:

> Reading the life of Jesus, too, makes one distinguish the separate idea of God. Before to-day I do not think I have ever realized that God was distinct from Jesus. It enlarges the matter almost beyond comprehension. People doubt the existence of Jesus--at least, they doubt incidents of his life, such as, say, the Ascension into Heaven after his death. But I do not understand that they deny God. I think everyone admits that in some form or other. --The thought makes the world sweeter--even if God be no more than the mystery of Life.

Later in the same letter, Stevens added to the wonder of human life and the ultimate mystery the third member of his trinity: "I feel . . . the overwhelming necessity of

thinking well, speaking well" (L, 139-41). Only as his desire for poetry became purely the desire for accurate speech, not infused with the longing for a romantic world dissociated from the immediate one, could Stevens' aesthetic become his spiritual. Over thirty-five years later this embryonic awareness of human wonder and ultimate mystery wed to accurate speech will bear fruit in Stevens' monumental poetic realization of the rock of being:

> It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
> A mountain luminous half way in bloom
> And then half way in the extremest light
> Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
> As if twelve princes sat before a king. (375)

Stevens' desire for accurate speech increases as his attention turned from the search for spirit within nature to the sense of spirit within self. But although this despiritualizing of nature could enable him to see the earth less romantically, it could also leave him without any sense of spirit at all. Stevens' letters and Journal entries from his pre-marriage days record pain and confusion as well as positive growth.

One of his main dilemmas continued to be his sense of the gulf between art and immediate life. On July 4, 1900, he wrote in his Journal: "Perish all sonnets. . . . Sonnets have their place . . . but they can also be found tremendously out of place: in real life where things are quick, unaccountable, responsive" (L, 42). In its most extreme form the tension between life and art was for him the conflict between scientific reduction and romantic

escape. On September 4, 1902, Stevens entered in his Journal:

> To-day while thinking over organic laws etc. the idea of the German "Organismus" crept into my thoughts--and as I was lunching on Frankfurters & sauerkraut, I felt quite the philosopher. Wonderfully scientific & clear idea--this organismus one. Yes: and if I were a materialist I might value it. But only last night I was lamenting that the fairies were things of the past. The organismus is truck--give me the fairies, the Cloud-Gatherer, the Prince of Peace, the Mirror of Virtue--and a pleasant road to think of them on, and a starry night to be with them. (L, 60)

The result of conflicts such as these, centering in the unreality of art and the meaninglessness of commonplace reality, is at times disillusionment and despair. Stevens' Journal entry for April 30, 1905, records a sense of spiritual vacuum:

> I feel a loathing (large & vague!), for things as they are; and this is the result of a pretty thorough disillusionment. Yet this is an ordinary mood with me in town in the Spring time. I say to myself that there is nothing good in the world except physical well-being. All the rest is philosophical compromise. Last Sunday, at home, I took communion. It was from the worn, the sentimental, the diseased, the priggish and the ignorant that "Gloria in excelsis!" came. Love is consolation, Nature is consolation, Friendship, Work, Phantasy are all consolation. (L, 82)

Even after acknowledging the element of self-conscious cynicism in this passage, one senses something of the controlled despair which showed up later in such poems as "Domination of Black" and "The Snow Man."

The way out of the despair began even in these early records to follow the path that would remain the basic one

also for the mature Stevens. Immediately following the previous entry, Stevens wrote: "If I were to have my will I should live with many spirits. . . . I should live with Mary Stuart, Marie Antoinette, George Sand, Carlyle, Sappho, Lincoln, Plato, Hawthorne, Goethe and the like" (L, 82). One path out of despair involved for Stevens a sensitivity to the "spirits" of the past. But the note of romantic escape into the past had to be qualified by a fresh sense of the present before it could offer a valid route out of the spiritual vacuum. Stevens' feeling for the immediate forces of nature, plus his sense of his own spirit (partly an inheritance from those spirits of the past), led in the same direction that his desire for accurate speech and for a sense of divinity were also leading him--all strands together forming a spiritual road into the future.

The following Journal entry offers the most important early evidence of Stevens' awareness of the sheer force of size and power of the natural elements. Beyond the need for romanticizing, such forces were due to play important parts in Stevens' future role of poet of earth.

> I thought, on the train, how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes & barrens & wilds. It still dwarfs & terrifies & crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens & orchards & fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless. And it is a proper question, whether or not the

> Lilliputians have tied him down. There are his huge legs, Africa & South America, still, apparently, free; and the rest of him is pretty tough and unhandy. But, as I say, we do not think of this. There was a girl on the train with a face like the under-side of a moonfish. Her talk was of dances & men. For her, Sahara had no sand; Brazil, no nud. (L, 73)

Such an idea of earth, seen without romantic trappings, seemed to provide Stevens with a fresh context within which he could more fully conceive of his own creative spirit. In a letter advising his future wife to join the church, he went on to observe: "I am not in the least religious. The sun clears my spirit, if I may say that, and an occasional sight of the sea, and thinking of blue valleys, and the odor of the earth, and many things. Such things make a God of a man; but a chapel makes a man of him. Churches are human" (L, 96). A sense of the elemental forces of nature combined with an awareness of his own God-like creative capacity invigorated Stevens' concern with his interior life as a perceiving and expressing spirit. From here on, Stevens' view of the immensity and mystery of the earth and his view of the spiritual efficacy of the mind of man grew together side by side.

At this same time, approaching age thirty, still presumably prior to the writing of his first major poetry, Stevens began to try to express to Elsie a fresh conception of the human mind along with a new belief in man's nobility. It is music that awakens him to the archetypal depth of

mental responses:

> What is the mysterious effect of music, the vague effect we feel when we hear music, without ever defining it? . . It is considered that music, stirring something within us, stirs the Memory. I do not mean our personal Memory--the memory of our twenty years and more--but our inherited Memory, the Memory we have derived from those who lived before us in our own race, and in other races, illimitable, in which we resume the whole past life of the world, all the emotions, passions, experiences of the millions and millions of men and women now dead, whose lives have insensibly passed into our own, and compose them. --It is a Memory deep in the mind, without images, so vague that only the vagueness of Music, touching it subtly, vaguely awakens, until
>
> 'it remembers its august abodes,
> And murmurs as the ocean murmurs there.'

This association of the racial unconscious with music helps to explain the prevalence of musical effects in Stevens' poetry. Elizabeth Drew relates T. S. Eliot's concern with the "auditory imagination" to the "mythical method of grasping experience."[5] For Stevens, music can call forth the archaic self within, which is a primary task for all myths. In this letter he went on to maintain:

> "great music" agitates "to fathomless depths, the mystery of the past within us." . . . And again, that at the sound of Music, each of us feels that "there answers within him, out of the Sea of Death and Birth, some eddying immeasurable of ancient pleasure and pain." --While I had always known of

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[5] T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry (New York: Scribner's, 1949), p. 20. Commenting on a paragraph from Eliot's essay, "The Music of Poetry," she writes: "The keyword in that passage, is that the auditory imagination fuses; and as we have seen, it is the experience of division and multiplicity reduced to unity, which is the essence of the symbolic or mythical method of grasping experience." Cf. Stevens' comments on the sounds of the letter C in "The Comedian" (L, 294).

> this infinite extension of personality, nothing has ever made it so striking as this application of Music to it. . . . (L, 136)

Whereas Stevens had been concerned previously with the romantic notion of the "divine force" and "responsive" spirit in the physical world, he now began to dwell more often on the "innumerable responsive spirits within" (L, 32, 42, 136).

In "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (89-92), these same attitudes help to form one of the earliest spiritual thrusts of Stevens' poetry. In that poem, he comes to see that the capacity of the mind to respond to the music of physical being, without trying to turn it into the romantic "wholly other," offers a mode of spiritual validation both to the mind and to physical beauty.

> Just as my fingers on these keys
> Make music, so the selfsame sounds
> On my spirit make a music, too.
>
> Music is feeling, then, not sound. . . .

First, the importance of the mind's response is affirmed. Then, enduring physical beauty is seen to be the proper source of man's celebration:

> Beauty is momentary in the mind--
> The fitful tracing of a portal;
> But in the flesh it is immortal. . . .
> [Susanna's music] plays
> On the clear viol of her memory,
> And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

The mind becomes the musical instrument on which the music of Susanna's physical beauty is sacralized.

Less than a week after the previous letter, Stevens wrote again, recording a new belief in man's nobility, one that enabled him to begin a resolution of the problem posed by scientific reduction.

> . . . I have lately had a sudden conception of the true nobility of men and women. It is well enough to say that they walk like chickens, or look like monkeys, except when they are fat and look like hippopotamuses. But the zoological point of view is not a happy one; and merely from the desire to think well of men and women I have suddenly seen the very elementary truth (which I had never seen before) that their nobility does not lie in what they look like but in what they endure and in the manner in which they endure it.

Stevens, significantly, goes on to relate his new sense of nobility to the problem of a world of appearances and a life lived in the mind, a tack anticipating the extent to which his fully developed idea of nobility would be associated with the imagination's capacity to provide insights into reality. Here, though, he simply observes:

> Everybody except a child appreciates that "things are not what they seem"; and the result of disillusion might be fatal to content, if it were not for courage, good-will, and the like. The mind is the Arena of Life. Men and women must be judged, to be judged truly, by the valor of their spirits, by their conquest of the natural being, and by their victories in philosophy.--I feel as if I had made a long step in advance.

Significant, too, is the fact that in this letter, containing the earliest exposition of his idea of nobility, Stevens first avowed the centrality of the mind --"The mind is the Arena of Life"--and then turned to the external world

with a renewed capacity for experience:

> It is a discovery, too, that very greatly increases my interest in men and women. One might say that their appearances are like curtains, fair and unfair; the stage is behind--the comedy, and tragedy. The curtain had never before been so vividly lifted, at least for me; and my rambles through the streets have been excursions full of amateur yet thrilling penetration. I respect the chickens; I revel in the monkeys; I feel most politely toward the hippopotamuses, poor souls. (L, 143-44)

Throughout his mature poetry, Stevens' meditation centers on the capacities of the mind in relation to the curtains of the experienced world, which come to be seen as the necessary veils of the mind's own fictions. Furthermore, the mind as source of nobility will be more and more affirmed as the only avenue into a physical world. Stevens' yearning for sacred groves began at this point to lead to the enigma of the curtains themselves, and his own lifelong exploration of the mind's necessary fiction would eventually compose a major fiction of its own. Stevens would come to see that the curtain could not be lifted, since it is not in the external world but is itself man's way of sight.

Stevens' mature poetry follows the lines established in these last few quoted letters. Eventually, he would discover that the mind, by enabling itself to converse with its own depth, could, like music, remember "its august abodes" and find that what speak in the mind's depth are the "ocean murmurs." Stevens, in creating through accurate speech a dialogue with the spirit within, finally came to

believe that the veil he had created was a "copy of the sun" (527).

There are only a few explicit indications in these pre-marriage records of the unique mode of Stevens' future poetry, poetry which so often grows out of a dialogue between Stevens' male consciousness and his interior queen and paramour, his imagination. Although we have noted early examples of his fluctuation between the dimensions of the mind and the external world, the Journal entries and his early letters to Elsie also point to the special meditative technique that becomes his means of reshaping his response to the physical world. In reaching the stage of his first important poetry, two elements of his thought began to alter: he ceased to think of his reading as romantic escape from dreariness and started to see it more as related to his immediate experience; and he began to think of his interior depth more personally as another self, associated both with his image of Elsie and his sense of his own Ariel spirit.

Among the excerpts of Stevens' letters to Elsie for the years 1905-06 is this one concerning the interior spirit: "Life seems glorious for a while, then it seems poisonous. But you must never lose faith in it, it is glorious after all. Only you must find the glory for yourself. Do not look for it either, except in yourself; in the secret places of your spirit and in all your hidden senses" (L, 85). Awakening these "hidden senses" gradually

became a primary concern for Stevens, creating the grounds for a true dialectic between imagination and external reality. Central to the dialectic was Stevens' growing awareness of the importance of accurate speech and of the world of his readings (early instances of his idea of a civilized main-stream). Stevens' letter to Elsie on January 17, 1909, illustrates his constant shifting between interior and external reality, along with his sense of the centrality of reading and clear expression. He began by describing two recent, exhilarating experiences in the park, leading to the following:

> The snow was just commencing to fall, blowing from the North, the direction in which I was going, so that my cheeks were, shortly, coated with ice--or so they felt. --It would be very agreeable to me to spend a month in the woods getting myself trim. . . . There is as much delight in the body as in anything in the world and it leaps for use.

Then he turns abruptly to the subject of his recent reading:

> It was balm to me to read and to read quickly. I have such difficulty with Maeterlinck. He distracts by his rhetoric. Indeed, philosophy, which ought to be pure intellect, has seldom, if ever, been so among moderns. We color our language, and Truth being white, becomes blotched in transmission.

From this expression of the importance of pure speech, he goes on to discuss Poe, the mind, and stagnating routine:

> Nowadays, when so many people no longer believe in supernatural things, they find a substitute in the stranger and more freakish phenomena of the mind--hallucinations, mysteries and the like. Hence the revival of Poe. . . . Poe illustrates, too, the effect of stimulus. When I complain of the "bareness"--I have in mind, very often, the effect of order and regularity, the effect of moving in a groove. We all cry for life. It is not to be

> found in railroading to an office and then railroading back. . . . But it is obviously more exciting to be Poe than to be a lesser "esquire." You see the effect of the railroading in my letters: the reflection of so many walls, the effect of moving in a groove.

The subject of unhealthy regularity leads directly to the importance of books and of his own interior spirit--both of which are seen to revitalize experience:

> But books make up. They shatter the groove, as far as the mind is concerned. They are like so many fantastic lights filling plain darkness with strange colors. . . . I like to write most when the young Ariel sits, as you know how, at the head of my pen and whispers to me--many things; for I like his fancies, and his occasional music.

Immediately following this reference to his Ariel spirit, Stevens broaches a central problem of his major poetry: "One's last concern on a January night is the real world, when that happens to be a limited one--unless, of course, it is as beautiful and as brilliant as the Park was this afternoon" (L, 122-23). In the future, his poetry was to be his way of relating the real world to his book world and his Ariel spirit, so that the real world would no longer be a limited one but lit by the light of imagination: "Arranging, deepening, enchanting night" (130).

A few months later, Stevens followed the same pattern in another letter to Elsie. After describing vivid experiences of the external world--an art show, a church, clouds--he concluded: "I wish I could spend the whole season out of doors, walking by day, reading and studying in the evenings. I feel a tremendous capacity for enjoying

that kind of life. . . ." Then just as he begins to complain about being "compelled into the common lot," he reminds himself:

> So many lives have been lived--the world is no longer dull--nor would not be even if nothing new at all ever happened. It would be enough to examine the record already made, by so many races, in such varied spaces. --Perhaps, it is best, too, that one should have only glimpses of reality--and get the rest from the fairy-tales, from pictures, and music, and books. --My chief objection to town-life is the commonness of the life. Such numbers of men degrade Man. The teeming streets make Man a nuisance--a vulgarity, and it is impossible to see his dignity. I feel, nevertheless, the overwhelming necessity of thinking well, speaking well.

More and more, man's artistic creation came to be seen by Stevens as the link between the mental world and the external one, and man's art became associated with "thinking well, speaking well" (L, 141).

Stevens' envisioning of an interior paramour to respond to his Ariel spirit was the final step leading to his first important poetry. Stevens' need to experience a sacred external world was just one side of his primary problem. The other side was his need for communion with his own interior depth. The gradual incarnation of his woman spirit enabled him to establish a dialogue between interior self and physical world. No traditional muse and no Beatrice, she nonetheless became the objectification of Stevens' own aspiring love, "a kind of sister of the Minotaur" (NA, 52). It is she whom Stevens would attempt to put into a spiritual relationship with earth, so that experience

of earth at last would require neither resignation to a lump of matter nor romantic escape from the mud of Brazil.

On the most immediate level, Stevens' woman figure is simply exalted good company on his solitary quest. Stevens' first portrait of his spiritual love is both romantic and touching. From his Journal, April 27, 1906:

> Clear sky. The twilight subtly mediaeval--pre-Copernican. A few nights ago I saw the rim of the moon, and the whole black moon behind, just visible. The larger stars were like flares. One would have liked to walk about with some Queen discussing waves and caverns, like a noble warrior speaking of trifles to a noble lady. The imagination is quite satisfied with definite objects, if they be lofty and beautiful enough. It is chiefly in dingy attics that one dreams of violet cities--and so on. So if I had had that noble lady, I should have been content. The absence of her made the stealthy shadows dingy, atticy--incomplete. (L, 91)

Stevens' woman figure was to remain throughout much of his poetry associated with the night, the moon, and stars (especially Venus).

His letters to Elsie indicate that she herself was the next image associated by him with his imagination. On January 12, 1909, he opened his letter to her:

> To-night you must come to no serious purpose--come as Bo-Peep--(I do not say it boldly.) --Imagine my page to be as white as the white sheet they use for magic-lantern shows--and suddenly see your changeful self appear there in the ribbons and flowers of the damsel that lost her sheep. I point and say (not at all familiarly)--"ma chere Bo!" And you vanish. --But it really isn't so frightful when I say it again, and perhaps you would not always vanish. (L, 118)

The manner in which he summons her presence before him, even here in a comic vein, anticipates the way in which the woman

figure is addressed in many of his poems. In fact, a number of Stevens' first (post-Harvard) published poems were written for Elsie.[6] But, as we will see, already in Harmonium, the woman presence is a pervasive one and was not to be confined in a single figure.

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[6] Stevens wrote two groups of poems for Elsie, each of which he collected in the years 1908 and 1909 under the title "June Book." Six of these poems appeared in Trend in 1914. See Buttel, pp. 48-49, 49n.

CHAPTER II

"THE MULES THAT ANGELS RIDE": HARMONIUM

The poetry of Harmonium developed out of the need to live spiritually in a physical world. Stevens bears witness to the failure of the romantic imagination that would unify living experience through a belief in transcendent spirit or through a sense of spirit outside the mind within nature. That which remains after this loss of faith in either form of spiritual life is the double sense that imagination creates the world that it lives in and that the fluttering things of nature declare their own presence--a condition which results in an unstable fluctuation between a bodiless but spiritually efficacious consciousness and a profane but physical external universe. The poems of Harmonium are largely given over, first, to decreating romanticisms that would resolve the living duality on bases no longer acceptable to Stevens, and, then, to exploring the two frontiers, the domains of the imagination and physical reality.

Stevens' exploration in Harmonium and throughout his poetry takes place on substantially two levels: that of analytic discourse, resulting in the meditative cast of his

poetry,[1] and that of mythic figuration, imagery which both sustains the discourse and serves as the cutting edge of the exploration. This second level makes up the presential dimension of Stevens' poetry because it exists at the confluence of his experience of a physical world and of his own imagination. Even in Harmonium these interior presences begin to compose a mythic structure facing toward external presence, while at the same time the philosophic meditation fluctuates in its emphasis between the realms of imagination and physical reality.

Following his marriage in 1909, Stevens' Journal entries largely cease, and even his letters to his wife in the ensuing period show a less pronounced concern with the elements of his fresh spiritual. It is mainly to the poetry that we must turn to pick up the thread of the quest. In 1914, Stevens began publishing his poetry for the first time since his undergraduate days, and in September, 1923, published his first collection in Harmonium.

The two most important poems in Harmonium for reflecting Stevens' spiritual evolution are "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "Sunday Morning." Not only are the poems similar in style and content, they also trace parallel spiritual steps and point in the same direction toward Stevens' future development. Although "Sunday Morning"

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[1] The standard discussion of Stevens' meditative style is Louis L. Martz, The Poem of the Mind (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), chs. 10 and 11.

first appeared in print three years prior to "Le Monocle," I wish to turn to the latter poem first largely because it ties in closely with the last picture of Stevens we saw in the early letters.[2]

II

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (13-18) confronts the problem of the survival of imagination and love in a world of change and decay. It is Stevens' address as a man of forty and "past meridian" to his imagination, whose desire for transcendent love appears to conflict with the poet's natural world. The poem concerns a fall, both from a sense of timeless unity with nature sustained by a sexually oriented imagination, and from romantic ideas of heavenly or earthly transcendence, the "starry connaissance" or the "coiffures of Bath."

The opening section recounts first the poet's mocking of his imagination's pretensions to sovereignty, having addressed her:

> "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
> O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
> There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."

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[2] Stevens, of course, arranged "Le Monocle" ahead of "Sunday Morning" in both Harmonium and the Collected Poems. Also, there is reason to believe that a short manuscript poem, "Dolls," itself a progenitor of "Le Monocle," was written about a year before the publication of "Sunday Morning." See Buttel, pp. 185-86.

Surely the opening address recalls Marian liturgy--"Mother of God" and "Regina of Rome"--but its overall purport develops out of the contrast between meaningless words which do not kill and freshly realized words that do kill. It is Stevens' old conflict again between the imagination as romantic queen and the destructive power of language associated with the immediate world (science, business, modern life). But now the memory of the "radiant bubble that she was" causes a "deep up-pouring from some saltier well / Within. . . ." The contrast between the imagination as queen of the heavens and the depth release of a new "watery syllable" of poetry (not from the heavens but from the mind) prefigures the alignment of symbolic forces both in this poem and in Harmonium as a whole. The imagination as transcendent queen gives way to the depth force of "some saltier well." Stevens' imagination imaged as woman sets sail in this first volume for "the high interiors of the sea" as the "Paltry Nude" who "is discontent / And would have purple stuff upon her arms" (5). Her gradual ennoblement throughout Stevens' poetry will depend upon her relationship to the natural processes of earth and the well of the imagination that she symbolizes--the "green vine angering for life" (95) and the "interior ocean's rocking" (79).

Section ii combines symbolic expression with discursive explanation, Stevens' favorite poetic technique (in this poem occurring in varying degrees in every section). The "red bird," representing Stevens' own desires, here

seeks his singing place "Among the choirs of wind and wet and wing" (earth's natural processes). But while the aging poet through consciousness of passing time cannot celebrate the spring, his imagination continues to require and imagine transcendence and love (cf. section v). The impossibility of individual, physical beauty surviving in time is the subject of section iii. The implication is that it is foolish to seek the "end of love" in such a form of beauty (abbreviated here as hair) when "not one curl in nature" survives. Yet the "radiant bubble" of the imagination's desire--the woman imaged here in her unmade hair and probably still partially associated with the poet's wife (cf. L, 251)--continues to appear out of the mind's depths, sleep (cf. 113).

The central theme of the fall is the subject of section iv. Consciousness of time and inevitable death means that the physical fruit of life tastes "acrid," instead of "sweet" as it did formally when the imagination's image of love and beauty was Eve, existing outside of time in "heavenly, orchard air." The symbolic apple teaches the same moral as the skull, but "excels" the skull in teaching not only awareness of death but also of the loss of love--since it itself is the "fruit / Of love. . . ." At this point in the poem, then, love remains accessible only to the "fiery boys" and "sweet-smelling virgins" of section v. Venus, the "furious star," burns only for youth, whose love is bound up with the procreative processes of earth--which

for the poet merely tick "tediously the time of one more year." And he recalls the crickets (a persistent image of cyclic process for Stevens) and the time when his imagination's "first imagery / Found inklings of [its] bond to all that dust."

Section vi and especially section vii initiate a turn toward the first positive aim of Stevens' spiritual. I do not agree with Joseph N. Riddel that section vi is "the most prophetic stanza in early Stevens"[3]--although on an abstract level the section points to the crux of Stevens' problem. The real breakthroughs in Stevens' development do not occur on a conceptual plane but in the mythic symbolism that links together the desire of his imagination and his sense of a physical world. For instance, in this case, section vii provides a genuine mythic thrust which continues to develop into the later poetry, while section vi states an abstract problem that remains fairly constant throughout Stevens' work.[4]

If the problem for "men at forty" is to discover "The basic slate, the universal hue," the difficulty is to preserve the "substance in us that prevails" (the desire and the capacity for love) in the face of the "quirky turn[s]"

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[3] The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 91.

[4] Riddel himself says: "There is every indication that [Stevens'] ideas in the abstract were fully formed (if not clearly refined) in the early poems. . . . His development is manifest in an evolution of style" (The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 5).

of the immediate world. In other words, how can we relate in love to a basic abstraction in the midst of a world of particulars that command our attentions and our love while reminding us of our age? At this point in the poem, it still appears to Stevens that "when amorists grow bald, then amours shrink / Into the compass and curriculum / Of introspective exiles, lecturing." Love remains "a theme for Hyacinth alone," that immortal youth.

The way out of the dilemma emerges powerfully in section vii first through spiritually weighted imagery:

> The mules that angels ride come slowly down
> The blazing passes, from beyond the sun.

Instead of ascension myth, this is descension myth. The angels return to earth, and on mules reminiscent of the Christ story as well as of the self-denial and otherworldly aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The centurions are of this world: they "guffaw," and their tankards shrill, not tinkle like the bells of the muleteers. They are Roman soldiers, certainly reminders of their counterparts at the Crucifixion, although here they are within a semi-comic context. "Suppose these couriers brought amid their train / A damsel heightened by eternal bloom." In such case, the "universal hue" sought in the previous section could perhaps be found in the transcendent idea of spirit, beauty, and love brought now to earth, whose honey "both comes and goes at once." Stevens expresses the idea

more fully in "Peter Quince at the Clavier"--especially:

> The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
> So evenings die, in their green going,
> A wave, interminably flowing. (92)

A sense of the eternal within the processes of time, and not outside of them--this is what the descending angels can bring from "beyond the sun." This is the "ancient aspect touching a new mind" which the poet in section viii "behold[s], in love."

But even as he sees in new light the eternal damsel of the imagination of earth, the poet cannot avoid sharp awareness of his own decay and approaching death. Speaking of himself and of the woman of his imagination, he writes:

> Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
> Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
> Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
> Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.
> We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
> The laughing sky will see the two of us
> Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

Stevens' constant self-reminders of age and death can be understood, especially in Harmonium, as persistent attempts to negate the romantic tendency to idealize the earth without fully accepting its dimensions. Recalling that Elsie, his wife, had been (and still partially was at the time of this poem apparently) one of Stevens' images for the queen of his imagination, the foregoing acknowledgement of age and death is particularly poignant in view of the following more

youthful extravagances in letters to Elsie (March 21, 24, 1907):

> you will never grow old, will you. . . . You must always have pink cheeks and golden hair. To be young is all there is in the world. The rest is nonsense--and cant. . . . Let us wear bells together and never grow up. . . . Will that stop Time and Nature?--Let us trap Nature, this cruel mother. . . . (L, 97, 100)

Although in section ix Stevens urges his imagination--his "ward of Cupido," his "venerable heart"--to "celebrate / The faith of forty," all but the most general idea of what that faith is remains unclear at this point, especially in view of the mordant recognitions of the previous section. The contours of the faith will only slowly be filled in from here on by the celebration of Stevens' poetry. The rite and the faith are interdependent. Now in a jovial manner, the poet seeks "verses wild with motion" to reflect the war of life, "music and manner of the paladins / To make oblation fit." He asks: "Where shall I find / Bravura adequate to this great hymn?" The context is dandyish, but the search for the right "Bravura" is essentially serious and central to Stevens' poetic quest.

Section x introduces one of Stevens' most pervasive mythic images: the tree, particularly the giant pine tree. A stately point of reference in Stevens' mythopoeic geography, the tree serves to focus his sense of the procreative earth; for while being a part of the green, cyclic pattern the tree also rises above it, a natural abstraction. Stevens' tree "stands gigantic" and contrasts sharply with

the "magic trees" and "balmy boughs" of the "fops of fancy." Such trees as these latter are usually visualized by the poet as palm trees (cf. "cloudy palm," 68). Not noble and not phallic, they appear to be associated in his mind with the mystical side of the Bible (one thinks of the "mules that angels ride" and Jesus' palm-strewn entry into Jerusalem). In this section, of course, the "balmy boughs" with their "silver-ruddy, gold-vermillion fruit" more broadly connote a generalized sense of the romantic. Stevens wants it clear that his "yeoman" symbol has nothing of the mystical about it. It is simply the enduring, procreative earth itself focused into the phallic tip "To which all birds come sometime in their time." Just as the "red bird" of section ii seeks his choir in the "wind and wet and wing," so the birds here are totally within the scheme of nature--unlike the poet, who in the following section makes it clear that man often acts "without regard / To that first, foremost law." But while Stevens is able to illustrate that sex is not all, he at the same time places himself in the "Anguishing" position of having separated himself once again from the processes of earth, the processes toward which his poem has been moving to validate spiritually. He finds himself here in the same position as in section ii, separated from the choirs of birds and without a choir of his own except his memory of his earlier romantic self--the "radiant bubble" before the apple was tasted. The last part of section xi illustrates the

division between the romantic "pool of pink" and "odious chords" of the frog. The imagination continues to desire its "heavenly, orchard air"--here its pool of lilies--but "Last night" is past and the imagination can no longer escape the sound of the booming frog (slimily real, sexual, and dying).

"Le Monocle" concludes on a positive note, prefigured by the descent of the mules and by the gigantic tree. Stevens' pigeons are apt symbols of modern spirit (imagination), ordinary birds of man's cities, replacing the dove, the traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit.

> A blue pigeon it is, that circles the blue sky,
> On sidelong wing, around and round and round.
> A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground,
> Grown tired of flight.

The blue pigeon of man's own imagination has ascended and taken on life in the blue sky. The white pigeon of transcendent spirit has fluttered back to earth, descending like the mules. The poet compares himself to a rabbi, once again drawing on the spiritual fund of Judeo-Christian imagery. When young he was distanced from the immediate world, his spiritual imagination focused elsewhere, and man then only a lump of flesh in his sight. Spiritual presence and physical reality remained divided until now when he is no longer content to simply observe in "lordly study."

> Like a rose rabbi, later, I pursued,
> And still pursue, the origin and course
> Of love, but until now I never knew
> That fluttering things have so distinct a shade.

Calling on that "substance in us that prevails," the capacity for love, for presential response to a sacred earth, Stevens announces the onset of his quest. The transcendent damsel has descended; the white pigeon has fluttered into things of this world, things which now have a "shade"--reminiscent of the bodiless spirit-shades of Dante as well as of simple physical reality. The conclusion of the poem is enigmatic. The meaning of such total incarnation is the purpose of Stevens' lifelong exploration.

III

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

"Sunday Morning" (66-70) opens with a conflict between the religious imagination and the immediate world. But here the immediate world is a more colorful and happy one than in most sections of "Le Monocle," and there is less nostalgia in Stevens' treatment of the religious past than in his picture of the romantic past in the first poem. Section i provides an example of one of Stevens' symbolic cross-currents. At first the immediate world dissipates the ancient one; then the "old catastrophe" encroaches on the present. This is an early instance of Stevens being caught between the forces of the spiritualizing imagination and the material world. In this section the imagination still seeks

its living form in the Christian myth, but the poem as a whole, of course, attempts to realign the imagination with its immediate world.

This first section is a wonderful, dream-like realization of the two worlds available for the imagination's spiritual sustenance. The Crucifixion moves into the center of consciousness primarily as an unearthly and death-oriented scene. It begins as a "calm" moving across water, darkening the shining ripples--in a sense, taking the life out of the water. From the perspective of her dream of Palestine, in the immediate world "pungent oranges and bright, green wings / Seem things in some procession of the dead. . . ." Stevens' water symbolism is an essential part of his mythic development: life-giving and death-giving, water is of the earth and therefore "inescapable." Only her "dreaming feet" can cross the "wide water" to the "Dominion of the blood and sepulchre." Sacrificial and death-oriented, the Christian myth, as Stevens sees it here, stands in sharp contrast to the green earth.

Moving on to a more discursive level in section ii, Stevens asks:

> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?

One desires to live in a physical world; "Divinity must live within herself"; the earth can come to seem like heaven.

Stevens' fundamental man-God, earth-Heaven metaphor has yet a comfortable prettiness about it. What remains to be developed over some thirty-five more years of poetry is a mythic portrait of earth-heaven as alien, savage, and powerful--and real. Here the "measures destined for her soul" are rain, snow, forest, and so on. But the full measures which will come to provide the forms of the poet's imagination will not be arrived at so easily. The false romantic will be decreated--including many of these "passions," "moods," "Grievings," "Elations," and "gusty / Emotions." In later poetry the earth will not only be celebrated as paradise but affirmed at the same time in its "essential barrenness" (393).

Section iii is a call for total incarnation. The trouble with Jove lies in his "inhuman birth" and the fact that "no sweet land gave / Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind." It is the human that is the center of man's spiritual; it is Christ's human desire that is responsible for "commingling" man's blood with Jove's mind. One wonders, though, whether the sky will be "much friendlier" after the sky God has descended. Even if it will not be the source of retribution, it will have been emptied of its residing spirit. The sky, like the rock, will come to declare a presence that is part of man's "labor" and "pain," but in itself a "dominant blank" (477).

