

**WALLACE STEVENS: HIS THEORY AND PRACTICE OF POETRY**

**THESIS**

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**By**

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**For Jo Ann and Betty  
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## FOREWORD

Wallace Stevens has attracted me since the beginning of my undergraduate days. I became acquainted with that part of the poet's work published in the various anthologies of American poetry. His two major poems--"Sunday Morning" and "The Man With the Blue Guitar"--have been among my favorite works in modern American poetry. Thus, I chose to undertake a study of the poetry of Wallace Stevens, first of all, because I had a fondness for his poetry--that is, as much of it as I had read. He was recognized, I knew, as an accomplished poet and worthy of a detailed study. The other basic reason for choosing to study Stevens was that I felt he would provide a challenge for me--in a creative way. A reader of poetry must be able--insofar as he is capable--to respond to the poet's words. He should be aware of the structure of the poem and sensitive to the sounds of the words as well as concerned with the meaning of the poem. Stevens' experimentation with sound and his willingness to utilize words seldom used by other writers appealed to me especially because he at the same time adhered to a discipline of structure throughout his works. Because I had a desire to write poetry myself, I was interested in a comprehensive study of a poet who spent most of his creative years trying to define the "perfect" poetry. Other than the poems themselves, Stevens wrote a number of essays and letters in which he attempted to make clear his theory of poetry. I discovered

that these attempts to articulate the idea of the poem were quite interesting and often helpful to me in my effort to develop a poetry of my own. Thus, the thesis which follows is the result of a creative stimulus as well as a desire to analyze and explain.

I began my study by reading all of Stevens' poems included in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens and Opus Posthumous. I read these poems first without resorting to the various critics who have written analyses of Stevens' work. Even on later readings I maintained a skeptical attitude toward the critics' interpretation of the poems. Thus, most of the interpretative comments presented in this thesis are completely my own, or those of the poet himself. (Stevens' letters contain numerous interpretative remarks about many of his poems.) What follows is a sincere attempt to respond to a major poet's work, and although some of my conclusions may be "off base," I think Stevens himself would have respected a study made in the manner I have described.

Besides reading all of Stevens' poems, I closely examined his letters (collected in a book edited by his daughter, Holly) and minutely studied his essays, which may be found in Necessary Angel and Opus Posthumous. After I felt that I had formed some distinctly definite opinions of his poetry, I consulted various critics of the poet and compared my ideas with theirs. (I believe the most helpful analysis of Stevens' work is Ronald Sukenick's Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure.) Having proceeded in this fashion, I then decided to try to answer four basic questions--each of which is the basis of a chapter in the thesis that follows: What is Stevens' view concerning the role of the poet? What is his theory of poetry? How did he practice his theory? What are

the rewards gained in reading Stevens' poetry? With these questions in mind, I re-examined Stevens' works, and with the help of a few of his critics, attempted to answer fully each question. The conclusions which follow are, for the most part, my own. I included opinions of other critics only when I judged that they were especially illuminating.

I sincerely wish to thank my wife, Jo Ann, for her patience during the many hours in which I had to lock myself in my study. I am indebted to my wife and Mrs. Betty McDaniel for their assistance in proofreading. My typist, Mrs. Lucille Koehler, showed an amazing amount of tolerance. Finally, my adviser, Dr. A. L. Bennett, was a pleasure to work with. His assistance was--well, "like nothing else in Tennessee."

--David C. Yates

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CHAPTER ONE  
THE ROLE OF THE POET

Wallace Stevens, one of the most difficult twentieth-century American poets, spent perhaps more time than any other American poet attempting to clarify the purpose of poetry and the poet's role in society. In fact, Stevens was so involved with the theory of poetry that many of his contemporary critics regarded him as a "poet's poet." The major portion of his work--both prose and poetry--concerns poetry and its place in a society which he feels has lost its conception of nobility and has discarded most--if not all--of its religious beliefs. In discussing this loss of nobility, Stevens says: "Little of what we have believed has been true . . . . The impermanence of the past . . . suggests . . . an impermanence of the future."<sup>1</sup> Unless modern man finds a substitute for his lost mythology, or religious beliefs, his life will become more and more empty and meaningless. He must find something to fill the vacuum.

Stevens felt that poetry should be the substitute for the lost mythology, and although he would have abhorred the thought, he did become, in his own fashion, a sort of evangelist for poetry--not in the dramatic manner of a Vachel Lindsay, but in a rather quiet, meditative, relentless way. His work is a determined effort to arrive at a "pure" poetry, which would satisfy both reality and the imagination. Characteristic of his near-evangelical tendency is a statement from his book

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<sup>1</sup>Wallace Stevens, Necessary Angel, pp. 20-21.

of essays, the Necessary Angel: "His [the poet's] role, in short, is to help people live their lives."<sup>2</sup> This statement is somewhat misleading in that Stevens did not make any effort to "corner" people and preach to them about the virtues of poetry, but it does illustrate the dedication that the poet felt for his profession.

Stevens was, in fact, dedicated to two professions--poetry and insurance. He entered both professions rather slowly. Born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, he was the son of Garrett B. Stevens and the former Margaretha Catherine Zeller. His father was a prosperous lawyer and an occasional "poet." Stevens was the second of three brothers: he had two sisters. He was graduated from Reading Boys High School in 1897 and enrolled in Harvard University shortly afterwards. Graduating from Harvard in three years, he entered, in 1901, the New York Law School and in 1904 was admitted to the bar in the State of New York. Although he published some poetry in collegiate publications, it was not until age 35 that he had his first real publication. This was in Harriet Monroe's Poetry magazine. After he was admitted to the bar, he practiced law for several years in New York before joining, in 1916, the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company's legal staff. He was transferred to Hartford, which remained his place of residence throughout the remainder of his life. He worked faithfully for the firm and became a vice-president in 1934, a position which he held until his death in 1955. On many occasions, his insurance work took preference over his poetry, and during these periods his creative output dwindled to

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<sup>2</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 29.



nearly nothing. Even after winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1955 for his Collected Poems, he chose not to retire from business. A year earlier he had declined an offer to be Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard for the same reason. His dedication to the insurance business most likely accounts for the fact that for a period of at least eight years--in the mid 1920's and the early 1930's--he produced very little verse. His daughter, Holly, reveals in Letters of Wallace Stevens that with the exception of a couple of poems, he "seems to have discontinued writing for the next five or six years; at least, he did not submit anything for publication."<sup>3</sup> She states that "his energy between the ages of 44 and 54 went largely into his work at the insurance company."<sup>4</sup> Even when his creative powers began to reawaken--chiefly after he became vice-president of the firm in 1934--Holly reveals that he "concealed his creative work from most of his insurance colleagues as well as he could for many years to come."<sup>5</sup> Throughout his life, then, he seemed to keep a sharp line between his poetic endeavors and his business.

For Stevens, poetry was in one way a personal thing, though he thought poems should be kept as impersonal as possible. Apparently it really was a means of elevation for himself, of achieving self-satisfaction. He often implied that the writing of verse was therapeutic. At its highest level, he once wrote, poetry is a "means of

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<sup>3</sup>Holly Stevens, Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 242.

<sup>4</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 243.

<sup>5</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 256.

satisfying both the reason and the imagination."<sup>6</sup> For this reason, poetry "may be superior to philosophy,"<sup>7</sup> because the philosopher, he explains, is concerned chiefly with reason instead of the imagination. In view of this conviction, it is no great surprise that Stevens' "supreme fiction" in his series of short poems, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," is poetry. To his friend, Henry Church, he wrote: "Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction; the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure."<sup>8</sup> (Stevens' preoccupation with change will be discussed in Chapter II.)

Poetry, for Stevens, is "a process of the personality of the poet."<sup>9</sup> A poet writes poetry "because he is a poet; and he is not a poet because he is a poet but because of his personal sensibility."<sup>10</sup> The poet's chief motivation in creating verse is to challenge his imagination. "One grows tired of the monotony of one's imagination . . . and sets out to find variety,"<sup>11</sup> he explains. That he considered poetry a creation of the poet's personality possibly accounts for his repugnance for explications. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he infrequently volunteered to explicate his poetry, which was considered extremely abstruse by many of his critics. Samuel Morse French points out that Stevens

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<sup>6</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 430.

<sup>9</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup>Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, p. 217.

<sup>11</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 221.

contributed to few of the literary symposia and answers to questionnaires that were common in the literary magazines during the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Stevens regarded explications as a destructive influence on the effectiveness of his poems. He declined to include an introductory note for his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." In a letter to Catherine Frazier of the Cunningham Press, he wrote: "You will observe that I have not included an introductory note. I don't like explications; the chances are the poems are very much better off in the long run without explications."<sup>13</sup> To H. L. Simons, whom he did send--at times, rather grudgingly--explications of his poems, he wrote: "A long time ago I made up my mind not to explicate things because most people have so little appreciation of poetry that once a poem has been explained it has been destroyed: that is to say, they are no longer able to seize the poem."<sup>14</sup> A remark which is the supreme example of the poet's reluctance to explicate is one he made to Simons before commenting on his poem "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons": "This is a perfect instance of destroying a poem by explaining it."<sup>15</sup> At the end of another letter to Simons, he emphasized: ". . . these notes [explications] are for your personal use. They are not to be quoted."<sup>16</sup> Actually, Stevens felt that poetry should

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<sup>12</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. xiv.

<sup>13</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 408.

<sup>14</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 346.

<sup>15</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 347.

<sup>16</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 350.

contain a certain amount of obscurity and that an explication--by the poet himself--would destroy this essential element. For the poet, he proclaims, "the irrational is elemental."<sup>17</sup>

Stevens' reluctance to explicate his poems, however, did not carry over to musing the mission of poetry. He labored with arduous honing to define poetry. In his essays and in his poems he set out to perfect a theory of that art. "Although the theory of poetry never developed fully, everything Stevens wrote can be related to it,"<sup>18</sup> French writes in an introduction to Opus Posthumous. French believes that from the very beginning, all of Stevens' poems are "about" poetry. "It is the one real subject of Harmonium and all the later work."<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that Stevens' original title for his Collected Poems was The Whole of Harmonium. The intense desire of Stevens to elevate poetry to the highest possible level is best illustrated in a letter he wrote to Archibald MacLeish shortly after he had declined the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship:

There are several things that are of utmost interest to me from which I have had to turn away and if I had been able to reconcile myself to the necessity of doing this, it is easier to reconcile myself to the necessity of passing up the present opportunity. One of these things is to try to find out whether it is possible to formulate a theory of poetry that would make poetry a significant humanity of such a nature and scope that it could be established as a normal, vital field of study for all comers.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 229.

<sup>18</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. xvi.

<sup>19</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. xiv.

<sup>20</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 853.

In accepting the National Book Award in 1955, Stevens told his audience: "We can never have great poetry unless we believe that poetry serves great ends."<sup>21</sup> And, in one of his essays, he elevates the "great ends" very close to that region where many mystics--or transcendentalists--place them. He wrote: ". . . while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God."<sup>22</sup> Thus, according to Stevens, poetry has--or should have--a most vital purpose, especially in a society which has been stripped of its traditional beliefs in God. He felt that by creating an order of its own and by existing solely as a work of art, poetry must be the logical substitute for man's lost religious beliefs. This is the reason that--late in his life--he made poetry the "supreme fiction," or "supreme myth." Harold Bloom, who feels that "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is Stevens' best work, describes it as "an attempt at a final belief in a fiction known to be a fiction, in the predicate that there is nothing else."<sup>23</sup> The fiction, Bloom feels, is "broadly poetry itself, and poetry is necessarily the subject of Stevens' poem."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Opus Posthumous, pp. 245-246.

<sup>22</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 222.

<sup>23</sup>Harold Bloom, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"; a commentary in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Marie Borroff, p. 77.

<sup>24</sup>Bloom, p. 77.

The lofty role that a poet should strive for is emphasized best in Section III of the first part of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

Stevens writes:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,  
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies  
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,  
To an immaculate end.<sup>25</sup>

Even in an earlier poem, "The Candle a Saint," Stevens praises the man (the poet) who sees "beyond the astronomers/The Topaz rabbit and the emerald cat."<sup>26</sup> The poet, he continues, must move toward the "image at its source,/The abstract, the archaic queen."<sup>27</sup> But Stevens' vehicles to his "source" remained, throughout his poems, here on earth. The "archaic queen" is reached by dwelling on earthly things. These are what send the imagination soaring, and his sources for images are endless--a jar, concupiscent cups of ice cream, peacocks, snow men, statues, rocks, pianos, tattoos, oak leaves, boats, peaches, horns, owls, and so on. Commenting on sources for his poetry, Stevens once wrote: "The world may, certainly, be lost to the poet but it is not lost to the imagination."<sup>28</sup> He added that the "great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 382.