Sections iv, v, and vi assert the single reality for man of time and earth: "There is not any haunt of

prophecy"; only "April's green endures." Once again birds inhabit the landscape, providing morning song and evening descent. The "consummation of the swallow's wings" prepares delightfully for the poem's final image. The imagination's longing for "imperishable bliss" conflicts with its quest for "enduring love" (lasting, not everlasting)--in other words, for sacred beauty. But "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires." This earth-mother-death figure is a central presence in Stevens' poetry. Here it is sufficient to observe that "Although she strews the leaves / Of sure obliteration on our paths . . . She makes the willow shiver in the sun. . . ." Death and procreation are twin aspects of the same process, and Stevens' willow tree is another of the poet's pine-tree-like images, phallic and rooted in the earth. The tree is given motion by the wind of change (death) when seen in the light of the real sun. Like the "fiery boys" and "sweet-smelling virgins" of "Le Monocle," the youths of section v, involved in the process of death and birth, awaken to the sexual, do their devotion, and "stray impassioned in the littering leaves," once again bringing life out of death (cf. 183-84). Still however, the poet (or the woman-figure of his imagination) is no longer a part of this scene of youth--although his sense of loss is far less pronounced in this poem than in "Le Monocle." While section v illustrates the source of April's endurance, section vi is Stevens' first longer comparison of earth to

paradise, finding in earth the substance of man's imagination and his paradises.

As we have observed of "Le Monocle," the processes of earth centered in time and change are envisioned as the proper environment for a fresh spiritual, the eternal dame coming to rest in the realm of the gigantic tree. Section vi continues the answer to the imagination's need for "imperishable bliss." Instead of emphasizing positively the processes of earth, this section negates the idea of imperishable paradises. Without death, paradise seems merely a pale copy of earth, but the argument still depends at this point on romantic images of nature, such as the "silken weavings of our afternoons." The section concludes by affirming the realm of earth-mother-death as the matrix out of which develop the imagination's creative queens:

> Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
> Within whose burning bosom we devise
> Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

Once again, as in "Le Monocle" (iii), the creative presence is associated with sleep, or rather with the sleepless depths of being, described elsewhere as "Vocalissimus, / In the distances of sleep" (113).

Although declaring the earth man's spiritual abode provides the basis for fresh belief, the next stage of the problem concerns the "Bravura adequate" to the devotion, the rite that can form the presences of the spiritual. Section vii is Stevens' first major effort to image both a devotion and a God-like presence. The devotion involves a primitive

exuberance, both bodily motion and vocal chant, a "heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish. . . ." The sun is not a God, "but as a God might be, / Naked among them, like a savage source." Such "boisterous devotion" persists only as a minor aspect of Stevens' rite. It seems to belong more properly in the comic picture of the "disaffected flagellants" in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," who are "well-stuffed, / Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade" (59). But the sun, of course, endures as a major mythic presence in Stevens' poetry. Exalted and elementary, both near and distant, the sun as a "savage source" exists at the junction of one of Stevens' symbolic cross-currents. Like the earth-mother who is both death and renewal, the sun (later a consort for her) is both of the sky and of the earth. The chant of the devotees is "of their blood, returning to the sky," but the sun, unlike Jove, "delights" in the "sweet land"--the lake, the trees, and the hills. To the extent that the primitive men represent an effort to become one with earth's processes, they do not provide an adequate avenue for Stevens' further development. He has already shown that a man "past meridian" (13) cannot join nature's choir. But as men through whom the natural forces can speak "voice by voice," these men are more elements of nature than representatives of a new belief. The real significance of this section for Stevens' development is that it shows the earth declaring itself, providing the configuration of the chant to the God-like sun and to the

forces which continue to choir after the men's chant is completed. The men themselves are of the "dew"--which Stevens interprets in a letter: "Men do not either come from any direction or disappear in any direction. Life is as meaningless as dew" (L, 250). The prime interest of this section for the developing myth is that the natural elements (here still romanticized) are conjoined with a devotion to the sun "as a God might be." Much later in Stevens' poetry the forces of earth (things of the sun) will come to form the configuration of the imagination-God when united in the icon of the poem.

Section viii is in a sense a revelation that amounts to a final dismissal of the extra-terrestrial elements of Christianity. The impulse in the first section to cross the "wide water" on "dreaming feet" is now arrested by a voice from the same spiritual dimension announcing: "The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering. / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay." The imagination can no more escape the water than Jesus could the grave; and the water that has been "without sound" is now the stage for a voice of proclamation. Stevens had recorded in a letter some years earlier his response to the "wonder of the life and death of Jesus" and his sudden realisation that "God was distinct from Jesus" (L, 140). But in this section what is left when Jesus' humanity is affirmed is an "old chaos of the sun," life with no external sponsor. Here the central tendency for Stevens to reduce the earth to its barrenness

is countered by more romantic nature imagery--deer, quail, and berries--though one step at least is accomplished: an acceptance of the humanity of Jesus as well as the "isolation of the sky." Once again, as in "Le Monocle," the pigeons remain as symbols of the spirit descending to earth from an empty sky. Also preserved is a sense of the enigma of the new spiritual condition along with a sense of affirmative hope--the "extended wings"--like the blue pigeons of "Le Monocle."

Looking back over the two poems, one observes a comic dandyism in "Le Monocle" that is far less pronounced in "Sunday Morning." Though there is no question that the comic also finds a significant place in Stevens' fresh spiritual, the poet's sense of comedy will be increasingly assimilated and balanced with the meditative and mythic elements of his poetry (cf. "St. Armorer's Church from Outside," 529-30). And even "Sunday Morning" points in this direction. Overall, "Le Monocle" is concerned with a somewhat fortunate fall, while "Sunday Morning" follows the fall with an affirmation of total incarnation and a concomitant acceptance of the finality of death. "Sunday Morning" also broaches more fully the problem of a mythic foundation (sun-God, mother-death) to acclimate the spirit to its new environment, although both poems depend heavily on imagery of spiritual descent. The main difference between the two poems is reflected in their titles: "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is a dandyesque image enigmatically pointing both to

the trick of language and to the general perspective of an older man; "Sunday Morning" names a traditional, religious day as well as calling to mind the casual time for thought associated by some with that morning (cf. the poem's opening lines). Most important, the latter title leads from the specifically Christian religious tradition to a reminder of the elemental basis of the word Sunday as a day of the sun (cf. "Ploughing on Sunday"). In a minor way, this strategy anticipates one of the major tendencies in Stevens' poetry as a whole. Traditional modes of experience in all their forms are destroyed at least momentarily in order to create the ground for fresh sight, experience of a new sacred, a "primitive ecstasy" (321).

In the manner, then, of the word Sunday, Stevens gradually uncovers vast, elemental forces--presences of earth and sky that constitute the mythic dimension of the poetry. These symbols generally remain abstract to the extent that they are not records of specific personal experiences but rather vague forces that slowly enter the poetry to form finally a primitive-like myth opening into an immediate world. In a sense, the mythic elements are what remain after Stevens' decreation takes place. When man's experience becomes totally deromanticized (demythologized), two domains remain: first, the mind, made up of huge abstractions of the external world--Tree instead of trees, Sun instead of specific sunny days; and, second, the external world experienced in an immediate sense as

mystery--a blank--that for which we have no words. Both these existential conditions form the background of Stevens' poetry and, of course, both are functions of the same constant--the destruction (or acknowledged deterioration) of former modes of spiritual experience.

The poetry of Harmonium as a whole traces the problem resulting when spiritual desire lacks a mode of spiritual fulfillment. Often the world appears to be either a lump (without imagination) or a false romantic creation (with imagination). For example, the prime tension in the volume as a whole resembles Crispin's difficulty in deciding between "man [as] the intelligence of his soil" and the "soil [as] man's intelligence" (27, 36). Deciding simply on the latter guide only leads to the "insoluble lump" (45) of the world as turnip--certainly in some ways a less acceptable spiritual condition than the "fluttering things" and "ambiguous undulations" of the poems under discussion, poems which do not clearly opt one way or the other for soil or intelligence.

But no matter what our opinion of Stevens' meditative determinations in Harmonium, the fact remains that a large body of mythic imagery has already begun to develop by this point in Stevens' career. Almost all of the major elemental symbols make at least an appearance in Harmonium, although of course most of them will also go through more full-scale development in his future poetry. It is time to turn to an analysis of the mythic dimension of much of the

basic imagery in Harmonium in order to provide the foundation for an exploration of the main line of development of Stevens' poetry.

CHAPTER III

"FROM THE EARTH WE CAME": MYTHIC IMAGERY

Beneath the meditative, urbane level of Stevens' poetry flows an undercurrent of elemental symbolism, a world of mountain and sea, sun and tree, which combines with the mysterious woman presences of the imagination to form a deeply primitive environment. Existing at the point of contact between sensory experience and the forces of the inner self, this complex of abstract imagery operates as a mythic screen to provide the basis of presential experience. Not to be confused with romantic primitivism, this mythic atmosphere occupies the vacancy left by decreations resulting primarily from the good sense of the centrally civilized mind. That this primitive orientation in Stevens' poetry is no isolated instance in modern literature is attested to by Northrop Frye's recent comments on the "modern tradition":

> Of all elements in the modern tradition, perhaps that of primitive art, of whatever age or continent, has had the most pervasive influence. The primitive, with its immediate connexion with magic, expresses a directness of imaginative impact which is naive and yet conventionalized, spontaneous and yet precise. It indicates most clearly the way in which a long and tired tradition of Western art, which has been refining and sophisticating itself for centuries, can be revived, or even reborn. Perhaps the kinship between the primitive and ourselves goes even deeper: it has frequently been remarked that we

> may be, if we survive, the primitives of an unknown culture, the cave men of a new mental era.[1]

The critic attempting to approach this primitive foundation is beset by the problem of trying to verbalize a spiritual dimension whose validity partly results from its not being tied down, from symbols that should remain open-ended. Stevens warns that "Nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible [than nobility]. Nothing distorts itself and seeks disguise more quickly. There is a shame of disclosing it and in its definite presentations a horror of it" (NA, 34). In Anatomy of Criticism Frye warns that "it is not easy to find any language capable of expressing the unity of this higher intellectual universe. Metaphysics, theology, history, law, have all been used, but all are verbal constructs, and the further we take them, the more clearly their metaphorical and mythical outlines show through." Frye goes on to conclude: "Whenever we construct a system of thought to unite earth with heaven, the story of the Tower of Babel recurs: we discover that after all we can't quite make it, and that what we have in the meantime is a plurality of languages." Frye's own answer to the problem involves an acceptance of the centrality of archetypal criticism, since "historical criticism uncorrected relates culture only to the past, [and] ethical criticism uncorrected relates culture only to the future. . . ." If

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[1] The Modern Century (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 95-96.

the dreamer of Finnegans Wake fails to make use of the "keys to dreamland," such activity is left for the reader and for the critic. Frye believes that making use of this "vast body of metaphorical identifications" can help to reforge "the broken links between creation and knowledge, art and science, myth and concept. . . ."[2]

Likewise, a cautious investigation of Stevens' mythic forms can help to forge a link between the poet's interior universe and his experience of a physical world. While such imagery faces inward toward the archetypal dimension of the mind, it also faces outward toward sensory experience. To understand these elemental symbols as mythic presences is to see the poetry itself more clearly in its role of "instinctive incantation" (291). Stevens' effort "to step barefoot into reality" (423) involves the cultivation of a sophisticated mythopoeic style that has much in common with primitive myths. In some ways his fresh spiritual is a leap back in the direction of the primitive shaman, who with his incantatory drums mesmerized his experience of a physical world into ritual celebration. Joseph Campbell writes, for instance, that "primitive man, from the first we know of him, through his myths and rites, turned every aspect of his work into a festival."[3] Recalling Frye's observations concerning the relation between primitive art

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[2] Anatomy of Criticism (1957; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1966), pp. 354, 341, 346, 354.

[3] Creative Mythology, p. 385.

and the "long and tired tradition of Western art," it is possible to see Stevens' primitive-like foundation as a new stage for presential experience.

Stevens' awareness of the tired traditions and his sense of an immediate earth are often juxtaposed in his poetry. He writes in the very early "Phases":

> There was heaven,
> Full of Raphael's costumes;
> And earth,
> A thing of shadows,
> Stiff as stone. . . . (OP, 5)

In order to open himself to the declarations of earth, Stevens frequently turns away from the traditional toward a primitive freshness. This tendency is clear already in another early poem, "Comme Dieu Dispense de Graces" (OP, 13-14) from "Lettres D'un Soldat":

> Here I keep thinking of the Primitives--
> The sensitive and conscientious schemes
> Of mountain pallors ebbing into air;
>
> And I remember sharp japonica--
> The driving rains, the willows in the rain,
> The birds that wait out rain in willow leaves.
>
> Although life seems a goblin mummery,
> These images return and are increased,
> As for a child in an oblivion. . . .

The young imagination in the oblivion resulting from the ebb of the old "mountain pallors" experiences sharply like a primitive an immediate earth, which however remains "mummery" without a mountain myth.

The discussion which follows seeks to highlight the spiritual dimension of Stevens' symbolism through frequent comparisons to primitive myth. In no way do I want to

underestimate his emphasis on the good sense of civilization or to imply a romantic regression. If Stevens' myth grows out of his attention to the primordial demands of the mind, it also develops out of response to an immediate physical world and to the demands of civilized consciousness. At the same time I do not consider my stressing of the primitive-like side of his imagery to be reductive. For instance, Géza Róheim has remarked: "If the testimony of anthropology indicates anything, it shows that primitive man is free, untrammeled, and truly self-reliant in comparison with Medieval or Modern Man."[4]

Stevens' mythic imagery from the Harmonium period consists largely of poetic abstractions of the processes of earth and sky and of the mind of man and its creations. To consider that such imagery merely stands for abstract ideas is to reduce the mythic elements to a conceptual level, when, in fact, such forms often enable the poet to escape the confines of discursive thought, preparing the way for abstract ideas rather than resulting from them. Stevens' mythic symbolism is very much responsible for the environment of many of his poems, the kind of environment that Stevens maintains "naturalizes [the reader] into its own imagination" (NA, 50). Such imagery provides a link between the poet's abstract ideas and his immediate sense

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[4] Magic and Schizophrenia, ed. Warner Muensterberger (1955; rpt. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1962), p. 50.

experience. It also provides a connection with past myths--fictions which have enabled people to relate in spiritual depth to their immediate surroundings and the mystery underlying all.

Mircea Eliade writes: "A thing becomes sacred in so far as it embodies (that is, reveals) something other than itself." But since Stevens' development is toward sacralization of the earth itself, the presences of his poetry do not point away from themselves. What Stevens' elemental abstractions do reveal is the earth itself and the mind of man--not elements of earth embodying the "wholly other" or the mind speaking God's Word, but rather the earth and the mind as sources of the myth of the "wholly other" and of God. Eliade goes on: "The thing that becomes sacred is still separated in regard to itself, for it only becomes a hierophany at the moment of stopping to be a mere profane something, at the moment of acquiring a new 'dimension' of sacredness."[5] Stevens' myth develops in response to a physical universe that provides no hierophanies--only a "Domination of Black." Stevens' inherited myths do not provide for him the basis for experience of the sacred. His poetry is therefore largely not the record of specific sacred encounters. Instead, the mythic elements of his poetry mostly appear early and develop gradually, looming larger and larger as they begin to form the ground of his

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[5] Patterns in Comparative Religion, trans. Rosemary Sheed (1958; rpt. New York: Meridian, 1963), p. 13.

belief and the stage for sacred experience--that is, not experience of an embodiment of the "wholly other," but experience of a thing sacred in itself, a "scrawny cry" that points nowhere but to itself. Stevens' fresh spiritual, then, is diametrically opposed to the traditional sense of the religious. Eliade observes: "Nowhere in the history of religions do we find an adoration of any natural object in itself. A sacred thing . . . is sacred because it reveals or shares in ultimate reality. Every religious object is always an 'incarnation' of something: of the sacred."[6] Stevens' scrawny "chorister" is sacred because it is "part of the colossal sun" (534). When ultimate reality for man is of the sun, the sacred object becomes an incarnation of the human spirit alone--which "adds nothing, [to reality] except itself" (NA, 61).

Stevens' mythic symbolism divides roughly according to its relation either to the earth or to the mind. The imagery devoted to the earth represents natural processes and formations centered in an earth-mother-death personification as well as in a symbolism of the life-giving sun. Imagery of the mind is rooted in Stevens' multi-formed woman figure, expressive of the idea of love and beauty, and supplemented by the star Venus and the rite of art and its creations.

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[6]Ibid., p. 158.

As we have observed, the basic mythic pattern of the early Stevens emerges in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "Sunday Morning." In these poems the lines of spiritual force lead downward, but there is no sense of a sky God impregnating the earth mother--only everywhere a sense of falling to earth. The symbols of the imagination alone appear to rise. The idea of love is embodied in images of woman and star. And the sun is presented as life-giving force, worshipped by "Supple and turbulent" men chanting in "orgy." But the relation between the procreative sun-earth and the poet "past meridian" remains largely enigmatic.

Two forms of transcendence are clearly denied in these poems: the mystical imagination within and the transcendent God without. The opening address of "Le Monocle" to the imagination's lady deflates through an overabundance resounding of Marian liturgy: "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds, / O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon." E. O. James characterizes the "Madonna of Catholic devotion": "She is nothing less than the Mother of God, the Queen of Heaven, the Woman clothed with the sun, having the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars above her head. . . ."[7] From the outset Stevens denies the imagination's woman image garbed in the traditional, supermundane garments of Catholicism.

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[7] The Cult of the Mother-Goddess (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959), p. 224.

Along with this symbol of the imagination goes the traditional image of an extra-terrestrial man-God; Jove of the "mythy mind" is no longer the proper consort of the mother earth. The impregnating rain of "Ploughing on Sunday" is already in the field; it does not arrive there through the offices of a beneficent or procreative God. Only the "wind pours down," bringing all transcendent images to earth. Eliade discusses the "notion of the universal monarch, a sun or representative of the sky God on earth. . . . [This] Emperor is the 'son of heaven'. . . ."[8] Stevens announces in Harmonium that "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" (64).[9]

Although Jove and paradise are to be succeeded by man and earth, the portrayal of earth in Harmonium is not primarily paradisiacal. While disparate elements of the earth--"bright, green wings"--are frequently celebrated, the earth mother herself is largely a matter of death and procreation. In "In the Carolinas" (4-5) Stevens asks with comic surprise: "Timeless mother, / How is it that your aspic nipples / For once vent honey?" The question belies the poet's expectation of anything but honey from his mother earth. The mother's answer in this instance is merely a

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[8] Patterns, pp. 62-63.

[9] Cf. Alan W. Watts, "Western Mythology: Its Dissolution and Transformation," Myths, Dreams, and Religion, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 9: "The most basic model or image of the world which has governed Western civilization has been the idea of the universe as a political monarchy. . . ."

remnant of Stevens' romantic view of nature (so clearly present in his early letters): "The pine-tree sweetens my body / The white iris beautifies me." The deer, quail, and berries of "Sunday Morning" are part of this same romantic attempt to make the processes of death more palatable. Usually when Stevens maintains in an immediate way that "Death is the mother of beauty," he falls into the contradiction of trying to celebrate a romantic nature made up of "warty squashes . . . Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains." This romantic orientation toward nature gradually disappears in his poetry, but the presence of the earth-mother-death figure remains at the center of his fresh spiritual.

Most of Stevens' acknowledgments of final death in Harmonium are in a comic-grotesque mode. Badroulbadour is carried out of her tomb--her gate to heaven--not by angels but by worms (49-50). Rosenbloom ascends to be buried in the sky "To a chirr of gongs / And a chitter of cries . . . To a jangle of doom / And a jumble of words" (80). Rituals oriented around the idea of spiritual ascension, symbolized by the rose or captured by the Biblical-sounding name Badroulbadour, are debunked by the burial of an ordinary corpse in the sky, both "Body and soul" (81). Rosenbloom is as dead as the woman who is cold and dumb, with horny feet protruding, in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream."

Eliade observes: "The marriage between heaven and earth was the first hierogamy. . . . The divine couple,

Heaven and Earth, . . . are one of the leitmotiven of universal mythology."[10] Stevens' earth mother presence in Harmonium is left without her mythological consort when the transcendent spirit of sky is denied. She sees "over the bare spaces of our skies . . . a barer sky that does not bend." Man's own spiritual condition alters, then, when the ultimate sky fails to bend in union around the earth: "Yet the spaciousness and light / In which the body walks and is deceived, / Falls from that fatal and that barer sky, / And this the spirit sees and is aggrieved." The poem's title is "Anatomy of Monotony" (107-108), but its concerns very much point towards Stevens' future development. For the imagination of man will now become the consort of earth, and earth the consort of man, but only when the imagination and God have become one. Furthermore, the development of man's spirit will be interwoven with his sense of earth's presence. The same poem opens:

> If from the earth we came, it was an earth
> That bore us as a part of all the things
> It breeds and that was lewder than it is.
> Our nature is her nature. Hence it comes,
> Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows
> The same. We parallel the mother's death.

The identity of man's nature with earth's nature, and earth's with man's, sets the stage for the prolific, symbolic cross-current I have outlined earlier. When it is developed that man is of the earth and also that the earth is of man, then the idea of man's God-like and barren

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[10] Patterns, pp. 239-40.

imagination will come into play with the earth's heaven-like and barren nature. The glory and mystery of human perception will even more completely occupy the center of Stevens' poetic stage. But already in Harmonium the presences of earth begin to declare themselves, entering the vacancy left by the poet's decreation of traditional religious and aesthetic romanticisms.

Intimately involved with Stevens' awareness of the earth mother are the multitude of natural processes that begin to structure his vision. Eliade observes that "The primal intuition of the Earth shows it as the foundation of every expression of existence. All that is on earth, is united with everything else, and all makes one great whole." The other side of the earth mother figure as death is the earth mother as procreation and renewal. Eliade writes: "What we call life and death are merely two different moments in the career of the Earth-Mother as a whole: life is merely being detached from the earth's womb, death is a returning 'home'."[11]

Stevens' sense of the procreative side of life is centered, in Harmonium as well as his later poetry, in his archetypal tree imagery. For Stevens, the tall, dark pine tree declares itself a presence of earth. Phallic and permanent, in its positive form it remains steadfast through all the seasonal changes of his poetry. Less an image of

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[11] Patterns, pp. 242, 253.

simple regeneration (such as the May Pole) and more a sort of enduring principle, the pine tree stands large as an unshakeable structure of life (and therefore death also). Eliade observes that "the tree represents . . . the living cosmos, endlessly renewing itself."[12] Such is the tree of "Le Monocle," which "stands gigantic, with a certain tip / To which all birds come sometime in their time. / But when they go that tip still tips the tree."

When the pine tree is recognized for the principle of life it comes to be throughout Stevens' poetry, two early renditions of such trees stand out all the more vividly in their negations. Something of the darkness out of which many of Stevens' poems emerge can be experienced in the following images. In "Domination of Black," the bright colors of the leaves, the fire, and the tails of the peacocks are all submerged within the "color of the heavy hemlocks." The turning changes of life in the wind, then, lead to vertigo and fear, not joy, when the poet sees "how the night came, / Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks" (8-9). Stevens' main symbol of procreative life is here a figure of death: the birds are not breeding in this tree but crying out (and real peacocks do scream) against the coming night.

A companion poem to "Domination of Black" in Harmonium, "The Snow Man" (9-10), sounds the same nadir of

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[12] Ibid., p. 267.

non-being, but this time through a sense of the lifelessness of winter instead of the protests of autumn. One of the difficulties with translating Stevens' imagery into philosophical abstraction is that such a poem as "The Snow Man" can be read simply as an illustration of the necessities and dangers of human consciousness or imagination: the snow man "beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." But emphasizing the elemental images of tree and winter, one can experience a powerful expression of non-being in a dead world:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves. . . .

The trees of life are covered with frozen death. The poem is an evocation of the "bare place" of a consciousness experiencing a sense of non-being without and within, the world of physical death confronting a mind which must remain nothing or experience "misery in the sound of the wind. . . ." It would be too pat to see this poem simply as the expression of a mind without a sustaining myth; the external world of the poem is more than just profane--it is a world against life, one of frozen inactivity reminiscent of Dante's version of Cocytus in which man remains frozen within himself.

So the trees of life in Harmonium represent non-life (not just cyclic change) as well as physical regeneration. And in these last two poems, the trees point clearly to this point as spiritually the darkest moment of Stevens' poetry. The earth's barrenness is affirmed without the saving God-imagination of man; the mind's barrenness is affirmed without the saving heaven-paradise of earth.

Another mythic tree image that appears in Harmonium and recurs in later poetry is Stevens' curious willow image. The earth mother of "Sunday Morning" "makes the willow shiver in the sun" so that the maidens and the boys will procreate. Here the willow is phallic and alive, in motion, one of Stevens' trees of life. But in his mind Stevens also associates the willow image with a church steeple, which is motionless and stands against the idea of physical procreation. The cock of morning and of life in Stevens' late "Credences of Summer" flies to a bean pole and, looking across the weedy garden of a former "complex of emotions," watches the "willow, motionless. / The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone" (377). Here the willow is used negatively to indicate a past principle of being, now dead, and contrasting sharply with the willow of sexual energy in "Sunday Morning." This latter image of the willow provides an excellent example of one way in which Stevens' mythic symbolism develops: through a principle of coalescence,

here of willow and steeple.[13] In a fairy tale Stevens sent to Elsie, August 3, 1909, he had written:

> A good many years ago, long before Malbrouck went to become a soldier, and yet not so long ago as the days of Hesiod (in fact, it is a little uncertain when) two pigeons sat on the roof of a barn and looked about them at the yellow corn-fields and the cows in the meadow and the church-spire over the hill and did nothing at all but murmur "Coo-coo-coo," "Coo-coo-coo" "Coo-coo-coo."

This illustration also points to an incipient mythic pattern ("days of Hesiod") focused outside of time ("it is a little uncertain when") which Stevens turns to again throughout his mature work and especially in the vignettes of some of his later poetry, such as in this episode involving the cock.

Counterbalancing the pine-tree-like imagery associated with the physical world is the palm-tree-like imagery associated by Stevens with the mind's fictions. In Stevens' mythic landscapes, the palm tree takes its place among the imagery of overabundance of the South--where there is little seasonal change. Romanticizing the exotic, Crispin makes "the most of savagery of palms" (31). But the palm has not the phallic sharpness of the pine, and so can easily become that "cloudy palm / Remote on heaven's hill" (68). Not only related to the South and to the Bible, the palm has yet another romantic connotation: the traditional palm of victory. The following use of the image involves all of

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[13] In this same poem the images of pine and tower also coalesce. See 373.

these connotations and more: when the "moral law" in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (59) is projected into "haunted heaven," "the conscience is converted into palms, / Like windy citherns hankering for hymns." Expressing both the poetic and religious (cf. "palmer") romantic, the palm remains still a tree, too, through which the wind makes weird, unearthly sounds. In later poetry this palm tree image also provides a gloss for Stevens' palm of the hand images (cf. 225).

Bird imagery in Harmonium is, first and most generally, imagery of natural life, often procreating in the pines (cf. 17). In the tropics, however, birds too share in the overabundance: "hawk and falcon, green toucan / And jay . . . raspberry tanagers in palms" (30)--symbolizing a physical world that is too exotic to be the proper "soil [of] man's intelligence" (36). On the other hand, specific kinds of birds begin to assume specialized purposes in this poetry, sometimes simply pointing toward the realm of abstract ideas, but often serving to unite Stevens' immediate sense of a presential world with abstraction. For instance, the swans of "Invective against Swans" (4) simply represent a romanticized attitude toward nature and life, associated respectively with the park and the statues. The soul can no longer fly in the swan's chariots when the "crows anoint the statues with their dirt." Unlike swans, however, birds such as crows, grackles and blackbirds are all part of a world fallen from the romantic--the world

where leftover egg shells sully nature's temple (cf. L, 62). "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (92-95) is an instance of Stevens' use of a symbol with mythic properties to explore and express this fallen world, which his poetry as a whole is continually in the act of discovering and creating. The poem opens:

> Among twenty snowy mountains,
> The only moving thing
> Was the eye of the blackbird.

The poem goes on to present a sequence of pictures, imaging a world in which the blackbird is both perceiver and object of perception, both within man and without--a relativistic universe ("many circles," ix) in state of flux ("the river is moving," xii) where the only "golden birds" (vii) are those which are imagined.

Peacocks, in contrast to the blackbirds, are romantic and vivid representatives of life as beauty. It is their coming death in a sense that is announced in "Domination of Black." Stevens' next two portraits of peacock-like birds are negative. In "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" (57-58), the peacock turns into a dream vision character named "Berserk," an insane romantic on a parallel with the equally insane modern world, "full of blocks / And blocking steel." The "parakeet of parakeets" in the satiric "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" (82) exists "amid a mort of tails," but "His lids are white because his eyes are blind." The tails of peacocks have long been associated

with beauty, resurrection and spiritual vision,[14] but Stevens draws on this fund of mythic connotations largely in order to negate the romantic. Yet the peacock's cry itself in "Domination of Black" is an image of vital immediacy, a reminder of the dimension out of which Stevens' abstractions grow.

Bird sounds echo throughout Harmonium and all of the subsequent poetry, but the most enduring note is the "rou-cou" of the dove or pigeon--the bird which for Stevens represents the ideal of spirit or love. In the early "Depression before Spring" (63), morning arrives, "the cock crows / But no queen rises." His "ki-ki-ri-ki / Brings no rou-cou, / No rou-cou-cou." In the tale which Stevens wrote for Elsie just before they were married, two doves (with their coo-coo-coos) are instrumental in the origin of golden hair and blue eyes in a girl whom the King eventually married (L, 152-55). But in this poem, "no queen comes / In slipper green." Just how pervasively morning, dove and dove notes, along with the queen, remain fused in Stevens' imagination is illustrated by his late "Song of Fixed Accord" (519-20). This poem immediately precedes the more major and crucial poem, "The World as Meditation," and it is clear that the dove's experience of the sun in the first poem is parallel to Penelope's in the second. The dove, too, confronts the "ordinariness" of the sun, while at the same time

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[14] Cf. Campbell, Creative Mythology, pp. 501-03.

the sun is metamorphosed into the "lord of love and sooth sorrow" who "made much within her." Penelope experiences the sun both as "only day" and as Ulysses (520-21). The significance of such a continuity within patterns of imagery lies in the fact that while they tend to build up into abstract mythic forms (doves as spirit, queen as imagination) they remain grounded as well in immediate sensation (the coos of doves). But now it need also be added that such images implying immediacy are seldom individualized; the peacocks cry like peacocks, the doves like doves, but we do not hear the individual bird. Stevens' poetry is far less the record of presential experience than evidence of a longing for such experience.

In much the same way that tree and bird imagery amounts to mythic abstraction growing from the senses, so too, most of Stevens' animal and vegetable or fruit imagery follows similar patterns--patterns which continue shifting, regrouping, and coalescing, while also building in depth through continuity. For instance, the "firecat" which begins the Collected Poems continues to reappear in various shapes, but always with fiery "bright eyes" (3) (implied at least)--which then deepen as symbols of devouring imagination, never satisfied. Stevens concludes "Montrachet-Le-Jardin": "I affirm and then at midnight the great cat / Leaps from the fireside and is gone" (264). Likewise, the crickets in "Le Monocle" which "came / Out of their mother grass" continue to serve as reminders of the monotony of

earth's cyclic processes. For example, in "The Comedian as the Letter C," "The Crickets beat their tambours in the wind, / Marching in a motionless march, custodians" (42).

The world of fruit and vegetable stands over against all notions of otherworldly paradises. Stevens early realizes the debunking potential of juxtaposing the pungent, growing earth with stale ideas of a static heaven or God. The best known passage using this device is section vi of "Sunday Morning," which begins: "Is there no change of death in paradise? / Does ripe fruit never fall?" The same juxtaposition is used for comic effect in "Cy Est Pourtracite, Madam Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges" (21-22), where Ursula makes an offering of a bed of flower-decked radishes to the "good Lord in His Garden." His response is a "subtle quiver [for the earthly reality of both the radishes and Ursula], / That was not heavenly love, / Or pity." This picture of the Lord quivering after earthly realities flatly contradicts the traditional direction of plant hierophanies, all of which, as Eliade concludes, "express the same idea: that vegetation is the manifestation of <u>living reality</u>, of the life that renews itself periodically." Eliade continues by observing that vegetation can only embody and display the sacred "in so far as it <u>signifies</u> something <u>other than itself</u>. No tree or plant is ever sacred simply as a tree or plant; they become so because they <u>share</u> in a transcendent reality, they become

so because they signify that transcendent reality."[15] For Stevens, the radishes and Ursula have the capacity of moving God to a (perhaps sacred?) response because they are solely of the earth: the traditional flow of spirit is diametrically reversed. Crispin discovers:

> The plum survives its poems. It may hang
> In the sunshine placidly, colored by ground
> Obliquities of those who pass beneath,
> Harlequined and mazily dewed and mauved
> In bloom. Yet it survives in its own form,
> Beyond these changes, good, fat, guzzly fruit.

But Stevens also realizes that to describe a plum as "fat" and "guzzly" is to be no closer to the ding an sich than to describe it as "dewed" and "mauved."[16] To symbolize the earth in its "essential barrenness," to embody its presential mystery, Stevens eventually will employ his image of the rock. The closest he moves in this direction in Harmonium is in Crispin's final discovery:

> The world, a turnip once so readily plucked,
> Sacked up and carried overseas, daubed out
> Of its ancient purple, pruned to the fertile main,
> And sown again by the stiffest realist,
> Came reproduced in purple, family font,
> The same insoluble lump. . . . (45)

Man is condemned to describe his world, and yet Stevens also discovers that to empty oneself on the means of traditional modes of response is to allow the monumental forces of earth to declare themselves.

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[15] Patterns, p. 324.

[16] Cf. "Floral Decorations for Bananas" (53-54). In this poem Stevens employs the plum image to fit ultra-civilized, eighteenth century taste in contrast to the desire for the "oozing," overabundant South of the banana.

The weather of earth, including all the natural forces surrounding man, enters Stevens' poetry gradually and steadily to help constitute a "new stage" on which the poet can act out his being.

Water imagery is common in Harmonium and throughout Stevens' verse, and as with most of Stevens' elemental symbolism, it helps to provide a mythic environment. Crispin, straight from "simple salad-beds / [and] honest quilts," found himself at sea, where waves "were mustachios / Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world." But "it was not so much the lost terrestrial . . . What counted was mythology of self. . . ." Crispin "now beheld himself . . . [and] was washed away by magnitude." What was left of him was "some starker, barer self / In a starker, barer world," and "Crispin / Became an introspective voyager." Water, like the earth itself, exists beyond man's "baton's thrust" (27-29)--a chaotic ground of being that can purge man of his civilized systems. Eliade observes that "water symbolizes the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return. . . . [I]t precedes all forms and upholds all creation. Immersion in water symbolizes a return to the pre-formal . . . a reintegration into the formlessness of pre-existence. . . ."[17] Crispin's water voyage strips him of his myth and turns him inward toward the ground of his own consciousness.

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[17] Patterns, p. 188.

Stevens' "nude" is "Eager for the brine and bellowing / Of the high interiors of the sea" (5). Stevens' myth of self will spring from "The Place of the Solitaires" (60), "a place of perpetual undulation" which is also "the motion of thought. . . ." In Harmonium water largely does not descend as rain from the sky to fecundate the earth. Crispin is frightened of thunder, lightening, and wind, but no rain is described (32-33). The water of life is already here for Stevens. In "green water, clear and warm," Susanna "searched / The touch of springs, / And found / Concealed imaginings" (90). But, of course, the elders standing aside the water profane her act of devotion, her opening of self to the elements. Like the woman of "Sunday Morning," the elders, too, would pass over the water on "dreaming feet"; unlike the woman they do not discover that the water is "inescapable." Men who worship the sun will walk in the "dew" (67, 70).

Stevens' water imagery centers more and more on rivers, especially in his later poetry. In Harmonium rivers symbolize process, usually either enigmatic or destructive. In "The Load of Sugar-Cane" (12), "The going of the glade-boat / Is like water flowing. . . ." In this river of life, everything is "like" everything else: rainbows like birds, wind whistling like killdeer. Only the "red turban / Of the boatman" is not "like" something else but is there to witness the enigma of relationship. At its most extreme, this enigma is the cannibalism of the river of life, captured in

the following title: "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Frogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs" (78). In this poem, "the rivers went nosing like swine, / Tugging at banks, until they seemed / Bland belly-sounds in somnolent troughs. . . ." The rivers of life are like pigs, but this water is also part of the ground of man's being. And the man who chooses not to be a part of the water will be defeated by it: "the man [who] erected this cabin, planted / This field, and tended it awhile, / Knew not the quirks of imagery. . . ." Therefore, "the hours of his indulent, arid days . . . Seemed to suckle themselves on his arid being, / As the swine-like rivers suckled themselves. . . ." To see how far Stevens eventually adapts himself to this river of life, compare to the previous poems one of Stevens' final poems, "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" (533): here the river is individualized, and the "mere flowing of the water is gayety, / Flashing and flashing in the sun . . ."--even though as a symbol of life it remains the "river that flows nowhere, like a sea."

Overall, then, water in its various forms in Harmonium both destroys and renews, both stands for the chaos of the physical world and for the mystery of interior consciousness. It also represents for Stevens spiritual possibility: the water in the fields of "Ploughing on Sunday" which illustrates a potentially sacred physical world, as well as the hope expressed in "Jasmine's Beautiful Thoughts underneath the Willow" (79) for a fulfillment of

love in "Bliss submerged beneath appearance, / In an interior ocean's rocking. . . ." In "New England Verses," Stevens writes that "the spirit craves a watery mountain" (105). But in his future verse Stevens creates his mountain of rock, while the water imagery largely forms into a river.

Wind in Harmonium, very much like river water, images change in both outer and inner worlds. The first of "Six Significant Landscapes" pictures an old man in China under a pine tree, who sees larkspur "Move in the wind. / His beard moves in the wind. / The pine tree moves in the wind. / Thus water flows / Over weeds" (73). Nothing stays still. For example, "The Wind Shifts" (83-84) illustrates that the mind, too, shifts like the wind. Stevens concludes Harmonium with an address "To the Roaring Wind" (113). "Vocalissimus," who is both the wind (in the outer world) and himself (in the inner world), the two together constituting the mystery of change.

The changing seasons are of course an essential part of Stevens' mythopoeic style, but in Harmonium there is little sign of the extent to which they will pervade the later poetry. For instance, Crispin approaches Carolina in the spring, "A time abhorrent to the nihilist / Or searcher for the fecund minimum" (35). Yet the common sense of spring's beauty is all that the image intends. In "Banal Sojourn" (62-63), summer, "like a fat beast, sleepy in mildew," is contrasted to "seasons, / When radiance came running down, slim through the bareness." Once again, the

imagery intends primarily to arouse a sense of the "swollen" overabundance of summer, a far cry from Stevens' later season imagery. For example, the idea of summer explored throughout the late "Credences of Summer" (372-78) makes that season a cardinal compass point in Stevens' mythopoeic geography. However, Harmonium does provide season imagery that at least points toward the future development--that is, imagery with significant relation to Stevens' spiritual. "The Man whose Pharynx Was Bad" (96) claims that summer and winter "Are both alike in the routine I know." But "if winter once could penetrate / Through all its purples to the final slate . . . One might in turn become less diffident. . . . One might. One might. But time will not relent." The "final slate" and time are still at odds, but summer and winter are beginning to represent states of vision as well as sense experience. We have already discussed "The Snow Man" in this light; another poem that even more explicitly links spirit and season is "Lunar Paraphrase" (107): "When at the wearier end of November . . . the body of Jesus hangs in a pallor, / Humanly near, and the figure of Mary, / Touched on by hoar-frost, shrinks in a shelter / Made by the leaves, that have rotted and fallen . . ."--then a sharp sense of spiritual loss results, enforced by the memories of "a golden illusion" and "an earlier season of quiet." Anticipating his future inclinations, Stevens here associates winter both with the moon--"mother of pathos and pity"--and with the mind's myths.

Stevens' linking of earthly season with heavenly body is a mode of fulfilling the prophecy of the descent of the eternal "damsel." With the sky emptied of its "mythy" king, some of the sky's mythic attributes can be fused with earth's. The usual location for such a merger would be a mountain, but in Harmonium there appears no genuine mountain and, in fact, little sign either that a real fusion is taking place. Nevertheless, an awareness of the still-living, mythic attributes of the sky's bodies begins to develop. In an abstract sense, for example, Crispin realizes "his voyaging to be / An up and down between two elements, / A fluctuating between sun and moon," that is, between a world in which external forms are lit up and overpower the mind, and a world in which the externals are dimmed and the imagination has its "indulgences" (35).

Although the sun is fully established in Harmonium as a reality principle, its mythic presence (alluded to in "Sunday Morning") is hardly developed at all. Two tendencies are clear. First, the sun as it appears in "Ploughing on Sunday" is a requisite to the glittering earth itself, allowing man to see immediate splendor. This representation of the sun bears a resemblance to what Philip Wheelwright describes concerning the sun's "attributes of godhead": "The solar effulgence arouses men's minds to a sense of power and majesty, while the light of it, in making vision possible, becomes a ready symbol for the spiritual vision

which is synonymous with the highest wisdom."[18] Second, and closely related to this first attribute, is the manner in which the sun not only allows man to see but also infuses its own god-like presence into the earth. In place of the "barer sky that does not bend" (108), the sun, for example, of "Sunday Morning" "delights" in the lake, the trees, and the hills. In a sense, for Stevens the sun's mythic attributes help to impregnate the earth mother with spiritual meaning.[19]

The moon exerts a negative force throughout Stevens' poetry, and in Harmonium this is practically all it exerts. Here the moon is the presiding spirit of the false romantic. To understand this negative function of the powerful mythological image of the moon is to more readily appreciate the extent of deromanticizing that Stevens undertakes in his poetry. When, symbolically, man chooses to turn away from his actual sense vision in the sun toward his moonlit imagination, he becomes the false romantic. It is a question of the stance, the emphasis, and there is no question where Stevens' overall emphasis lies. Crispin sees that the "Maya sonneteers . . . still to the night-bird made their plea" (30) despite the brilliance of the actual birds about them.

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[18] The Burning Fountain, p. 125.

[19] Cf. Eliade, Patterns, p. 127: "And we have thus observed the phenomenon . . . of the replacing of the supreme sky figure by an atmospheric and fecundating god, the spouse . . . of the Great Mother of earth, moon, and plant-life. . . ."

It is in the moonlight that one meets "Berserk," even though there is beauty in "the moonlight / Falling there, / Falling / As sleep falls / In the innocent air" (57-58). Only in his subsequent poetry does Stevens begin to attach a positive value to the moon--usually in association with the mysterious vision of the unconscious arising out of sleep (cf. "The Men That are Falling," 187-88). The primitive mythological symbolism of the moon as fertility, regeneration, destiny, or change has no real place in Stevens' myth.[20] Symbolically, for Stevens the moon's influence too often makes men "Castratos of moon-mash" (355).

The heavenly presence for the true seeker of love is the planet Venus. The evening star is of the night, but closer to day than the moon. Since for youth it is a symbol of physical love, this aspect of the star's meaning can keep it closely related to the immediate earth. In "Le Monocle," the "furious star" intended for youth, reminds us that "The measure of the intensity of love / Is measure, also, of the verve of earth" (14). Stevens' most extended treatment of the image is both a warning against its misuse and an acclamation of the star's potential significance. "Homunculus et La Belle Étoile" (25-27) at first pictures Venus romantically: "In the sea, Biscayne, there prinks / The young emerald, evening star. . . ." This version of the star is fit only for the false romantics: "Good light for

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[20] Cf. Eliade, Patterns, pp. 154-85.

drunkards, poets, widows, / And ladies soon to be married." On a higher level, philosophers, too, allow the star to charm them "until they become thoughtlessly willing / To bathe their hearts in later moonlight. . . ." But these are the false philosophers who can lull themselves to sleep with their thoughts. Real scholars (similar to the "rose rabbi") "think hard" and discover perhaps "that their mistress / Is no gaunt fugitive phantom. / She might, after all, be a wanton, / Abundantly beautiful, eager, / Fecund. . . ." Then from the light of Venus shining on this earthy mistress might come the "innermost good of their seeking. . . ." Stevens concludes:

> It is a good light, then, for those
> That know the ultimate Plato,
> Tranquillizing with this jewel
> The torments of confusion.

The star of love lighting a real earth (more "ultimate" than idea) leads not away from reality but focuses a sacred realm from within life's immediate duality. Again Stevens brings a mythic sky image to earth.[21] And in later poetry, in "Martial Cadenza" (237-38) for example, Stevens makes it sharply clear that this star is no escape from time but rather calls the immediate moment into life: "the ever-living and being, / The ever breathing and moving, the constant fire, / The present close, the present realized. . . ."

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[21] Cf. Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949; rpt. New York: Meridian, 1956), p. 303.

Thus, the earth mother in all her variations, growing and dying under the sun's influence, is for Stevens the true end of love. But the faculty of love, the imagination of man, is equally a frontier of Stevens' exploration. Throughout his poetry appear woman presences of the imagination, exteriorizations of Stevens' deepest impulses toward the sacred. One way to conceive of such presences is through Jung's discussions of the anima figure, which he refers to as "My Lady Soul" and identifies as the "archetype of life itself."[22]

Stevens' woman figures of the mind--and these should be carefully distinguished from his earth mother imagery--appear primarily in two similar but distinctive forms. "Sunday Morning," for example, is largely a dialogue between woman-imagination and man-intellect. Here the woman figure expresses spiritual desire and responds to potential spiritual fulfillment, functioning very much like one aspect of the anima, which Jung says, "communicates the images of the unconscious to the conscious mind. . . ." Elsewhere he adds: "The anima should function as a bridge, or a door, leading to images of the collective unconscious, as the persona should be a sort of bridge into the world."[23] But

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[22] Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 13; The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 32.

[23] Memories, Dreams, Reflections, pp. 187, 392.

Stevens' woman figures are often not presented in the first person and do not serve as a bridge in this sense. Usually they are less expressions of the imagination in action than images attempting to portray characteristics of this woman spirit within, images sometimes devotional in appeal.

In "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" (5-6), Stevens presents a pictorial image of the female spirit of the imagination--here, of course, associated with Venus and her sea birth. The poem works like a painting, emphasizing primarily three characteristics of the spirit. She is fresh and young, associated with elements of nature, especially springtime. She is discontent, "Tired of the salty harbors," and therefore anxious to be off for "the high interiors of the sea." She is without any external apparatus except the "first-found weed" she rides on; no clothes, no "purple stuff" (to proclaim her goddess identity) and without even a shell, she nonetheless is helped on by the wind. The "goldener nude" that she will become will be the spirit of a more arranged world: no "brine and bellowing" but a "sea-green pomp"; no "scurry and water-shine" but "an intenser calm." Yet this future world in which her spirit is acclaimed (perhaps immortalized in bronze) and the elements of nature ordered (even the torrent is "spick") seems not to have the vitality and excitement of her paltry beginnings.

There is occasionally in Harmonium only slight difference between Stevens' feminine representation of the

imagination and his earth mother figure. When such an earth spirit is described as "wanton" and "Fecund" as in his "Homunculus" poem, there is no problem. Such an image will eventually grow into Bawda, the procreative mistress of earth. But even during his Harmonium period, Stevens still occasionally appears to project his imaginative spirit into nature, or at least seems to look for a spirit from without. "O Florida, Venereal Soil" (47-48) is directed to a Venus spirit of earth. As in his early letters, Stevens here still wishes to counter the "dreadful sundry of this world, / The Cuban Polodowsky, / The Mexican woman, / The Negro undertaker . . ." with a romantic spirit of the night, which here is "insatiable" and torments him "Lasciviously." Stevens still attempts to keep the spiritual and the sexual close together in this poem, but sexual incarnation will not be Stevens' mode of spiritual fulfillment. Increasingly he is able to establish boundaries between earth and imagination, so that when they do come together there can be a true moment of sacred contact. Here Stevens requests his "Donna" of the night to "Conceal [herself] or disclose / Fewest things to the lover. . . ." Evidentally she discloses too few things, for Stevens opens his "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night" (85-86) with "I had as lief be embraced by the porter at the hotel / As to get no more from the moonlight / Than your moist hand." Then comes the turning point where outer voice becomes inner voice: "Speak, even, as if I did not hear you speaking, / But spoke for you

perfectly in my thoughts, / Conceiving words, / As the night conceives the sea-sounds in silence. . . ." No longer without, but now within, the woman spirit will begin to speak with a voice tempered by masculine intellect: "Say that the palms are clear in a total blue, / Are clear and are obscure; that it is night; / That the moon shines."

Accepting the distinction between spirit-self and external world allows Stevens to validly embody his imagination with configurations from outside himself. In a sense, distinguishing between self and world is the first step in creating the grounds for love. In "The Apostrophe to Vincentine" (52-53), Stevens' "paltry nude" becomes flesh and blood, and the poet's own capacity for a spiritual relationship with the earth is determined through his imagination's relationship with a woman. Jung observes: "Every mother and every beloved is forced to become the carrier and embodiment of this omnipresent and ageless image [the anima] which corresponds to the deepest reality in a man."[24] The first section of the poem refers to Stevens' earlier attempt to describe his woman spirit: "nude," "small and lean," "nameless." But then in the following sections she comes to life: "warm as flesh," "brunette," "clean" and dressed in green; "walking, / In a group / Of human others," "talking." Most important, Stevens says: "And what I know you felt / Came then." Experience of another, not himself, is what

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[24] Aion, p. 13.

allows him a first major step of spiritual growth--for he now has a measure of his own depth of spirit. The next step is the realization of what the possibility of love means for his experience of earth: "Monotonous earth I saw become / Illimitable spheres of you. . . ." The eternal damsel of "Le Monocle" has truly come to earth as "heavenly Vincentine."

Stevens' major devotional poem in Harmonium is directed not to the sun or earth but to the imagination. "To the One of Fictive Music" (87-88) opens with lines reminiscent of the mock opening of "Le Monocle," except that this praise is serious:

> Sister and mother and diviner love,
> And of the sisterhood of the living dead
> Most near, most clear, and of the clearest bloom.
> And of the fragrant mothers the most dear
> And queen, and of diviner love the day
> And flame and summer and sweet fire. . . .

Of the same family as the mythic figures of the past--"The sisterhood of the living dead"--Stevens' living presence needs no pretension to transcendence ("cloudy silver") to support her, only the natural crown of her own "simple hair." For she is the spirit of man, and separate from the "wind and sea," yet able to give "motion to perfection . . . out of our imperfection wrought. . . ." She is the guiding spirit behind man's experience of an external world, and this is what man desires most:

> That music is intensest which proclaims
> The near, the clear, and vaunts the clearest bloom,
> And of all vigils musing the obscure,

That apprehends the most which sees and names,
As in your name, an image that is sure. . . .

The poem concludes with a sense of uncertainty over just what the imagination should provide so that man's image of the external world will not be "too like . . . Too near, too clear. . . ." This dilemma in the future leads to some of Stevens' greatest poetry. At this point, Stevens simply affirms without reservation his devotion to the spiritual possibilities of the imagination--which is to say, its capacity for fictive music.

The hair which crowns Stevens' woman presence is an image pointing to the natural growth of the depth forces through her into form and consciousness. Later, the leaves which cover the rock (cf. 526-27) will connote much the same meaning, with the exception that by that time Stevens will have fully developed his art imagery. Man's various artistic modes are his means of giving shape to the forces within and his means of seeing the world without. As Stevens creates the grounds for an increasing awareness of the spirit-depth of the imagination, he also deepens his apprehension of art as man's rite of being.

We have already seen from his early letters how music provided him with a metaphor for the "mystery of the past within us" (L, 136). In Harmonium, music is Stevens' art image most fully developed in its ritual dimension. But even music is more often found in a comic context, such as the "guitars-catarrhs" word play in "The Ordinary Women"

(10-12). Only in "To the One of Fictive Music" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier" does Stevens begin to explore the mythopoeic possibilities of his music imagery: "the music summoned by the earth / That separates us from the wind and sea" (87); "Susanna's music [that] . . . On the clear viol of her memory . . . makes a constant sacrament of praise" (92).

In architecture, too, Stevens discovers a symbol with mythopoeic potential. There are many kinds of dwellings and structures in Harmonium as well as in the rest of the poetry. But architectural imagery has the disadvantage of referring to fixed creations and is therefore more often used simply to provide settings or illustrations than to embody the flow of being. In fact, living within a structure often has negative connotations for Stevens. For instance, it is their guitar music which actually allows the "Ordinary Women" (10-12) to flit "through the palace walls" of their imaginations. Crispin settles for a cabin, though he "once planned / Loquacious columns by the ructive sea" (41). The man who erects the cabin in "Frogs Eat Butterflies . . ." (78) lives through "arid day" avoiding the river. In "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" (88-89), the "dweller in the dark cabin" chooses to live in a dream "obscured by sleep. . . ." Stevens explains his theory of the supreme fiction to the "High-Toned Old Christian Woman" with an architectural metaphor. But his most significant effort during this period to image elements of his myth in

architectural forms is "Architecture" (OP, 16-18). Although the poem is over-written (Stevens omitted it from the second edition of Harmonium, 1931), it remains a cache of potential mythic symbolism, some of which does not fit well with the architectural pattern. He wants his structure to be a never-ceasing "building of light": "How shall we hew the sun, / Split it and make blocks, / To build a ruddy palace?" The palace's "chiefest dome [will be] a demoiselle of gold." Such imagery, when it grows naturally into his overall myth, will be essential to his major poetry; it will not be integrated by an encompassing metaphor from architecture, however, but by the man-God, earth-heaven cross-current at the center of his spiritual.

As this discussion of the mythic imagery of Stevens' Harmonium period concludes, I want to at least mention some surprising and significant absences. First, although Stevens' poetry has much in common with painting, there is no extended effort in Harmonium to present images of painting as rite or to provide a mythic dimension to this art form. The "men at forty" who paint lakes in "Le Monocle" is about as far as Stevens goes. Also, there are few indications of the extent to which Stevens' metaphor of the imagination as light will come to compose a major element of his vision, although candles and lanterns do at least make an appearance: "My candle burned alone in an immense valley" (51); "the steadfast lanterns creep across the dark" (56).

Above all, in Harmonium there is no central man, there is no rock, there is no poem as icon. The closest Stevens approaches to his central man figure is in the "rose rabbi" of "Le Monocle" and the scholars who "think hard" in "Homunculus et La Belle Étoile." His usual man figures are soldiers and clowns, both of whom negate romantic transcendence. "The soldier falls. / He does not become a three-days personage, / Imposing his separation, / Calling for pomp" (97). Man-Christ does not ascend; there is no separation from earth. Crispin's pretensions are "clipped" (46). There is as yet no "philosophers' man" (250), no "giant of nothingness" (443). The only giant is a "yokel" (6) being seduced by beauty. Only when earth's barrenness is experienced through the rock image, and when the woman-imagination is tempered by the man-intellect, will the central poet be able to avoid the seductions of the romantic in order to create his poem of contact between mind and earth.

CHAPTER IV

"MORE THAN SUDARIUM": Ideas of Order and The Man with the Blue Guitar

Following the publication of Harmonium in 1923, Stevens published few poems until its second edition in 1931. It is tempting to question the reason for this apparent lapse, especially considering the extent of creativity before and after this period; but for the purposes of this study it is sufficient to note that with the renewal of his writings, leading to Ideas of Order (1935-36), Stevens reassumed his accustomed themes and reentered the mythic environment already partially formed in Harmonium. Although a few key symbols were yet to appear, Stevens' poetry from the 1930's on was devoted primarily to deepening the myth and making it his own.

The poems of Ideas of Order are more often specifically focused on the problem of belief than the poems of Harmonium. Stevens' second volume of poetry is a collection of farewells as well as a proclamation of a fresh and enigmatic faith in the imagination. The major force of most of these poems is toward decreation of aesthetic or religious romanticisms, Stevens once more attempting to pull apart stale interpenetrations of earth and imagination. He therefore sails away from Florida (117-18), a land of

imagery too much akin to the mind's romances, either too sparce or too exotic, "bleaching sand" or "vivid blooms." He acknowledges: "That land is forever gone . . . [although] I loved her once."

The rejection of the romantic, as we have seen, begins in Harmonium, where it takes the form especially of a denial of otherworldly paradises and aesthetic exaggerations. In Ideas of Order, this decreation is related more closely to the way man sees, no longer stressing the soil as man's intelligence, but deepening the meaning of the idea of the romantic itself. In a letter announcing the possibility of "Ideas of Order" as the title for his forthcoming volume, Stevens went on to observe:

> Poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic. Without this new romantic, one gets nowhere; with it, the most casual things take on transcendence, and the poet rushes brightly and so on. What one is always doing is keeping the romantic pure: eliminating from it what people speak of as the romantic. (L, 277)

Clearly the idea of the romantic for Stevens is intimately related to the idea of myth as construed in this study. If a "new romantic" leads to experience of "transcendence," then we are dealing with a way of perceiving the sacred in the "casual things" of an external world.

The difference between the romantic of the past and the modern romantic grows out of the fact that man is presently aware of myth as a wholly human creation in a way that was impossible before. The idea of human projection,

which began as a comic proposal in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," is now explained as a problem in "keeping the romantic pure." For Stevens, the new romantic must originate in the mind, not in an order coming from without. "Too many waltzes have ended. . . . There is order in neither sea nor sun. . . . The epic of disbelief . . . will soon be constant" (121-22).

Stevens also begins in this volume to make greater use of mountain imagery as an index of spirit. "There's that mountain-minded Hoon," who ever desired more than the waltz, and whose mythic figurations "were never figures of men. / Now, for him, his forms have vanished" (121). From the Alps, "Panoramas are not what they used to be. / Claude has been dead a long time. . . . But in Claude how near one was / (In a world that was resting on pillars, / That was seen through arches) / To the central composition, / The essential theme." But now, the "pillars are prostrate, the arches are haggard" (134-35).

The loss of a frame for the composition is, for Stevens, what allows man to "believe beyond belief."[1] For although "Marx has ruined Nature, / For the moment . . . the panorama of despair / Cannot be the specialty / Of this ecstatic air" (134-35). From the Alps, one sees the

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[1] Stevens writes: "It is as if in a study of modern man we predicated the greatness of poetry as the final measure of his stature, as if his willingness to believe beyond belief was what had made him modern and was always certain to keep him so" (OP, 202).

"crosses on the convent roofs / Gleam sharply as the sun comes up." And one knows that what is below earth and what is above earth are alike in the past, even though the faithful continue to chant their "poem of long celestial death; / For who could tolerate the earth / Without that poem, or without / An earthier one, tum, tum-ti-tum / As of those crosses, glittering, / And merely of their glittering, / A mirror of a mere delight" (135-36). For Stevens, the cross as symbol is dead; it remains alive simply as a physical form in the bright air of earth. The implication is that the modern "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)" can expect no traditional arrangement of beautiful flowers any more than the "Botanist on Alp (No. 2)" can now expect the rose of paradise. Past aesthetic and religious romanticisms are dead: "Bare earth is best. Bare, bare, / Except for our own houses, huddled low . . . where the voice that is in us makes a true response" (137-38).

As in Harmonium so in Ideas of Order Stevens continues to await the birth of love. Now as he moves toward the autumn of his life, "The grass is in seed. The young birds are flying. / Yet the house is not built, not even begun. / The vetch has turned purple. But where is the bride?" In this "semi-world" lacking a mountain myth, Stevens turns once more to the woman figure within. "She must come now. . . . Those to be born have need / Of the bride, love being a birth" (119).

The great poem of this volume is "The Idea of Order at Key West" (128-30), an elevated portrait of Stevens' woman presence, her song, and the earth. In Harmonium, love is born out of Stevens' open response both to otherness ("The Apostrophe to Vincentine") and to the woman voice within ("To the One of Fictive Music"). Now in this poem the symbolic cross-current that flows throughout Stevens' poetry stands out in sharp relief. The earth becomes the inhuman sea; the voice of man becomes the only spirit he shall know. The mystery of the woman spirit faces the mystery of the "veritable ocean. / The sea was not a mask. / No more was she."

Given the two ultimates of Stevens' poetry, the mysteries extending without and within, "The Idea of Order" thrusts first toward inwardness and then back toward the external world. This is the typical movement of Stevens' poetry as a whole: flowing first along the current leading to the frontier of the imagination and then back toward the frontier of physical reality. First, "it was she and not the sea we heard. . . . The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea / Was merely a place by which she walked to sing." When man asks "Whose spirit is this?" the answer initially appears to be that it must be her own. For if it were the voice of the sea man heard, it would only be "deep air." But the poem turns in its answer to this question. The spirit is more than the "dark voice of the sea . . . More even than her voice, and ours, among / The meaningless

plungings of water and the wind." The answer to the question "Whose spirit is this?" unravels only when Stevens images the conjunction of voice and earth.

> It was her voice that made
> The sky acutest at its vanishing.
> She measured to the hour its solitude.
> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang.

Stevens' spiritual center is located here at the line of demarcation between earth and mind. The imagery of sea now becomes that of sky in order to sharpen the idea: the space of sky is defined by its boundary on the horizon. But sea and sky both can only be known through her song, into which they disappear.

> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker.

The lines which follow these are not, then, so clearly solipsistic.

> Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Although for her there is only the world of her song, the relationship between the song and the sea remains paramount. She is the "single artificer." She makes the earth "acutest at its vanishing."

The denouement of the poem takes us momentarily away from the elemental landscape of voice and sea toward the town and its fishing boats. But the world of man is built within the compass of the mystery of human perception.

Man's lights map out the world he lives in, just as the imagination's song is a song of sea and sky. But whereas for the woman the sea is "merely a place by which she walks to sing," her song being uppermost, for the male consciousness it is the sea and sky that are foremost. What is important for him is that the lights

> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

The poem concludes by celebrating the "Blessed rage for order," an order involving, first, the receptive song of the woman sung alongside the sea and, second, the aggressive male consciousness which transforms the song into light turned back onto the elements. In this way, the imagination's song is no longer the prison she is condemned to live in, but a way of sight allowing the transcendence of a pure romantic. Although the old composition seen through the pillars and the arches is gone, these new lights of the imagination are "fragrant portals" opening onto the sea as well as into ourselves in "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." Spiritual transcendence and sense experience are united in the transparence of man's imagination.

As lover of his woman spirit and as experiencer of bare earth, the poet figure emerges in Ideas of Order as the prophet with accurate speech, the "harmonious skeptic" (122) who will give motion to the mythic "shapes" again. The poet's function is not ornament, "mere sound." "As part of nature he is part of us. / His rarities are ours: may they

be fit / And reconcile us to our selves . . . [creating] An infinite incantation of our selves / In the decadence of the perished swans" (144-45). In reconciling the male intellect to the desires of the woman spirit, the poet begins to assume the role of the rabbi, the quester of love (although the rabbi figure also continues to appear in Stevens' poetry). For example, Stevens directs his "Re-statement of Romance" (146) to his inner self:

> The night knows nothing of the chants of night.
> It is what it is as I am what I am:
> And in perceiving this I best perceive myself
>
> And you. Only we two may interchange
> Each in the other what each has to give.
> Only we two are one, not you and night,
>
> Nor night and I, but you and I, alone,
> So much alone, so deeply by ourselves,
> So far beyond the casual solitudes,
>
> That night is only the background of our selves,
> Supremely true each to its separate self,
> In the pale light that each upon the other throws.

Few passages in Stevens provide so explicit a statement of the double self of the poet. But along with reconciling his two selves, the poet must also sharply separate himself from the external world. The night is alien--to perceive <u>that</u> is to more fully experience both what is within and without.

For Stevens' future development, the most essential short poem in <u>Ideas of Order</u> is "How to Live. What to Do" (125-16).[2] Not only does this poem initiate the major

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[2] Stevens wrote on November 15, 1935: "I took a look at Ideas of Order the other night to see whether there was any single poem in it that I preferred to all the others. If there is, it seems to be How to Live. What to

symbol of his late work, it also serves to develop his scenic fable technique in a mythic direction. He has already to this point presented numerous sketches of people in the abstract. In fact, much of his poetry involves, to some degree at least, this technique of glimpsing brief and often enigmatic scenes, such as in Harmonium "The Ordinary Women," "The Doctor of Geneva," "The Weeping Burgher," and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." Gradually many of these sketches begin to develop in the direction of those elemental abstractions defined by this study as mythic. One notices a gradual shift toward a greater preponderance of natural forces, a lessening of comic or ironic effects, and an increase in more purely scenic as opposed to conversive or discursive elements. Note the way in which the elemental symbolism takes on mythic proportions in this poem, a precursor of Stevens' major later poetry:

> Last evening the moon rose above this rock
> Impure upon a world unpurged.
> The man and his companion stopped
> To rest before the heroic height.
>
> Coldly the wind fell upon them
> In many majesties of sound:
> They that had left the flame-freaked sun
> To seek a sun of fuller fire.
>
> Instead there was this tufted rock
> Massively rising high and bare
> Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown
> Like giant arms among the clouds.