<sup>26</sup>Collected Poems, p. 223.

<sup>27</sup>Collected Poems, p. 223.

<sup>28</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 142.

<sup>29</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 142.

Stevens' ambition, of course, was to write that "great poem of the earth." "Until it is written many lesser things will be so regarded [as great],"<sup>30</sup> he concluded. Commenting on Stevens' passion for earthly images, Randall Jarrell once wrote: "Setting out on Stevens for the first time would be like setting out to be an explorer of the world."<sup>31</sup>

For a poet so concerned, then, with the earth and "things as they are," it is certainly in order to investigate his ideas concerning the sociological and political obligations of the poet. Stevens lived through two major wars and a major depression; he saw misery, poverty, and suffering. In a letter to H. I. Simons, he once stated that he believed in doing "everything practically possible to improve the condition of the workers."<sup>32</sup> Concerning World War II, he wrote to Leonard C. van Gayzel:

As the news of the development of the war comes in, I feel a horror of it: a horror of the fact that such a thing could occur. The country is more or less divided between those who think that we should hold aloof and those who think that, at the very least, we ought to help the British and the French. Our sympathies are strongly with the British and the French, but this time there is an immensely strong feeling about staying out.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 142.

<sup>31</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens," The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, ed. by Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller, p. 180.

<sup>32</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 351.

<sup>33</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 342.

But, to Stevens, there was a world of difference between the obligations of Stevens the citizen and Stevens the poet. In an essay, he defines explicitly the obligation of the poet: "I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the poet. He has none."<sup>34</sup> To Simons, he explains that it is simply a question of whether poetry is a thing in itself, or whether it is not. Answering in the affirmative, he wrote: ". . . there is no obligation that it [poetry] shall attach itself to political reality, social or sociological reality, etc."<sup>35</sup> Thus, reading Stevens' poetry, one will find--unlike much of the "peace" poetry of the sixties--no sermons on the cruelties of war or the plight of the minorities. In one of his rare poems concerning war, "The Death of a Soldier," he simply indicates, rather poignantly, that nature is really indifferent to the struggles of the soldier. When he falls in combat, "without pomp":

Death is absolute and without memorial,  
As in a season of autumn,  
When the wind stops,  
When the wind stops and, over the heavens,  
The clouds go, nevertheless,  
In their direction.<sup>36</sup>

For Stevens, the poet, the real battlefield of life takes place in the mind--between one's imagination and one's perception of reality. The poet, of course, is the one who engages in the "major battle." In

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<sup>34</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 27.

<sup>35</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 403.

<sup>36</sup>Collected Poems, p. 97.



"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," he writes: "Soldier, there is a war between the mind/And the sky, between thought and day and night."<sup>37</sup> The poet, unlike the soldier, is engaged in a war "that never ends."<sup>38</sup> "But your war ends,"<sup>39</sup> he informs the real soldier. The faith conveyed by the poet, if it is conveyed accurately, is the spiritual sustenance by which the soldier lives and dies.

To Stevens, then, the poet's spiritual, or metaphysical role--his effort to erect an object of faith--lies in the existence of the poem (as a work of art) itself. The poet is not to take the place of the gods; indeed, they have not been defeated or overpowered. It is simply that, as Stevens expressed it, "they came to nothing,"<sup>40</sup> The poet is not a preacher, or even a philosopher in the pure sense of the word; he is engaged in creating something which is an end in itself--even if that end is fictional. To Stevens, the unreal has an existence. "It follows that/Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven/Before and after one arrives . . .,"<sup>41</sup> he writes in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." But, regardless of the intentions of the poet in creating a particular poem, he must voice his images through credible things--things which constantly surround him. He must allow his imagination to work with "things as they

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<sup>37</sup>Collected Poems, p. 407.

<sup>38</sup>Collected Poems, p. 407.

<sup>39</sup>Collected Poems, p. 407.

<sup>40</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 206.

<sup>41</sup>Collected Poems, p. 485.

are." An excellent illustration of Stevens' practice of letting the imagination start with the "credible things" can be found in Part V of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

One part  
Held fast tenaciously in common earth  
And one from central earth to central sky  
And in moonlight extensions of them in the mind  
Searched out such majesty as it could find.<sup>42</sup>

Or in the "It Must be Abstract" section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

My house has changed a little in the sun.  
The fragrance of the magnolias comes close,  
False flick, false form, but falseness close to kin.<sup>43</sup>

The poet implies that even if things in the imagination are false, we must nevertheless strive to reach them because, as he repeatedly emphasizes, the imagination is the only thing we really possess.

To Stevens, reality is both an abstract conception and a concrete presence. In the conclusion of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," he illustrates the dual "existence" of reality:

It is not in the premise that reality  
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses  
A dust, a force that traverses a shade.<sup>44</sup>

It is the "concrete presence" of reality that the poet must use as a

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<sup>42</sup>Collected Poems, pp. 468-469.

<sup>43</sup>Collected Poems, p. 385.

<sup>44</sup>Collected Poems, p. 489.

Those, then, who want to pick up this "twang" are welcome to do so.

These lines, more than anything else in Stevens' poetry, reconcile the two seemingly contradictory statements he made in Necessary Angel:

"His role [the poet's], in short, is to help people live their lives."<sup>49</sup>

"Poetry is the scholar's art."<sup>50</sup> The poet "twangs" it out. His work is available for anyone. His obligation is thus fulfilled. The scholar is the person who picks it up and absorbs it, and his life will be enriched--if the poem is successful.

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<sup>49</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 61.

springboard for his imagination. He emphasizes this in "The Man With the Blue Guitar":

Things as they are  
Are changed on the blue guitar<sup>45</sup>

or:

I cannot bring the world quite round,  
Although I patch it as I can.<sup>46</sup>

But, to Stevens, the "patching" of the world is done in the poems themselves, in the creation of this "supreme fiction." He once emphasized the freshness of reality when it is suffused with the imagination:

But the truth about the poet in a time of disbelief is not that he must turn evangelist. After all, he shares the disbelief of his time. He does not turn to Paris or Rome for relief from the monotony of reality. He turns to himself and denies that reality was ever monotonous except in comparison.<sup>47</sup>

The poet's spiritual role, then, lies completely in the creation of his poem. After that is done, his obligation ceases. This is why he can have his guitarist sing:

I know my lazy, leaden twang  
Is like the reason in a storm;  
  
And yet it brings the storm to bear,  
I twang it out and leave it there.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Collected Poems, p. 165.

<sup>46</sup>Collected Poems, p. 165.

<sup>47</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 213.

<sup>48</sup>Collected Poems, p. 169.

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<sup>49</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 61.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE THEORY OF POETRY

The bud of the apple is desire, the down-falling gold,  
The catbird's gobble in the morning half-awake--

These are real only if I make them so. Whistle  
For me, grow green for me and, as you whistle and  
grow green,

Intangible arrows quiver and stick in the skin  
And I taste at the root of the tongue the unreal of  
what is real.<sup>1</sup>

These lines from Stevens' "Holiday in Reality" illustrate a theme which underlines all of the poet's work: the nature of imagination and reality, and the relationship between the two. It is virtually impossible to understand and appreciate Stevens' poetry without an understanding of his conception of these two terms. Other than being typical of his play upon his major theme, the above lines are illustrative of his theory of poetry, for Stevens is unique in the frequency with which he discusses his theory of poetry in his poetry. For example, in "The Man With the Blue Guitar" he writes: "Poetry is the subject of the poem,/From this the poem issues and returns."<sup>2</sup> Thus, an understanding of his major theme significantly contributes to an understanding of his theory of poetry since the theory, for all practical purposes, completely envelops the theme. Whether or not Stevens' poetic statements concerning "reality" and the "imagination" are philosophically consistent is

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<sup>1</sup>Collected Poems, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Collected Poems, p. 176.

poetically immaterial; the fact is that his theory developed into an effective poetic device. It enabled him to alternate, much like a skillful jazz musician improvising at a jam session, between high and low keys, playing innumerable variations on a general theme.

Stevens felt that man can create his own reality through the use of his imagination, provided he lets his imagination begin with "credible things." He emphasized repeatedly that the poet must explore the earth for the imagery which he incorporates in his poetry. In this respect (and this respect only), he is similar to Robert Frost, who underscored his fondness for New England pastoral images in "Birches." Stevens would agree with Frost that the "Earth's the right place for love," and--like Frost--he would climb "Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more" and then dip down to earth again.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Stevens approached his abstractions through the use of concrete images, and he held firmly to the principle that the mind, in order to accept a new version of reality, must be elevated by things in which it can not only "see" but "believe" as well. In the lines which open this chapter, an abstraction, "desire," is approached through the concrete image, "the bud of the apple." Desire, the poet says, is the first step in achieving an understanding of or a communion with reality, just as the "bud" will eventually develop into an apple. Reality--represented by the apple, the sun ("the down-falling gold"), and the "catbird's gobble"--can exist only insofar as the mind perceives

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Frost, "Birches," in New England Pocket Anthology of Robert Frost's Poems, ed. by Louis Untermeyer, p. 90.

it. ("These are real only if I make them so.") But, of course, the poet is searching for more than mere acknowledgment of reality. He desires that reality be seen with meaning, that it be a catalyst for the imagination. Thus, Stevens gives the apple the gentle imperative, "Whistle for me, grow green . . ."<sup>4</sup> As his imagination is stimulated, he begins to create his fiction, or poetry. He tastes "at the root of the tongue the unreal of what is real." The "unreal" is, of course, the imagination, stimulated by the real and desire.

The lines from "Holiday in Reality" illustrate still another concept in Stevens' poetic theory: that the imagination must adhere to what is real. "An isolated fact, cut loose from the universe, has no significance for the poet,"<sup>5</sup> he maintains in an essay from Necessary Angel. In another essay he states: "What concerns us in poetry, as in everything else, is the belief of credible people in credible things."<sup>6</sup> In still another essay he charges that Plato's imagination did "not adhere to what is real" and thereby lost its effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> The example Stevens gives of Plato's failure to satisfy the imagination is worth examining because it illustrates Stevens' view of the proper means of achieving the satisfaction needed. He quotes a passage from the Phaedrus, where Plato speaks of the soul in a figure of a composite nature--a pair

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<sup>4</sup>William Van O'Connor in The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens maintains (p. 99) that Stevens uses the color "green" to "suggest livingness and our involvement in the physical world."

<sup>5</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 93.

<sup>6</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 6.



of winged horses and a charioteer. Unlike the winged horses and the charioteer of the gods, who are all noble, Plato says that "ours are mixed; and we have a charioteer who drives them in a pair, and one of them is noble and of noble origin, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble origin." Plato then adds that the soul or animate being has the care of the inanimate, and "traverses the whole heaven in divers forms appearing; when perfect and fully winged she soars upward and is the ruler of the universe; while the imperfect soul loses her feathers, and drooping in her flight at last settles on solid ground." Stevens, recalling that Coleridge labeled this passage "Plato's dear, gorgeous nonsense," says that it fails us as poetry because Plato did not make it possible for us to "yield ourselves to the unreal."<sup>8</sup> The charioteer driving winged horses across heaven was as unreal to Plato as he is to us, Stevens says. Plato knew it was "divine foolishness" but adhered to the unreal and intensified it, and succeeded only in intensifying its unreality. The gods and the charioteers were not credible to Plato. "We understand it rather than participate in it," Stevens says, concluding that, for the poet, the imagination must have "the strength of reality or none at all."<sup>9</sup>

Stevens emphasized his concept of adherence to reality frequently, and not only in his prose. For example, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which Ronald Sukenick describes as a poem concerning the ego's relation to reality,<sup>10</sup> Stevens in Part IX writes:

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<sup>8</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup>Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure, p. 167.

We keep coming back and coming back  
 To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns  
 That fall upon it out of the wind.<sup>11</sup>

In "Things of August" he writes:

He turned 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.

He could understand the things at home.<sup>12</sup>

The poet, Stevens intensely felt, must concern himself with the credible. His job is to intensify what is real, not to intensify unreality. An intensification of the real will sometimes give, as the lines from "Holiday in Reality" suggest, a "taste at the root of the tongue the unreal of what is real." An intensification of the unreal, however, only produces further unreality, or pure phantasy.

Stevens' belief that the poet must adhere to the real led him to a glorification of the physical world and a rejection of the supernatural teachings of religion, but before looking at this matter, we must examine his views on the nature of reality. In his essay "Three Academic Pieces," he says that "if we desire to formulate an accurate theory of poetry, we find it necessary to examine the structure of reality, because reality is the central reference for poetry."<sup>13</sup> In his discussion, Stevens says that the chief component of the structure

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<sup>11</sup>Collected Poems, p. 471.