Do. I like it most, I suppose, because it so definitely represents my way of thinking" (L, 293).

There was neither voice nor crested image,
No chorister, nor priest. There was
Only the great height of the rock
And the two of them standing still to rest.

There was the cold wind and the sound
It made, away from the muck of the land
That they had left, heroic sound
Joyous and jubilant and sure.

Sun, moon, rock, wind, trees, clouds--and yet one would not call this a nature poem. The forces of nature are not presented with individualized immediacy; rather, they are abstractions which form an atmosphere of the mind. For Stevens, however, they are abstractions of a different order than the "voice [and] crested image" of former modes of the imagination. Not reliant on man's aesthetic and religious traditions ("the muck of the land / They had left"), the abstractions of nature provide a fresh mythic figuration of their own.

The rock, for instance, comes together here with man and his paramour for the first time in Stevens' poetry.[3] It provides an illustration of Stevens' mythopoeic process. On the one hand, as an image of earth the rock serves a function which Stevens' sea and sky imagery cannot fulfill. The rock--as well as Stevens' closely related mountain imagery--is a representation of the alien substantiality of earth that is important to Stevens' efforts to see the earth in its essential barrenness. But on the other hand, the

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[3] For a detailed discussion of Stevens' rock figure, see Ralph J. Mills, "Wallace Stevens: The Image of the Rock," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 96-110.

unusual power of such images as the rock cannot simply be explained in relation to their abstract functions. To say that the rock image enables Stevens to strip the earth to a clean bareness is to describe the image as if it functioned as an idea. But the unique level or pitch of Stevens' poetry, which is conspicuously illustrated in the rock image, cannot be adequately described by reference to abstract ideas alone. It is to his own experience and to the immediate act of perception we must turn to understand the magical power of the rock. Fortunately we have a brief record of an early response of Stevens to mountainous rock. On a trip West in 1903 he wrote in his Journal of the "capital mountains," especially their "mass." He was struck by the "rock character of mountains above the timber line" (L, 64). Such records only hint at the way in which his receptive imagination must have opened throughout his life to the declarations of phenomena. It is his poetry which completes the picture by showing how such momentary experiences of physical presence coalesce into powerful presences of the mind. This central aspect of Stevens' genius can best be described with reference to the primitive's experience of the sacred. In view of Stevens' image of and response to the rock, note the following observation of Mircea Eliade:

> The hardness, ruggedness, and permanence of matter was in itself a hierophany in the religious consciousness of the primitive. And nothing was more direct and autonomous in the completeness of its strength, nothing more noble or more awe-inspiring,

> than a majestic rock, or a boldly standing block of granite. Above all, stone is.[4]

Such descriptions of the primitive's sense of his world provide both a key for understanding Stevens' own responses and a parallel for describing the level or pitch of his poetry.

Stevens wrote during this period that Milton "today, instead of going off on a myth . . . would stick to the facts. Poetry will always be a phenomenal thing" (L, 300). Stevens' own decreation of former myths aims also at facts, at phenomena. With the rock image available to strip even his own changing fiction, Stevens continued to open himself to the declaration of phenomena. "Lions in Sweden" (124) concludes by affirming that, after the "sovereign images" are gone, the "vegetation still abounds with forms."

II

Although he would always continue his decreation of stale modes of the imagination Stevens became increasingly aware at this time that one always believes in something in order to see at all. Fictions are necessary, and now his conscious concern over his own fiction intensified.

Ideas of Order was published first in July, 1935; Owl's Clover first appeared in the fall of 1936, and The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems was published in October, 1937. While most of the poetry of Ideas of Order

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[4] Patterns, p. 216.

is linked closely in theme and style with Harmonium, the next two volumes diverge markedly in both form and subject. Concerning the first of these two volumes, Stevens wrote: "What I tried to do in Owl's Clover was to dip aspects of the contemporaneous in the poetic" (L, 314). Concerning poems that would comprise "The Man with the Blue Guitar," he wrote: "They deal with the relation or balance between imagined things and real things which . . . is a constant source of trouble to me" (L, 316). "Owl's Clover" is a relatively conscious attempt to create mythic forms to provide a perspective for contemporary matters; these forms largely do not survive in Stevens' subsequent poetry. "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is a discursive poem founded in Stevens' developing mythic pattern; it makes conscious the relationship between Stevens' quest for a fresh spiritual and his concern with the imagination-reality dilemma. Stevens' usual woman presence makes no prolonged appearance in either poem: this is a time of primarily conscious exploration, a fact which hinders the first poem and aids the second.

Much of "Owl's Clover" is pretentious in a way that Stevens' poetry seldom is. In its exotic and often enigmatic and abstract language it shows affinities with early poems such as "Le Monocle" and "The Comedian," but unlike these poems "Owl's Clover" is not written from an ironic or comic perspective. It attempts rather to be serious proclamation--weighty and witty, but only occasionally comic. Its

failings stem from Stevens' avowed purpose. In seeking "to dip aspects of the contemporaneous in the poetic" he discovered that the contemporaneous was not to be the native stuff of his poetry any more than the poetic (or mythic) could be summoned at will.

The poetic side of "Owl's Clover" seems intended by Stevens as a kind of mythic elevation. His larger-than-life figures and his pompous voice are parts of a poetic atmosphere which aims at transcendence. The opening section of the poem serves as an illustration of the aims and shortcomings of the poem as a whole.

"The Old Woman and the Statue" (OP, 43-46) juxtaposes the statue (a "symbol of art") with the old woman (a "symbol of those who suffered during the depression"; OP, 219). The marble horses "thrust against / The earth" attempting to rise on "feathery wings," but this form of transcendence is falling to the destruction of time. Just as the figures of Jesus and Mary in Harmonium are surrounded by "leaves, that have rotted and fallen" (107), so "rotten leaves" here swirl around the horses. Stevens begins "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" with a view of Plato's figure for the soul, which employs winged horses and a charioteer. The question for Stevens is "Why does this figure, potent for so long, become merely the emblem of a mythology, the rustic memorial of a belief in the soul and in a distinction between good and evil?" The answer is "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is

real. . . . It has the strength of reality or none at all" (NA, 4, 6-7). In this first poem of "Owl's Clover" Stevens finds it impossible to reconcile the "harridan self" of the contemporary mind with the figure of transcendence. Only without the presence of the old woman could evening "like a budding yew" be brilliant. And only in that mythic domain, "there,"[5] could the horses rise again, "Hoofs grinding against stubborn earth until / The light wings lifted through the crystal space / Of night."

So it is throughout the poem. The contemporaneous remains separated from the mythic, and Stevens' contrived mythic figures do not get off the ground. Figures such as the statue, the celestial muses, the greenest continent, Ananke, the Portent, and the Subman do not become elements of Stevens' living myth; they are elevated abstractions which do not embody the forces either of earth or the imagination. The poem as a whole testifies to Stevens' conscious need for transcendence, but it remains largely a mythological exercise rather than living myth. Wylie Sypher explains the difference:

> Mythology is not myth, but myth that has been rationalized or verbalized. Mythology is one way of making reality conform to our ideas of reality. . . . Dubuffet's anti-painting is mythical; but it is a revolt against mythology in art. . . . A myth that is consciously intended turns into mythology. . . .[6]

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[5] On Stevens' use of the mythic "there," see Vendler, pp. 79, 88.

[6] Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art (New York: Random, 1962), p. 131.

The point is that the living myth of Stevens' poetry grows from his immediate experience of earth and imagination; his words and his experience are entwined in the mythic environment of his poems. The more he pulls away from his immediate realities the more he discovers that, like Plato's figure of the chariot, his "imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. . . ." In "Credences of Summer" Stevens affirms--even as he fixes his experience in the "eternal foliage" of his myth--that "One of the limits of reality" is the hayfields of Oley, Pennsylvania (373-74).[7]

"Owl's Clover" concludes by returning the poet once again to the sacramental center of his own life. The place of contact between the mind and the world is, at the end of the poem, the night in which "the realist and the man of imagination are indistinguishable" (L, 373). Stevens' "passion merely to be / For the gaudium of being, Jocundus instead / Of the black-blooded scholar," is not a surrender of his efforts in the poem but the desire for re-entry into a real world at its acutest point, where "night and the imagination . . . [are] one."

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[7] Cf. Vendler: "It is its myths which distinguish Owl's Clover . . . from the long poems which preceded it. A great part of the poem is mythical, not the 'once upon a time there was' of folk tale but rather the 'my soul, there is a country' of myth still extant" (p. 79).

III

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" is a collection of brief forays into the same problems which occupied Stevens in "Owl's Clover." It is a more successful poem because it remains largely on a meditative level without trying to force the mythic dimension to develop through elevated presentations alone.

Imagining himself, the artist figure, as the player of a guitar allows Stevens a new freedom of poetic meditation, looser and surer than anything he had done previously. For instance, in answer to the desire for transcendence--"A tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (i)--he can now respond:

> If to serenade almost to man
> Is to miss, by that, things as they are,
>
> Say that it is the serenade
> Of a man that plays the blue guitar. (ii)

This element of playfulness in the poem permits a range in the exploration of the idea of transcendence which was not possible in the serious pronouncements of "Owl's Clover."

The first form the problem of transcendence assumes is the juxtaposition of the everyday world, "flat and bare . . . [with] no shadows . . ." and poetry, which "must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns" (v), the reason being simply that the "thinking of art seems final when / The thinking of god is smoky dew" (vi). In the absence of God, ritual attempts to raise the everyday world to levels of transcendence only illustrate their own

insufficiency. The progress of the hero through the streets is attended by bells and confetti, but no one believes in the "pagan in a varnished car" (x). Toward the end of his life, Stevens, commenting on this poem, contrasted this commonplace hero ("a politician, a soldier, Harry Truman as god") with the image of a "superman" through which a supreme fiction could be created (L, 789).

Already during this period of his poetry, Stevens has alluded to the "harmonious skeptic" who could sum us up, and to the portent, whose "shaggy top / Broods in tense meditation" (OP, 68). Gradually these figures coalesce around the central hero as meditating man occupied with the problem of perception, that is, with the making of myth, the grounds for credible transcendence. More and more the poetry points to the moment of transcendence when the mind's fiction will allow the world to declare itself, when imagination and reality become one. "Slowly the ivy on the stones / Becomes the stones." Commenting on the line "time grows upon the rocks" (xi), Stevens equated time with "life" and the rock with the "world," and then observed: "As between reality and the imagination, we look forward to an era when there will exist the supreme balance between these two, with which we are all concerned" (L, 363). Such a moment can occur to the man who "lies awake at night" asking "Where / Do I begin and end? And where, / As I strum the thing, do I pick up / That which momentously declares / Itself not to be I and yet / Must be. It could be nothing

else" (xii). That which declares itself to be can only do so in the mind of man. The mind and the world, then, come finally to the music of the guitar, the word which both unites and separates mind and world--"The amorist Adjective aflame" (xiii)--the love myth.

The candle of a single imagination "is enough to light the world" (xiv). But what world and what candle in this present age of destruction, both within and without? "Things as they are have been destroyed" (xv). There can be no love in a traditional sense between man and his world. The earth is no mother, but an oppressor. To create is "to live at war, / To chop the sullen psaltery, / To improve the sewers in Jerusalem, / To electrify the nimbuses" (xvi). Stevens satirizes attempts to re-sacralize a world like ours. Man is only an animal playing the guitar with "claws" and "fangs" (xvii). Yet in spite of these "desert days," the basic longing of Stevens' poetry reasserts itself:

> A dream (to call it a dream) in which
> I can believe, in face of the object,
>
> A dream no longer a dream, a thing,
> Of things as they are. . . . (xviii)

Such a dream is to be founded in the strumming of the guitar and in the "touch of the senses, not of the hand," an experience like daylight "in a mirroring of cliffs, / Rising upward from a sea of ex." Stevens explained this last image as a "purely negative sea. The realm of has-been without interest or provocativeness" (L, 783). But the image also has an aura of the primeval

about it that helps to deepen the spiritual suggestiveness of the light on the cliff. The dream of things as they are relates to the senses touched by the guitar, which in turn relate to the light upon the waters of a creative origin (cf. "The Irish Cliffs of Moher," 501).

The remainder of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is largely given over to the abstract problems arising from the idea of the creative act of poetry as a foundation of a dream to believe in. Stevens seeks to maintain the autonomy of the imagination as well as to open that imagination to the declarations of an external world. On the one hand, he would "reduce the monster" (xix) to himself, thereby being more than a mere part of the physical world. While at the same time he would be the "intelligence" of the physical world and not himself at all. At times no reconciliation seems possible: the two monsters face each other: "the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone" or "Dichtung and Wahrheit" (xxiii). But there is also another suggestion proffered. Commenting on section xxii, Stevens wrote: "Poetry is the spirit, as the poem is the body" (L, 363). Seen in this way, there could be a reconciliation: the imagination as intelligence of the earth would not lose its autonomy. Rather, the imagination both "takes" ("sun's green, / Cloud's red") and "gives, / In the universal intercourse."

More crucial than the abstract meditations for the focus of this study, however, are certain implications through the remainder of the poem for the living myth itself.

"Poetry is the subject of the poem" (xxii). Stevens commented that he had in mind here "pure poetry." He continued: "The purpose of writing poetry is to attain pure poetry. The validities of the poet as a figure of prestige . . . is wholly a matter of this, that he adds to life that without which life cannot be lived. . . . Here is a fundamental principle about the imagination: It does not create except as it transforms" (L, 363-64). The idea of pure poetry, just as the idea of the pure romantic and the idea of transcendence, transparence or transformation, is defined by Stevens primarily with reference to the religious. For instance, he observed that the "idea of pure poetry . . . appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and, for that matter, greater, if the idea of God is only one of the things of the imagination" (L, 369). In his own poetry, from this period on, the idea of transcendence becomes more and more central, while conscious mythological and religious metaphors provide an increasingly spiritual atmosphere. The mode of transformation becomes paramount.

The imagination, the self, begins to grow toward divinity:

> A substitute for all the gods:
> This self, not that gold self aloft,
>
> Alone, one's shadow magnified,
> Lord of the body, looking down,
>
> As now and called most high,
> The shadow of Chocorua
>
> In an immenser heaven. . . . (xxi)

The human self is not altered but transformed through a magnification, just as Chocorua will remain a specific mountain in New Hampshire while it grows into a mythic presence. Remaining sections of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" describe similar modes of transformation, as Stevens continues to experiment with short sketches with potential mythic properties.

The scholar, previously a figure for satire, now reappears in junction with the word: "A poem like a missal found / In the mud, a missal for that young man, / That scholar hungriest for that book, / That very book . . . that latined phrase" (xxiv).

The artist as magus figure expresses Stevens' exuberance with the magical powers of the poet: "He held the world upon his nose / And this-a-way he gave a fling. / His robes and symbols, ai-yi-yi-- / And that-a-way he twirled the thing. . . . The grass turned green and the grass turned gray" (xxv). This primitive sense of power at being able to summon a world into existence is a step beyond

his hypothesis in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." Soon he will be able to say "Thou art not August unless I make thee so" (251).

But while the artist assumes his god-like properties, he does not forget that the earth is filled with the "gloom . . . [of] the darkness of the sea" (xxvii). He nevertheless emphatically affirms:

> I am a native in this world
> And think in it as a native thinks
> . . . . . .
> Here I inhale profounder strength
> And as I am, I speak and move. . . . (xxviii)

The guttural spelling "Gesu" (cf. L, 784) in this section emphasizes Christ as earth man, as the concluding poem of this volume also does.

The cathedral of section xxix is another spiritual index. But it is "What is beyond the cathedral, outside, [that] / Balances with nuptial song." The sacred marriage is between mind and that which is outside the cathedral, not within. The marriage takes place through the mind's search for resemblances: "To say of one mask it is like, / To say of another it is like. . . ." From within the church, though, "The shapes are wrong and the sounds are false. / The bells are the bellowing of bulls." The act of meditation on what is outside alone remains a good: "Franciscan don was never more / Himself than in this fertile glass." Stevens commented that he "chose a Franciscan because of the quality of liberality and of being part of the world" (L, 784). Stevens' own meditation seeks out the point of

balance between reality and imagination, but his "point of still" within the mind is diametrically opposed to Eliot's religiously orthodox "still point" in "Burnt Norton," which is within the "turning world."[8]

In contrast to the don, Stevens portrays in the following section (xxx) the figure of the "fantastic actor, poet" (L, 362), the "old fantoche" who is in the world not the church. The cross that he eyes is a telephone pole. It is he who discovers that, despite its "installments" and "crusty stacks," "Oxidia is Olympia" (cf. L, 788-90). Stevens' figure of the artist as clown (from Crispin on) allows the poet to be both within the world and yet protected from it by his own sense of play. Such a presence serves an important balance to the figure of the god-like poet, supreme within his own imagination. But section xxxi makes clear that too much of Oxidia blunts man's response to the cock's herald of the new day. There can be no Olympia when "there is no place, / Here, for the lark fixed in the mind. . . ." The balance for this cock of a new day will not be fully realized until "Credences of Summer."

The poem concludes with an explicit reminder that to be a native of the world and to dream the dream of the pure romantic, one must abandon the stale romanticisms.

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

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[8] The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), pp. 119, 121.

> That it is this or that it is that,
> But do not use the rotted names. (xxxii)

The keynote is a fresh spontaneity, an openness to the "madness of space . . . [and] its jocular procreations. . . ." The dream is one in time, not of "Time in its final block" (xxxiii), and founded not in the future but in the play of the poet combining the imagination's night with the consciousness of day.

The Man with the Blue Guitar volume concludes with two poems which trace the problem of transcendence to a new spiritual space: the immediate commonplace united with the ultimate abstraction.

> The poet striding among the cigar stores,
> Ryan's lunch, hatters, insurance and medicines,
> Denies that abstraction is a vice except
> To the fatuous. These are his infernal walls,
> A space of stone, of inexplicable space
> And peaks outsoaring possible adjectives.
> One man, the idea of man, that is the space,
> The true abstract in which he promenades. (185)

The problem of a fresh spiritual is finally the problem of relationship, of love. The false romantic, the "moralist hidalgo," prostitutes the idea of love by seeing in the world only what he cares to see--his "whore is Morning Star." But for the "outer captain, the inner saint," he who can open himself to what is without and within, love is still possible--it remains a "heavy-fruited star" (185-86).

The final poem of the volume, "The Men That are Falling" (187-88), is an intimate portrait of compassion, love made possible in the "man that thinks" when the object of his spiritual desire is here and now, despite "the

catastrophic room" of the present world. "God and all angels sing the world to sleep . . ." but belief in the supernatural does not sing him to sleep. Such beliefs for him are "lost remembrances": their "bells grow longer" only in memory. In their place is unfulfilled desire, "beyond despair, / Like an intenser instinct"--but for what "he cannot know." In place of his usual response to such desire--his rendezvous with his woman image of love (cf. 237)--the image that now appears to him on his pillow is the "head of one of the men that are falling" (specifically, in the Spanish Revolution: L. 798). This image is "More than sudarium" since it is not a relic of the past but a living icon of the present.[9] Unlike his interior paramour who speaks to him, this man "spoke only by doing what he did." He died for his desire for "God and all angels," not knowing that in reality "death was his belief though death is a stone."

> Taste of the blood upon his martyred lips,
> O pensioners, O demagogues and pay-men!

These are the people who have perverted this martyr's love of life to a belief in death. "This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die." The poem and the volume concludes with "the dreamer, bent / Over words that are life's voluble

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[9] Cf. W. B. Yeats, "Veronica's Napkin," The Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 235. This poem is also based on a contrast between "The Father and His angelic hierarchy" and the living "pattern on a napkin dipped in blood."

utterance"--words which utter life, belief which makes possible, even in this room, love in man.

CHAPTER V

THE "LAST AND TALLEST HERO": *PARTS OF A WORLD* AND *NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION*

The year 1942 saw the publication of *Parts of a World*, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," and Stevens' first major essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." All three efforts were toward the founding of a groundwork for Stevens' belief in the imagination, and they all pivot on the idea of the "center" or the "central."[1] No longer simply a matter for Stevens of the poet's creating his personal world, now at stake is the idea of the imagination as God and the creation of a world for man. Not until Stevens could imagine himself into the role of the poet as hero was the full mythic potential of his poetry to be realized.[2]

Stevens' letters during this period through 1942 show him still occupied with the ideas of transcendence and a pure romantic, matters which he now discussed in terms of

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[1] For a brief illustration of Stevens' own attitude toward his idea of the "center," see NA, 115-16.

[2] Cf. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 40. In view of Stevens' eventual identification of the imagination and God and his central concern with the external world, note: "the two--the hero and his ultimate god, the seeker and the found--are thus understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identified with the mystery of the manifest world."

the idea of the center. Referring to the time during which he "began to feel round for a new romanticism," he wrote, "I began to feel that I was on the edge: that I wanted to get to the center. . . . I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal, the central. . . . Of course, I don't agree with the people who say that I live in a world of my own; I think that I am perfectly normal, but I see that there is a center" (L, 352). The idea of the central is closely related for Stevens to the spiritual aspect of poetry and the heroic nobility of the central poet. For instance, he observed:

> The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing, but the intention is not to foster a cult. The knowledge of poetry is a part of philosophy, and a part of science; the import of poetry is the import of the spirit. The figures of the essential poet should be spiritual figures. (L, 378)

The spiritual figuration of Stevens' own poetry is, as we have seen, from Harmonium on, anchored in a primitive-like abstraction consisting largely of imagery of elemental nature. Now during this period leading to Parts of a World, Stevens went on to consciously link his concerns over spiritual belief and the nobility of the poet with man's urge to poetry. Commenting on "On an Old Horn" (230), he

wrote of the

> survivals of the thinking of our primitive state. . . . [O]ne has, after all, only one's own horn on which to toot, one's own synthesis on which to rely; one's own fortitude of spirit is the only "fester Burg"; without that fortitude one lives in chaos. . . . The order of the spirit is the only music of the spheres: or, rather, the only music. . . . It follows that a lion roaring in a desert and a boy whistling in the dark are alike, playing old horns: an old horn, perhaps the oldest horn. (L, 403-04)

The idea of poetry, then, is centered by Stevens not only within the framework of the good sense of civilization but also in the depths of instinct, especially the primitive urge to imaginative order. The figure of the central artist, both as thinking man and primitive musician or chanter, is the primary mythic presence to develop in Parts of a World. And as this image of the poet as hero develops, other old and new themes become constellated about it, preparing the stage for the longer mythic poems of his final three volumes of poetry.

On the primitive side, the emphasis on openness to earth continues to develop in this volume along with the attitude of game and play (so pronounced in "The Man with the Blue Guitar"). The opening poem, "Parochial Theme" (191-92), recalls the playfulness of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" as well as the abstract sense of the outdoors in "Ploughing on Sunday." There is a joyous acceptance of the natural that acknowledges but is undimmed by the thought of death. In this primitive forest of "heavy trees . . . grunting, shuffling branches . . . blue-green

pines," the poet acclaims, "this health is holy, / This halloo, halloo, halloo . . . This barbarous chanting of what is strong. . . ." This is the only scene for salvation, here where "There's no such thing as life; or if there is, / It is faster than the weather, faster than / Any character." The concluding advice is: "Piece the world together, boys, but not with your hands." This is just what "Parts of a World" attempts to do.

The world is pieced together with words, but words also awaken our sense of the world's chaos.

> The imperfect is our paradise
> Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
> Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
> Lies in flawed word and stubborn sounds. (194)

Stevens' rage for order is also a rage for the chaos of bare earth. In "On an Old Horn" (230), the bird conjugates "Pipperoo, pippera, pipperum" while the stars fly "like insects of fire in a cavern of night. . . ." True disorder is not experience of chaos; it results from the violent orders of old "when the bishops' books / Resolved the world. We can't go back to that" (215). When we acknowledge that the "squirming facts exceed the squamous mind," we can discover that "great disorder is an order." A "relation appears, / A small relation expanding like the shade / Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill." Just as in "The Idea of Order at Key West," following the woman's song by the chaos of the sea, man's lights are turned on the

darkness, so too, the primitive song on perhaps the oldest horn is the beginning of a small shape.

In the well-known "Of Modern Poetry" (239-40), the poet becomes a "metaphysician in the dark, twanging / An instrument . . ."--but, unlike the musician of the "Blue Guitar," this guitarist is placed firmly at the center of a new stage. He communicates to an "invisible audience," making his words theirs, "as of two / Emotions becoming one." The guitar "gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses. . . ." The idea of the poet begins to emerge in this volume as something more than the "harmonious skeptic" (122) of Ideas of Order. He is more also than the primitive magician figure of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," who "held the world upon his nose" (178). He is gradually becoming the hero with a mission to deepen the quality of human perception through his words. Stevens says:

> Words add to the senses. The words for the dazzle
> Of mica, the dithering of grass,
> The Arachne integument of dead trees,
> Are the eye grown larger, more intense. (234)

The main thrust of Parts of a World is toward locating the image of the central mind firmly within the confines of the physical earth. Living people, who are "sensible to pain," do not want to exist in the air with the "little owl"; they turn toward the "cocks . . . clawing at their beds / To be again. . . ." They want the "sharpest sun: / The sharpest self, the sensible range, / The extent of what they are" (243-44). Stevens defines this "sensible

range" more and more frequently with reference both to the mind at the center of civilized consciousness and to the imagination as a primitive force that can survive the dawn of day's realities.

"The Latest Freed Man" (204-05) is freed from "the truth," or as Stevens says elsewhere, "The the" (203). This man is content not to find a "doctrine to this landscape. . . . [T]he morning is color and mist, / Which is enough. . . ." The sun is personified as "the strong man vaguely seen," as it will later be identified with Ulysses. The idea of man and the idea of the sun are one in the sense that the same force of reality gives life to both of them. The new man experiences what it means "to be without a description of to be . . . To have the ant of the self changed to an ox . . . To know that the change and that the ox-like struggle / Come from the strength that is the strength of the sun. . . ." If the sun is symbol of the truth, it also represents a pluralism encompassing the mind of man. The freed man discovers "everything . . . more real, himself / At the center of reality, seeing it." Stevens' fresh spiritual continues as always to spring from the desire for presential experience (that which is "more real") and to pave the abstract way toward such experience. "The Man on the Dump" (201-02) "sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail. / One beats and beats for that which one believes. / That's what one wants to get near." Again, the

oldest horn is played in the dark with chaos on one side and presence on the other.

But only by acknowledging the finality of otherness is either chaos or presence possible; "On the Road Home" (203-04) is an explicit statement of this cornerstone of Stevens' belief. An intimate recapturing of a dialogue with his interior self, the poem is also an abstract portrait of the intimate side of earth's presence.

> It was when I said,
> "There is no such thing as the truth,"
> That the grapes seemed fatter.
> The fox ran out of his hole.
>
> You . . . You said,
> "There are many truths,
> But they are not parts of a truth."
> Then the tree, at night, began to change,
>
> Smoking through green and smoking blue.
> We were two figures in a wood.
> We said we stood alone.
>
> It was when I said,
> "Words are not forms of a single word.
> In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
> The world must be measured by eye";
>
> It was when you said,
> "The idols have seen lots of poverty,
> Snakes and gold and lice,
> But not the truth";
>
> It was at that time, that the silence was largest
> And longest, the night was roundest,
> The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
> Closest and strongest.

The concept of <u>the</u> truth or the Word is founded on an idea of ultimate unity, the belief in a final abstraction beyond the mind. It robs all separate elements of their finality as it destroys the finality of individual words. But

Stevens maintains "there are only the parts": the two selves, the grapes, the words--the disparate realities of a presential world, a fresh spiritual space in the darkness.

Stevens takes stock of the abstract framework of his belief in "Asides on the Oboe" (250-51). The poem provides a noteworthy linking up of Stevens' idea of central man with the spiritual dimension of the art of perception. If "final belief / Must be in a fiction . . ." it cannot be in the "obsolete fiction" of projected gods. Belief must be in the idea of man, the creator of the gods. This abstraction is the living one for our time:

> The philosophers' man alone still walks in dew,
> Still by the sea-side mutters milky lines
> Concerning an immaculate imagery.

He is the "central man, the human globe, responsive / As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass, / Who in a million diamonds sums us up." He is the full creative capacity of man, the glass through which individual men see themselves and their worlds. Through the idea of Man alone can men recover a sense of sacred presence, the transcendence or transparence for which Stevens has sought.

> He is the transparence of the place in which
> He is and in his poems we find peace.

Through his art--his "hautboy" and his poems--he provides a way of sight, which is to say that he creates the world that we live in by speaking it into existence, saying, "Thou art not August unless I make thee so." By becoming the I of the creator, man creates the thou of the world. Physical

reality will rendezvous with him alone (cuckolding its obsolete lovers) for the union which is also a fresh incarnation.

> Clandestine steps upon imagined stairs
> Climb through the night, because his cuckoos call.

In time of "death and war," the failure of traditional, romantic myth, the "jasmine scent," is all the more obvious. In a letter to Hi Simons, December, 1939 ("Asides" was first published in December, 1940), Stevens approvingly referred to the idea of the "primordial importance of spiritual values in time of war" (L, 346). When "jasmine islands" become "bloody martyrdoms," men no longer respond to the idea of providential gods. "We found the sum of men. We found, / If we found the central evil, the central good." Therefore the fallen are buried "without jasmine crowns." God has always suffered everything for men; now men know that they have suffered with him, that "we and the diamond globe at last were one." Although the jasmine does not return, the idea of Man can now be believed in "without external reference."

II

Parts of a World, like all his poetry, abundantly illustrates that for Stevens both the way to the idea of the center and the way to experience of elemental earth require decreation of stale abstractions or ways of sight. As he says in "The Man on the Dump" (201-03), "The dump is full /

Of images. Days pass like papers from a press." But when "One rejects / The trash. That's the moment when the moon creeps up / To the bubbling of bassoons." Rejection of the trash means satire, and in this volume Stevens' decreation frequently takes the form of difficult, allusive, short poems based on satirical contrast. For instance, "Arcades of Philadelphia the Past" (225-26) presents a view through the arcades of Philadelphia, a city associated with early Christianity (Revelation, III, 7-12), but in the present merely a city "that the spiders ate"--an image depicting spiderwebs among crumbling masonry. The meaning of the poem depends on the reader's association of Vallombrosa, strawberries, and the Apennines with medieval Christianity.[3] The poem's final lines conclude this allusive satire of otherworldly oriented religion:

> The strawberries once in the Apennines . . .
> They seem a little painted, now.
> The mountains are scratched and used, clear fakes.

Side by side with his efforts at decreation in Parts of a World, Stevens initiates a force of affirmation that is based on fresh experience of earth plus a sense of spontaneous speech. Just as Crispin was tempted to make the rejection of the romantic into a false romantic of its own, becoming the "searcher for the fecund minimum" (35), so too, in "Landscape with Boat" (241-43), the "anti-master man,

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[3] See R. D. Ackerman, "Stevens' 'Arcades of Philadelphia the Past,'" The Explicator, 24 (1966), No. 80.

floribund ascetic," is a "Nabob / Of bones. . . ."

> He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
> Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still
> The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
> He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
> And not be touched by blue.

Rejection itself can be romantic if one posits a "neutral centre" in place of heaven and continues to suppose a "truth beyond all truths." Such a negator "never supposed / That he might be truth, himself, or part of it. . . . He never supposed divine / Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing / Was divine then all things were. . . ." Unlike Crispin, however, this man, were he "better able to suppose," could enter a space that is more than quotidian. He could experience a fresh confidence in his external world as well as in his song. He could observe the "palms" and "wine," and say: "The thing I hum appears to be / The rhythm of this celestial pantomime."

Some of the ambiguities of Parts of a World as a whole arise from Stevens' desire to both spiritually validate the "part" as well as affirm an abstract, final belief. "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard" (247) begins with affirmation: "After the final no there comes a yes / And on that yes the future world depends. / No was the night. Yes is this present sun." But the conclusion of the poem makes it clear that after the rejections there can be no "One thing remaining, infallible," since the mind "can never be satisfied." There can be no final yes for Stevens unless it is centered in the ever-changing mind. There can be no belief

for him in the sense of an infallibility providing a "form on the pillow" or an "aurole above the humming house."

On the other hand, "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" (248-50) makes her rejection into an extravagance of its own. By saying "no / To everything," making the moonlight crumble to "degenerate forms," she nonetheless wears velvet and ascends her mountain into "lofty darkness." Her desire for ultimate bareness causes her to rein in her own creative energy, speaking negations into her donkey's ear--while the donkey wishes "faithfully for a falsifying bell." The "figure of capable imagination," who descends the mountain, is "Dressed poorly" and is "intent on the sun." His horse is "all will," and he himself "impatient of the bells and midnight forms." It is this capable figure who creates the "ultimate elegance: the imagined land"--which is the pure romantic, the transparency. In this poem, then, emphasis on negation and distrust of the imagination are means of an ascent into a false romantic; while desire for the sun linked with a faith in the powers of the imagination leads to a descent into a pure "imagined land."