<sup>12</sup>Collected Poems, p. 493.

<sup>13</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 71.

of reality is the resemblance between things. In some sense, all things resemble each other, he maintains, noting, for example, that in a beach setting there is enough green in the sea to relate it to palm trees and there is enough of the sky reflected in the water to create a resemblance between them. Each man resembles all other men, each woman resembles all other women, and this year resembles last year. Each world also resembles other worlds. (And this resemblance, from Stevens' point of view, may be taken in its many mental connotations as well as its literal, physical aspects.) "The beginning of time will, no doubt, resemble the end of time,"<sup>14</sup> he states. The resemblance between things is a significant component of the structure of reality for Stevens because it is the basis for appearance. He writes: "Poetry is often a revelation of the elements of appearance."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the poet, in creating his art, may work on the resemblance between two or more parts of reality, on the resemblance between something real and something imagined, such as music and whatever may be evoked by it; or (though this is not recommended by Stevens) on two "imagined things," such as when we say that God is good, since the statement involves a resemblance between two concepts, a concept of God and a concept of goodness.<sup>16</sup> Although poetry is a part of the structure of reality, it can enhance and heighten our sense of reality by reinforcing that which two dissimilar things have in common. By creating this feeling of intensification, the poet creates a new level of

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<sup>14</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 72.

reality. "In short," Stevens says, "a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality creates a reality of its own."<sup>17</sup> Getting to the main point of his discussion, Stevens writes: "It is not too extravagant to think of resemblances and of the repetitions of resemblances as the source of the ideal."<sup>18</sup> Thus, the true metaphor in poetry incorporates the ideal. Stevens' poetry is basically a search for resemblances which he can utilize metaphorically. One of Stevens' critics, Robert Pack, emphasizes this aspect of Stevens' poetry. He writes: "The apparent dichotomy between things as they are known to the perceptual eye and things as they are known by human feeling and imagination is Stevens' greatest concern."<sup>19</sup>

Stevens' discussion concerning the resemblance of things is about as close as he came to actually defining reality. He does have some rather interesting aphorisms:

The real is the only base. But it is the base.

We live in the mind.

The poem is a nature created by the poet.

Realism is a corruption of reality.

Reality is a vacuum.

The great poem is the disengaging of (a) reality.

Reality is a motif.

Reality is the spirit's true center.

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<sup>17</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup>Robert Pack, Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought, p. 76.

Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into.<sup>20</sup>

Actually, the chief difficulty in understanding Stevens' concept of reality is that he saw it as constantly changing. Ultimate reality, for Stevens, is therefore unattainable. Northrop Frye is the most helpful of Stevens' critics who attempted to clarify the poet's conception of reality. Frye maintains that reality for Stevens means "not simply the external physical world, but 'things as they are,' the existential process that includes ordinary human life on the level of absorption in routine activity."<sup>21</sup> Human activity, Frye explains, can resist routine by arresting it in an act of consciousness, but the normal tendency of routine is to work against consciousness. "The revolution of consciousness against routine is the starting point of all mental activity, and the center of mental activity is imagination, the power of transforming 'reality' into an awareness of reality,"<sup>22</sup> says Frye. Following Frye's line of reasoning, it becomes clear why Stevens refers to the mind as a "violence from within that protects us from a violence without."<sup>23</sup> Routine activity, such as earning a living, paying the bills, listening to the rhetoric of politicians, is what Stevens labels "the pressure of reality."<sup>24</sup> It is

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<sup>20</sup>Opus Posthumous, pp. 160-178.

<sup>21</sup>Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Marie Borroff, p. 164.

<sup>22</sup>Frye, p. 162.

<sup>23</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 36.

the imagination which must press back against this pressure. Thus, Stevens maintained that poetry is written to "help people live their lives."<sup>25</sup> To Stevens, the minimum basis of the imagination is to be aware of the surrounding pressures of "things as they are." However, he believed that the imagination in its fullest sense can bring something to reality which was not there in the first place. It can create an element of the unreal, a fiction formed by the fact that conscious experience is liberated experience. The unreal, then, is the sense of exhilaration in art. Frye quips that to Stevens the "unreal in imaginative perception is most simply described as the sense that if something is not there it at least ought to be there."<sup>26</sup> The effect, or the "reality," that a poem should have is suggested in Part II of Stevens' "A Primitive Like an Orb":

We do not prove the existence of the poem.  
It is something seen and known in lesser poems.  
It is huge, high harmony that sounds  
A little and a little, suddenly,  
By means of a separate sense. It is and it  
Is not and, therefore, is.<sup>27</sup>

Stevens utilized this notion of the unreal in much of his poetry. A notable example is "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," where he applies the "reality of the unreal" concept to the hero--actually an abstraction of aesthetic awareness which the imagination can bring us rather than an actual man. Stating that the hero "is not an image," he writes:

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<sup>25</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup>Frye, p. 164.

<sup>27</sup>Collected Poems, p. 440.

It is a feeling.  
 There is no image of the hero.  
 There is a feeling as definition.  
 How could there be an image, an outline,  
 A design, a marble soiled by pigeons?  
 The hero is a feeling, a man seen  
 As if the eye was an emotion,  
 As if in seeing we saw our feeling  
 In the object seen.<sup>28</sup>

The poet emphasizes that the exhilaration which the imagination brings us cannot be defined in conventional terms; it can only be felt. ("There is a feeling as definition.") The poem, if it is successful, will mirror this feeling, will give us "our feeling/In the object seen." The reality to which Stevens refers is not tangible; thus, no image can be made of it. Again, as in "Holiday in Reality," the abstraction (here, almost ironically) can only be approached through the use of concrete images. In the above lines, the abstraction itself is represented by "hero" and "man." The "eye" is used in conjunction with "emotion." In most of his poems, Stevens creates a feeling for the unreal by utilizing metaphors that equate either tangible with the tangible or the tangible with the intangible. One foot, so to speak, is always on earth. For Stevens, the imagination works with reality and is not separate from it. Robert Pack notes that Stevens considers "infinite reality" as consisting of things as they are and the imagination. "It does not prefer one or another, but rather includes both,"<sup>29</sup> he says.

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<sup>28</sup>Collected Poems, p. 278.

<sup>29</sup>Pack, p. 76.

An excellent example of the imagination working from reality to produce its own reality is found in Stevens' widely anthologized short poem, "Anecdote of the Jar." The poem reads:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.  
The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.<sup>30</sup>

The jar, a symbol in this poem for the imaginative mind, imposes its own order on the chaotic reality ("slovenly wilderness") which surrounds it. The imagination is man's supreme asset. (Note that the jar was placed "upon a hill," so that it is "tall and of a port in air.") The jar, or imagination, can dominate reality, make the "wilderness" rise up to it, imposing an order of its own so that the "wilderness" (reality) is "no longer wild." The imagination, like the jar, serves as a point, or center, which conquers reality ("It took dominion everywhere"), although its appearance ("gray and bare") may seem inconspicuous. The imagination does not submit to the pressure of reality ("It did not give of bird or bush") but, instead, uses reality as a base and rises above it, creating its own reality. This, Stevens felt, was the role of the poet.

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<sup>30</sup>Collected Poems, p. 76.



It is interesting to note in regard to the role of the imagination, the similarities between Stevens' views and those contained in the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson spoke of the poet as one who "unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew."<sup>31</sup> Another Emersonian statement quite similar to Stevens' view is: "The Imagination may be defined to be the use which the Reason makes of the material world."<sup>32</sup> Of course, the two thinkers would have had their great differences in their conceptions of the supernatural, since Stevens would have found it impossible to accept Emerson's transcendentalism. An example of Stevens' rejection of transcendental philosophy may be found in "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly." "Mr. Homburg," who represents Emerson, is the central character in the poem, and during his visits home, "To Concord, at the edge of things," he had at least one irritating idea: "To think away the grass, the trees, the clouds/Not to transform them into other things."<sup>33</sup> Emerson, Stevens says, created a "mechanical and slightly detestable" nature free from man and yet a little like him. This nature resides in "an element that does not do for us,/So well, that which we do for ourselves."<sup>34</sup> Emerson's spirit is "A thing not planned for imagery or belief." Stevens feels that Mr. Homburg of Concord was wrong. Natural facts are not symbols of the spiritual world, as Emerson believed. There are no celestial ideas hiding

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<sup>31</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by Stephen E. Whicher, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup>Emerson, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup>Collected Poems, p. 517.

<sup>34</sup>Collected Poems, p. 518.

behind "things as they are." There are no ideas until the human mind forms them. One of Stevens' latest critics, James Baird, points out that "the mind of Emerson reaches toward Plato; the mind of Stevens flourishes upon the phenomenal reality of his century, described again and again in the dogmas of modern art: an operandum of nature so grave in monotony that only the play of the imagination and the act of artistic making can make it endurable."<sup>35</sup>

Stevens, with his preoccupation with imagination and reality and his rather meditative, detached point of view, has been frequently labeled as a "Philosopher-poet." In his essay "A Collect of Philosophy," he writes: "Theoretically, the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry . . . . A poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems."<sup>36</sup> Sukenick points out that Stevens did not write poetry that had to do with people in social relation. "There is little in his poetry of narrative, little that is personal, little that is occasional, nothing that is dramatic,"<sup>37</sup> writes Sukenick. Stevens, according to Sukenick, does not attempt to assert fact, but rather seeks to adjust belief to fact, to bring about a temporary agreement with reality. Stevens himself, in writing about poetic truth, states that it "is an agreement with reality, brought about by the imagination of a man disposed to be strongly influenced by his imagination, which he believes, for a time, to be true, expressed in terms of his emotions or

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<sup>35</sup>James Baird, The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, p. 71.

<sup>36</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 187.

<sup>37</sup>Sukenick, p. 24.

. . . in terms of his own personality."<sup>38</sup> The key words in the preceding excerpt are "for a time" because Stevens never really caught up with reality in its broadest sense. Reality, he maintained, is in a constant state of flux. Man

Lives in a fluid, not on solid rock.  
The solid was an age, a period  
With appropriate, largely English, furniture . . .  
Policed by the hope of Christmas.<sup>39</sup>

His poetry is characterized by a reach towards a final formulation that does not exist, and it is as if he continued to reach even though he knew all the while that his attempts would fall short. In "This Solitude of Cataracts," which depicts the poet as living in a world of constant change, the poet desires that the river "go on flowing in the same way." He longs for permanence, for life to remain the same. He wishes to walk

beneath a moon nailed fast.  
He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind  
to rest

In a permanent realization, without any wild ducks  
Or mountains that were not mountains, just to know  
how it would be,

Just to know how it would feel, released from  
destruction,  
To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis,<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 54.

<sup>39</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 68.

<sup>40</sup>Collected Poems, p. 425.

But permanence does not exist; a groping for a static existence is hopeless. The following lines from "Sunday Morning" indicate a belief about our existence that Stevens held throughout his life:

We live in an old chaos of the sun,  
Or old dependency of day and night,  
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,  
Of that wide water, inescapable.<sup>41</sup>

All man can do is to find "salvation" here on earth, in the present, according to Stevens, who in 1943, nearly twenty years after he wrote "Sunday Morning," developed the idea of a "supreme fiction" (poetry) to serve as a substitute for religious beliefs which modern man had found no longer credible. For Stevens, then, it was not doctrine but the area of operation that counted. "It is the belief and not the god that counts,"<sup>42</sup> he wrote. Sukenick, pointing to Stevens' comment that "in the long run the truth does not matter," emphasizes that the truth most certainly does matter to the dogmatist, the philosopher, and the didactic poet.<sup>43</sup> Stevens does not fit into any of those classifications. When in autumn of 1955, Pack wrote in the Western Review that "Mr. Stevens' work does not really lead anywhere," Stevens wrote a letter to his critic, stating:

That a man's work should remain indefinite is often intentional . . . . I don't mean to exercise the slightest restraint on what you say . . . . But we are dealing with poetry, not with philosophy. The last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Collected Poems, p. 70.

<sup>42</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 162.

<sup>43</sup>Sukenick, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, pp. 863-64.