The refreshing elements of the spontaneous and the primitive continue to develop in Parts of a World as alternatives to (or ways toward) the securing of an abstract belief. In "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun" (248), Stevens announces that "some things . . . instantly and in themselves . . . are gay / And you and I are such

things. . . ." He goes on:

> It is there, being imperfect, and with these things
> And erudite in happiness, with nothing learned,
> That we are joyously ourselves and we think
>
> Without the labor of thought. . . .

Still stressing this immediate and emotional involvement with things, Stevens refers to the "gaiety that is being, not merely knowing, / The will to be and to be total in belief, / Provoking a laughter, an agreement, by surprise." Such emphasis on a feeling of oneness with things is rare in Stevens' poetry, where the main stress is on separating self and world. But Stevens begins to allow himself this happy identification with the imperfect elements only as his decreation clears the way for evanescent moments of faith. His closeness to the elements was nearly disastrous in "Domination of Black," and "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" offered little of the sense of affirmative joy found in this present poem.

"Martial Cadenza" (237-38) is an exquisite representation of Stevens' reawakening to the joy of the present moment. Once again it is the star of love that symbolizes his own capacity for presential experience. Here the star calls back for him the living presence of his past (as usual, shared with his woman companion), "as if life came back . . . as if evening found us young, still young, / Still walking in a presence of our own." The experience that Stevens is trying to capture here is similar to one he described in his Journal some thirty-five years before:

"Tonight, there was a long twilight and after dinner I took a stroll. . . . I could not realize that it was I that was walking there. . . . Now and then something happens to me, some old habit comes up, some mood, some scene . . . returns, and I return with it. But more often my days are mere blots on the calendar" (L, 81). The reawakened memory of the living past is "like sudden time in a world without time, / This world, this place, the street in which I was, / Without time: as that which is not has no time. . . ." His present world is for him like "blots on the calendar," filled with the silence of armies after the defeat. It does not exist in time; it is profane. "What had this star to do with the world it lit, / With the blank skies over England, over France / And above the German camps? It looked apart." Yet it is the star "that shall maintain--Itself / Is time, apart from any past, apart / From any future, the ever-living and being, / The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire, / The present close, the present realized. . . ." The star symbolizes love, the experience of the sacred in the moment of time. In a letter to Elsie thirty years before, Stevens related the same star to his capacity for presential response:

> The woods along the side of the road looked at their height. And yet at twilight, in the neutral light . . . I did not altogether respond--my sensibilities were numb--emotion sealed up. . . . But when the sun had set and the evening star was twinkling in the orange sky, I passed a camp. . . . There were two or three camp-fires and at one they were broiling ham. Well, Bo, it may sound absurd, but I <u>did</u> respond to that sugarey

> fragrance--sensibilities stirred, emotions leapt--
> the evening star, the fragrance of ham, camp-
> fires, tents. It was worth while, by Jupiter!

It is this capacity for heightened experience of an immediate world that is symbolized by the star, "the vivid thing in the air that never changes, / Though the air change."

Yet there is small evidence anywhere in Stevens' poetry of such immediacy of response. There is spontaneity abstracted, as in the "Bright & Blue Bird," but little sense of immediate personal experience. His poetry, I maintain, is basically his way to such experience. It functions as myth, that is, as an abstract gateway into a presential world. It is only very rarely the record of an immediate experience, except for a few instances--mostly among his very late poems. The memory of the living moment in "Martial Cadenza," however, reminds us that Stevens' pursuit of the "origin and course / Of love" (18) continues.

Two poems which emphasize spontaneity and sense experience refer in their titles to hands (a persistent image of sense immediacy in Stevens' poetry): "The Sense of the Sleight-of-hand Man" (222) and "The Hand as a Being" (271).[4] The first poem stresses the casual aspect of poetic creation as well as the accidental nature of the source of the poem's celebration:

> One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths,
> One's tootings at the weddings of the soul
> Occur as they occur.

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[4] Cf. Vendler's discussion of "Oak Leaves Are Hands," pp. 149-53.

This surprise aspect of both immediate experience and the writing of the poem leads to acknowledgement of the ultimate surprise, the mystery at the source of the myth:

> It is a wheel, the rays
> Around the sun. The wheel survives the myth.
> The fire eye in the clouds survives the gods.

It is interesting to note that Stevens draws upon the fund of ancient mythologies to make his point that the sun outlasts its myths. This is a good example of Stevens' reverting to primitive forms to express a living myth with presential immediacy: the sun is a wheel and an eye to the visionary perception of the primitive. William Tyler Olcott notes, for example, that "the most ancient and popular solar symbol seems to have been the eye. . . . The sun, in short, possessed to primitive minds all the attributes of a great eye gazing down upon the earth. . . . Vieing in importance with the eye symbol of the sun was the wheel symbol."[5] The elements of Stevens' spiritual continue to develop from and lead toward immediate sense experience. (For a later, more extended appearance of the sun as wheel, see "Page from a Tale"). This present poem concludes with more of the same emphasis. Like Yeats, who at times would be "ignorant as the dawn,"[6] Stevens, too, in his swing toward sense immediacy, concedes that "It may be that the ignorant man,

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[5] Myths of the Sun, orig. Sun Lore of All Ages (1914; rpt. New York: Capricorn, 1967), pp. 288-89.

[6] Collected Poems, p. 144.

alone, / Has any chance to mate his life with life / That is the sensual pearly spouse. . . ."

The second poem, "The Hand as Being," pictures this mating, contrasting it with an Eliot-like over-consciousness.[7]

> In the first canto of the final canticle,
> Too conscious of too many things at once,
> Our man beheld the naked, nameless dame. . . .

At this pole of Stevens' myth, man by becoming ignorant unites with his projected imagination in a physical world. At the opposite pole, when his imagination is god-like, he absorbs the physical world into himself: "Thou art not August unless I make thee so." The naked dame of this poem is, of course, another image of the interior woman, like the "paltry nude" (5) of Harmonium. She, too, represents the active ideal, the capacity for love. Her living presence (her hand) "composed him and composed the tree" (the external world). Finally, through his release from the tyranny of thought and through his sense of oneness with the world, he "lay beside her underneath the tree."

Just as the decreative side of Stevens' myth opens up the possibility of such intimate identification of interior self and external world, so also such immediate

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[7] The repetitive lines, "first canto of the final canticle" and "Too conscious of too many things at once," resemble Eliot's lines from "Ash-Wednesday": "first turning of the second stair . . . second turning of the second stair . . . first turning of the third stair . . ." and "These matters that with myself I too much discuss / Too much explain" (Complete Poems, pp. 63, 61).

sensation continues to form the very basis of the myth. For instance, in "Contrary Theses (II)" (270), a description of particularities gives way to concern with the abstract myth:

> One chemical afternoon in mid-autumn,
> When the grand mechanics of earth and sky were near,
> Even the leaves of the locust were yellow then,
>
> He walked with his year-old boy on his shoulder.
> The sun shone and the dog barked and the baby slept.

He goes on to describe his search for a "final refuge":

> He walked toward
>
> An abstract, of which the sun, the dog, the boy
> Were contours.

And although the "abstract was suddenly there and gone again . . ." he saw it "plainly: / The premise from which all things were conclusions, / The noble, Alexandrine verve." Stevens' poetry rarely records these moments of the "weddings of the soul," but the central mythic elements of the poems both result from and lead toward such experience.

At night, when the mind and the forces of the universe most fully interpenetrate, the abstraction of day takes on life as a mythic presence. In "The Candle a Saint" (223), the "noble, Alexandrine verve" becomes the green night herself that moves "among the sleepers, the men, / Those that lie chanting green is the night." The presence of nature abstracted in living myth is the "noble figure, the essential shadow, / Moving and being, the image at its source, / The abstract, the archaic queen."

The relationship between this force of earth's presence outside of mind (but experienced in the mind) and

the interior self is the subject of a number of short poems in Parts of a World. "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" (267) discovers that "It is difficult to read. The page is dark." When he reads, knowing "what it is that he expects," the page (his reading of life) is "blank."[8] But since the "greeness of night lies on the page," the advice to the "realist" in the second half of the poem is to read, "not knowing what you expect." Then the "green falls on you as you look . . . That elemental parent, the green night, / Teaching a fusky alphabet." From this direction man escapes the projections of his own expectations, but the language he learns from archaic night is "fusky," alien. The progression of the months in "Metamorphosis" (265-66) makes the point emphatically. When still close to the living warmth of summer, "the wind spells out / Sep-tem-ber. . . ." But as one approaches the death-dealing, alien depth of winter, the impact of the destructive side of the natural process (the worms) is insane and with an inhuman vocabulary: "Wiz-nil-imbo." For Stevens, man cannot rest in such chaos, even though the green earth provides the stuff of his experience.

"Yellow Afternoon" (236-37) is a poem of devotion to this elemental parent (an unusual instance here of the earth as father), but even this poem swings back at its conclusion

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[8] For another possible reading of the poem, see Doggett, pp. 80-81.

to the interior self. It opens:

> It was in the earth only
> That he was at the bottom of things
> And of himself. There he could say
> Of this I am, this is the patriarch. . . .

In the second stanza, the earth as father speaks to him, proclaiming human truths:

> He said I had this that I could love,
> As one loves visible and responsive peace,
> As one loves one's own being,
> As one loves that which is the end
> And must be loved, as one loves that
> Of which one is a part as in a unity,
> A unity that is the life one loves. . . .

Just as the female presence of the green night of nature falls on Phosphor's page, so too, the "odor / Of earth penetrates more deeply than any word. / There he touches his being. There as he is / He is." But the poem alters abruptly at this point; the male presence of earth becomes woman: "thought that he had found all this / Among men, in a woman--she caught his breath. . . ." Man's love relationship with the external earth is for Stevens always a matter of a return to the image of his interior self:

> But he came back as one comes back from the sun
> To lie on one's bed in the dark, close to a face
> Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks.

Although the self within is portrayed here (as in "The Men that are Falling") as strange and alien, (as one might expect in a poem directed toward intimacy with father earth), nevertheless, it is she who makes love possible.

Man experiences his world through the image of the interior presence; in this sense, Stevens' woman is a mythic

figure. She is an essential living element of a mind that sees the world only through itself. In "Poem with Rhythms" (245-46), Stevens explains that just as the "hand between the candle and the wall / Grows large on the wall . . ." so

> The mind between this light or that and space,
> (This man in a room with an image of the world,
> That woman waiting for the man she loves,)
> Grows large against space. . . .

Only in the image without can he come to know the presence within:

> There the man sees the image clearly at last.
> There the woman receives her lover into her heart
> And weeps on his breast, though he never comes.

The creations of the mind, like those of the hand, measure the intensity of the light within and frame the experience of space without. It is no wonder that "the mind / Turns to its own figurations and declares, / 'This image, this love, I compose myself / Of these. In these, I come forth outwardly.'"[9]

From his swing toward validation of immediate sense experience, Stevens' poetry swings back to affirm the significance of the woman within and of her images formed in the mind. "Bouquet of Belle Scavoir" (231-32) is a tribute to the creative force of the woman presence: "It is she alone that matters. / She made it" (the bouquet, the composition of nature). Only in her bouquet can she be known:

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[9] Cf. Cassirer, Mythical Thought, p. 196: "the fundamental rule which governs all spiritual development . . . [is] that the spirit arrives at its true and complete inwardness only by expressing itself."

"Everything in it is herself." Like Penelope, the man in the poem seeks his love image in the physical world:

> How often had he walked
> Beneath summer and the sky
> To receive her shadow into his mind . . .
> Miserable that it was not she.

But the search for love continues, especially since each new poem adds to her bouquet and testifies to her active presence.

> But this she has made. If it is
> Another image, it is one she has made.
> It is she that he wants, to look at directly,
> Someone before him to see and to know.

III

In contrast to Stevens' succeeding volumes of poetry, Parts of a World contains only a few longer poems, and these are transition poems. They manage neither the mobile discursiveness of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" nor the mythic depth of "Credences of Summer." They do, however, express forcefully at times Stevens' basic concerns with the meaning of perception, the idea of love, and the figure of the hero.

"Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (252-59), emphasizing the mind side of reality, views the act of perception as a spiritual faith. "Messieurs, / It is an artificial world" (i). "The eye believes and its communion takes" (ii). But the basic enigma of perception is not to be skirted. The confusion of "these days, half

earth, half mind; / Half sun, half thinking of the sun" (vi), is requisite to the belief, as doubt is to faith. Stevens' belief centers exactly in the act of perception:

> What
> One believes is what matters. Ecstatic identities
> Between one's self and the weather and the things
> Of the weather are the belief in one's element,
> The casual reunions. . . .

The section concludes with an expression of a primary article of Stevens' faith. He begins by suggesting that "if one went to the moon, / Or anywhere beyond, to a different element, / One would be drowned in the air of difference, / Incapable of belief, in the difference." The earth is an essential element of man's belief. The mode through which the earth is experienced is all-important, and the mode of experience that Stevens goes on to describe is another example of his urge toward primitive freshness:

> And then returning from the moon, if one breathed
> The cold evening, without any scent or the shade
> Of any woman, watched the thinnest light
> And the most distant, single color, about to
> change,
> And naked of any illusion, in poverty,
> In the exactest poverty, if then
> One breathed the cold evening, the deepest inhalation
> Would come from that return to the subtle centre.
> (vii)

Returning to the earth in poverty, stripped of his myths, man discovers the earth in its "first idea" as the source of his myth. Later, especially in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens develops more fully this notion of the "myth before the myth" (383). But even here one senses the

coming together of the moment of perception with the ultimate abstraction.

"Montrachet-Le-Jardin" (260-64) is a sensitive inquiry into the relationship between love, belief, and perception. "What more is there to love than I have loved?" If there is nothing more than earth to love, then the earth is "bright, O bright," even though the clock "clicks" off our time. But if there is "something more to love, / Something in now a senseless syllable . . . Amen to the feelings about familiar things, / The blessed regal dropped in dagger's dew. . . ." Not only would the existence of a transcendent reality destroy the finality of immediate experience, it would also destroy the significance of man's own thought, his "singular skeleton, / Salt-flicker," since man could never become the "hero of his world."

Stevens' affirmation of the finality of this world correlates with his confidence in man as hero. It is "night's undeciphered murmuring" that becomes the "hero's throat . . . From which the chant comes. . . ." And just as the night becomes the hero, so the hero delivers man to a "hero's world." Man as skeleton is man without the flesh of belief. It is he who "hears the earliest poems of the world / In which man is the hero."[10] The idea of man as hero centered in a physical earth makes possible a fresh

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[10] Cassirer discusses the early epics in which the "hero is discovered, and in him the individual man as an active and suffering subject" (Mythical Thought, pp. 196-99).

spiritual space, a "hero-land to which we go, / A little nearer by each multitude, / To which we come as into bezeled plain. . . ." Instead of being ruled by the "speechless, invisible gods . . . from over Asia," man's belief rests finally on the "naked man as last / And tallest hero and plus gaudiest vir." Such a hero combines in him two selves: the interior self that makes love possible and the heights of consciousness that in the past projected the idea of the good into the minds of the gods. "But to speak simply of good is like to love, / To equate the root-man and the super-man. . . ."

The poem concludes with Stevens speaking in the first person, assuming the voice of the hero. He rejects his own former attempts to stress the paradisal side of earth (present even in "Sunday Morning"): "A little while of terra paradise / I dreamed. . . ." But the mind is not content with dreams; man has a "mournful sense" that seeks out fact and must be satisfied in any new structure of the imagination.

> Bastard chateaux and smoky demoiselles,
> No more. I can build towers of my own,
> There to behold, there to proclaim, the grace
>
> And free requiting of responsive fact,
> To project the naked man in a state of fact,
> As acutest virtue and ascetic trove.

The items of fact that Stevens goes on to list emphasize the meaningless repetitions of nature without an external sponsor, but in the new spiritual space even these "cataracts / As facts fall like rejuvenating rain, / Fall down through

nakedness to nakedness, / To the auroral creature musing in the mind."[11] When fact meets naked self, a "sun-sacrament" is possible, but the "one sense" that is the "single main" through which "life's latest, thousand senses" flow is the desire for the real. The poem ends with Stevens' usual reminder that this rite of the imagination, his poem, is an affirmation only of the moment; but as we know from his subsequent poetry, this linking of the idea of love with the idea of the hero is a crucial step for his mythopoeic imagination.

The final poem of Parts of a World--"Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" (273-81)--instead of being a response (as the previous poem) to the idea of the hero, is largely a dissection of the idea itself.[12] In a sense, it concludes (where the previous poem begins) with the assertion that the "hero is a feeling" (xii). The poem progresses step by step from the failure of the heroic dimension in the present, including the practical gods and the old romances (i-iii), to the need to express the idea of the hero to the common man (iii-iv), since the hero is the only possible grounds of belief (vi). The poem proceeds to emphasize the hero as abstract idea instead of as a particular embodiment (vii-ix), but then goes on to describe the

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[11] This is an early instance of a figure that will become an important force in the late poetry--the "child asleep in its own life" (OP, 104, 106).

[12] For a detailed discussion of the poem, see Vendler, pp. 154-67.

dangers of "dry descriptions" (x), which can be turned into "profane parades," starving the real spiritual appetite (xi). The "hero is a feeling"--which is to say he is an eye we see through (xii), the all made one (xiii), an abstraction that yet is the "organic centre of responses. . . . [And] To meditate man . . . Creates, in the blissfuller perceptions, / What unisons create in music" (xiv). Here Stevens has brought together the mind's meditation, the idea of the hero, the act of perception, and the "sudden rightnesses" (240) of art. The "highest man . . . embraces / The self of the hero," creating a mythic basis for the coming together of mind and physical reality, "the solar single, / Man-sun, man-moon, man-earth, man-ocean" (xv). But as in the previous poem the firecat leaps away, so too, "Examination" concludes with a wilted "bouquet of summer," only a remnant of the "sun-sacrament." But here Stevens hints at the sacraments to come:

> But was the summer false? The hero?
> How did we come to think that autumn
> Was the veritable season, that familiar
> Man was the veritable man? So
> Summer, jangling the savagest diamonds and
> Dressed in its azure-doubled crimsons,
> May truly bear its heroic fortunes
> For the large, the solitary figure. (xvi)

The hero-world of the mind will not be separated from the world of immediate experience, and summer's mythic abstractions are due to take the center of the stage of Stevens' poetry as he embraces the "large, the solitary figure" of the hero.

IV

The gateway to Transport to Summer is "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (380-408), which was published originally in the same year as Parts of a World, 1942, but is placed misleadingly at the end of Transport in the Collected Poems. Although this long poem adds nothing essentially new to the abstract contours of Stevens' myth, it does bring together in a single poem all the ideas basic to his spiritual, and they in turn provide the framework for the growth of his own supreme fiction in his remaining poetry. Now, as the ideas assume a fundamental pattern that will remain to the end, I will begin altering my own focus to concentrate more fully on the accelerating development of the mythic dimension of the poetry. Stevens' more discursive meditations continue, of course, but now within a field whose components are stabilized; between the meditations the myth grows.

It is significant that Stevens dedicated his poem to Henry Church, especially in view of the tenor of his letters to Church during this period. Stevens came into contact with him early in 1939 (L, 338n.), but already on June 1, 1939, he wrote him of his interest in "pure poetry" and of his "confidence in the spiritual role of the poet" (L, 340). By May, 1940, he advised him to establish a "Chair of Poetry at Harvard . . . for the study of the history of poetic thought and of the theory of poetry" (L, 358). In October, 1940, he wrote him that the "major poetic idea in the world

is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary." He goes on: "The knowledge of poetry is a part of philosophy, and a part of science; the import of poetry is the import of the spirit. The figures of the essential poet should be spiritual figures" (1, 378). Such correspondence glosses the opening lines of the poem, especially the "single, certain truth," the "central of our being," and the "vivid transparence."[13] For Stevens, the single truth has come to center on the way in which the idea of God merges with the idea of man, resulting in a modern form of transcendence--transparence, the capacity for love, for experience of presence. Both the poetry of God-man and the ecstacy of transparence grow out of the "spiritual figures" of the poet.

Stevens assumes first in this poem the role of a spiritual guide. He teaches that the single truth, or the ultimate abstract, is symbolized by one of his spiritual figures, the "inconceivable idea of the sun." But to see

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13 Stevens expressly stated that these "first eight lines have nothing to do with Mr. Church: they are by way of introduction to the poem" (L, 538). The first line--"And for what, except for you, do I feel love?"-- is certainly a form of invocation to the woman of his imagination. The relevance to the poem of his dialogue with Church remains undiminished, though, by either of these observations.

the idea of the sun, "you must become an ignorant man again." Stevens' idea of the ignorant or naked man does not contradict his emphasis on the mind in the center of civilized consciousness. It is only man at the center who can be naked. It is he who would "Never suppose an inventing mind as source / Of this idea [of the sun] nor for that mind compose / A voluminous master folded in his fire." The idea of the sun is seen in its first idea when it is "Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images. . . ." The naked man is the central man who realizes that the "death of one god is the death of all." To name the sun is to kill it. "Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named." The sun here is Stevens' symbol for that which is, for final reality beyond the web of language. "The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / in the difficulty of what it is to be" (I, i).

It is only through language that man experiences, however enigmatically, the idea of the sun. "The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea" (I, iii). This abstract, for Stevens, is embodied in the earth:

> The clouds preceded us
>
> There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
> There was a myth before the myth began,
> Venerable and articulate and complete.
>
> From this the poem springs. . . . (I, iv)

In his contact with earth man re-forms the idea in his living mind--it becomes an "abstraction blooded, as a man by thought" (I, vi). The poem grows out of the earth and leads back to the earth transmuted in transit through the mind.

As always, Stevens' discursive thought arrives back at the moments of union between man and earth: "incalculable balances . . . moments of awakening, / Extreme, fortuitous, personal. . . ."[14] As he says, "Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake" (I, vii). The question of the first idea is the question also of man, the experiencer. The idea of man that Stevens goes on to develop in the conclusion of this first section of his poem relies on the image of man as lover-poet-clown. It is "he that reposes / On a breast forever precious for that touch, / For whom the good of April falls tenderly, / Falls down, the cockbirds calling at the time." This lover who touches and is touched by the earth is a "foundling of the infected past," when people did not know how to love the earth. This portrayal of the hero represents an emotional peak for Stevens. He calls on his interior muse for aid: "My dame, sing for this person accurate songs. / He is and may be but oh! he is, he is" (I, ix). Corresponding to the idea of the sun is this "major abstraction . . . the idea of

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[14] Harold Bloom, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 81, in comparing Stevens' "moments" to Wordsworth's, notes the "exhaustions that attend the increases of self-awareness in Romantic tradition."

man." And like the first idea, the major man is not to be named either. He is "More fecund as principle than particle."

The idea of the sun and the idea of man are abstract poles of a mythic geography, ultimate expansions from the center of those casual moments of union. The only figuration that Stevens will allow this major man is a portrait of an equally casual poet-clown, "in his old coat, / His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town. . . ." Stevens concludes:

> It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
> The final elegance, not to console
> Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

Only this comic foundling from the past can open himself to the sun of a "Cloudless . . . morning" (I, x) and speak the poem that refreshes the first idea.

The scene which opens the second main section of the poem is like an impressionistic drawing: "Violets, doves, girls, bees, hyacinths / Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause / In a universe of inconstancy." But the girls wear the same jonquils in their hair that their mothers did, and over this garden scene presides an "old seraph," inhaling the "appointed odor." It is a "withered scene . . . that . . . has not changed enough." It needs refreshing by new metaphors--"the pigeons [not doves] clatter in the air" (II, i). But the informing myth of this Italian garden is founded on the desire for permanence, not acknowledging or being refreshed by the ever-beginning and ever-ending cycle

of the natural world. The President can ordain the "bee to be / Immortal" (II, ii), but only statues remain "inhuman bronze" while the funerals take place--and statues are "rubbish in the end" (II, iii).

"Two things of opposite nature depend / On one another. . . . This is the origin of change." The mind and the world interpenetrate. "The partaker partakes of that which changes him . . . and the sailor and the sea are one." Midway through the poem and just prior to a sea change, Stevens here offers encouragement to his interior self--"Follow after" (II, iv)--whereas Dante, en route to heaven, offers his readers a warning (Paradise II. 1-18).

Section v is an example of the mythic scenic technique which Stevens calls upon increasingly in the later poetry. Having its origin especially in the abstract story of "The Comedian," this anecdotal mode relies heavily on primary colors and elemental forms, imagery now fully endowed with a spiritual dimension. The death of the planter has not affected the wild orange trees on the blue island; even his three lime trees are now "baked greener in the greenest sun." Instead of a planted nature, on the island to the south rests "like / A mountain, a pineapple pungent as Cuban summer"--a contrast to the "appointed odor" of section i. There the "great banana tree . . . pierces clouds and bends on half the world." Juxtaposed with the spherical shapes of order that survive despite the planter's death on the blue island of the imagination, the elongated

shapes and procreative tree of life provide the other half of the experiential world. The artist figure (with a banjo) remembers his former living space (a less wild one) as a spherical melon, "pink / If seen rightly yet a possible red" when it is withered as in the opening scene. This artist is affected positively by the brilliant colors and forms of the world about him, despite the travail of a new land; death is no relief, only a separation from the "banjo's twang." Imaginative order involves carving out a momentary poem in chaos, but chaos is our native element and the source of our joy.

Each living thing composes its world, saying "bethou me." Without the "bethous" there is only "idiot minstrelsy"--sounds uninformed by the any spirit of order. But for man a higher sense of order is possible: he can recognize that which is beyond self as well as the force within. "Bethou him, you / And you, bethou him and bethou" (II, vi). Such separation between self and world makes possible the realization of love, the sacred meeting between these two final realities: "For easy passion and ever-ready love / Are of our earthy birth and here and now / And where we live and everywhere we live. . . ." These meetings are our "accessible bliss," involving no more than "degrees of perception" (II, vii). But despite the fact that man recognizes his separation from nature, as the "too weedy wren" cannot, he can never experience the naked spouse without a "fictive covering [which] / Weaves always glistening from

the heart and mind" (II, viii). Nanzia Nunzio is always to be stripped and arrayed in the same moment.

Stevens' urge to expand the relevance of poetry beyond the domain of the personal is clearly in evidence in section ix. The poet as hero creates a mode of being that spreads beyond himself (cf. 340, "An age is a manner collected from a queen"). "It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks. / He tries by a peculiar speech to speak / The peculiar potency of the general, / To compound the imagination's Latin with / The lingua franca et jocundissima." He brings together the language of the spirit and the language of the senses. He sits in a "Theatre / Of Trope," taking part in the general "will to change." "The casual is not / Enough. The freshness of transformation is / The freshness of a world." The poet's role is to transform by refreshing, to "propose / The suitable amours" (II, x), the fresh spiritual that weds the imagination to its world.

The third section of the poem juxtaposes stale ritual and belief with the fresh spiritual founded in immediate perception. It begins by contrasting the "jubilas [sung] at exact, accustomed times" with the "difficultest rigor" of catching from the "Irrational moment its unreasoning" (III, i). The "blue woman" of the imagination does not desire evasive metaphors; "from her window [she names] / The corals of the dogwood, cold and clear . . . being real . . . except for the eye, without intrusion" (III, ii).

Avoiding the irrational moment, former myths have been founded in "A lasting visage in a lasting bush, / A face of stone" that is intended to outlast the weather. Resembling Keats' portrait of Saturn in the "Fall of Hyperion," this visage, too, is a mythic presence become an "effulgence faded." It has been "Too venerably used"--destroyed as an object too long of veneration. As the story of Jove leads to the story of Christ in "Sunday Morning," so here the idol is replaced by the story of Orpheus, the "dead shepherd [who] brought tremendous chords from hell / And bade the sheep carouse." But the children (who knew no better) paid tribute to neither heaven nor hell, but to earth (the carousing sheep) with nature's own flowers, multiformed and impermanent, "no two alike" (III, iii).

Stevens' own fable concerns this last form of love. Another variation on the fundamental sacrament of his poetry--the marriage of imagination and earth--this "mystic marriage in Catawba" takes place in the sun of "noon . . . [and] on the mid-day of the year"--Stevens' mythic moment (as we will see in "Credences of Summer"). Although of course this is a humorous story filled with delightful sounds, it is also essentially an abstract, a mythic shape. The "ceremonial hymn" warns that "Each [participant] must the other take as sign, short sign / To stop the whirlwind, balk the elements." Unlike the face of the previous section whose hair was the "channel slots of rain," this perennial ritual survives the weather because the "great captain loved

the ever-hill Catawba [Bawda's land] . . . And Bawda loved the captain as she loved the sun." The male mind's woman and the physical female's hero, like Penelope and Ulysses, the earth and the sun, are "love's characters come face to face." Stevens' search (originated in "Le Monocle") for the origin and course of love among the fluttering things of the time-space universe keeps leading him to the moment of perception and the mythic dimension of experience of earth. "They married well because the marriage-place / Was what they loved. It was neither heaven nor hell" (III, iv).

In contrast to Bawda's open desires, Canon Aspirin's sister lives in a "sensible ecstasy" (III, v) by rejecting her dreams. Her counterpart, the Canon himself, however, comes to realize that at midnight there is a "nakedness, a point, / Beyond which fact could not progress as fact." One discovers the pressures of the imagination when one is least under the spell of the physical world, but the Canon discovers also that it is "not a choice / Between but of."[15] Imagination and physical reality interpenetrate. The Canon Aspirin can only cure the headache of indecision by including "the things / That in each other are included, the whole, / The complicate, the amassing harmony" (III, vi). Still one more distinction must be made before the "I" of Stevens' lyrical self emerges for the first time in the poem

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[15] Doggett, pp. 116-17, rightly compares the Canon's night flight of the imagination to the flight of Milton's Satan, and then goes on to contrast the Canon's ascent with the angel's descent (III, viii).

since the proem.[16] If the Canon accepts both imagination and physical world, he can still misuse the imagination in order to simply impose "orders as he thinks of them, / As the fox and snake do." He then procedes to raise "statues of reasonable men, / Who surpassed the most literate owl, the most erudite / Of elephants." But to project orders of the mind on the disorder of nature is still to impose like the animal no matter how reasonable it may come to seem: "to impose is not / To discover." Stevens goes on to declare his faith:

> 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.

His poetry has recorded from Harmonium on his efforts to open himself to "major weather." The extent of his success is attested by the degree to which the later poetry is both patterned on the elements and open to the terror of what remains beyond the mind, for the real will seem "at first, a beast disgorged, unlike. . . ." The only fiction that will not be stripped is this "fiction of an absolute" (III, vii), centered on moments of discovery.

Like the "eternal damsel" of "Le Monocle," the angel here also "leaps downward." Transcendence becomes transparence during the "hour / Filled with expressible bliss,"

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[16] Cf. Vendler, p. 197.

the moment in time when the imagination is God, when "majesty is a mirror of the self" (III, viii). Then again, when the mind is viewed in relation to the "repetitions" of nature, the "man-hero [may not prove] the exceptional monster, / But he that of repetition is most master." Even this participation in the goings round of nature, though, is a "final good." Man would still be doing "all that angels can" (III, ix), although his communions in the green world would amount merely to the observation of a spinning leaf. Man's image depends on whether he is viewed from the perspective of nature or of the imagination.

Nature's image, too, as it forms in the imagination, is composed of more than repetition. It becomes the mirror of the woman spirit: the earth mother facing the interior paramour, each representing a frontier of experience incomplete and not to be named. Nature seen through a mythic eye is addressed: "Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night." She is "the more than natural figure." He cannot name her because she becomes the "soft-footed phantom, the irrational / Distortion . . . The fiction that results from feeling." To name this "green . . . fluent mundo" (III, x) is to put a stop to change and cut off the dimension of mystery.

The epilogue underscores once again the central theme of Parts of a World and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": the idea of poet as hero. The soldier represents the active participating side of life. But his war "ends."

The poet's "war between the mind and sky . . . never ends." Yet both wars "are one. They are a plural, a right and left, a pair. . . ." The active life and the life of the mind depend on one another. "The soldier is poor without the poet's lines. . . . [He dies] with proper words . . . or lives on the bread of faithful speech." Stevens has brought together his supreme fiction and the life of the world: "How simply the fictive hero becomes the real. . . ." As the voice of the real, the poet-hero is now in a position to extend his personal poetry into the mythic domain.