Sukenick concludes that Stevens "does not start with received truth which is to be justified as in, say, Paradise Lost, but from a position of no belief which constantly impels him to resolution in the repetitive search for the credible of which his poetry consists."<sup>45</sup>

Although Stevens cannot be called a philosopher, there is no doubt that the bulk of his poems are philosophic in nature. But, much like his use of concrete images, he used philosophic ideas as a springboard for the imagination. He gave his personal reaction to these ideas. Hi Simons, who prefers to think of Stevens as "simply a poet," nevertheless acknowledges that "each of his mature poems exhibits at least one Metaphysical trait and all Metaphysical characteristics are present somewhere in his work."<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most intriguing of Stevens' themes is his view concerning the problem of belief--in both its metaphysical and theological aspects. Stevens' point of view begins with an acceptance of chaos in the sense that true reality has, at bottom, no meaning and no value. Sukenick points out that when Stevens speaks of God, it is evident that, for him, God is a being whose essence does not involve His existence. Stevens' theory basically assumes that belief is a psychological process, a need on the part of man for an affirmative relation to reality. In "Esthetique Du Mal," which Sukenick describes as "Stevens' major attempt to discover a tenable attitude in the face of the evils inherent in life

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<sup>45</sup>Sukenick, p. 24.

<sup>46</sup>Hi Simons, "The Genre of Wallace Stevens," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Marie Borroff, p. 44.

without the consolations of supernatural belief,"<sup>47</sup> Stevens depicts modern man as being alone in the turmoil which arises now that the old religious beliefs are inadequate: ". . . and yet, except for us/The total past felt nothing when destroyed."<sup>48</sup> We have found out, he continues, that our conception of God has become outmoded. We, who--by the way--are the only creatures on earth who miss Him, erred in seeing Him as a benevolent old man:

The fault lies with an over-human god,  
Who by sympathy has made himself a man  
And is not to be distinguished, when we cry.

Our god, he continues is "A too, too human god, self-pity's kin/And uncourageous genesis." The dilemma, then, rests on man's loss of belief and his basic need for belief, his "passion for yes." Stevens' alternative is a peculiar kind of naturalistic religion, a belief in the reality which constantly surrounds us. "It seems/As if the health of the world might be enough," he writes, urging man to seek reality in the physical world and accept both the good and the evil it has to offer. He issues an invitation:

Softly let all true sympathizers come  
Without the inventions of sorrow or the sob  
Beyond invention. Within what we permit,  
Within the actual, the warm, the near,  
So great a unity, that it is a bliss,  
Ties us to those we love.

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<sup>47</sup>Sukenick, p. 122.

<sup>48</sup>For quotations taken from "Esthetique Du Mal," see Collected Poems, pp. 314-325.

He acknowledges that the world is not perfect: "We are not/At the centre of a diamond." But at the same time, pain, or evil, is not the result of the earth's malice, but the innocence of her physical reality. We must accept this reality and make the most of it, for "The greatest poverty is not to live/In a physical world."

In "Sunday Morning" Stevens also glorifies the "physical world," despite its imperfections. He calls death the "Mother of beauty" because it provides reality with the change that is needed to stimulate the imagination. Hypothetically, in the figure of the woman asking for permanence, he visualizes a world without change, in this case, the traditional concept of heaven:

Is there no change of death in paradise?  
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs  
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,  
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,  
With rivers like our own that seek for seas  
They never find, the same receding shores  
That never touch with inarticulate pang?  
Why set the pear upon those river banks  
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?  
Alas, that they should wear our colors there,  
The silken weavings of our afternoons.<sup>49</sup>

In his later poetry, most notably in the poems included in Transport to Summer, Stevens attempted to develop an alternative for man's "passion for yes." He seemed to realize that man had not learned to live in the physical world, accepting it in totality as he should. He laments this in the following passage from "The Auroras of Autumn":

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<sup>49</sup>Collected Poems, p. 69.

An unhappy people in a happy world--  
 Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference  
 An unhappy people in an unhappy world--

Here are too many mirrors for misery  
 A happy people in an unhappy world--  
 It can not be.<sup>50</sup>

And in "Saint John and the Back-Ache" he proposes a time when man will recognize that the pain which is present in the world is also its wisdom, and that which inflicts pain and kills is also the reality which we must live with and try to understand. At the time of man's awakening, the "serpent," or the awareness of reality, which is now "unknown,/Denied, dismissed," will be understood and accepted by man. His "venom and . . . wisdom will be one."<sup>51</sup> The present obstacle to man's acceptance of reality, organized religion, is represented in the poem as a "stale turtle," who will "grow limp from age." Then Stevens says, "We shall be heavy with the knowledge of that day."<sup>52</sup>

The substitute for the "stale turtle" is developed fully in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The poem, 659 lines long, moves toward the creation of a fictive hero who will supply man's need for his "passion for yes." Pack comments that

In his "Notes," Stevens presents to us the abstraction-- a supreme fiction--which would totally disabuse us of our disillusionment and would fill reality with the ultimate fullness of imagination. Such a 'fiction' can, of course, only be approached, not reached, and so Stevens' "Notes" moves "toward" it.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Collected Poems, p. 420.

<sup>51</sup>Collected Poems, p. 437.

<sup>52</sup>Collected Poems, p. 437.

<sup>53</sup>Pack, p. 94.



In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens presents his idea of "major man," which is a full development of the "man" he proposed to "evolve" in Section XXX of "The Man With the Blue Guitar." "Major man" is an abstraction, a man-hero, which Stevens develops to replace the divine-hero, or the old idea of God in which man can no longer believe. That man has always had difficulty relating to a divine hero is indicated early in "Notes" as Stevens declares that "The death of one god is the death of all."<sup>54</sup> His abstraction, "major man," then, is basically a call for both a humanistic and naturalistic approach to salvation. Man's happiness, he emphasizes, is to be found "here and now/And where we live and everywhere we live." Stevens says that the only reality that man can find is in his own time and place. Although ultimate reality, or the "final belief," is unattainable, he feels that man may find minor pleasures in the world in which he resides. The poet's job, then, is not to elevate man toward a supernatural concept of salvation but to re-invigorate him in his present environment. The poet should not turn man from the world but back toward it. He should not preach to him of a future salvation but return to him the present. In Stevens' words, the poet is not "to console/Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound."

The ultimate abstraction of man, "major man," is not completely attainable, since the abstraction is timeless in nature and therefore subject to change. "It does not follow that major man is man," writes Stevens, who often implied that the search for the ultimate is what really counts. "In the long run the truth does not matter," he states

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<sup>54</sup>For quotations taken from "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," see Collected Poems, pp. 380-408.

in his "Adagia."<sup>55</sup> In "Notes" Stevens attempted to resolve the hopelessness of man's groping for something final through still another abstraction of a man that is obtainable. This abstraction is "MacCullough," who stands for the desires of the ordinary man of the twentieth century. "Major man" is not entirely attainable, but "MacCullough" is. Stevens writes: "The pensive giant prone in violet space [major man]/May be the MacCullough, an expedient." Joseph Riddel, a recent critic of Stevens, is most helpful in defining MacCullough's role in "Notes." Riddel maintains that "being a man with imagination," MacCullough "is capable of imagining a major man, just as he could once imagine God . . . . But what is significant is that he can imagine at all, that is, can create."<sup>56</sup> MacCullough, then, in Riddel's opinion, is "Man in his act of imagining, taking the world into his self, and giving it order and meaning as it gives him body and sustenance."<sup>57</sup>

Thus, what Stevens evolves in "Notes" is an abstraction of man (or abstractions, since "MacCullough" is only the current representative of "major man") to help him realize that the world is his to master, provided he lets his imagination play upon things which are found in the world, things which are credible. Major man is "abler/In the abstract than in his singular,/More fecund as principle than particle" because he is an ideal that one can believe in. He represents Stevens' belief that we should accept what is humanly possible and desire no more. In lines

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<sup>55</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 180.

<sup>56</sup>Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens, p. 173.

<sup>57</sup>Riddel, p. 173.

which parallel his earlier poem, "Sunday Morning," Stevens emphasizes his rejection of an ideal which does not spring from the earth: "After a lustre of the moon, we say/We have not the need of any paradise,/We have not the need of any seducing hymn." By stressing that true happiness can only be found here on earth and in mankind living, the poet can help people live their lives. Through "MacCullough," Stevens celebrates not only man's world but his imaginative gift as well. Through "major man" Stevens projects an "ultimate reality" that--although not really attainable in the time-space sense--one can place before himself as a worthwhile ideal. "MacCullough" exists in the present; "major man," in the past and in the future.

At this point, it should be reemphasized that Stevens' major themes and his theory of poetry are virtually inseparable, because he constantly tried to apply two maxims to his poetry: "The theory of poetry is the life of poetry. The theory of poetry is the theory of life."<sup>58</sup> In "Of Modern Poetry," Stevens makes it clear that poetry is concerned primarily with life. In a world which constantly changes and is in constant flux, the poet must search for "what will suffice," even if he himself is the sole audience of his obscure musings. The piece opens dramatically and sententiously: "The poem of the mind is the act of finding/What will suffice." Then, noting that the world's past is "a souvenir," he says:

It [the modern poem] has to be living, to learn the speech of  
the place.  
It has to face the men of the time and to meet

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<sup>58</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 178.

The women of the time. It has to think about war  
And it has to find what will suffice.<sup>59</sup>

The search for "what will suffice" is evident in "The Man With the Blue Guitar," a long poem of thirty-three sections which emphasizes, at times, the power of the imagination, and at other times, the power of reality. The poem, one of Stevens' major poetic efforts, is the subject of Chapter Three.

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<sup>59</sup>Collected Poems, p. 240.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE PRACTICE OF POETRY

"The Man With the Blue Guitar" is Stevens' best long poem, and while this judgment may be debated, there is no doubt that it serves as a key to all of his work. A poem of thirty-three sections, each of which is independent but thematically related, "The Blue Guitar" consists of at least a little of all of Stevens' major beliefs about poetry. The sections vary from eight to sixteen lines of rhymed and unrhymed couplets and present an overall image of the poet improvising back and forth between two opposites--imagination and reality. The reality that Stevens works with in the poem is chiefly the reality of "things as they are" here on earth, the day-by-day things that man must contend with, such as the smokestacks and factories and the "installments paid" referred to in Section XXX. These day-by-day things form the pressures of reality which man, especially the poet, must transform in order to obtain a certain amount of imaginative freedom. But at the same time, the imagination depends on the realities of the world because it is a base that allows man to soar into "flights of the imagination." Without these realities as a base, Stevens believed, the images that the imagination brings to the artist would be incredible and therefore unreachable. Thus, because of this dependence, the poet swings back and forth in "Guitar," praising--at times--reality, resisting it at other times, and glorifying the imagination at times but consistently implying its

worthlessness in its "pure" form. The poet, then, seems to search for an ideal balance between the two, a sort of agreement between imagination and reality, but the search is endless and only fitfully achieved because of the changing nature of both. "Things as they are," although seemingly static day-by-day as they are arrested in the consciousness, change as the seasons change, and the poet never quite plays the tune "Of things exactly as they are"<sup>1</sup> requested of him in the first section. As reality--in its worldly sense--slowly evolves, or changes, so does the imagination. The ideal or center-point can thus never be reached. But by trying to reach this center, the poet can satisfy his own demands for expression--and the demands of those people who also respond to the power of his "fiction," or poetry. That the great mass of people respond only to the secular things in life is troublesome to the poet, but is an unavoidable fact of life. His mission, stated in Section VIII, is to "twang" out his rhapsody and "leave it there."

The guitar player in the poem, then, represents the poet, and the figure of the musician is presumed by some readers to be a figure suggested by a Picasso painting. However, Stevens, in a letter to Renato Poggioli (whose interest in the poet was in translating his work into Italian) states: "I had no particular painting of Picasso in mind and even though it might help to sell the book to have one of his paintings on the cover, I don't think we ought to reproduce anything of Picasso's."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>All quoted references to "The Man With the Blue Guitar" are in Collected Poems, pp. 165-184.

<sup>2</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 786.

In another letter to Poggoili, Stevens wrote that the "general intention of the Blue Guitar was to say a few things that I felt impelled to say (1) about reality; (2) about the imagination; (3) their interrelations; and (4) principally, my attitude toward each of these things."<sup>3</sup> He adds that "this is the general scope of the poem, which is confined to the area of poetry and makes no pretense of going beyond that area." Thus, it is basically a poem about a poet searching for the proper approach to his art. Following is a section-by-section analysis of "The Man With the Blue Guitar":

## I

The man bent over his guitar,  
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.

The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are."

Section I, reprinted above to illustrate the general tone of the poem, emphasizes that the poet ("the man with the blue guitar") adjusts reality to suit his own needs by his creative perception of it. The poem is one of many illustrations of Stevens' belief that the poet must begin with credible, or tangible, things before he can create his poetry.

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<sup>3</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 788.

("Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar.") The "blue guitar" is a symbol of the imagination. The poet is a "shearsman of sorts" because he must choose--or shear--those things in his environment which will stimulate his imagination. On this particular day, the poet has an abundance of stimuli to work with, because the "day was green," or filled with the rebirth of spring. (Stevens used the color "green" as a symbol of change.) In the poem the poet has been charged by his audience (who are not identified) with not playing "things as they are." The poet answers this charge by claiming that he changes "things as they are." The poet is then asked to search for the ultimate, or true reality, and Stevens here implies that man has a basic desire for some kind of final belief. ("But play, you must,/A tune beyond us.") The poet is requested to search for ultimate reality, for "things exactly as they are," and that is to proceed in the right direction, for "things as they are," the raw facts of nature and human life, are full of infinite possibilities. We cannot really perceive things as they are, except momentarily by the senses, for when a perceiving mind becomes aware of its sensations and feels desire (and other emotions) and strikes an attitude, things as they are are already changed and some of their possibilities are becoming realized on the guitar. This is a temporary balance, a temporary agreement between the imagination and reality and thus a progression toward things exactly as they are. Things as they are unperceived by the conscious mind are nothing, nothing at all; they are only postulated. They exist but they are meaningless.



## II

The poet in Section II concedes that a complete understanding of reality is impossible ("I cannot bring a world quite round"). Despite this, he makes the effort and patches it as he can. The first stanza, then, is typical of Stevens' belief that it is the effort made, the poem written, and not the final truth that is important. "The search/For reality is as momentous as/The search for god,"<sup>4</sup> he has Professor Euca-lyptus pronounce in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." For Stevens, the effort to "patch" the world is one of the prime functions of the poet. In the second couplet of Section II, Stevens introduces one of his fictions, an abstraction of the ideal of man ("I sing the hero's head"). This abstraction, to be developed fully in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," serves as an humanistic-naturalistic ideal for man to strive for. That the abstraction--or ideal--is never quite reached is indicated in the third couplet where the poet reaches "through him almost man to man." That the attempt falls short, or even completely misses the goal, is almost beside the point. The poet is still performing his function. It is still "the serenade/Of a man that plays a blue guitar."

## III

In Section III, the poet longingly dreams of actually reaching the ideal proposed in the previous section. The first word in the first couplet, "Ah," implies that the grasping of the ideal is strictly desire

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<sup>4</sup>Collected Poems, p. 481.

and not actual fact. The poet longs for a final belief, an acceptable ideal ("man number one"). He would like to pin the ideal down, capture it, much as a man might kill a specimen for dissection ("To drive the dagger in his heart"). This second line indicates a desire to simplify the ideal so that obtaining it would be as simple (and concrete) a matter as killing. Once captured, the ideal could be examined, or dissected ("To lay his brain upon the board") and the full satisfaction of such an understanding could be enjoyed ("And pick the acrid colors out"). The poet would then be able to exhibit, or write about, the knowledge he received. In a letter to Hi Simons, Stevens explains that the image in couplet three is derived from a custom of Pennsylvania farmers of nailing hawks up on a board "to frighten off other hawks."<sup>5</sup> However, in New England, Stevens explains, "a bird is more likely to be nailed up merely as an extraordinary object to be exhibited." He adds that "this is what I had in mind." Thus, the ideal Stevens strives for, if captured, would be displayed, much as the New England farmer would display his "extraordinary object." The poet would "nail his thought across the door,/Its wings spread wide to rain and snow." The poet searches for the ideal in its liveliest, most imaginative form ("To strike his living hi and ho") and then tries to record that experience in the most exact, effective form possible ("To tick it, tock it, turn it true"). The recording of this experience, which would occur in the imagination's highest, wildest form ("savage blue"), is the poet's ultimate desire. He desires to play it on his guitar, to jangle "the metal of the strings."

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<sup>5</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 359.

## IV

"In this poem reality changes into the imagination (under one's very eyes) as one experiences it, by reason of one's feelings about it,"<sup>6</sup> wrote Stevens concerning Section IV in a letter to Poggioli. Thus, in the first couplet, life--or "things as they are"--"picks its way on the blue guitar," or the imagination. The idea presented is one of Stevens' favorites: that the imagination works with credible things, things which are found here on earth. This earth, then, is all we have ("A million people on one string"), and everything we do is confined to the limits of our environment ("And all their manner in the thing"). Life here on earth must, therefore, be accepted in its broadest sense, "right and wrong" and "weak and strong." The necessity to accept this world, despite its imperfections, is, of course, a major theme which runs throughout Stevens' work. Section IV, for example, closely parallels the theme developed in "The Poems of Our Climate," where Stevens maintains that the "imperfect is our paradise."<sup>7</sup> In the last two couplets of Section IV, Stevens says that the realities of life beckon, or call upon, our imagination to play upon them. The imagination, much like "a buzzing of flies in autumn air," is thus both attracted to and bound to the realities of life. Life, then, for the poet, consists of constant "buzzing" of the "blue guitar," or the imagination. Things as they are have an order of their own, but an imperfect, unrealized order. The imagination's order brings the primitive order into full realization.

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<sup>6</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 793.

<sup>7</sup>Collected Poems, p. 194.

## V

In Section V, the poet is again addressed by his unnamed audience-- an audience which reflects the modern age of disbelief. The audience denies the existence of the imagination ("There are no shadows in our sun,/Day is desire and night is sleep./There are no shadows anywhere"). Telling the poet not to speak of the "greatness of poetry," the skeptical audience announces that the earth has no particular meaning; it is "flat and bare." For poetry to succeed, it must "take the place/Of empty heaven and its hymns," for these have been lost and are no longer credible to modern man, who lives in a completely secular world. What is needed, the audience maintains, is a poetry that would transcend the esthetic pleasure of its music to the lost faith. It must praise the ideal of man; it must involve "ourselves in poetry." This section, by hinting at what true poetry should do, points toward Stevens' "major man" abstraction, which is suggested in Section XXX ("From this I shall evolve a man") and developed fully in his later major poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" ("The major abstraction is the idea of man/And major man is its exponent").<sup>8</sup> Faith in poetry and in the possibilities of mankind must take the place of our lost religious faith.

## VI

Section VI is an example of Stevens' belief that the imagination is "like light" in that it adds "nothing, except itself" to the world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Collected Poems, p. 388.

<sup>9</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 61.

Like light, the imagination does not change things as they are, but only allows us to see more. Thus, in the first couplet, the poet is asked to play "A tune beyond us as we are/Yet nothing changed by the blue guitar." In the second couplet, the necessity to form a final belief in which the ideal of man is the central doctrine is emphasized ("Ourselves in the tune as if in space"). The role of the imagination--to increase, not change, our awareness of reality--is stressed ("Yet nothing changed, except the place of things as they are and only the place/As you play them, on the blue guitar"). The reality that the poem itself creates is, then, brought about by a true awareness of reality. In the last four couplets, the poet suggests that the power of poetry is an adequate substitute for man's loss of belief in God. The reality of the poem is final, Stevens says. It is "beyond the compass of change." Thus, when one experiences an imaginative truth, or a poem, he experiences a reality which is "for a moment final." Stevens, in commenting about Section VI, said: "Things imagined (the senses of the guitar) become things as they are."<sup>10</sup> In an age of disbelief, when the "thinking of god is smoky dew," poetry offers a reality which is, for a moment at least, final. ("The thinking of art seems final.") The imagination, then, is a reality. It "becomes the place of things as they are." It offers a reaction to reality ("a composing of senses of the guitar") which, by its very reaction, becomes a reality in its own right, and momentarily the reality of the imagination and "flat and bare" reality are in agreement. The poem is fixed

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<sup>10</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 360.

"beyond the compass of change," but the imagination and things as they are change. So there must be new poems.

## VII

Section VII illustrates the vital role that reality has in the creative process. The poem has an ironic (and effective) twist to it in that Stevens sets up a hypothetical situation which allows him to praise and glorify reality, much as poets and artists have glorified the imagination--or Muse--throughout history. What Stevens does is place reality where the imagination has always been placed. He simply changes their location. As a result, in his hypothetical situation, reality becomes as difficult to reach as the imagination has always been. By placing it out of reach, he dramatizes the role that it plays in the creative process. In this section, the "sun" is a symbol of reality; the "moon," a symbol of the imagination. The poet opens by acknowledging that man lives more with reality than with the imagination. ("It is the sun that shares our works./The moon shares nothing.") Like the sea, the imagination is difficult to conquer, or to reach. It is vast, remote. The hypothetical situation is introduced in couplet two: "When shall I say of the sun,/It is a sea; it shares nothing." Now, the poet is isolated from reality in much the same way as he was formerly separated from the imagination. If this situation were to actually occur, if the "sun no longer shares our works," the earth would then be populated by robots, not men. They would be "mechanical beetles," incapable of thinking, fantastical. Detached from reality, standing "in the moon," the poet would then praise and long for reality such as he now praises and

desires the imagination. Reality would then require the same descriptions we now give the imagination. It would become "the immaculate, the merciful good." After making his point that reality has an equal status with the imagination, the poet then leaves his hypothetical state and returns to reality. Once more, he longs for the Muse. "The strings are cold on the blue guitar." If not radiant with inspiration, the poet is at least wiser than before.

### VIII

Section VIII depicts the poet in his effort to salvage some kind of order from the chaos of a reality that is constantly changing. Chaos, for Stevens, is a result of a failure to reach a satisfactory agreement with reality. Sukenick explains it this way: "The perception of chaos for Stevens comes when reality seems void of meaning and without emotional connection with the ego."<sup>11</sup> Stevens "perceived" chaos several times in his poetry. For example, in one of his earlier poems, "The Snow Man," it is perceived through the bareness of winter, the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."<sup>12</sup> And in a poem he wrote late in life, "The Rock," which is particularly interesting after a close study of "The Man With the Blue Guitar" because of its ironical references to the guitar, the aging poet perceives chaos as he looks back on his life, realizing what he has lost forever and knowing that many of his ideas no longer seem valid. In a very poignant passage, he writes:

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<sup>11</sup>Sukenick, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Collected Poems, p. 10.

The houses still stand,  
Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness.

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.  
The lives these lived in the mind are at end.  
They never were . . . The sounds of the guitar

Were not and are not. Absurd.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in Section VIII, the poet is attempting to conquer chaos by putting a little meaning, a little order, into it. The poet can never achieve a total victory, but he can "bring the storm to bear." The impermanence of chaos in the section is suggested by a nighttime storm. The morning after, the sky is "vivid, florid, turgid" and the thunder rolls by. In Stevens' own explanation, the poem, in its attempt to picture the tumultuous brightness of morning and the gold rays of the sun breaking through as the weather clears, is "like reason addressing itself to chaos and brings it to bear."<sup>14</sup> The poet, like morning, also is engaged in a struggle against the "cold chords" of reality. He attempts to put meaning and order into it. "Chaos" and "nothingness" are names, then, for reality when it is not perceived by the human mind. The eye may see reality but there is no meaning, no more than for a snowman, for example. The poet's job is to perceive this meaning and "twang it out and leave it there." Once this is done, his chore is completed. "I twang things out and don't try for more,"<sup>15</sup> commented Stevens in a letter to Poggioli.

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<sup>13</sup>Collected Poems, p. 525.

<sup>14</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 791.

<sup>15</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 788.



## IX

In a letter to Poggioli, Stevens sums up Section IX by stating that the "imagination is not a free agent."<sup>16</sup> The section, like Sections IV, VI, and VII, stresses the need for the poet to realize that the imagination depends on reality. The imagination is not a faculty that functions spontaneously without references. The man of imagination, or the poet, is part of his environment. He is "merely a shadow hunched/Above the arrowy, still strings" of his guitar. He is within the confines of the weather ("the overcast blue"), and he must accept this fact in order to make the best possible use of his creative power. The overpowering, dominant pressure of reality is again emphasized in Section IX, since the guitar, or the imagination, "is a form, described but difficult." By virtue of his creative process, the poet is "The maker of a thing yet to be made," a line which emphasizes Stevens' idea that the poem ("thing") is a reality in itself. Perhaps the most effective development of this idea can be found in a later poem, "Description Without Place," where Stevens argues that what we imagine, or create in our minds, is in itself a reality. Description, he writes, is

revelation. It is not  
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,  
In its own seeming, plainly visible,<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 789.

<sup>17</sup>Collected Poems, p. 344.

The poet in Section IX, then, develops a thought "that grows/Out of a mood." The poet's thought, or his description, is like the outward appearance of an actor, who must create the "reality" of his role. Bound to his stage, much as the poet is bound to his environment, his "weather," the actor must, nevertheless, work from his stage in order to create his fiction, or, to borrow the expression in the lines from "Description Without Place," the "artificial thing that exists." The actor, then, creates his fiction through his "gesture," his "speech," his "melancholy words," and the "weather [or confines] of his stage." The poet, Stevens implies, must also work from his "stage"--the world. The imagination must return to reality for fresh beginnings.

# X

In Section X Stevens depicts the common man--with his "passion for yes," or his desire to believe in something--going through the motions of glorifying a particular man, a kind of agreed-upon superman. The scene of the glorification is a parade, an event which is typically American. The object of glorification is most likely a politician. In fact, Stevens, in a letter to Poggioli, suggests that he had in mind Harry Truman.<sup>18</sup> The politician is enjoying the full spectacle of the parade--the "reddest columns," the papers thrown in the streets, the bells tolling, the "beautiful trombones." The politician, however, despite all the pageantry is not Stevens' idea of the ideal of man. In his letter to Poggioli, he calls him a "second-rate creature," a "false

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<sup>18</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 789.

hero."<sup>19</sup> In the fourth couplet, the politician is "A pagan in a varnished car." Basically, then, he is the adversary of Stevens' ideal of "major man." Although the people sense his falseness ("behold/The approach of him whom none believes"), they pretend to believe in him because of both the desire, or passion, to believe and the mass hysteria produced by the pageantry of the parade. Thus, the politician becomes one "Whom all believe that all believe." In his letter Stevens says that the false hero is one "in whom actually no one believes is a great man, but in whom everybody pretends to believe." The parade, the politician, his false rhetoric--all of this represents Stevens' concept of the "pressure of reality"--a pressure which we must "push back" through the faculty of the imagination. The imagination, then, makes itself heard in the fifth couplet ("Roll a drum upon the blue guitar./Lean from the steeple. Cry aloud"). In the sixth couplet, the imagination fights back. The poet addresses the false hero with hostility, calling him his "adversary" and deriding him by "hoo-ing the slick trombones." The cheap glory of the false hero, who is the opposite of the imaginative man, makes the poet sick at heart ("Yet with a petty misery/At heart"). It is this feeling of disgust, repeated in the hearts of other men, which will ultimately destroy the false hero ("the prelude to your end"). Men of imagination will ultimately triumph over the pressure of reality. The disgust that they feel will be the "touch that topples men and rock."

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<sup>19</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 789.

## XI

The relationship between reality and the imagination fluctuates throughout "The Man With the Blue Guitar." In some sections, reality is the stronger of the two, in others, the imagination. In Section XI the emphasis is on reality and its effect upon the elements which make it up. The reality which surrounds man, or his environment, works steadily in a kind of harmonious tune ("chord") to unite all elements, but in doing so, it also destroys them as individual objects. ("Slowly the ivy on the stones/Become the stones.") Reality, chiefly through the process of change, or "time," slowly causes objects to cease to exist separately. Even people, especially people living in an age where the pressure of reality overpowers the imagination, are absorbed into the cities ("Women become/The cities") and cease to function as individuals. The great masses of people are absorbed by their environment and, in the long run, become indistinguishable from it ("men in waves become the sea"). The appetite of reality, then, is inexhaustible. The sea "returns upon the man," and the "fields entrap the children." Man becomes, like a fly caught in a spider web, a prisoner of his environment. Like the fly, he becomes "wingless and withered," and his imagination is stifled. He is simply a non-thinker, simply "living alive." In this section, then, Stevens' portrait of man defeated by his environment closely parallels the "creeping men" who are "mechanical beetles" of Section VII. The absence of harmony ("discord") between reality and the imagination "magnifies" the problem. In the last couplet, however, Stevens points to a time when there will exist the supreme balance

between the imagination and reality. Thus life ("time") will grow with the world ("grow upon the rock") and will not be overpowered, or consumed, by it.

## XII

In Section XII the emphasis is shifted back to the imagination, as the poet identifies himself with it by saying that "The blue guitar and I are one." The implication that the imagination cannot be separated from the individual is remindful of a statement Stevens made in Necessary Angel: "We live in the mind." If we "live in the mind," he further states, "we live with the imagination."<sup>20</sup> In the poem, then, the music of the orchestra is interpreted by each individual, and the images that the music evokes are peculiar to each individual. Stevens states in a letter to Poggioli that the music reminds him "of shuffling men who are, in height, as high as the hall and who fill the hall with their forms."<sup>21</sup> This explanation, admittedly, does not clear up the obscurity of the second couplet, but one may take it as an illustration of the individuality of each person's imaginative faculty. It is also possible that Stevens may have in mind his concept of "major man" by his reference to the "shuffling men/High as the hall." At any rate, the poet, as an individual, is completely alone in his struggle to achieve imaginative truth. As the "whirling noise/Of a multitude [society] dwindles," he "lies awake at night" feeling rather inadequate (suggested by "timid breathing") and confused (suggested by "Where/Do I begin and end?").

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<sup>20</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 790.

In these periods of depression, the imagination does not seem to dwell within him. It "momentously declares/Itself not to be I." Yet the intense desire, the feeling that something is there, remains. The imagination "Must be" identified with him. "It could be nothing else." The suggestion that the imagination is a faculty which dwells within the individual is remindful of the Emersonian concept of the "intuitive faculty." Speaking of this faculty, Emerson wrote: "It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns, that beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect he is capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled on itself), by abandonment to the nature of things."<sup>22</sup>

### XIII

Like the preceding section, and in contrast to Section IX, Section XIII depicts the imagination as superior to reality. "The poem . . . deals with the intensity of the imagination unmodified by contacts with reality, if such a thing is possible,"<sup>23</sup> comments Stevens to Poggioli. The poem, he adds, "has to do with pure imagination." With this explanation in mind, the "pale intrusions" of reality into "blue," or imagination, are "corrupting pallors" in that they detract from the imagination in its pure state. As the poet plays his guitar ("ay di mi"),<sup>24</sup> he realizes that on the level of the imagination that the artist can perceive, intrusions of reality may bring positive results ("blue buds") or negative

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<sup>22</sup>Emerson, p. 233.

<sup>23</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 785.

<sup>24</sup>Stevens comments (Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 783) that "'ay di mi'" is purely phonetic and that he had "no thought" of Spanish in his mind.

results ("pitchy blooms"). On a higher, or pure level, the poet would be completely content with the unchecked expansion ("diffusions") of the imagination. He would be content with this state of pure and untainted ("unspotted") imaginative reverie, much as an imbecile would be with a simple toy. His joy would be complete; he would be ignorant of the knowledge of reality, or "things as they are." Imagination is the key to the poet's satisfaction; it is the "heraldic center of the world." Its forms of expression are beautiful and innumerable; it is "blue sleek with a hundred chins." The imagination in the last line is elevated to a kind of deity, something which exists in a reality of its own and something to be worshipped. The "amorist Adjective aflame" is the imagination in its purest form, the equivalent to the "major man" ideal that Stevens created for humanity. In a somewhat confusing, but nevertheless revealing, explanation of the last line, Stevens wrote: "In this . . . poem the amorist Adjective means blue . . . as a word metamorphised into blue as a reality."<sup>25</sup> The explanation attempts to get across Stevens' idea of "pure imagination" as a living, eternal reality of its own, something that the poet, as in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," may strive "towards" but never quite reach.

#### XIV

Section XIV glorifies the imagination in a world that is overwhelmed with scientific enlightenment. "One after another," he comments in a letter to Simons, the discoveries of the scientists "irradiate us and

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<sup>25</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 783.

create the view of life that we are now taking."<sup>26</sup> Each of these discoveries is both a star that shines with its own light and, possibly, a world in itself ("orb"). The discoveries, "First one beam, then/A thousand . . ." overwhelm us; they are "radiant in the sky." "Day," or increased knowledge, is "the riches of their atmosphere." But despite the advancement of the scientific community, the poet feels that the "little candle of imagination is all we need."<sup>27</sup> He comments that despite the "brilliance of modern intelligence, one realizes that, for all that, the secret of the world is as great a secret as it ever was." The world, then, has its own appearances in the light of the imagination. Like the star of scientific discovery the imagination "glistens"; it is the "amorous Adjective aflame" mentioned in the preceding section. Modern man too often pays heed to the flashy things created through technology and the skill of man. Thus, such things as a "German chandelier," which, in his letters, Stevens describes as "oversized, over-elaborate,"<sup>28</sup> are more apt to be appreciated than the more unobtrusive things, such as the imaginative faculty of man. In contrast to the more noticeable light from the fancy chandelier, the poet states that "A candle is enough to light the world." That the candle, or imagination, is regarded by Stevens as the highest possible virtue is emphasized, years later, in one of his finest poems, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," where he states: "We say God and the imagination are one . . . /

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<sup>26</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 363.

<sup>27</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 363.

<sup>28</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 363.



How high that highest candle lights the dark."<sup>29</sup> The awesome power of the imagination is effectively illustrated in the fifth couplet where "Even at noon/It glistens in essential dark." At night, the imagination makes finer the finer things in life, such as "fruit and wine/The book and bread." In the last couplet, Stevens sees the poet sitting in a world of varying shades of gray (suggested by "chiaroscuro") playing upon his guitar ("In a chiaroscuro where/One sits and plays the blue guitar"). The implication is that, through the use of the imagination, he may expand the gray world into a variety of colors; he may make it both interesting and rewarding.

## XV

Section XV depicts Stevens' view of society as in a state of decay. The poet questions whether society is no longer able to relate to reality and has fallen into a kind of non-thinking, mechanized state. He wonders if he also, as a member of society, has been infected with its disease. The first three lines of the section compare society to a Picasso painting and asks if the intentional distortion of reality reflected in the painting is applicable to modern society. Stevens comments in his letters that the quoted phrase, "hoard of destructions," is "either from a group of dicta by Picasso . . . published by Christian Zervos or from a comment by Zervos on Picasso."<sup>30</sup> In line four, the poet, as a member of society, asks whether he is also "deformed." ("Do I sit, deformed, a naked egg . . .?") The expression, "a naked egg,"

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<sup>29</sup>Collected Poems, p. 524.

<sup>30</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 783.

refers to the creative possibilities that wait, perhaps in vain, to be fractured--or fertilized--by the poet. As a member of the "deformed" society, the poet then wonders if he too sees only the surface of things as they are and not the reality--or heart--of them. Stevens explains that line five, which reads "Catching at Good-bye, harvest moon," refers to a popular song entitled "Good-bye, Good-bye Harvest Moon."<sup>31</sup> The significance of the line--and the one that follows--is that the poet worries if he, like society, is attracted to superficial labels and catchy lyrics instead of being aware of things themselves. He asks whether he is attracted to the popular song without really "seeing the harvest or the moon." If this is true, then he, like society, is no longer orientated toward the imagination. By failing to really "see" things as they are, society--and possibly the poet--has destroyed them ("Things as they are have been destroyed"). The crucial questions for the poet are: Is society's malady contagious? Must all of its members share this sickness? Things as they are have been destroyed. The poet asks, "Have I?" Am I, the poet wonders, also dead, as society is? Like so many members of society, the poet wonders if this thought is "a memory, not alive?" Does he think in a kind of automatic memory of stale perception, as, for example, his recollection of the popular lyrics? In a touching conclusion to the section, the poet depicts himself sitting at a table "on which the food is cold." Some wine has been spilled on the floor, and the poet wonders if his blood--or life--is as wasted as the wine on the floor. If it is, he has no hope of revival. The depressing

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<sup>31</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 783.

picture of society which Stevens depicts in this section is very similar to one presented in "Owl's Clover," a poem published in 1936, a year earlier than "The Man With the Blue Guitar." Speaking of the great works of sculpture, works which are no longer appreciated by society, the poet describes the "white-maned horses' heads" as

Parts of the immense detritus of a world  
That is completely waste, that moves from waste  
To waste, out of the hopeless waste of the past  
Into a hopeful waste to come.<sup>32</sup>

## XVI

In Section XVI Stevens depicts the earth as both alien and hostile to man. Perhaps his picture of earth is from the viewpoint of modern society, which has failed to become truly aware of the environment that surrounds it, or perhaps he is merely presenting an image of the poet in a mood of depression--either because his creative faculty has failed him or because of the negative effect that a "distorted" society has on him. Whichever the intent, Stevens opens the section by proclaiming that "The earth is not earth but a stone." By "stone," he means that it is cold, lifeless, and indifferent. It is "not the mother" that man quite often likes to believe it to be. It does not hold men as they fall. The poet then goes a step further as his depression mounts. Earth is worse than a stone. It is "an oppressor," completely hostile to mankind. It not only grudges man his death; it even "grudges the living that they live." Life, then, consists of constant agony and struggle. Man must

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<sup>32</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 49.