CHAPTER VI

"OF SKY, OF SEA, LARGE EARTH, LARGE AIR": TRANSPORT TO SUMMER

The major poems of Transport to Summer--"Chocorua to Its Neighbor," "Esthétique du Mal," "Description without Place," and "Credences of Summer"--are all heavily endowed with the auro of myth. Speaking frequently under the aegis of the poet as hero, Stevens both affirms and negates from a trans-personal dimension: his becomes the voice of proclamation; his fables point toward a visionary depth; his imagery of elemental nature is writ large as myth.

The night vision of "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" (296-302) is the means of Stevens' transport into the credences of day. It is his most successfully sustained visionary creation, making "Owl's Clover" look all the more wooden. Yet it has received relatively little critical attention, even though it carves out a spiritual space that reappears tellingly throughout Stevens' poetry.[1] If the poems of Parts of a World, along with the "Notes," etch the

[1] For a somewhat extended treatment of the poem, see Robert Pack, Wallace Stevens, 2nd ed. (1958; New York: Gordian, 1968), pp. 159-64; see also Baird, pp. 226-28, who writes that "Chocorua" "takes its place among the primary devotional poems in English."

abstract contours of the central man, "Chocorua" deepens the conception into vision. The idea of central man, the poet as hero, is transformed into mythic presence. The mountain-minded man (like Hoon) now breathes the air formed by the mountains of his own creation. The environment of the poem is indicated at the onset in the elevated voice of Chocorua:

> To speak quietly at such a distance, to speak
> And to be heard is to be large in space,
> That, like your own, is large, hence, to be part
> Of sky, of sea, large earth, large air. (I)

From this distance and in this large space, the idea of man (not "armies" of men) could live as presence: "One foot approaching, one uplifted arm" (II). Reinforcing this effect of distance in space is a distance in time. The vision occurred "last night" and is evoked in the past tense.

Combining with the powerful presence of the mountain to form the mythic setting, the "crystal-pointed star of morning, rose / And lit the snow to a light congenial / To this prodigious shadow." This star of love appeared at the "end of night" and before dawn, lighting the sacramental meeting place of imagination and reality. The night figure who came in an "elemental freedom" (iii) had also the "feel of day"--but "of a day as yet unseen, in which / To see was to be." This is primarily a night poem that prepares for the credences of day of later poems; the marriage of the night imagination with the day earth is, for Stevens, the sacred moment when imagination and reality are one, when

"To see [is] to be" (iv). But although this mythic dimension can exist for Stevens in an act of individual perception, in terms of the world of men it is still of a day to come.

Beyond the body's form, this shadow "was a shell of dark blue glass, or ice, / Or air . . . Blue's last transparence as it turned to black" (v). Symbolic of the deepest imagination, this darkest of blues allows transparence. It is to unite in Stevens' poetry with the rock of earth in a mythic configuration of the idea of love. This "shell" was the "glitter of a being, which the eye / Accepted yet which nothing understood. . . ." Seen with the eye of vision this form was beyond understanding; it was a "fusion of night . . . And of the brooding mind" (vi).[2] Representing the "pure romantic," this fusion relies on the dimension of mind that makes love possible. It is no wonder that this figure stood "as tall as a tree in the middle of / The night." His presence creates the mythic moment, the sacred center.[3] He is an image that points to where images cease: "Both substance and non-substance, luminous flesh / Or shapely fire: fire from an underworld, / Of less degree than flame or lesser shine" (vii). Stevens' vision here parallels Yeats' "image, man or shade, / Shade more than

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[2] The figure exists in the dimension of the sacred, the space where "Night and the imagination [are] one" (OP, 71).

[3] For the relationship between sacred time and space and the idea of the center, see Mircea Eliade, Patterns, Ch. 10, and The Sacred and the Profane, Ch. 1.

man, more image than a shade . . ." which becomes "Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit, / Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame. . . ."[4] But whereas Yeats' mythic space is created by the city of Byzantium, Stevens' space is typically formed through the natural elements, night, star, and mountain. Like Yeats', Stevens' image also represents the sacred moment of pure spirit (imagination) when "all complexities of fury leave."

> Upon my top he breathed the pointed dark.
> He was not man yet he was nothing else.
> If in the mind, he vanished, taking there
> The mind's own limits, like a tragic thing
> Without existence, existing everywhere. (viii)

Evocation of presence gradually begins to give way to proclamation of attributes--and these, first, in the form of paradox: not man but nothing else, vanishing and existing everywhere. To say simply that this is the imagination's unreality coloring all external realities is to avoid the element of mystery so pronounced here and throughout the poem. Minus the evocation of presence, Stevens' poetry can frequently be dealt with as philosophical abstraction. But acknowledging the presential dimension bloods the abstraction: the mystery at the source of belief in Man and Mind. In this realm, the idea of man is a shadow in the mind present everywhere in the seamless mystery of mind and world.

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[4] "Byzantium," Collected Poems, pp. 243-44.

The shadowy presence breathed in his consciousness from night, "inhaled / A freedom" (ix) in the absence of day's strictures on the imagination. But when the shadow spoke, as "daylight came," he made certain that the particularities of the world, "the simplest soldier's cry," were acknowledged, even during "moments of enlargement" (x), as part of what he was. The central mind takes its freedom from the night but recognizes firmly the difficulties of day:

> My solitaria
> Are the meditations of a central mind.
> I hear the motions of the spirit. . . . (xi)
>
> There lies the misery, the coldest coil
> That grips the centre, the actual bite, that life
> Itself is like a poverty in the space of life,
> So that the flapping of wind around me here
> Is something in tatters that I cannot hold. (xii)

The central mind in the daylight is acutely aware of its separation from the tatters outside itself.

The voice of the mountain proceeds: "In spite of this [the sense of poverty], the gigantic bulk of him / Grew strong, as if doubt never touched his heart"--or because doubt did touch him? Now catechizing, the voice continues: "From what desire / And from what thinking did his radiance come? / In what new spirit had his body birth?" (xiii). The answer is: "He came from out of sleep. / He rose because men wanted him to be" (xiv). To say that this presence has come into being because of man's desire is not to make him the product of wishful thinking. This shadow has arisen as an image ("by day") beyond the "form" of man but definitely

of men, "Excluding by his largeness their defaults." He is an embodiment of man's "power" and his "thought" (xv). His "starry head" was part "darkness . . . part desire and part the sense / Of what men are." This central man is aided by "others like him safely under roof" (xvi), not at the mountain peak, but transfiguring figures like himself: "captain . . . Cardinal . . . scholar" (xvii). They are images of the imagination, part "of the human mountain . . . Blue friends in shadows, rich conspirators, / Confiders and comforters and lofty kin" (xviii).

Chocorua, too, is a human mountain (the real transfigured by man's imagination) that proclaims: "To speak humanly from the height or from the depth / Of human things, that is acutest speech" (xix). The woman's voice in "The Idea of Order at Key West" also makes the "sky acutest at its vanishing." And Stevens prefaces the Necessary Angel with a definition of nobility as "man's spiritual height and depth." Chocorua goes on to make this vision of the spirit of man acutest at its vanishing:

> It is an eminence,
> But of nothing, trash of sleep that will disappear
> With the special things of night, little by little,
> In day's constellation, and yet remain, yet be. . . .
> (xx)

Although this shadow is a "megalfrere," it is more than the names men call it--"glubbal glub" (xxi), "metaphysical metaphor"--because it rests on Chocorua, "thinking in my snow, / Physical if the eye is quick enough. . . ."

The vision of the poet as hero is finally a matter of the immediate changes that he brings: "an enkindling, where . . . the air changes and grows fresh to breathe" (xxii). With a vision to believe in,

> To breathe is a fulfilling of desire,
> A clearing, a detecting, a completing,
> A largeness lived and not conceived, a space
> That is an instant nature, brilliantly. (xxiii)

As the imagination and God become one, the air of earth provides the sacred response to the desire for love. Through the vision of man, sacred reality comes to exist not in the eye of God but in the eye of man, "an instant nature."[5]

After the vision, the "great arms / Of the armies, the solid men, make big the fable." But the night vision is itself the beginning of the fresh belief, "of a day as yet unseen," just as the enkindled things of a physical world will also become for Stevens "part of the colossal sum . . . Still far away" (534). The shadow is himself the poet as hero; he is "their [the makers of the fable] captain and philosopher, / He that is fortelleze, though he be / Hard to perceive and harder still to touch" (xxiv). Although he arose in the night imagination, "searching / The pleasure of his spirit in the cold" (xxv), he was still no more than man.

> How singular he was as man, how large,
> If nothing more than that, for the moment, large

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[5] Eventually Stevens will stress the extent to which the eye of the hero is the eye of nature, the elements of nature providing the form of his vision. Vendler sees this "eye of nature" symbolized in the evening star, but she does not deal with the way in which the poet achieves his "oneness with nature" (p. 283).

> In my presence, the companion of presences
> Greater than mine, of his demanding, head
> And, of human realizings, rugged roy . . . (xxvi)

Though he is not the father (only a "bare brother"), as a "companion of presences" (experiences of the sacred) he is more than of the mind. He is the guiding spirit of man's perceptions, not just imaginings, but "realizings."

II

"Esthétique du Mal" (313-26) is a confusing array of modes and tones. But it is unified by the drive to provide an abstract framework (both discursive and mythic) for a spiritual relationship between the mind and the physical world of pain and death. In order for the presence of ma[illegible] man to be the source of "human realizings," there must remain no barrier between the idea of man and the idea of earth: mal is mal, the mind offers no escape. Helen Hennessy Vendler's appraisal of this poem illustrates the danger of failing to acknowledge Stevens' primary loyalty to the physical earth. She writes that "Esthétique" "is at once the most random and the most pretentious of Stevens' long poems. . . . The ambitious attempt to link evil and aesthetics was prompted conceivably by the same defensiveness toward 'life' which produced the epilogue to Notes, Stevens' most notoricus attempt to prove that poetry and

life are interdependent."[6] On the contrary, Stevens' poetry as a whole is his way into life in a physical world. As the imagination becomes God, with earth providing the contents of this central mind, Stevens moves toward experience of a presential physical world. An aesthetics of evil is a crucial step toward reclaiming for his mythic space a major segment of human experience.

"Esthétique" makes human suffering an essential part of Stevens' supreme fiction. No sooner does he establish that "Pain is human" (i) than he goes on to emphasize the idea of pain as a finality in a world where "both heaven and hell / Are one, and here. . . ." No longer can the romance of heaven and hell separate the bees from the honey and both from man. Perhaps "pain, no longer satanic mimicry, / Could be borne" (iii).

But for pain to be a finality in the human scheme of things it must be an essential element in man's central sense of his world. No longer can there be the good flowers and the bad flowers--"All sorts of flowers. That's the sentimentalist." Transparence (encounter with reality) appears in "Variations in the poems of a single sound, / The last. . . ." The "Hot-hooded and dark-blooded" rose is captured from nature to exist in the mind, but finally it is not the single rose but the central sense of nature that is

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[6] See pp. 206-07. Cf. p. 320, n. 16, where Vendler objects to Riddel's claim that Stevens was devoted to the physical world.

captured.[7] The "Spaniard of the rose" would not "muff . . . the mistress for her several maids . . . foregoing the nakedest passion for barefoot / Philandering. . . ." The "last" sound of B. and the dark rose of the Spaniard are transparencies because they embody the mal of life. "The genius of misfortune / Is not a sentimentalist." He is not the "genius of the mind"; he is the "genius of the body, which is our world." Another version of central man, this genius of the body is the spirit of earth, the artist who makes the dark rose of nature "exist in his own especial eye." Such transparencies, though, are momentary: "false engagements," since the "fault [of mind] / Falls out on everything" (iv). Pain in human.

Acceptance of the actual world, including human suffering, leads to a sense of unity (comparable to the "single sound" of section iv) that "Ties us to those we love." Within the actual, man experiences transparencies through the "services / Of central sense. . . ." And "these things disclosed, / These nebulous brilliancies . . . these minutiae mean more / Than clouds, benevolences, distant heads." In place of the transcendent, immediate experiences of the sacred are composed of the actual world spoken into being by the central sense and seen in an especial eye. The earth is clothed with the "attributes / With which we

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[7] For a reading of this section that starts from the opposite premise, stressing the particular and the central sense, see Riddel, pp. 206-07.

vested, once, the golden forms . . . Before we were wholly human and knew ourselves" (v).

Sections vi and vii provide the most crucial mythic thrust of the poem, the first as a surrealistic fable, the second as a lyric spiritual. The first explores the basis of such change in ways of belief as that which brings the "golden forms" to earth; the second endows the now "wholly human" man with such a form.

Section vi, I believe, has been generally misunderstood.[8] The "further consummation," the love relationship, which the sun desires is for the transfiguration of his own image in the night world of mind. But this image, the moon, always "appears / To be askew." Such "transmutations" from sun to moon are always imperfect and transitory, since, as we have seen, as things enter the mind, "fault / Falls out on everything. . . ." The night sky is filled with bygone images of such consummations, like the junk in "Dezembrum."[9] The "big bird" feeds on these transmutations, such as the moon, but not on the sun itself; this "bony appetite" is the force of change belying every desire for lasting consummation. The crumbling moon is a perennial symbol of such change, just as the bird has been a symbol of the

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[8] The usual procedure has been to start with the idea that the bird feeds on the sun. See, for example, Riddel, pp. 208-09, and Vendler, pp. 213-15.

[9] Cf. "The sky is no longer a junk-shop, / Full of javelins and old fire-balls, / Triangles and the names of girls" (218).

destructive principle. Joseph Campbell, for instance, discusses "an important and fascinating terra-cotta plaque from ancient Sumer, c. 2500 B. C., that shows the ever-dying, ever-living lunar bull, consumed through all time by the lion-headed solar eagle."[10] Stevens' bird feeds on the imagination's symbols of consummation, which transform from moon to yellow flowers growing from "turquoise leaves." Like the yellow acacias in section ii, these flowers are images of the night romantic that is ever vulnerable. But "in the landscape of / The sun . . . [the bird's] appetite becomes less gross. . . ." When tested by the light of day, the flowers of the imagination sometimes survive (at least momentarily) because of the "curious lapses" of the now "corrected" appetite of the bird. In fact, it is the destructive bird itself that makes day possible: "The sun is the country wherever he is." The principle of change at the heart of life, the bird that "Rose from an imperfection of its own" (or as Stevens puts it later, "As if nothingness contained a métier," 526), evades fixity, the "point of redness." Any more ultimate principle of life is usually imaged by Stevens in a comic or surrealistic vein. The sun is "in clownish yellow"; the "yellow grassman's mind is still immense"--elsewhere Stevens portrays a similar "inhuman author, who meditates / With the gold bugs, in blue meadows" (377).

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[10] The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 54.

If the bird of change avoids redness, Stevens himself does not. From this time on in his poetry, he frequently desires to "fix [the sun] in an eternal foliage" (373). And just as the God-like presence of Man as imagination is the mythic focus of "Chocorua," so here in section vii the "soldier of time" is transfigured into a mythic presence central to the poem as a whole. To miss the power and beauty of this dimension of Stevens' poetry is to fail to grasp the essential character of Stevens' greatness. Yet Helen Hennessy Vendler observes: "Just as human condolences and love evoke a slackened poetry in Stevens, so does the elegy for the unknown soldier. . . . Stevens has averted his mind from the visual scene and has fixed it not on experience but on pious value."[11] Stevens' visionary poetry is not false piety any more than all his spiritual poetry from "Sunday Morning" to "The Rock" is fake sacrament.

> How red the rose that is the soldier's wound,
> The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all
> The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,
> The soldier of time grown deathless in great size.

The "great size" of the soldier locates him in the same large space as the presence in "Chocorua." Once again, this is a night vision, this time of mortal and suffering man. In no way does the poem seek to skirt the problem of death and pain. But if pain is human and man himself is the

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[11] Vendler goes on: "It is a betrayal of Stevens' most ambitious aesthetic to name death a summer sleep, to call a wound a rose, to palliate finality by a stroking hand, and to blur the tragic outline by a spell of Parnassian language" (p. 209).

only spirit he shall know, then the rose of the wound of time must take the place of the rose of heaven and the "reddest lord" (iii). In a poem full of flowers, this single rose is the only point of redness that can occupy the mythic space vacated by the loss of belief in heaven and hell. There is quietude and sadness in this vision, but no escape. This soldier has "deathless rest" on a Purgatory-like mountain "in which no ease is ever found, / Unless indifference to deeper death / Is ease. . . ." Lacking traditional forms of spiritual death, the soldier of time continues to exist in the mythic space of man's own creation. As a transfigured presence of man's life, the "red soldier" offers men neither reward nor punishment after death, only a brotherhood of the dead, moved solely by the wind and ordered only in the "mystical convolutions" of the soldier's sleep.

> The shadows of his fellows ring him round
> In the high night, the summer breathes for them
> Its fragrance, a heavy somnolence, and for him,
> For the soldier of time, it breathes a summer sleep,
>
> In which his wound is good because life was.
> No part of him was ever part of death.
> A woman smoothes her forehead with her hand
> And the soldier of time lies calm beneath that
> stroke.

Minus an afterlife, man's death is a summer sleep in the "high night." Mal is mal, and yet the wound is "good" if it is the condition for being alive. Without a sense of cosmic morality, all life is innocent from a mythic perspective. There is no "deeper death" any longer because "A woman smoothes her forehead with her hand. . . ." This

figure of the imagination is merely signaling the change of one era of belief for another (cf. 272). The soldiers of time go eventually neither to heaven nor hell but into the mythic form of mortal man, who sleeps perpetually in the summer night and, of course, exists only in the minds of living men.

Seen rightly, the soldier of time is another element of Stevens' poetic myth. The remainder of "Esthétique" makes clear the extent to which this myth develops from and leads to a physical world. As early as "Le Monocle" Stevens had confronted the problem of affirming a spiritual dimension within a world of age and death. In discursive form, he announced in "Sunday Morning": "Death is the mother of beauty." But from "Esthétique" on, the place of suffering and death as presential force in Stevens' myth is assured. The dying soldier, who first appears with emotional immediacy in "The Men that Are Falling," becomes now the "soldier of time"--a mythic abstraction growing out of the immediate world and leading back into it. In contrast, the phantom believers in pure spirit are "without place / Like silver in the sheathing of the sight, / As the eye closes. . . ." Stevens' realist does not close his eyes, but his affirmation of the "imagination's new beginning, / In the yes of the realist . . ." is carefully qualified with his reminder that the "tragedy, however, may have begun, / Again" (viii).

Stevens follows with a series of juxtapositions of statements of poverty and affirmations of belief. "The moon

is . . . a lustred nothingness . . . The prince of the proverbs of pure poverty. . . . Yet we require / Another chant, an incantation. . . . It is a declaration, a primitive ecstasy" (ix). "Life is a bitter aspic. . . . The tongue caresses these exacerbations." "Natives of poverty, children of malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur" (xi). "This force of nature in action is the major / Tragedy. This is destiny unperplexed, / The happiest enemy" (xiii). Beneath the "no" to otherworldly beliefs and notions of immortal spirit lies the "yes" to this world. But the questions remain: What is the tragedy in the "imagination's new beginning"? What overall mythic form will the earth assume?

The realist seeks in the "nostalgias," or myths of the past, the "most grossly maternal" image of earth.

> His anima liked its animal
> And liked it unsubjugated, so that home
> Was a return to birth, a being born
> Again in the savagest severity,
> Desiring fiercely, the child of a mother fierce
> In his body, fiercer in his mind, merciless
> To accomplish the truth in his intelligence.

The mother is both without and within. Contrasting with Stevens' idealized nude or his woman of the imagination, this figure represents the animal self and the animal earth. She is the "softest / Woman with a vague moustache . . . [and] she is as she was, reality, / The gross, the fecund. . . ." Present from Harmonium on, but now more fierce and fecund, this earth mother will merge with

Stevens' abstract, archaic, green queen to become "Madame La Fleurie" (507).

One aspect of the tragedy inherent in Stevens' myth lies in the epistemology it presupposes. From the perspective of myth, Stevens can affirm:

> Reality explained.
> It was the last nostalgia: that he
> Should understand. That he might suffer or that
> He might die was the innocence of living, if life
> Itself was innocent. (x)

But in section xii, he acknowledges the shortcomings of living in a will-less absorption in the "innocence of living." Knowledge derives from categorizing self and world, self and other people. The human will demands either bringing the outer world into the self or projecting self into the world. But "Is it himself in them he knows or they / In him?" The line between inner and outer cannot be drawn. "This creates a third world without knowledge, / In which no one peers, in which the will makes no / Demands." This is the world in which Stevens has imaged his soldier of time. This is the mythic space growing out of moments of transparency, but it is also a world lying beneath or beyond the will and subject only indirectly to the realm of human knowledge. In this mythic domain, the will "accepts whatever is as true, / Including pain, which, otherwise, is false." But believing there is no ultimate spiritual cause of pain and no ultimate spiritual satisfaction or desire does not alleviate, in an immediate sense, either the pain or the desire. What room is there in such a world for a

"woman, / However known, at the centre of the heart?" Man still desires the sacred, and believing in the finality of earth seems at times to leave him with only "rocks" to love.

Stevens' answer, as usual, is that there is nothing else. And compared to otherworldly beliefs of the past, the new spiritual has everything they had plus the awareness that it is all here and now. Not to believe in the earth in this earth-bound era means to believe in an idea of the mind only, like Konstantinov, forcing the emotion into an "intellectual structure." Such an "extreme of logic would be illogical" (xiv). Stevens concludes with a major expression of his primary article of faith:

> The greatest poverty is not to live
> In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
> Is too difficult to tell from despair.

To turn aside from earth because it is not what one desired is to turn away from reality--the only valid grounds of belief. Though man forsakes paradise, his own future on earth opens to him:

> The adventurer
> In humanity has not conceived of a race
> Completely physical in a physical world.
> . . . . . .
> This is the thesis scrivened in delight,
> The reverberating psalm, the right chorale.

Finally then, despite a world of pain and despite the dualisms of the understanding, Stevens pinpoints his spiritual focus on the immediate act of living, in our perceptions of a physical world:

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

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

III

"Description without Place" (339-46) is ostensibly a discursive poem, although concise logic is not its forte.[12] Essentially, however, the poem is a successful evocation of the poetry of ideas at the heart of Stevens' fresh spiritual.[13] A careful reading of the poem is especially important for exploring that area in Stevens' poetry where abstract ideas assume spiritual overtones (the basic ground, for instance, of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"). For just as experience of the physical world can through the mind's fictions come to have a presential dimension, so ideas, too, can be experienced as poetry (cf. OP, 183ff.). This poem is filled with hypnotic cadences and strangely simple diction not in order to confuse the nominal logic of the poem but to provide an almost liturgical tone as setting for the ideas.

It is possible that to seem--it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

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[12] Vendler says of the poem's opening section: "If this is not the unspotted imbecile revery, it is not far from it" (p. 219).

[13] In a general sense this might be said of all Stevens' ideas. For instance, Doggett writes that "idea in Stevens has a poetic rather than a philosophic function" (p. 203).

Later Stevens dramatizes Penelope's experience of the sun both as sun and as Ulysses. It is in the "seemings," in the expectations of the mind, that sacred experience is possible. Even though the queen's name is an "illustrious nothing," a matter of the mind only, nevertheless, she can be summoned by the "saying of her name," and "her green mind [can make] the world around her green." The queen here is more than an image of a personal imagination; she is the imagination of an age. Therefore, "her own seeming made the summer change." As a mythic presence, her image in the mind is the form through which man experiences reality. As the "green queen" she is an embodiment of nature; she makes possible man's presential experience of that physical world. She has appeared in the "golden vacancy" to replace the transcendent, golden, mythic figures of another era of belief. She causes "time" to exist again (as it does in "Martial Cadenza," for example), and time is her "week-day coronal" (i). Through her the sun can be experienced through a myth other than Sunday's, which is rooted in timelessness.

"Such seemings are the actual ones: the way / Things look each day, each morning. . . ." But they can only be affirmed as "actual" now that Stevens has developed his idea of the central. The queen is the image of the imagination of the central mind at a given time. Behind the individual "original" perception of the actual in the "blind / forward of the eye" is the "greater seeming of the

major mind." The queen, then, represents a "style" of the imagination, a "major manner" (ii).

Such a view of imaginative transformation presupposes ongoing change, "potential seemings, arrogant / To be, as on the youngest poet's pages. . . ." Such a view leaves open the possibility of an apocalyptic future "in which being would / Come true . . . The intentions of a mind as yet unknown. . . ." But just as "integrations of the past are like / A Museo Olimpico," not active agents of present seemings, so a distant future cannot be the basis of present integrations, "Seemings that it is possible may be" (iii). Nietzsche's preoccupation with the "discolorations" of dead myths meant only that his imagination was focused not on the present moment but on the "deep pool" of the past, shedding light only on those "swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution, round and round. . . ." Overconcern with the future is just as dizzying. Lenin banished the swans of the past only to substitute "swans to come." He, too, missed the present, thinking of "apocalyptic legions" (iv).

The "spirit's universe" depends on a "sense" that is "indifferent to the eye." Even without place, this sense would exist, "an expectation, a desire." It is the origin for man of experience of the sacred; it is the final board of appeal "To which we refer experience, a knowledge / Incognito, the column in the desert, / On which the dove alights . . . A palm that rises up beyond the sea. . . ." Stevens' increasing use of traditional, religious metaphors

in no way links him with the letter of traditional belief. The purpose of images like the dove and the palm is to create a fresh spiritual space out of a heritage of religious symbols whose otherworldly elements have been decreated. Man's special sense is not only related to the dimension of mystery captured by the metaphors but also to the idea of the central mind. This sense is part of the "difference that we make in what we see / And our memorials of that difference, / Sprinklings of bright particulars from the sky." (Elsewhere Stevens calls it the "central sky," 375.) The importance of the future, then, derives not from apocalypse but from the "seeming" side of each moment of experience. Since the moment is first anticipated by the mind and then experienced by the mind when it is already passed (cf. OP 190-91), the future is the "categorical predicate, the arc." It is through the myth that creates the expectation, facing the future, that the moment is experienced. The "old stars" are made "fresh / In the brilliantest descriptions of new day, / Before it comes" (my italics). The special sense, the "just anticipation," is, then, embodied in myth, in "forms that are attentive in thin air" (v)--the air of the mountains in the mind.

> Description is revelation. It is not
> The thing described nor false facsimile.

Just as the figure in "Chocorua" is neither man nor anything else, so description is neither the thing nor false copy. It is composed of man's "memorials" of momentary

integrations, neither sun nor moon but the "book of reconciliation [of the two] . . . The thesis of the plentifullest John" (vi).

The word of man does not derive from a preexistent Logos, although man's word is the "making of the world." Stevens' "hidalgo" is a Don Quixote figure of powerful imagination.[14] But unlike Quixote he is a "hard hidalgo" whose speech is a "mountainous mirror" of Spain. The emphasis here, as that of the poem as a whole, is on the creative imagination, but the mirror reflects a physical world as well as the "hidalgo's hat." A style of the imagination is a "style of life," although its "subjects [are] still half night." The immediate moment of experience depends upon a "cast / Of the imagination" which derives from the past (a "description without place") and "portend[s]" the future, "alive with its own seeming, seeming to be / Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening" (vii).[15] The emphasis in section i on the green queen's effect on the physical summer is here redirected toward the interior universe. Description in red, like that of the soldier of time, amounts to a mythic form "alive with its own seeming." It is this jewel in embryo which Stevens in

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[14] The first time the hidalgo appears in Stevens' poetry he is a comic, magnifico-type figure who projects his imagination without regard for external reality: his "whore is Morning Star" (186). Don Quixote is of course the best known hidalgo in literature.

[15] See Vendler's discussion of "redden" (pp. 228-29).

Harmonium says could "Tranquilliz[e] . . . The torments of confusion" (27), that is, reconcile sun and moon.

IV

"Credences of Summer" (372-78) is the culmination of Stevens' transport to summer, his fullest expression of a "centre"--the "origin and course / Of love"--that has been the aim of all his poetry. Such declaration does not preclude the dark side of his vision (as we will see in "Auroras of Autumn"); in fact, it makes possible a more total negation as well as affirmation. More than act of the mind, "Credences" is structured as a meditation but declares a faith through its mythic forms, a faith that began in Stevens' poetry with the idea of man and man's relationship to earth, and which grew through the idea of the poet as hero, until Stevens himself took the stage as central poet. When the imagination and God are one and the poet speaks from the central sky, the result is poetry embodying the truths of summer, poetry as act of belief.

The first lines of the poem parallel the opening of Eliot's declaration of faith in "Little Gidding." Eliot begins: "Midwinter springs is its own season . . . When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire . . . There is no earth smell / Or smell of living thing. This is the spring time / But not in time's covenant. . . . Where is the summer, the unimaginable / Zero summer?" Eliot's belief

starts at the "world's end";[16] Stevens' truths are spoken on the "last day of a certain year / Beyond which there is nothing left of time." Both enter a mythic dimension, but unlike Eliot's, Stevens' faith is founded in the world of generation. "Credences" begins:

> 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.

Stevens' "midsummer come" replaces the "kingdom come" of the Pater Noster and depends for its existence on decreation of the "fools" of the imagination--both of the old, familial spiritual order (cf. 415) and of the personal memory. The "fidgets of remembrance" are "false disasters--these fathers . . . mothers . . . lovers. . . ." Just as he does in "The Rock," Stevens here strips the memory in order to exist at a supreme point in time (not timelessness), which is his mythic moment.[17]

Only at such a moment can the mind's fiction pull together the poles of imagination and reality and "Fix [them] in an eternal foliage. . . ." The reality of summer

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[16] Complete Poems, pp. 138-39.

[17] Cf. Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, pp. 68-113. For primitive man the mythic moment is reached through a ritual renovating of the cosmogony, which is described in his myth. Stevens' myth is centered in an ever incipient cosmogony, his own poetic re-creations of the world. It represents time, not the primordial moment of creation of time out of eternity. In contrast to Stevens' "last day" of the year, the primitive ritualizes the beginning of the New Year, when "time that is 'new,' 'pure,' 'holy' . . . [comes] into existence" (p. 76).

is a mythic truth; therefore, "Postpone the anatomy of summer, as / The physical pine, the metaphysical pine." Unlike "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Credences" drives beneath the level of argumentation as well as toward a more elevated conception of poetry. It does not "play / The imagined pine, the imagined jay" (184). Stevens observed in retrospect: "At the time when ["Credences"] was written my feeling for the necessity of a final accord with reality was at its strongest" (L, 719). The reality of the centre which the poem seeks is an abstraction: "Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky. . . ." Yet is is the "very thing. . . . Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight." It is both "fertile" and "essential barrenness." Like the gold sun, Stevens' eternal foliage is the figuration of his myth, which is both barrenness (the nothingness of the mind) and the physical world (since it is the basis of man's sight). Uniting the imagination and actuality, the myth forms the grounds of the real, the sacred, and brings "arrested peace, / Joy of such permanence, right ignorance / Of change still possible." It is the source of transcendence, the end of Stevens' desire.

> Exile desire
> For what is not. This is the barrenness
> Of the fertile thing that can attain no more. (ii)

The mythic figuration of section iii is not the truth in the sense of "The the" (203). That form of an ultimate is beyond Stevens' ken and surrealistically symbolized at the end of this poem as the "inhuman author."

Stevens' sun of reality belongs to the earth and to man. His construction of his centre, though, remains the basis for experience of the sacred, now an earth-bound experience. Eliade observes that the primitive believes his "Sacred Mountain--where heaven and earth meet--is situated at the center of the world . . . an axis mundi. . . ." The primitive builds his temples or "sacred towers" there where he can ritualistically repeat the cosmogony, since the "cosmic mountain . . . is also the earth's navel, the point at which Creation began." Eliade goes on: "The center, then, is pre-eminently the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality. . . . Attaining the center is equivalent to a consecration, an initiation; yesterday's profane and illusory existence gives place to a new, to a life that is real, enduring, and effective."[18] Still referring to the "very thing" that he seeks as "it," Stevens begins:

> It is the natural tower of all the world,
> The point of survey, green's green apogee,
> But a tower more precious than the view beyond,
> A point of survey squatting like a throne,
> Axis of everything, green's apogee
>
> And happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymns.

Stevens' tower is a "natural" tower, not artificially created by man separate from nature, but formed by him in response to the elements of nature. The tower is nonetheless "more precious" than the elements themselves, since it forms the grounds of sacred experience, a "point of survey"

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[18] Cosmos and History, pp. 12, 14, 16, 17-18.

and an "Axis of everything," and opens onto a "folk-land" with "marriage-hymns." Stevens often has in mind a simple community of people and land, and songs and sacrament (both pairs united by hyphens).[19] Of course, the tower, too, is the abstract basis for marriage of mind and earth.