"live in war" and "at war." Even his creative effort is thwarted. Stevens explains in his Letters that line eight, "To chop the sullen psaltery," means that poetry is written "with great difficulty, because of excess realism in life."<sup>33</sup> By realism, Stevens meant concern with the practical things of life. Men, in their struggle to improve life, have forgotten about the imagination and are orientated to the material, practical aspects of life. Thus, they strive to "clean the sewers," to "electrify the nimbuses." The imaginative, even the spiritual, aspects of Jerusalem, for example, are bypassed. On a Sunday, congregations make a superficial effort to satisfy the non-secular aspect of life ("Place honey on the altars"). Thus, the poet, who realizes that the earth's resources lie untapped, is a "lover" who dies "bitter at heart." In a society where realism is predominant, he can never achieve full satisfaction. He is vaguely aware, and therefore "bitter," that something is missing.

## XVII

In Section XVII man's soul, his "animal," is depicted as too wild and too free to be contained within a mould. Unlike the body, which "has a mould," the soul does not. It is like an animal in temperament, not like the quiet and passive soul described by the religious or spiritual ones ("The angelic ones"). Man's soul, according to the poet, attacks the blue guitar, or imagination, much as an animal would its food. The soul, then, is constantly hungry, especially in a society filled with arid, anti-imaginative "desert days." Thus, the soul must

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<sup>33</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 360.

find satisfaction, or salvation, through the imagination, on which "its claws propound, its fangs/Articulate." That man's salvation must be achieved within his environment and within his life span is, of course, a common theme of Stevens. The imagination can give him a semblance of order, "a mould," as suggested in line seven, but it cannot, because of its changing nature, give him permanent satisfaction. The sooner we realize this, the sooner shall we begin to articulate the mind, or imaginative faculty. In "Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," Stevens again refers to man's mind, the "animal." Suggesting that the imagination is the food of the soul, he writes:

To have satisfied the mind and turn to see,  
 (That being as much belief as we may have,)  
 And turn to look and say there is no more  
 Than this, in this alone I may believe.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, in Section XVII, the "final victory" of the imagination, or "north wind" consists in overpowering man, baffling him with constant change. Men are not capable of meeting it in its fullest, purest state. They must find minor satisfactions of the mind. Their achievement is compared to "a worm composing on a straw." Of course, the worm is a silent beast, and the tune it plays, although satisfying to itself, is—in ratio to the vastness of pure imagination—only a very minor note in the total melody.

### XVIII

Section XVIII illustrates a significant function of poetry, which is referred to as a "dream." (Elsewhere in Stevens' work poetry is

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<sup>34</sup>Collected Poems, p. 257.

often called a "fiction.") The poem, or the "dream," is something in which the poet can believe. It is the poet's salvation in the face of the excessive reality which surrounds him. As Stevens put it in an earlier poem, "A High Toned Old Christian Woman," poetry "is the supreme fiction,"<sup>35</sup> and it should replace mankind's lost religious beliefs. Once created, poetry becomes an experience, achieves a reality of its own, and thus ceases to be a fiction. It becomes "A dream no longer a dream" because it achieves a reality of its own. Its reality, indicated by the words "a thing" in line three, is formed by an adherence to the reality of things in our environment ("a thing/Of things as they are"). The reality of the poem is the "tune beyond us" referred to in Section I in that it is a reality which is "of the senses" and cannot be reached, or touched, physically. It gives "the touch of the senses, not of the hand." It is also the reality that, in Section XVII, the soul, or the "animal," "claws" for, and it can be achieved only after "long strumming on certain nights," or when the poet is both creatively inclined and willing to strive for it. In an effective metaphor, Stevens closes the section by comparing the poem's reality to the wind, whose sensory presence is its only meaning ("wind-gloss"). The reality of the poem comes as daylight comes, and like light it enables one to have an increased awareness. The poem, finally, is an object of veneration because it stands almost alone as an interpreter of reality. The poem rises "upward from a sea of ex," and the "sea" represents society. In a letter

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<sup>35</sup>Collected Poems, p. 59.

to Poggioni, Stevens writes that "a sea of ex means a purely negative sea."<sup>36</sup> The poem, then, is the only positive force in this sea.

## XIX

In Section XIX, the poet desires to acquire complete control over nature so that he can use it freely for his own purpose. The "monster" in the poem is nature, and it is nature that the poet faces, or combats. It is this battle that the poet refers to in the concluding section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," where he addresses the "soldier" and says that "there is a war between the mind/And sky, between thought and day and night."<sup>37</sup> In a letter to Poggioli, Stevens comments on Section XIX, stating that the poet wants "to face nature the way two lions face one another."<sup>38</sup> As a man of the imagination, he wants to write poetry "with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of monster [nature]."<sup>39</sup> The imagination should be completely adequate, he says, in the face of reality. Thus, in the opening lines of Section XIX, the poet's desire is to "reduce the monster to Myself." By doing this, he may feel adequate as a poet. As a poet, he also wants to be more than merely a part of reality; he wants control over it ("be more than part/Of it"). By obtaining this control, he will be able to play more than just songs saturated with reality. He will be able to utilize things as they are as tools which will help him achieve the reality of the

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<sup>36</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 783.

<sup>37</sup>Collected Poems, p. 407.

<sup>38</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 790.

<sup>39</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 790.

"tune beyond us" referred to in Section I or the "dream" of Section XVIII. In creating his "dream," or "fiction," he will have integrated two realities--the reality of nature and the reality of the imagination--into form. Thus, he will then be able to play "the two together as one." After mastering nature so that all its resources are available to him, he will then be "its intelligence." The lions referred to in the last couplet are an effective conclusion to the section. They represent the struggle between the imaginative man and his environment. The "lion in the lute" refers to the man of imagination, while the "lion locked in stone" refers to the man who is imprisoned in his environment--nature--and, though he desires freedom, he is incapable of imaginative thinking. The latter lion, of course, represents the majority of men in modern society. In both cases, however, the "lion" represents man's basic desire to break loose, savagely, from the pressure of reality, to "claw" at the blue guitar, as indicated in Section XVII. In a later poem, "Poetry Is a Destructive Force," man's "misery" is to have a beast, a "lion" or an "ox" within "his breast," to "feel it breathing there."<sup>40</sup>

## XX

Stevens, in his letters, labels Section XX as "the search for belief." He apostrophizes the air and calls it his friend, his "only friend," but in the final analysis, it may be only air. Thus, he searches for a true belief, a belief that should be "Friendlier than my only friend,/Good air." The imagination, or "ideas," do not serve as a true

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<sup>40</sup>Collected Poems, p. 192.



belief because an idea is isolated, and true belief must involve an agreement, or a reconciliation with life. It must be a "brother full/ Of love," a "friend," which ideas alone cannot be. Thus, the blue guitar in the mood of this poem ends up being somewhat inadequate. It is a "Poor pale, poor pale guitar" because it cannot, at the moment of this writing, meet the demands required of a true belief. Life consists, then, of one's environment--or reality--("good air") and one's ideas, or imagination, and a true belief must encompass the two of them. For Stevens, the poet's job is to attempt to do this. This desired agreement between reality and the imagination is effectively presented in the following passage from "Adagia": "To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of imagination but it is to be at the end of both."<sup>41</sup> True, or final belief, for Stevens, ended up being a belief in a "fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else." The "fiction," as has been pointed out previously, is poetry itself. The leap of faith must be that the fiction will become real, that the reality of fiction and the reality of reality will become one. But here, the poet feels unable to accomplish this ("poor pale guitar").

## XXI

Section XXI also deals with the problem of belief, but in it the poet goes a step further than he did in Section XX and arrives at the conclusion that a belief in man in his present environment is better than a belief in the gods. "A substitute for all the gods," he states, is "This self." The traditional concept of man's soul, "that gold self

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<sup>41</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 175.

aloft," is not adequate in our age of science and is therefore rejected by the poet. The term "This self" emphasizes Stevens' idea that a credible belief in a noble man must adhere to man as he is in the place where he is. An ideal of man, "one's shadow magnified," should take the place of religious myth. Stevens relates this ideal to man's earthly scene by having the ideal "looking down" from the "shadow of Chocorua." ("Chocorua" is a reference to a mountain in New Hampshire.) In a later poem, "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," Stevens emphasizes the relationship to man that his ideal must have. "Chocorua" again represents the humanistic aspect of his ideal, and in a personification of the mountain, the poet writes: "Now, I, Chocorua, speak of this shadow as/A human thing."<sup>42</sup> Section XIX of the same poem is perhaps Stevens' best illustration of his humanistic philosophy:

To say more than human things with human voice,  
That cannot be; to say human things with more  
Than human voice, that, also cannot be;  
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth  
Of human things, that is acutest speech.<sup>43</sup>

Returning to Section XXI of "Blue Guitar," the ideal of man, thus, is an "immenser heaven" than the traditional concept of heaven. This "humanistic heaven" would be "lord of the land and lord/Of the men that live in the land." A belief of this nature would not be tainted or distorted with superstitions and would not be over-inflated. It would be "Without shadows, without magnificence" because its foundation would be comprised

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<sup>42</sup>Collected Poems, p. 300.

<sup>43</sup>Collected Poems, p. 300.

of things as they are--"The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone."  
It would be credible. The guitar in the poem seems more robust, not so pale.

## XXII

Section XXII presents a major statement of Stevens concerning the function of poetry: "Poetry is the subject of a poem." The chief end of a poet, quite simply, is not merely to describe or to imitate, but to write poetry. The poem "issues," or starts with the poetic, or the imagination, and to this it "returns." To Simons, Stevens, in an explanation of this section, wrote: "Crudely stated, poetry is the imagination." The purpose of writing poetry, he added, "is to attain pure poetry."<sup>44</sup> The poem's subject matter then is not an imitation of reality but an esthetic integration of "things as they are." In the poem itself ("Between the two,/Between issue and return") there is "An absence of reality" or a fictive version of it. The "fictive version," however, is in itself real; it is a reality, furthermore, which stems from the reality of the world of men. Stevens comments to Simons that "poetry is a passion, not a habit" and that this "passion nourishes itself on reality." The imagination, then, has no source except in reality, and, in Stevens' words, "ceases to have any value when it departs from reality."<sup>45</sup> The poem is a perception of reality; it is from this perception that the poem acquires its full being or "true appearance." The perception which gives it its

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<sup>44</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 363.

<sup>45</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 364.

"true appearance," however, is obtained from the "sun's green" (the life that the sun gives to the earth), the "cloud's red," the "earth feeling," and the "sky that thinks" (the height that man's imagination can soar). "From these," Stevens concludes in the last couplet, the poem "takes." Finally, the poem, by virtue of the imaginative reality that it becomes, has a contribution to make in the "universal intercourse." Speaking of this contribution, Stevens wrote to Simons: "The validity of the poet as a figure of prestige to which he is entitled, is wholly a matter of this, that he adds to life that without life cannot be lived, or is not worth living, or is without savor . . . ."46

### XXIII

Section XXIII is an extension of XXII. It consists of a series of contrasting images, all of which relate to the basic opposition of the "imagined and the real" of line ten. Relative to poetry, Stevens' point is that the poet alternates between opposites, seeking a credible belief somewhere in the center. However, since reality and the imagination are, by nature, in a constant state of change, the center is never a fixed point. The poet in his search finds that the relationships between opposites can be seen in such a way as to produce the "reality" of his fictions. This concept is best illustrated in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" where:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend  
On one another, as a man depends

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<sup>46</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 364.

On a woman, day on night, the imagined  
On the real.<sup>47</sup>

The opposite concepts, when linked together by the man of imagination, ". . . embrace/And forth the particulars of rapture come."<sup>48</sup> Thus, Section XXIII of "Guitar" opens with "A few final solutions," and the fact of death ("a duet/With the undertaker") is seen in the corresponding opposites that it evokes. Death brings feelings toward immortality ("A voice in the clouds") and toward mortality ("another on earth"). For man, who has a passion for a "final solution," the sublime, the "voice/Of ether," prevails because it is a voice which is "serene and final." But, at the same time, the voice of mortality ("The grunted breath serene and final") sticks with him, and he cannot push it aside. His life, then, consists of a constant fluctuation between opposite concepts, and the poet, who "keeps on playing year by year/Concerning the nature of things as they are," explores the nature of the "imagined and the real," "thought/And the truth," and "Dichtung und Wahrheit" (poetry and truth) in an effort to make life more pleasurable, to make ". . . all/Confusion solved."

#### XXIV

In Section XXIV Stevens returns to his idea that man must combat the pressures of secular society through the use of his imagination, represented in this section by the "poem." That "A poem" represents both a

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<sup>47</sup>Collected Poems, p. 392.