> It is the mountain on which the tower stands,
> It is the final mountain. Here the sun,
> Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.
> This is the refuge that the end creates.

No longer a night vision like "Chocorua," the day's sun ("Sleepless") can now also breathe its "proper air" on the "final mountain." The blue figure of the night emerges with the sun and becomes an image of the poet himself, "the old man" with "no book" between himself and the sun now that he stands on the tower.[20] In this fresh spiritual space man is able to absorb the truths of summer and be "appeased / By an understanding . . ."--not by becoming one with the sun but by feeling at home with it. Such a relationship has been all along the end of Stevens' desire, the source of his quest in love, and he is "appeased . . . By a feeling capable of nothing more."

The "understanding" achieved in section iii is the subject of sections iv and v, which express the relationship

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[19] For instance, his interest in his boyhood past and the Reading of old, as well as his interest in genealogy, reached a peak during his later life, a fact attested to by the number of late poems referring to ancestors and specific place names. Cf. L, 397-98; Baird, pp. 238-42.

[20] Again Stevens contrasts with Yeats, for whom the tower is often associated with night and books. Cf. "The Phases of the Moon," Collected Poems, pp. 160-64.

between the casually physical "days" of the year and the "day" of the imagination, the mythic moment. Resembling the opening section of the poem, the scene in Oley is physically ripe--"too ripe for enigmas." To be too much at one with this side of the summer world (associated with the poet's own past, see L, 719) is to be stymied by the fathers, mothers, and lovers of personal memories. Too close to a land of "hay, / Baked through long days . . . , the distant fails the clairvoyant eye. . . ." The inner vision--the "secondary senses"--is met not with "evocations" but with "last sounds . . . of a language without words." This dimension of experience is "One of the limits of reality," the "utmost," and must be accepted as "good." The greatest poverty is not to exist in this world of Oleys, but to exist in a world of days minus the single day of the imagination is alike a poverty.

"One day enriches a year." The imagination's queen image determines man's form of belief and experience (cf. 254, 340). But how does she arise in men's minds? Is she merely the "humble" representative of eternity like her spiritual counterpart, the man who is "lofty" and perpetual."[21] The answer is that she arises, like the figure of the new hero, the "bristling soldier" (who is out-foxed by the weather of time), from the land itself. Her "more than casual blue / Contains the year. . . ." The day, the mythic

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[21] Cf. "The Good Man Has No Shape" (364), where the physical Christ is betrayed by Lazarus from the dead.

moment, then, "Enriches the year, not as embellishment" from the past ("souvenir") but as living presence of the present. Like Stevens' "black day" of section i, the day of the imagination, "stripped of remembrance . . . displays its strength-- / The youth, the vital son, the heroic power." Although not limited to the present (note "other years"), living myth grows out of the immediate world and returns to it its own power.

Stevens' "rock of summer" is his own vital centre.

> It is the visible rock, the audible,
> The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
> On this present ground, the vividest repose,
> Things certain sustaining us in certainty.

A mythic abstraction of the act of immediate perception, Stevens' rock is a presence in the mind of the old man on the sacred mountain, an image as basis for presential experience. It is described with proper elevation:

> It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
> A mountain luminous half way in bloom
> And then half way in the extremest light
> Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
> As if twelve princes sat before a king. (vi)

The physical world is united with the central imagination in a modern incarnation in a fresh spiritual space. In contrast to otherworldly myths, this one accepts the king and princes as finalities and exalts them as such.

The remainder of the poem traces the rock's significance for the spiritual life. Most important, it means that the satisfaction of man's desire for the sacred depends upon his devotion to the "common fields" of summer. The ordered

stages of his spiritual experience can no longer be described by circles external to himself. It is now the self that is "thrice concentred" and provides the metaphor for a spiritual "inscendence," that is, transparence. The self "grips [the object] in savage scrutiny, / Once to make captive, once to subjugate / Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim / The meaning of the capture. . . ." The three steps correspond to the level of sense perception, the level of conscious will (either aggressive or passive), and the level of the imagination. It is at this final stage that the spiritual desire is satisfied through experience of the sacred, the "hard prize, / Fully made, fully apparent, fully found" (vii).

The new day of "the visible . . . the more than visible" is announced by a trumpet cry that is "like ten thousand tumblers tumbling down / To share the day." Tumblers are pigeons, and the violent power of their descent here in the mythic dimension of a new day contrasts sharply with the "ambiguous undulations" of their descent "on extended wings" in the evening of "Sunday Morning." Concerning the trumpets, though, Stevens has a surprise for the reader, whose mind is "aware of division" between inner and outer, yet still projects an expectation that the trumpet's cry will resemble the impressive "personage" he has come to venerate "in the unreal" (viii).

Instead, the cry comes from an ordinary cock.[22] The morning of a new day for the spirit is also an everyday morning.

> Fly low, cock bright, and stop on a bean pole. Let
> Your brown breast redden, while you wait for warmth.
> With one eye watch the willow, motionless.
> The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone
> And last year's garden grows salacious weeds.

The garden (both real and mythic) of the spirit is without its gardener and his cat (a priest image, cf. 254). The procreative willow, like a steeple, is motionless. It is "last year's garden"; it represents a "complex of emotions" based upon an order external to the mind of man: "the spirit of the arranged, douceurs, / Tristesses, the fund of life and death, suave bush / And polished beast. . . ." Central to this arrangement is the separation of good and evil: God appears in the "suave bush" (Exodus III. 2ff.) and man's evil is embodied in the "polished beast" (Exodus XXXII. 4ff.). But the cock's sound is not to be a part of this complex (which finally is a projection of man's own desires), "Not part of the listener's own sense" (ix). In contrast to his early fear in the peacock's scream (8-9), Stevens is ready for this call, and will be again when he hears the "scrawny cry" of a later bird (534).

In place of the arranged, there is in the traditional sense now only chaos, an insane surrealistic play by

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[22] Cf. Philip Wheelwright's discussion (Metaphor and Reality, p. 108) of the symbolic meaning of the cock in Eliot's "Waste Land." In contrast to Stevens', Eliot's cock crows from the remains of a chapel.

an "inhuman author, who meditates / With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night." But in contrast to his early response in fear to the planets "Turning in the wind" (9), Stevens' present response to the random motions of fireflies is a happy acceptance of the "huge decorum . . . the mottled mood of summer's whole. . . ."[23] The vividness of the colorful and curious costumes of characters without a humanized author bespeaks their freedom "from malice and sudden cry." More than red, they are "roseate"--part of the rose of a new mythic space where the human scene is final.

V

The shorter poems of Transport to Summer also explore the mythic dimension. Like the major poems, they, too, are often weighted with elemental imagery, either basic (as in the primary colors) or primitive-like (as in the forms and forces of nature). They, too, illustrate Stevens' growing attraction to his personal past: remembrance of his Christian heritage provides a parallel and contrast to his own maturing belief, and his memory of the countryside and people of his childhood adds to the folk environment that increasingly appears in his poetry.

The same development of the long poems (from the night vision of the central poet as hero to the red mythic

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[23] Cf. Stevens' calm acceptance of the stars in "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain" (349-50), plus the line: "the night-flies acknowledge these planets. . . ."

forms arising in that poet's mind) can also be traced in the shorter poems. For instance, in "God Is Good. It Is a Beautiful Night" (285), the scholar's head is speaking in the light of the moon, "seeking celestial / Rendevous . . . Squeezing the reddest fragrance from the stump / Of summer." In "Repetitions of a Young Captain" (306-10), the major man is "Accoutred in a little of the strength / That sweats the sun up on its morning way / To giant red" (iii). Major men are believable fictions themselves. In "Paisant Chronicle" (334-35), the major men "are characters beyond / Reality, composed thereof. . . . They are / Nothing in which it is not possible / To believe . . . more / Than Tartuffe as myth . . . The easy projection long prohibited."

As a major man Stevens often expresses the desire in this volume to speak beyond the personal as part of the growing force of a fresh mode of belief. In "The Motive for Metaphor" (288), he reprimands himself for "shrinking from / The weight of primary noon, / The A B C of being, / The ruddy temper, the hammer / Of red and blue . . . The vital arrogant, fatal, dominant X." The color red in various forms increasingly dominates the poetry, but it is no longer derided as changeless fraud in a world of change (cf. 170). Now Stevens desires the red and, as he does in "Esthétique," links the red of living to the red of myth. He identifies himself with a new era of activity that sharply contrasts with the "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" (290-93). The violent armies in the poem quickly become a force that will

cry like an "instinctive incantation," a destructive force thriving "In a storm of torn-up testaments" and composed of "marchers" marching "toward a generation's centre." In contrast to the present violence, imagery of the past provides a calmness for Stevens in which the immediate and the mythic merge. For instance, in "A Completely New Set of Objects" (352-53), the memory of a local festival easily turns into a rite in which his friends bring "From the water in which he believed and out of desire / Things made by mid-terrestrial, mid-human / Makers. . . ."[24] The dancers are transfigured into a "thousand thousand / Carrying such shapes . . . [as] were the exactest shaping / Of a vast people old in meditation. . . ."

But memory is thought, and "Thought is false happiness. . . ." Stevens continues to reaffirm his primary attachment to the immediate earth: "the mind / Is the eye, and . . . this landscape of the mind / Is a landscape only of the eye" (305). The people in "Holiday in Reality" (312-313) knew that "to be real each had / To find for himself his earth, his sky, his sea." Yet the poet knows also that the "down-falling gold, / The catbird's gobble . . . are real only if I make them so." He tastes "at the root of the tongue the unreal of what is real."

And just as in the past when the problem of perception arose, Stevens now once again turns to his central

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[24] Cf. Samuel French Morse, Wallace Stevens (New York: Pegasus, 1970), pp. 205-06.

faith that the earth can provide its own "unreal" framework in man's mind. Then the earth can be perceived through a myth that has grown out of itself. In contrast to the belief of "Old John Zeller," now "It is more difficult to evade / That habit of wishing and to accept the structure / Of things as the structure of ideas." But this is the road that Stevens continually opts for. In place of Zeller's projections of cosmic meaning, there is only "Darkness, nothingness of human after-death" (336) to greet the fallen flyer. In such a scheme of things, "To say that the solar chariot is junk / Is not a variation but an end. / Yet to speak of the whole world as metaphor / Is still to stick to the contents of the mind / And the desire to believe in a metaphor" (332). The world as metaphor, the earth as grounds of its own myth, is what remains when the solar junk is cleared away.

Only then does the power and finality of otherness reach the mind as physical presence--and therefore as mythic presence at the same time. The young men who hunt "The Pediment of Appearance" (361-62) with preconceptions of what that "savage transparence" should be miss the total alien power of earth: "The pediment / Lifts up its heavy scowl before them." But in "The Red Fern" (365), when common day opens "Its unfamiliar, difficult fern, / Pushing and pushing red after red . . ."--then day and the myth of day become one. The physical is the source: "the parent trunk: / The dazzling, bulging, brightest core, / The furiously burning

father-fire. . . ." The infant eye must waken to pierce the "physical fix of things." The first stage of Stevens' experience of the object in his concentric self, immediate sense experience is the prerequisite of a myth to grow out of the physical. Stevens' "fisherman" is "all / One ear . . . all / One eye. . . ." Instead of fish, this angler might catch the dove, Stevens' own symbol of spirit and satisfaction of desire. "In that one eye the dove / Might spring to sight and yet remain a dove" (356-57). The beginning of spiritual sight is at the sense level; the spiritual dilemma is preserving the dove as dove even as it is inscended to the level of the imagination.

One way that Stevens attempts to preserve the quality of sense experience at the level of the imagination is to combine allusion to past myths or other literature with offhanded, commonplace imagery (cf. "Credences, iii, ix"). For instance, "Continual Conversation with a Silent Man" (359-60) begins:

> The old brown hen and the old blue sky,
> Between the two we live and die--
> The broken cartwheel on the hill.

The first two lines resemble Yeats, particularly in "Vacillation" or "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes."[25] The third line echos Eliot's "bedded axle-tree" in "Burnt Norton, ii." The point is not how consciously Stevens uses

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[25] Cf. "Between extremities / Man runs his course" or "between these two a girl at play. . . . There can be nothing solider till I die" (Collected Poems, pp. 245, 168).

this device but how easily he moves between the folk-ritual side of his myth (which is close to the sense world) and the abstract side at the heights of the imagination (such as the "rock" section of "Credences"). Sense immediacy and mythic abstraction increasingly interplay to the very end of Stevens' poetry, paving the way for the coming together of the moment of sense experience and the spiritual desire of the imagination.[26]

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[26] An example from Transport to Summer of this relationship between the personally immediate and the mythic abstract is "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream" (371-72), in which a "dive / Into the sun-filled water" transforms into "floating without a head / And naked . . . in the company of the sun. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

"BREATHE FREEDOM, OH, MY NATIVE": AURORAS OF AUTUMN

The Auroras of Autumn (1950) is a continuation of, not a departure from, the main line of Stevens' development, which crystallized especially in the major mythic poems of his previous volume. His own comment on one of the major poems of Auroras ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven") is also true of the other long poems: "This is not in any sense a turning away from the ideas of Credences of Summer: it is a development of these ideas" (L, 637). While the idea of death is more pronounced in this volume, it is still an extension of Stevens' confrontation with evil and suffering in earlier poems. The presence of death simply assumes its place in Stevens' pantheon. Overall, the poems of Auroras build on the base of "Credences" as they go on to depict, in awe and fear, the "roseate" and primitive-like space of Stevens' fiction. Along with a continued emphasis on the abstract orb of man's poem, there is a growing sense of rite in many of these poems, especially surrounding the idea of man (and of Stevens himself) as creator. Finally, the poems frequently seek to import the idea of "things" of a physical world into the mythic space; the image of life as a river emerges fully for the first time since Harmonium.

While "Esthétique" fixes the idea of human suffering in Stevens' "eternal foliage," "The Auroras of Autumn" (411-21) and "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (431-36) create a central place in Stevens' myth for the facts of change and death. It is one thing to call death the "mother of beauty" and to announce that the supreme fiction must change; it is another thing to experience the death of friends and one's own oncoming death and to realize sharply that one's credences are but momentary stays against chaos. Stevens acknowledged that the "Owl" "was written in the frame of mind that followed Mr. Church's death. While it is not personal, I had thought of inscribing it somehow, below the title, as, for example, Goodbye H. C." (L, 566). The remarkable thing about these two poems is that they both proclaim Stevens' "yes" to life in spite of (or because of) their powerful embodiments of change and death. The serpent of "Auroras" is "the bodiless." He is less the source of change (like the "bony" bird, 318) than the fact of formlessness inherent in change. Existing in the largeness of mythic space, "Beneath his tip at night / Eyes open and fix on us in every sky." Even he, however, is not to be believed as ultimate: he might be "Another image at the end of the cave. . . ." His poison is "that we should disbelieve" even in him as "master of the maze . . . Relentlessly in possession of happiness." But if he cannot stand as an ultimate existing outside of the cave, he at least cannot be avoided within the cave. He "lives" in man's

scheme of things, "his nest, / These fields, these hills. . . ." From one perspective, he is the dimension of mind which constantly negates itself, "form gulping after formlessness." The serpent stands for the negative side of man's vision; the "lights" of man's imagination--as at "Key West" or in the rock of "Credences"--"may . . . in the midmost midnight . . . find the serpent. . . ." The emphasis, then, in the first half of this poem is on the "auroras" as lights which negate their own forms. Instead of "arranging, deepening, enchanting night" (130), they expose the chaos of change, the formless behind man's forms and earth's forms.

Much of the poem concentrates on the dying of the old ways, both the personal losses and the ways of belief. A deserted cabin is the "white of an aging afternoon. . . . The wind is blowing the sand across the floor." There is a personal touch in the dried flowers and in the "man who is walking on the sand." But there is a more-than-personal dimension to the following: "Here being visible is being white . . . the accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise. . . ." The idea of white is the bodiless serpent brought closer to home--still undifferentiated, alien, part of the wind and sand, but now also cast with nostalgia. White is the color of sleep in the "Owl." Both the presences of the physical world ("Credences") and of the imagination ("Key West") have dried up. The finality of nature and of man's need for a dwelling means from one perspective that man must be always in the process of leaving his

abodes. From another angle--not the South of the physical day but the North of the night imagination--the idea of change itself is heightened by the auroras, "frigid brilliances . . . great enkindlings" (ii), promising, truly or falsely, a new day, a fresh abode.[1]

But personal decay and death is not to be assuaged by the grandeurs of the trans-personal dimension of the imagination. Even on this evening when the sense of earth as mother (the "purpose of the poem") is full, the longing remains for the "half [of the house] they can never possess . . . Still-starred." Like a still-birth, the stars (the imagination) appeal to men to escape the decay of earth, but only the mother "gives transparence to their present peace." The problems of the "men at forty" in "Le Monocle" are now vastly extenuated: the mother herself "has grown old" (since he sees her through his present age); the "kiss" and "touch" of the physical world are no longer vivid but merely remind of passing time. "The house will crumble and the books will burn" (iii). He and the mother will fall asleep together. Only the formless serpent, the "Boreal night," will remain to light the windows from the outside, the wind of time in command.

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[1] Cf. Baird, pp. 294-98, where he follows up Frye's observation of the "Morgenrot" of a "new recognition" in "Auroras." Baird also discusses the aurora borealis as "phenomenal reality" and as symbol. (Cf. also L, 702.) My own study stresses this interdependence of the phenomenal and the mythic as a constant for Stevens.

Beyond the human earth "sits" the "inhuman author" (377). But unlike in his episode in "Credences," here the alien father has the center of the stage, an inhuman reality; the roseate characters are human but unreal, "actors . . . in company, in their masks"--who come as in Hamlet to the royal presence.[2] Stevens' poignant appeal to the inhuman father is Job-like:

> Master O Master seated by the fire
> And yet in space and motionless and yet
> Of motion the ever-brightening origin,
>
> Profound, and yet the king and yet the crown,
> Look at this present throne. What company,
> In masks, can choir it with the naked wind? (iv)

Compared to the elemental forces, which are children of their inhuman father, the human drama is but a brief charade, the subject of the section following. The festival of man is made all the more ridiculous when set against the background of an aristocratic order, the "mother [who] invites humanity to her house . . . The father [who] fetches tellers of tales. . . ." The joy of freedom for the roseate characters of "Credences" is replaced by the despair that "there are no lines to speak. . . . There is no play."

But as usual for Stevens the fact that there is no pre-set play leads from despair to affirmation. First, the

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[2] The vague echo of Hamlet, reinforced by section v and by the "Danes in Denmark" of section ix, is appropriate to the problem of identity in a cosmic play with an inhuman author. Hamlet's own interior dialogue and his relation to the players is a crucial turning point in Western consciousness involving the idea of man as a self-created identity. Cf. Erich Heller, The Artist's Journey into the Interior (New York: Random, 1965), pp. 125-32, 136-48.

disillusionment that there is no ultimate pattern:

> It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
> Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
> And mountains running like water, wave on wave,
>
> Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed
> To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
> A season changes color to no end. . . .

The continual changes of earth and imagination lead nowhere, or at any rate the "denouement has to be postponed. . . ." But the individual man who acknowledges the absurd "theatre" and makes the "named thing nameless" experiences the gigantic force of a universe of change, the serpent and the auroras, both physical and imaginary:

> He opens the door of his house
>
> On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
> An Artic effulgence flaring on the frame
> Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.

The fear that he feels is awe and terror, not the vertigo of disorder in "Domination of Black" but a sense of the vast power, unnamed, of a world beyond him and within him.

But to postulate as source of such experience an "imagination that sits enthroned" means to violate the signatures of a visible universe that no longer proclaim a source with human meaning. The idea of a creative source "must change from destiny to slight caprice." The old sense of tragedy is to be jettisoned along with the "stele" marking its orientation toward a transcendent source. That which "must unmake it" is a "flippant communication under the moon"--a sense of the casual to reflect the casual spectacle in which man lives.

The "pure principle" of "innocence" is another version of Stevens' pure romantic, embodied in his mythic moment. It "is not a thing of time, nor of place," and yet "It exists, it is visible, it is, it is." It is a faith that the innocent imagination of man can find a spiritual home in the innocent earth. Such a principle of faith "exists / Almost as predicate." It is what encourages men to open their doors on flames as well as to "lie down like children in this holiness. . . ." When the imagination is no longer conceived as a "spell of light, / A saying out of a cloud," and when earth is conceived as "no false sign / Or symbol of malice . . ." then it is the "innocent mother" earth who sings her children to sleep, creating the "time and place in which we breathe. . . ." Even if the principle of innocence exists "in the idea of it, alone" (viii), it remains the predicate for a fresh spiritual time and place, declared by the mother in the minds of her children.

Such a faith resembles those times in the past when men "were as Danes in Denmark . . . hale-hearted landsmen," alive in the "idiom of an innocent earth, / Not of the enigma of the guilty dream."[3] In a mythic earth-bound scene, a rendezvous with the imagination is a rendezvous with earth. Winter earth does not portend spiritual

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[3] Miller emphasizes the absence of individuality, self-consciousness, in the Danes, resulting in projections of the supernatural (pp. 217-18). My reading stresses their primitive oneness with earth, a state of innocence with no need for distant gods.

disaster. The loss of God does not make the earth bare but shifts man into a primitive sense of awareness, through which the stars become presences again, "putting on their glittering belts" (cf. 421-23). Espousing this same principle of earth's innocence, the poem's final section is primarily a liturgy emphasizing the earth not as a vale of tears but as a "happy world" (an innocent one). While the "congregation" is read this doctrine, the central "genius" continues to meditate by his "lights." Lights, which in the opening section were turned on the "bodiless" serpent, are now described as a "blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick . . ."--fire both creative and destructive, providing a sense of field and hearth, the credences of summer even in winter's cold.

II

"The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (431-36) is a quiet evocation of the innocence of death. One of Stevens' great visionary poems, it reaches through the experiences of sleep and peace toward the presence of the universal mother. A sense of rest replaces otherworldly traditions of fear. The environment of the poem partakes of both the mythic depth of "Chocorua" and the abstract serenity of the "red soldier" section of "Esthétique." It provides a dream-like experience of that which is beyond experience.

Two forms move among the dead, high sleep
Who by his highness quiets them, high peace
Upon whose shoulders even the heavens rest.

Two brothers. And a third form, she that says
Good-by in the darkness, speaking quietly there,
To those that cannot say good-by themselves.

Stevens makes it clear that these forms are not dead mythology: "abortive figures, rocks, / Impenetrable symbols, motionless. They move / About the night." These three personifications are manmade figures, but they represent that which lives "without our light." They are protean projections from life-bound experience into the innocent peace beyond life: "sleep the brother is the father, too, / And peace is cousin by a hundred names. . . ." The woman figure is identified first as the "syllable between life / And death"--the voice at the juncture of life and death, subsuming the two. She "is the mother of us all, / The earthly mother and the mother of / The dead." Concerning the primitive's sense of this mother, Eliade observes: "What we call life and death are merely two different moments in the career of the Earth-Mother as a whole: life is merely being detached from the earth's womb, death is a returning 'home'."[4] Stevens concludes: "Only the thought of those dark three / Is dark" (i). Cosmic innocence means that life and death are two versions of the same finality, the earth mother. Death is dark only from the side of life, not from the dimension of mythic unity in the mother figure.

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[4] Patterns, p. 253.

The "day" (past, future, present), when a man can walk "living among the forms of thought . . . conceiving his passage as into a time / That of itself stood still," is another rendition of Stevens' mythic moment. Significant is the fact that this space of "forms" is, "if of substance, a likeness of the earth. . . ." Like former projections of paradise (cf. "Sunday Morning," vi), the death-after-life forms of Stevens' myth also grow from the earth, although they are "less time than place, less place than thought of place" (ii).[5] Sections iii-v evoke the presences of this space.

Sleep is an "ever-changing, calmest unity," a "giant body" of "whiteness folded into less, / Like many robings. . . ." Stevens' solid mountain (such as Chocorua or the "final mountain" of "Credences") becomes as sleep a "moving mountain . . . central / Where luminous agitations come to rest. . . ." In contrast to the "old catastrophe" of "Sunday Morning," a "calm [that] darkens among water-lights" (i), sleep is like the "weaving and the crinkling and the vex, / As on water of an afternoon in the wind / After the wind has passed." It is an entrance into nothing but itself, a change of form but not of spiritual condition. "Sleep realized / Was the whiteness that is the ultimate

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[5] Once again, Stevens' image resembles Yeats' image from "Byzantium" (Collected Poems, pp. 243-44), "Shade more than a man, more image than a shade. . . ." Cf. also Stevens' "fling without a sleeve" (v) with Yeats' "flame that cannot singe a sleeve. . . ."

intellect"--simply the other side of consciousness. No longer a cause of fear, the presence of sleep, like that of peace and the mother, is a source of the strength that comes from living out life's own conditions: "A diamond jubilance beyond the fire, / That gives its power to the wild-ringed eye"--of the sleeper, the man who lives in thought's forms. Experienced in the environment of mythic presence, the sleep of life assumes its place in Stevens' pantheon.

> Then he breathed deeply the deep atmosphere
> Of sleep, the accomplished, the fulfilling air.
> (iii)

Peace is the "brother of sleep . . . [but an] inhuman brother . . . vested in a foreign absolute. . . ." Compared to the mother and brother, peace is an artificial "personage," created by the imagination. And in this poem dedicated to the existential facts of sleep and death, peace appears "estranged, estranged." Still, in Stevens' myth of death he plays the essential role of "peace after death." He, too, is adorned with the "green" of earth and the "blood" of man, but as the whiteness of sleep is the reverse side of intellect so the "brilliance" of peace is the world's side of imagination. He is the manmade figuration of death-after-life designed to "keep us in our death" by symbolizing the peace of death. He has the positive value of guarding against ominous notions of death such as the "summer of Cyclops / Underground" (iv)--a description which recalls both the pale inoffensiveness of Homer's Hades and the savagery of Polyphemous.

The dominant presence of the poem is the woman figure--who speaks, when the others do not. Whereas sleep provides the strength of a "deep atmosphere" and peace a guard against the horrors of the end, the mother provides an "influence felt instead of seen." A principle of change, like the serpent, the mother, however, "held men closely with discovery . . . in the way / Invisible change discovers what is changed. . . ." She provides for man an externalization of the invisible within. She is being; she stands "tall in self not symbol." In her the mythic rose is more than souvenir; she is "rosed out of prestiges / Of rose. . . ." She is the primal unity of self beyond separate selves. But, above all, she "says good-by." She moves "With a sad splendor, beyond artifice . . . on the edges of oblivion." She is, finally, "in the silence that follows her last word" the "reddened" (v) image of mother death.

Stevens concludes the poem by reminding us that these forms are "beings of the mind." But they were "Compounded and compounded, life by life . . . The pure perfections of parental space. . . ." This "mythology of modern death" is a result of a "desire that is the will, / Even of death," just as all Stevens' mythic figurations have grown out of his desire for presence, for life.

> It is a child that sings itself to sleep,
> The mind, among the creatures that it makes,
> The people, those by which it lives and dies. (vi)

Living without a sponsor, man becomes the child-creator of his own parents, those beings of the mind that determine his experience of life and death.

III

The forms of the mind compose man's poem, his myth. The idea of man and the idea of earth both derive from the poem, and both depend, for Stevens, on the idea of the centre. In "A Primitive Like an Orb" (440-43) the central poem is celebrated as the mate of earth and merges with Stevens' mythic embodiment of man. The abstract orb of the supreme fiction comes together with the primitive presence which first emerged in "Chocorua."

"A Primitive Like an Orb" begins with recognition of the difficulty of apperceiving the central poem, even though it is the "essential gold." The poem at the centre is of the mind, the result of "spiritual fiddlings" and "slight genii in . . . pale air" (i). It is not something to be proven except through experience of its embodiments in "lesser poems." The central poem is a "huge, high harmony . . . [that] Captives the being, widens---and was there" (ii). But "such captivity" is like a pastoral rite, with "milk . . . wheaten bread and oaten cake . . . Green guests and table in the woods and songs / At heart. . . ." Once again Stevens appeals to a sense of folk communion as illustration of the "space grown wide" through the essential

poem, which is really a spiritual metaphor, "the obscurest as, the distant was . . ." (iii).

The "clairvoyant men" who experience, create, and celebrate the central poem are the "lover, the believer and the poet"--all, aspects really of the central self. "Their words are chosen out of their desire, / The joy of language, when it is themselves" (iv). Expressing their desire for love, presence, they express themselves and also open communication with earth. The "used-to earth and sky . . . the used-to tree and used-to cloud, / Lose the old uses. . . ." The essential poem, both created by man and lived in by man, allows fresh incarnation, the union of imagination and earth:

> These men, and earth and sky, inform
> Each other by sharp informations, sharp,
> Free knowledges, secreted until then,
> Breaches of that which held them fast. It is
> As if the central poem became the world,
>
> And the world the central poem, each one the mate
> Of the other. . . . (v-vi)[6]

Section vi helps explain why in Stevens' later poetry the interior woman self often merges with the earth mother figure. His interior "mate of summer" is "her [summer's] mirror and her look, / Her only place and person. . . ." In the mythic moment, they are "both one," sacramental mates uniting inner and outer.

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[6] Whereas in his prose Stevens' idea of a "breach of reality" (OP, 190-91) is illustrated on a philosophical level, this same "breach" in the poetry is grounds for the sacred, for a momentary unity of mind and earth beyond duality.

Now that the central poem has been seen to be both the result of desire and a response to desire, Stevens continues in the second half of his poem to attempt, first, to describe and, then, to embody the idea of the essential poem. His early rage for order now becomes a desire for unity, and the central poem "a poem of / The whole, the essential compact of the parts" (vii). As usual, Stevens will not follow the thread of causes for the poem to any specific sense of an ultimate; the central poem may be the product of a "vis, a principle . . . the meditation of a principle . . . an inherent order . . . a nature . . . a repose. . . ."

But the feeling of the poem can be provided a metaphor: the "muscles of a magnet aptly felt. . . ." The central poem is a "giant on the horizon, glistening, / And in bright excellence adorned, crested / With every prodigal, familiar fire . . . Vested in the curious folds of majesty" (viii-ix). In contrast to his usual satire of pretensions to royalty, here he endows his giant with the same "crest" that he had left behind in "How to Live. What to Do." The majestic giant is, however, to be associated also with "unfamiliar escapades: whirrees / And scintillant sizzlings such as children like"--a feeling of festival and excitement. The heavenly and the casual are brought together in the giant's "following, / A source of trumpeting seraphs in the eye, / A source of pleasant outbursts on the ear."

To reduce the giant to "scale," to realistic proportions, robs him of the "power of his form" (x). He is an "abstraction given head, / A giant on the horizon, given arms, / A massive body and long legs, stretched out. . . ." He is more than abstract idea; he is primitive presence, the abstract orb of the poem alive in the mythic figure of man. He is the Creator in a this-worldly spiritual: "a close, parental magnitude, / At the centre on the horizon, concentrum, grave / And prodigious person, patron of origins" (xi). The giant is a necessary fiction arising from the immediate experience of life. He exists in almost comic largeness, a sort of folk hero, because men are what they are in the innocent comedy: "The lover writes, the believer hears, / The poet mumbles and the painter sees. . . ." Instead of a cosmic creator there is this scene, but the faculty which created the Creator still creates out of the dimensions of this scene. Each of these figures, then, is a "tenacious particle, / Of the skeleton of the ether. . . ." The giant is a "giant of nothingness," a form of the mind giving mythic life to the idea of the central poem. He is the "total / Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods / Of color . . . each one / And the giant ever changing, living in change" (xii).

IV

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (465-89) resembles the "Notes" in its discursive style, but goes beyond the earlier poem as declaration of a fresh spiritual. The abstract contours of Stevens' thought remain basically the same and his central themes are reiterated, but "An Ordinary Evening" is more sharply directed toward the physical present--New Haven instead of the supreme fiction--and more fully endowed than even the "Notes" with a spiritual dimension.[7] Although the poem is frequently concerned with language and poetry as modes of perception (that is, as myth), Stevens' own mythic figurations are less abundant here than in much of his late poetry. "An Ordinary Evening" is more declarative than meditative, more preceptorial than mythic. It is a major exposition of the poet's belief in poetry.

The "Eye's plain version" is never plain; it is "part of the never-ending meditation, / Part of the question that is a giant himself. . . ." The act of perception is both source and object of Stevens' meditation, and the center of this poem. An ordinary evening is not ordinary when man realizes that it has no "double" except in the

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[7] Stevens described his efforts in "An Ordinary Evening" as trying "to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false" (L, 636).

mind. This mind representation, then, becomes all-important, as the New Haven--New Heaven pun suggests. Even the level of this "recent imagining of reality" depends on metaphor: it is "a new resemblance of the sun . . . A larger poem for a larger audience . . . A mythological form, a festive sphere, / A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age" (i). The mythic form, the giant of nothingness, is cause and product of a new imagining of the world of objects, such as the houses which now comprise New Haven--New Heaven.

> Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,
> So that they become an impalpable town, full of
> Impalpable bells, transparencies of sound,
>
> Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self. . . .

Such transparence depends upon a particular "sense in which we are poised, / Without regard to time or where we are. . . ." The sphere of the imagination provides the dimension of the eternal to the time-space world. This "sense" is the "object / Of perpetual meditation, point / Of the enduring, visionary love. . . ." For Stevens, transparence occurs when the object enters this dimension of the mind without changing shape, just brilliancy. When such peaks of visionary love are reached, "we cannot tell apart / The idea and the bearer-being of the idea" (ii). For instance, such a moment occurs in Stevens' own poetry when his vision of his earth mother merges with his interior woman figure. "The point of vision and desire are the same."

The idea of perception depends, then, on that figure with the capacity for creative love, the "hero of midnight . . . ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth. . . ." He alone can acknowledge the "misery that infuriates our love," the "black of night" surrounding us, the "hill of stones" we live on--and still "make beau mont thereof." From this perspective, the world depends not on holiness coming from without but on the will to holiness within, the "desire for love . . . set deep in the eye, / Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene, / In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall" (iii). Experience of the sacred within the phenomenal world depends upon the creative desire of man, not on the divine love of God.[8]

Such desire is a primitive force like a "lion roaring in the desert and a boy whistling in the dark" (L, 404); it does not accept the plain version of reality but "cries / With a savage voice . . . In a savage and subtle and simple harmony" (iv). Man cannot avoid the desire with plainness; there is only the "inescapable romance, inescapable choice / Of dreams." One cannot escape the mind, and yet one should not posit a spiritual origin for man either. Consciousness arose casually "in the leisure of blue day" (v).

"Reality is the beginning not the end. . . ." The force of Stevens' emphasis always brings the mind to earth. Unlike Eliot, whose "beginning" and "end" both point beyond

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[8] Cf. Eliot's idea of love, which retains a transhuman dimension ("Burnt Norton" v and "Little Gidding" iv).

themselves, Stevens' alphabet is based on "Naked Alpha," the rock that receives the imagination's light. "Alpha continues to begin. / Omega [the imagination] is refreshed at every end" (vi). Learning with such an alphabet in the "chapels" and the "schools," men no longer separate themselves spiritually from things. They enter the comedy no longer as fallen spirits but with greater "depth" and "height" than they had known they had. In this new space, the "incredible becomes . . . credible day again" (vii). Man's desire for love becomes founded on the real. "We descend to the street and inhale a health of air / To our sepulchral hollows." The assuaging of desire comes through the learning of a "mother tongue / With which to speak to her" (viii). Stevens' poetry as a whole is fundamentally just such a tongue learned from the mother earth.

The "poem of pure reality" is another version of Stevens' pure romantic, but it illustrates the extent to which his emphasis keeps returning to immediate apprehension of earth along with a certain wariness of tendencies in the imagination. Apart from New Haven the imagination is meaningless (as is New Haven, also); the full view of reality often starts for Stevens with the simple, unreflective, and then grows to be enveloped by the spirit of the mind. The "poem of pure reality" is

> A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,
>
> The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
> Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
> Nothing beyond reality. Within it,

Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
And through included, not merely the visible,

The solid, but the movable, the moment,
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air. (ix)

New Haven begins in the eye as New Haven but ends in the mind as New Heaven.

Section x expresses this same wariness toward the imagination when it is oriented away from earth. "It is fatal in the moon and empty there." The earth encourages change; the moon does not: "it is haunted by the man / Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died." But earth's nature is a "double-thing. / We do not know what is real and what is not." The dimension of mystery is revitalized, making a fresh form of faith possible. Man's spirit on earth "resides / In a permanence composed of impermanence, / In a faithfulness as against lunar light, / So that morning and evening are like promises kept. . . ." The desire for love leads to the mystery of earth, to the "faithfulness of reality." The distinction between the profane and the sacred, between the physical and the metaphysical, is collapsed into the mind of the man who lives on a physical earth in the center of consciousness. But the spiritual imagination "must stand potent in the sun." At age twenty-nine Stevens had noted the loss of vitality in the modern church in contrast to "tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the noble depths of men familiar with Gethsemane, familiar with Jerusalem.--I do not wonder

that the church is so largely a relic. Its vitality depended on its association with Palestine" (L, 140). Now he says simply, "Juda becomes New Haven or else must." That which replaces the former "profoundest forms" (destroyed "with wafts of waking") is

> A verity of the most veracious men,
> The propounding of four seasons and twelve months.
> The brilliancy at the central of the earth. (xi)

The poem is "Part of the res" because it is of the immediate moment in time, "when the marble statues / Are like newspapers blown by the wind." Such a moment is within the "casual litter" of leaves. The same whirling which caused the fear in "Domination of Black" is here accepted as the foundation of the words that "are the life of the world" (xii).[9] The ephebe "seeks out / The perquisites of sanctity. . . ." He confronts "the big X of the returning primitive"--the mystery of a world that has yet to be named.

> It is a fresh spiritual that he defines,
> A coldness in a long, too-constant warmth,
> A thing on the side of a house, not deep in a
> cloud. . . . (xiii)

The tall eucalyptus tree is a caricature of man reaching in the clouds for that which keeps falling to earth. Again the descending lines of spiritual force are evident, but, unlike "Le Monocle," vii, there is no conflict between the sounds of "tinkling bells" and "shrilling tankards." Here there is one sound, the "ramshackle sound" of the rain. Professor Eucalyptus "seeks / God in the

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[9] Cf. Vendler, pp. 273-78; Doggett, pp. 166-68.

object itself, without much choice." Stevens has long since ceased to make earth paradisal in the way of "Sunday Morning." What the Professor believes is theoretically possible does not alter the "tink-tonk" of the rain. But given the fact of the rain, the other half of the experience depends upon man's words, the "description that makes it divinity. . . ." Stevens is in no way encouraging a false romantic; the rain is what man starts with. It "is not a substitute. It is of the essence not yet well perceived." Man's "paradisal parlance" is not intended to alter the rain, only man's experience of it.

The "instinct for heaven" gives way to the "instinct for earth," for the "gay tournamonde of a single world / In which . . . as and is are one."[10] The "hand of desire" seeks out the actual, which is described again in transformation from elementary condition to spiritual state:

> The rain kept falling loudly in the trees
> And on the ground. The hibernal dark that hung
> In primavera, the shadow of bare rock,
>
> Becomes the rock of autumn, glittering,
> Ponderable source of each imponderable,
> The weight we lift with the finger of a dream. . . .
>
> (xv)

But the immediate world is yet to be named spiritually: "Among time's images, there is not one / Of this present. . . ." The ancient images, such as those from the "Italian blue," do not suffice to describe the present day

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[10] For Stevens' comments on words of his own invention, particularly "tournamonde," see L, 699 and n.

and night--the "Oklahoman."[11] Yet even in the present "perfection . . . something of death's poverty is heard." The full validation of time is also the acknowledgement of the emptiness of death, "tragedy's most moving face." The sense of the deadness of the past is a sense of the transiency of the present as well. But awareness of "total leaflessness" (xvi) is the price man pays for living in a real world, and Stevens' poetry as a whole affirms that the price is worth it. As he says in the following section, "The strength at the centre is serious." Leaflessness seen not as death's emptiness but as cosmic mystery is "The dominant blank, the unapproachable. / This is the mirror of the high serious. . . ."

Stevens halts at this foray into the abstract and turns back to the "commonplace," which contains within it, though, both the comic and the tragic. Centering again on the idea of perception, he observes that "it is the window that makes it difficult / To say good-by to the past and to live and to be / In the present state of things. . . ." Windows, like arches and pillars, shape the perception; past windows have kept man from the immediate physical. But the "life and death of this [present] carpenter depend / On a fuchsia in a can. . . ." Heir only to the weather of earth, this carpenter bases his window on the truth of the moment

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[11] By "masculine" Stevens wished to indicate ways of sight centered in father gods (cf. "masculine myths," 518).

which allows him to perceive the present. His is a slap-dash arrangement, an "eccentric" city[12] without traditional order and within time among the talking "clocks" (xviii).

The center of this new sight--its "radial aspect"--occurs in the mind, although "At another time . . . [it] came / From a different source." Now the "radial aspect of this place" comes from

> A figure like Ecclesiast,
> Rugged and luminous, [who] chants in the dark
> A text that is an answer, although obscure. (xix)

The old man on the mountain in "Credences" has returned wearing the mantle and chanting the text of a spiritual prophet.

Although the "imaginative transcripts" of the past are dead, and their town "a residuum" even then, the myth was once "blue." It took shape in "feeling" and became "persons." To evade this myth of transcendence (the "clouds") is to be left a "naked being with a naked will / And everything to make" (xx). Or perhaps such freedom is an illusion, man being subject to the "wills of other men . . . [and] the will of necessity. . . ." No matter why, spiritual vision chooses an "alternate romanza," "opposite of Cythére"--island beyond the senses.[13] Based on the things

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[12] The idea of a new city of man to replace the city of God is pervasive in this poem about New Haven-New Heaven. See also sections xx and xxiv. Cf. Baird, pp. 262-63.

[13] For views concerning the image of Cythére, see Doggett, pp. 184-86; Baird, pp. 40-41. For my purpose it is enough to see that the romanza associated with Cythére is clearly founded on the "distant," that which is outside the mind, beyond life.

in "Time's poverty" and with only "isolation [from transcendent spirit] / At the center," this new myth of the senses depends upon its own "celestial mode . . . If only in the branches sweeping in the rain. . . ." Viewed within the weather of time, the "two romanzas, the distant and the near" (xxi), are, alike, celestial creations of the mind.

The poet's side of the search for reality-God is linked both to the senses and to the idea of love. The poet makes "breathless things broodingly abreath / With the inhalations of original cold / And of original earliness." A version of the poet's need to refresh the first idea, as in "Notes," this sense of earliness is "Not the predicate of bright origin." It is a primitive-like response to immediate earth, and it develops out of the search for love as well as the search for reality. But love is not without; it is a human capacity to create sacred reality. The "evening star" is "wholly an inner light . . . [shining] From the sleepy bosom of the real" (xxii).

Section xxiii alters Stevens' usual use of day and night imagery.[14] Here the "sun is half the world, half everything, / The bodiless half." Imagery of day, no longer needed for forming the myths of summer, can now be adopted to deepen the mystery of the commonplace world by bringing the spiritual imagination to New Haven. "At evening, after dark, is the other half. . . ." Now, the night, no longer

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[14] Cf. Doggett, pp. 176-77.

simply a mythic time for the imagination, is representative of the immediate pull of earth's darkness. Although "disembodiments / Still keep occuring . . ." the feeling of night is like a "long, inevitable sound, / A kind of seasoning and coaxing sound, / And the goodness of lying in a maternal sound, / Unfretted by day's separate, several selves, / Being part of everything come together as one." The body is released from the mind into a unity with earth, a force toward darkness often present in Stevens' very late poetry.

But alongside the sense of individual death recurs constant affirmation of a new day of the imagination. The truths of day--which throughout his poetry have been a source of difficulty for the imagination--become responsible for moments of joy in Stevens' late poetry. The night--originally the time of the pure romantic--becomes the time of unity in death. Both the joy of new day and the repugnance from death's night grow naturally out of Stevens' myths of summer, which add up to a monumental affirmation of life.

> It was
> In the genius of summer that they blew up
>
> The statue of Jove among the boomy clouds.
> It took all day to quieten the sky
> And then to refill its emptiness again. . . .

Although the day has not arrived, there is a "readiness for first bells . . . a willingness not yet composed. . . ." What is awaited is a fresh form of experience, "a

happening / In space and the self, that touched them both at once / And alike" (xxiv). The "genius of summer" has paved the way for a union of space and self.

The hidalgo, the Don Quixote figure, is the artist figure of imagination, of "life," who watches the poet for "unfaithful thought." It is the one constant in a life of change because it is "abstract"; the hidalgo is a principle or faith, a demand, a self-created mythic presence--a "hatching that stared and demanded an answering look" (xxv).

Honesty is the question also of section xxvi, whether to lose oneself in the romantic distances of an afternoon by Long Island Sound or attend to the details of the moment in the city. In the first instance, even the "blotches" on the walk were "Blooming and beaming," and "The sea shivered in transcendent change. . . ." These large elemental forces are "lineaments" of an "earth, / Seen as inamorata. . . ." The basic figurations of Stevens' myth have grown largely from such a perspective. The problem is to turn these truths of summer back on the immediate commonplace, where the "inamorata, without distant . . .[is] lost, and naked or in rags, / Shrunk in the poverty of being close. . . ." Yet despite the gritting of particularities, the immediate world provides a proximity of reality which the distant cannot: it "whispers humane repose." In contrast to the particular, the following section's story of the "Ruler of Reality" and the "Queen of Fact" is a light,

scholarly-like abstract, but it, too, makes the same point: the Ruler finds his "sass" only with the Queen of Fact.

Now that a full emphasis on the particular has been made, Stevens is in a position in section xxviii to restate powerfully the basic premise of his poetry. Despite the qualifying opening, for Stevens "reality exists / In the mind. . . ." This is not to say how reality gets in the mind but only that the real exists for man in his experience of it. The immediate details--"tin plate . . . loaf of bread . . . long-bladed knife"--and the mind's "Misericordia" are "two in one." The relationship between the mind and its world is the source of the "endlessly elaborating poem" of man. The "theory / Of poetry is the life of poetry . . . [and] the theory of life. . . ." The mind is the living-space of the real; its metaphors provide the spiritual dimension of experience. Man lives

> in the intricate evasions of as,
> In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
> The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for
> lands.

Such lands are imaged in the "land of the lemon trees," a tropic land of the imagination, whose inhabitants eloquently "rolled their r's. . . ." Stevens' mythic fable then introduces to this yellow land the "wandering mariners" from the "land of elm trees," whose words are "mere brown clods." The realists of the North, however, finds themselves at home in the South. Having said farewell to Florida long before in Ideas of Order, Stevens now

reapproaches the exotic with an imagination nurtured by the restrictive weather and solid earth of the North. The "dark-colored words" of Stevens' mariners provide new substance to romantic space, "an alteration / Of words that was a change of nature" (xxix). The "longed-for lands" are accessible through a myth formed by the facts of earth.

Such facts are the basis of section xxx, which takes us back to the North at a time when the "robins are lá-bas. . . ." This is the environment of "barrenness" which strips the romances, eventually making the pure romantic momentarily possible. "The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge, / Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks." The weather of earth emerges again, washing away "something imagined." The power of the mind's credences over the earth is checked. "The wind has blown the silence of summer away." That which remains are the declarations once again of the presences of earth.

> A clearness has returned. It stands restored.
>
> It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
> It is a visibility of thought,
> In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.

The mind becomes the medium through which earth sees herself. Even this poem devoted to the city of man has wound its way back to the presences of earth.

The immediate elements of experience form the basis of the myth. The "hundreds of eyes" become in the final section the "less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds / Not often realized. . . ." Each of the "hundreds of

eyes" is itself a red presence--like the red soldier--of the larger myth: "These are the edgings and inchings of final form. . . ." Reality as experienced by man grows out of the earth into the mind and back to the earth again.

> It may be a shade that traverses
> A dust, a force that traverses a shade.

V

If "An Ordinary Evening" sees Stevens turning the force of his summer myth toward the commonplace city of man, "Things of August" (489-96) represents a turning toward the particulars of personal experience. Stevens' credences remain his foundation, even for his negations, but his desire to touch the "things" of his immediate world becomes greater than ever.

> These locusts by day, these crickets by night
> Are the instruments on which to play
> Of an old and disused ambit of the soul
> Or of a new aspect, bright in discovery--
>
> A disused ambit of the spirit's way. . . .

While avowing the power of the immediate noises of nature, he turns repeatedly toward a sense of primitive contact. Still describing the new ambit of the spirit, he compares it to the "spirit's sex . . . as the voice of one / Meets nakedly another's naked voice" (i). He encourages man to "spread sail" and to "Break through" the egg-barriers that separate him from immediate contact:

> Breathe freedom, oh, my native,
> In the space of horizons that neither love nor hate.
> (ii)

Such a space is like "the Mediterranean / Of the quiet of the middle of the night, / With the broken statues standing on the shore." There, in the middle of the mind and earth, the poetry of human consciousness--whether directed within ("interior intonations") or without ("a world of objects")--creates "A nature . . . The peace of its last intelligence" (iii).

There is sadness in this quietude, but not over the "broken statues," the loss of past spiritual meaning. Stevens mourns rather the "sad smell of the lilacs . . . as of an exhumation returned to earth. . . ." Life and earth are "rich," but the "sentiment of the fatal is a part / Of filial love." Earth's "dagger," however, is preferable to the "blessed regal dropped in daggers' dew" of "Montrachet-le-Jardin"--the dagger of a transcendent parent separating man from earth. In earth's hand, the dagger might even represent "parental love." But Stevens can still wish, without contradiction, that lilacs had been "warmer, rosier" (iv).

Section v is a clear indication of the main tendency of Stevens' last poetry. No longer placing primary emphasis on the need for the mind to create its abstractions out of earth's forms, he stresses more frequently the desire to experience the nonhuman things around him, even though such experience is often darkened by a sense of his own approaching death. Supported by the mythic foundation of his own fiction, he can now afford to "give the week-end to wisdom,

to Weisheit, the rabbi. . . ." It is within this "thinker as reader" side of himself that the myth exists:

> A crown within him of crispest diamonds,
> A reddened garment falling to his feet,
> A hand of light to turn the page,
>
> A finger with a ring to guide his eye
> From line to line. . . .

But the overall thrust of the poetry turns away from fictive abstractions toward the experience of otherness that the myth makes possible. While the thinker "reads what has been written . . ." Stevens' two selves "lie on the grass and listen / To that which has no speech. . . ." The aggressive force of man's lights at "Key West" becomes the passive experience of otherness by the woman imagination. But the outer world is no longer "merely a place by which she walked to sing." The forms of Stevens' myth (derived from the earth) now allow the things of earth to declare themselves. "The world images for the beholder" (vi). The sense of aggressive self gives way to a sense of self as spirit of place, "the blank mechanic of the mountains, / The blank frere of fields, their matin laborer."

It is no wonder, then, that Stevens now turns

> From the tower to the house,
> From the spun sky and the high and deadly view,
> To the novels on the table,
> The geraniums on the sill.

Stevens' poetry from here on traces his entrance into the mysterious space of a world both mind and thing. He no longer requires the darkness of night as mate for his

imagination (cf. 358; OP, 71).

> It was curious to have to descend
> And, seated in the nature of his chair,
> To feel the satisfactions
> Of that transparent air. (vii)

He goes on to describe the source of this change, asking first, "when was it that the particles became / The whole man . . . and that differences lost / Difference and were one?" His answer is that

> It had to be
> In the presence of a solitude of the self,
> An expanse and the abstraction of an expanse,
> A zone of time without the ticking of clocks,
> A color that moved us with forgetfulness.

The source of his fresh sense of unity is of course his own abstract spiritual, alive in the mythic moment of time without time, a red figuration "Tranquillizing . . . The torments of confusion" (27).

The following stanza illustrates vividly his awareness of the primitive dimension of his abstract and its close relationship to the presential. He speaks first of the "archaic form / Of a woman with a cloud on her shoulder"--the presence that unites his inner and outer selves: "We resembled one another at the sight." He continues:

> The forgetful color of the autumn day
> Was full of these archaic forms, giants
> Of sense, evoking one thing in many men,
> Evoking an archaic space, vanishing
> In the space, leaving an outline of the size
> Of the impersonal person, the wanderer,
> The father, the ancestor, the bearded peer,
> The total of human shadows bright as glass.

Stevens' interior space is filled with giant presences, parents of a child-self already emerging with new sight.

In the broader sense, his own supreme fiction takes its place as

> A new text of the world,
> A scribble of fret and fear and fate,
> From a bravura of the mind,
> A courage of the eye. . . .

A product of the imagination's force combined with the physical senses, the new myth "comes from ourselves":

> It is a text that we shall be needing,
> To be the footing of noon,
> The pillar of midnight,
> . . . . . .
> A text of intelligent men
> At the centre of the unintelligible,
> As in a hermitage. . . . (ix)

Although Stevens has formed for himself a spiritual home, his own experience, however presential, perforce remains autumnal:

> The mornings grow silent, the never-tiring wonder.
> The trees are reappearing in poverty.

The leaves are going, the poverty of winter approaching; but warmth yet remains as well as the capacity to touch--both deriving from the presence of love, his woman within, although "She is exhausted and a little old" (x).

The winter toward which Stevens moves is both his own death and the death of a way of being for man. His mythic figurations have brought him to a primitive shore where experience is steeped in power and awe. In "Page from a Tale" (421-23), "in the hard brightness of that winter

day . . . Hans heard, / By his drift-fire, on the shore," two sounds: that of the water and wind, "without meaning and speech," and that of the men still on the ship, singing "so blau . . . so lind / Und so lau. . . ."[15] But the ship is "foundered in the ice." "Men would be starting at dawn to walk ashore. / They would be afraid of the sun: what it might be. . . ." Hans experiences "New stars . . . a foot across . . . couriers of [the ship's] death. . . . They looked back at Hans's look with savage faces." But for Hans, "the cold / Was [also] like a sleep. . . . The sea was a sea he dreamed. / Yet Hans lay wide awake." The mythic contours of Hans's mind, though, permit the experience of savage presence. The songs of the men on board protect them until they must leave the ship in order to survive. Then,

> The sun might rise and it might not and if
> It rose, ashen and red and yellow, each
> Opaque, in orange circlet, nearer than it
> Had ever been before, no longer known. . . .

The power of otherness will assail them. The sun might appear with the power of a primitive symbol:

> A wheel spoked red and white
> In alternate stripes converging at a point
> Of flame on the line, with a second wheel below,
> Just rising, accompanying, arranged to cross,
> Through weltering illuminations, humps
> Of billows, downward, toward the drift-fire shore.

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[15] See Baird's excellent discussion of this poem, pp. 112-16, although I do not agree it is necessary to emphasize that the poem "is compelled by twentieth-century science." This is an apocalypse concerning the way man experiences his world, the picture of the end of a way of belief; it has nothing to do with "atomic decimation."

Reality will no longer be that which is known, but that which is experienced in its otherness. The spiritual space of such experience for Stevens has been created out of his own momentary marriages of imagination and earth. In such a space, the sun "might come bearing, out of chaos . . . Whirlpools of darkness in whirlwinds of light . . . The miff-maff-muff of water, the vocables / Of the wind, the glassily-sparkling particles / Of the mind. . . ."

The major poems of the Auroras of Autumn have, first, extended Stevens' summer truths into the realm of darkness and death and, then, envisioned through the orb of man's poem the idea of the ordinary city of man and the particular things of common experience. The figure behind all these developments remains the poet himself--not the giant now, but the "Large Red Man Reading" (423-24).

A mythic abstraction of Stevens himself, the Red Man unites the poet figure with the rabbi figure. His sacred words bring the "ghosts" of transcendence back to earth, "those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more" (like the earlier Stevens in "Domination of Black"). The Red Man reads from the "poem of life"--first a "great blue tabulae" and then a "purple tabulae" (absorbing the Red Man's mythic dimension). Compared to the vacancy of transcendent space, even the pain and ugliness of earth's thorns are preferable, part of the intensity of stepping "barefoot into reality." This creator figure does not so

much create life--as Stevens, in the first flush of his sense of the poet's power ("Thou art not August . . ."))-- rather, he reads life into existence. The "poem of life" is "Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them." The Red Man provides through his voice a "feeling" for earth, that is, the sense of the sacred that the "ghosts" had sought elsewhere. He intones, as in a rite, "Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines. . . ."

"ENGENDERINGS OF SENSE": LAST POEMS

Stevens' last poems record that living space toward which all his poetry has been growing, a space in which the abstract and the particular can unite in the central poet's mind. Considering Stevens' age and his resignation to the "nothingness of human after-death" (336), these poems are often surprisingly contented--not however through the innocence of a second childhood[1] but through the sense of a completion that allows a rebirth of sight. There is a feeling of contact with a physical earth in many of the poems which hints at those moments of immediate experience which, it has been the claim of this study, have formed the foundation of his myth throughout the poet's life. The final poems, then, are less occupied than usual with construction of the myth itself and more intent than usual on recording the space of "things" within and without--experience of which the myth has made possible. If the credences of summer have faded, it is because Stevens is now at the mysterious threshold of an experiential world opened to him by his own supreme abstractions.

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[1] Cf. Vendler, p. 312: "This extraordinary creature, Stevens' last mythical invention, is the child one becomes in second childhood, in that sickness where the eyes dim, where the body is a chill weight, and the old winning fairy tales of bearded deities become irrelevant."

The sole important addition to the myth to develop in the last poems is the figure of the child--who stands at the gateway to a fresh mode of spiritual experience. Stevens' first "homunculus" appeared in Harmonium in the title of a poem about the evening star (25-27), where the image of the little man is surely meant ironically, pointing to the minuscule false romantics of the poem. But the poem concludes by directing the quest of love toward a "mistress [who] / Is no gaunt fugitive phantom . . . [but] a wanton, / Abundantly beautiful, eager, / Fecund. . . ." The child that is born in Stevens' last poetry is the child of the fecund mother earth. The child's father, however, is no sky god. The principle of the spiritual father has been brought to earth, to merge with "earth / And sea and air" (501-02). The child is born of the "spirit [that] comes from the body of the world," not from "masculine myths we used to make" ("Looking across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," 517-19).

The father god, as we have seen, has merged with the mind of central man; it is the poet as hero who replaces the sky god as consort of earth (cf. 107-108). The child is of their union:

> The sibyl of the self,
> The self as sibyl, whose diamond,
> Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth
> Is poverty, whose jewel found
> At the exactest central of the earth
> Is need. (OP, 104)

Jung discusses the "great significance of the child motif in mythology." Especially, the "archetype of the 'child god' is extremely widespread and intimately bound up with all the other mythological aspects of the child motif." Jung relates the archetype to homunculi and goes on to observe that the "child motif is extremely variable and assumes all manner of shapes, such as the jewel, the pearl . . . and so on."[2]

Stevens' child is the anticipation of a new form of life:

> . . . Wanderer, this is the pre-history of February.
> The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.
>
> You were not born yet when the trees were crystal
> Nor are you now, in this wakefulness inside a sleep.
> (522)

Jung says that "occurrence of the child motif . . . signifies as a rule an anticipation of future developments, even though at first sight it may seem like a retrospective configuration."[3] Stevens' child anticipates also a fresh union of opposites.

> At the antipodes of poetry, dark winter,
> When the trees glitter with that which despoils
> them,
> Daylight evaporates, like a sound one hears in
> sickness.
>
> One is a child again.

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[2] The Archetypes, pp. 151, 158-60.

[3] Ibid., p. 164.

Born out of the darkness of winter, Stevens' child announces a new day:

> And always at this antipodes . . .
>
> One thinks that it could be that the first word spoken,
> The desire for speech and meaning gallantly fulfilled,
>
> The gathering of the imbecile against his motes
> And the wry antipodes whirled round the world away--
> One thinks, when the houses of New England catch the first sun.
>
> The first word would be of the susceptible being arrived,
> The immaculate disclosure of the secret no more obscured.
> The sprawling of winter might suddenly stand erect,
>
> Pronouncing its new light and ours, not autumn's prodigal returned,
> But an antipodal, far-fetched creature, worthy of birth. . . . (OP, 95-96)

Jung relates the "child" to the hero motif; the "'child' distinguishes itself by deeds which point to the conquest of dark." Finally, the child "symbol anticipates a nascent state of consciousness."[4]

The state of consciousness that emerges most fully in Stevens' final poems is able to infuse the mind's love into moments of immediate experience. Since the mythic forms of the poet's mind have grown out of marriages with earth, his living myth now provides a screen through which the elements of immediate experience can reach the level of imagination without in themselves being altered. Stevens'

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[4] Ibid., pp. 167, 168.

Ariel spirit--in early manhood associated by him with the romantic (cf. L, 50, 123)--has become united with his sense of reality.

> His self and the sun were one
> And his poems, although makings of his self,
> Were no less makings of the sun.
>
> It was not important that they survive.
> What mattered was that they should bear
> Some lineament or character,
>
> Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
> In the poverty of their words,
> Of the planet of which they were part. (532-33)

Instead of a sacred mountain to provide the meeting place of the physical and the spiritual, of earth and heaven, man and God, Stevens has created "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain" (512).

> There it was, word for word. . . .
>
> He breathed its oxygen,
> Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

The space of the poet's own experience, then, encompasses both the love dimension of the imagination and the mind's sense of reality. The mind provides a transparence of place. The "Old Philosopher in Rome" (508-10) experiences

> a kind of total grandeur at the end,
> With every visible thing enlarged and yet
> No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns. . . .

The dimension of heaven has become a dimension of imagination providing a vision of reality. The "River of Rivers" (533) is the Farmington River flowing near Hartford as well as the abstract river at the convergence of physical and

spiritual experience. But like the Styx, it too is "fateful"--a finality in fresh spiritual space. Unlike former embodiments of spirit, this river is

> Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore
> Of each of the senses. . . .

The major qualification of Stevens' spiritual remains, however, that the "river . . . flows nowhere, like a sea." The mind has "no knowledge except of nothingness / And it flows over us without meanings" (OP, 113). Although it is tempting to stress his allusion in the "Final Soliloquy" (524) to "an order, a whole, / A knowledge," the overwhelming emphasis in Stevens' last poetry is on the fresh space itself, not where it comes from (outside the mind of man) or where it goes. For him, his mother, not his father, is his firmest reality, and his last picture of her as the destructive presence, "Madame La Fleurie" (507), is a powerful evocation of earthly mortality.

> His grief is that his mother should feed on him,
> himself and what he saw,
> In that distant chamber, a bearded queen, wicked
> in her dead light.

But even during moments of painful awareness of his age, images of immediate physical surroundings break through into his poetry with a frequency unusual for Stevens. In "The Plain Sense of Things" (502-03), his feeling of "sadness without cause" leads to the observation that

> The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
> The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one
> side.

While he can muse that the "great structure has become a minor house" or that a "fantastic effort has failed" (502), his own immediate experience frequently belies the despondency.

In "The Hermitage at the Center" (505-06), his image of love gradually merges with immediate sensations until his interior woman presence becomes one with the female earth. Proceeding in counterpoint, the poem at first sharply separates outer and inner, sensation and ideal:

> The leaves on the macadam make a noise--
> How soft the grass on which the desired
> Reclines in the temperature of heaven. . . .

But as the "desired" "attends the tintinnabula . . . Of birds . . ." their external "intelligible twittering" replaces "unintelligible thought." The poem closes with his love presence no longer in the mind's "temperature of heaven" but serenely at home in the circles of earth:

> And yet this end and this beginning are one,
> And one last look at the ducks is a look
> At lucent children round her in a ring.

Above all, it is the power of earth that dominates Stevens' last poetry. Experienced in the fresh space of his own perceptions, the flow of <u>things</u> becomes presential. In "Reality Is An Activity of the Most August Imagination" (CP, 110-11), this force of the immediate earth is unusually pronounced:

> Last Friday, in the big light of last Friday night,
> We drove home from Cornwall to Hartford, late.
>
> It was not a night blown at a glassworks in Vienna
> Or Venice, motionless, gathering time and dust.

There was a crush of strength in a grinding going
round,
Under the front of the westward evening star,
The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins. . . .

What the august imagination finally provides is the stage of "visible transformations" where solid earth meets visionary love.

There was an insolid billowing of the solid.
Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air.

The boundaries of this space of the imagination reach from interior presence to external sensation. On one side, the moonlight of the imagination discloses "the essential presence, say, / Of a mountain, expanded and elevated almost / Into a sense, an object the less;" at its other boundary, the imagination brings sense form to the indefinite, disclosing "the figure waiting on the road / An object the more. . . ."

The purpose that Stevens affirms at the end is the birth of sight, "as if being was to be observed. . . ."

The one moonlight, the various universe, intended
So much just to be seen--a purpose, empty
Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,
Certain and ever more fresh. Ah! Certain, for
sure . . . (531-32)

Man becomes the spirit of earth; his "chapel rises from Terre Ensevelie . . . In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness" (529-30).[5]

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[5] Cf. Baird's incisive remarks on "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," pp. 310-11.

In such a chapel the rite of poetry remains paramount, the cosmogonic act of the "Interior Paramour" (524):

> Light the first lights of evening, as in a room
> In which we rest and, for small reason, think
> The world imagined is the ultimate good.

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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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