<sup>48</sup>Collected Poems, p. 392.

pleasurable and credible experience, or true belief, is emphasized by the comparison he makes between it and a missal. That the "poem" is a precious commodity and worth struggling for is also implied in the simile. The poem, then, is "like a missal found/In the mud." It is both true and precious. "Mud," represents the reality of this world. The "poem" is the vehicle for combating the pressures that society imposes upon us. The "poem," or "missal," is also for the "young man," the "scholar," who is "hungriest for that book," or the full experience that the imagination offers. The "young man" parallels the "youth as virile poet" Stevens develops in Necessary Angel. In the essay, "The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens says that the poet, or the man of the imagination, must have both the strength and vitality to be imaginatively productive in a society which is orientated towards reality. The youth in the essay is identified as "imagination, in a leaden time and in a world that does not move for the weight of its own heaviness."<sup>49</sup> In such a world, the poet must possess the vitality that youth symbolizes. Thus, the "young man" in couplets two and three is hungry for even a "page/Or, at the least, a phrase" of the imaginative experience. He searches for the perfect phrase ("latined phrase"), so that he may "know" the imagination in its most rewarding form. In his letters, Stevens comments on "a missal for brooding sight" as follows:

I desire my poem to mean as much, and as deeply, as a missal. While I am writing what appear to be trifles, I intend these trifles to be a missal for brooding-sight: for an understanding of the world.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Necessary Angel, p. 63.

<sup>50</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 790.

Once the imaginative experience is realized, the young man will be able, as Stevens comments, "to seize it as a hawk seizes a thing."<sup>51</sup> The poet, then, continues to "play" his tune, in hope of achieving the "latined," or perfect phrase. He plays from his imagination, from what he thinks.

## XXV

The emphasis in Section XXV is completely on the imagination, as the poet celebrates its power as an earth-moving force. The section is a poetic extension of Stevens' maxim that the "mind is the most powerful thing in the world."<sup>52</sup> The man of imagination is able to master reality and use it for his own ends. In "Adagia," Stevens states that the "world is at the mercy of the strongest mind in it whether that strength is the strength of sanity or insanity, cunning or good-will."<sup>53</sup> In Section XXV, the central figure, "He," is the man of imagination. Like a seal playing with a ball, he holds the world "upon his nose." Stevens depicts him with a touch of the comic, for dressed in "robes" and decorated in "symbols," he can make reality a part of his performance, or show. Reality, like a ball in a circus performance, can be played with at will. ("And this-a-way he gave a fling/ . . ./And that-a-way he twirled the thing.") The showman, the man of imagination, is in complete control. But, ironically, the world does not realize that it moves as the imagination directs. People are unconscious of what is occurring. They do not see, nor feel, the movement of the world as the man of the imagination "spins" it. ("They did not know the grass went round.") In

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<sup>51</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 360.

<sup>52</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 162.

<sup>53</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 174.

a letter to Simons, Stevens gives a clue to the understanding of the confusing third couplet, where the poet states: "Sombre as fir-trees, liquid cats/Moved in the grass without a sound." The cats, Stevens says, are

cats that move smoothly as liquid. They are solemn black blobs on the mind's eye, sombre as fir trees. When the imagination is moving rapidly, it identifies things only approximately, and to stop to define them would be to stop altogether. No doubt these sombre cats are merely sombre people going about their jobs.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, the cats, the "sombre people," continue to live unaware of the imagination's power. They reproduce mechanically ("had cats"), and reality to them is dull and meaningless ("the grass turned gray"). In contrast, the imagination is eternal ("the nose is eternal") and it constantly changes reality, the "things as they were" and the "things as they are." The imagination will change reality into "Things as they will be by and by." Stevens defines the "fat thumb" which "beats out ai-yi-yi" in the last line as the "stupid people at the spectacle of life, which they enjoy but do not understand."<sup>55</sup> The tone of this section is exuberant, triumphant, playful. The guitar is not poor nor pale.

#### XXVI

Section XXVI, while it praises the imagination, is really weighted heavily toward reality. Basically, it is an illustration of Stevens'

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<sup>54</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 361.

<sup>55</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 361.



theory that the imagination is linked to reality and therefore depends on it, despite its struggle to gain complete freedom. The poet says that while the imagination may transform the world ("The world washed in his imagination"), one must also realize that the world, or reality, was originally there to change. In other words, without it the imagination could not function since it would have no base. Despite the transformations the imagination may make, it, like the sea returning incessantly to the shore, always returns to reality. To the poet, the world is a "shore," and its original "sound," "form," and "light" are all elements to which the imagination must return. Emphasizing this concept, the poet likens the world to a parent bidding his son or daughter good-bye. It is the "relic of farewells" or the "Rock, of valedictory echoes," which the imagination, no matter how high it may soar, can never completely forget. This filial attraction that the imagination has for reality is stated by Stevens in a letter to Simons: "But this transformation having been effected, the imagination with its typical nostalgia for reality tried to go back and recover the world."<sup>56</sup> A child of reality, the imagination, sooner or later, will long for its mother, even though it may speed, "a bar in space," far from home. Thus, in this section "home" is a friend (like the air), not something to combat. In couplet four, the poet likens the world to a sand-bar in a sea of space ("Sand heaped in the clouds") and implies that the imagination, like a ship, will eventually have to deal with it. Once confronted with the sandbar, or the world, the imagination ("giant") must again cope

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<sup>56</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 364.

with its obstacles. It must fight "Against the murderous alphabet." Thus, the poet, because of imagination's attraction to reality, will never arrive at true imaginative perfection; he may think about it, dream about it, but Utopia, as indicated in line ten, is "inaccessible." With every transformation he makes with his imagination there is an inescapable return to reality, and in the process, he senses that something truly exquisite has slipped away. ("A mountainous music always seemed/To be falling and to be passing away.")

## XXVII

Section XXVII shifts back to reality. Sukenick feels that the "juxtaposition of the two sections [this one and Section XXVI] indicates that the relation between the two [reality and the imagination] may first be dominated by one and then by the other."<sup>57</sup> Section XXVII is similar to parts of the first section of "The Comedian as the Letter C" in that in both poems Stevens uses the sea to represent reality overwhelming the imagination. In "Comedian," Crispin, the man in search of the imaginative power, finds himself a "merest minuscule in the gales" of the sea. In the following excerpt, Stevens depicts Crispin as completely engulfed by the sea:

The dead brine melted in him like a dew  
Of winter, until nothing of himself  
Remained, except some starker, barer self  
In a starker, barer world, in which the sun  
Was not the sun because it never shone.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Sukenick, p. 97.

<sup>58</sup>Collected Poems, p. 29.

Crispin found that "The sea/Severs not only lands but also selves."<sup>59</sup> In Section XXVII of "Guitar," the sea (reality) is also overwhelming. A part of the "fallen snow," it "whitens the roof"; it "drifts through the winter air," carried along by the "north wind," which represents the onrushing force of reality. The "gloom" that the poet feels is this "darkness of the sea" which surrounds and oppresses him. Unlike the "geographers" and "philosophers," whose exclusive province is reality, the poet is concerned with something more--the imagination. But for a few exceptions, such as "icicles on the eaves," reality is drab and dark. It is also rather cruel in its ridicule; it holds back and mocks the imagination, that "demon that cannot be himself." Its "iceberg settings satirize" the imagination, which constantly "tours" or searches the changing sea-like world ("the shifting scene") for something to release creative energy, for some transformation of intractable reality. The time is unpropitious.

#### XXVIII

In Section XXVIII Stevens makes one of his major statements about reality--one which he repeated quite often throughout his poetry. The first couplet is that major statement and it is also the key to an understanding of this section. It reads: "I am a native in this world/And think in it as a native thinks." Man, Stevens implies, must accept his world totally. He must proceed as if this were the only world. Despite his imaginative faculty, reality, or this earth, influences his thinking

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<sup>59</sup>Collected Poems, p. 30.

and determines his fate. The imagination, no matter how high it may fly, has its base in reality. The poet, then, is "not native of a mind," or the imagination, but rather a "native of the world/And like a native think[s] in it." The "thoughts" he may "call his own" are really thoughts which proceed from reality. The direct address to "Gesu" in line three, according to Sukenick, is not intended to be blasphemous. "It perhaps is meant to lend the fervent tone of faith to the secular belief that is to replace religion,"<sup>60</sup> he conjectures. Stevens himself suggests that the word not be taken too seriously. "It was just a word with the particular spelling I wanted,"<sup>61</sup> he comments in his letters. In the fourth and fifth couplets, Stevens implies that reality, despite its changing nature, offers the man of imagination constant sources of inspiration. Earth's mutability, suggested by the "wave/In which the watery grasses flow," forms, nevertheless, a pattern so that change itself becomes "fixed as a photograph." One may always anticipate, for example, the great changes that the earth offers each year in the movement through the four seasons. Although time and the changing seasons bring death ("The wind in which the dead leaves blow"), it also furnishes the poet with the "profounder strength" to move his imagination. Through his acute awareness of his surroundings, the poet can create his own version of reality--his "fiction," his poem. Standing among "things as they are" he can make them become things as he thinks they are. Once his poem is created, the things he thinks become things he says they are on the

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<sup>60</sup>Sukenick, p. 98.

<sup>61</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 784.

blue guitar, because of the "reality" of his poem. It should be re-emphasized, however, that, to Stevens, the poem could never have become a "reality" had he not accepted the reality of "the place," the external world. In a poem written near the end of his life, "The Planet on the Table," the poet again underscores this concept. Saying that he "was glad he had written his poems," he concludes:

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.<sup>62</sup>

Section XXVIII is the key poem in the thirty-three variations. Now we know what Stevens means by "a tune beyond us, yet ourselves" and "things exactly as they are."

## XXIX

In Section XXIX Stevens depicts the church as an agency which distorts both the past and the present. The section opens with the poet sitting in a cathedral, meditating to himself after reading a "lean Review," or a typical church publication which, apparently, yields little of value as far as the poet is concerned. He comments that these "degustations," or samplings of church philosophy found in the Review, "oppose the past and the festival" of life. The church, the poet feels, is not related to both life as it is and life as it was, to "What is beyond the

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<sup>62</sup>Collected Poems, pp. 532-533.

cathedral, outside." The implication is, of course, that the poet, or more broadly, the man of the imagination, is concerned with what is "outside" the cathedral. A similar charge against the clergy is made in one of Stevens' later poems, "Reply to Papini," where the poet "does not speak in ruins/Nor stand there making orotund consolations."<sup>63</sup> In contrast to the clergy, the poet "shares the confusions of intelligence."<sup>64</sup> By attempting to relate to the natural world and not to the supernatural, the poet at least makes the struggle to reach a satisfactory agreement with reality. According to Sukenick, the poet in Section XXIX of "Guitar" "realizes that the point of resolution in the search for the credible is a point of balance between possible attitudes, the spiritual and the earthly, each of which has its merits."<sup>65</sup> The clergy, Stevens feels, has forsaken man by adhering solely to the spiritual. The poet, in contrast, spends his life in a constant effort to obtain rapport with reality and the imagination. He seeks to "balance things/To and to and to the point of still." In his craft he is forever seeking resemblances, forever associating "things as they are" with ideas. Thus, in the fifth couplet, the poet says of one mask "it is like" and says of "another" that "it is like." In his struggle, however, the poet realizes that his goal will never quite be reached. He knows "that the balance does not quite rest." Any rapport he reaches between the imagination is temporary because of the changing nature of both. But it is always fresh and fascinating;

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<sup>63</sup>Collected Poems, p. 446.

<sup>64</sup>Collected Poems, p. 446.

<sup>65</sup>Sukenick, p. 99.

it is always "strange, however like." In the last two couplets, the poet concludes that the scope of the clergyman's concern is inadequate ("wrong") and his religious ritual ("sounds") are "false." Entrenched in the dogma of his outdated institution, the clergyman is a stubborn, narrow-minded individual whose teachings are like the "bellowing of bulls." The clergyman ("Franciscan don") remains "himself" only in the context of his institution. Outside his window ("glass") the earth is fertile, offering ample opportunity for his imagination to function. The poet regrets that the clergyman, locked in his "degustations in the vaults," will not seize the opportunity that the outside festival world has to offer.

### XXX

As stated in Chapter Two, Section XXX--when viewed in the context of the complete Collected Poems of Stevens--points toward the "major-man" abstraction which is fully developed in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." In an effort to satisfy the demands of reality and the imagination and, at the same time, develop a credible belief for modern man, Stevens opens the section by proposing to "evolve a man." He refers to this "man" as "the old fantoche" in line two. He explains this reference to Poggioli in the following manner:

Man, when regarded for a sufficient length of time, as an object of study, assumes the appearance of a property, as that word is used in the theatre or in a studio. He becomes, in short, one of the fantoccini of meditation or, as I have called him, "the old fantoche." . . . As we think about him, he tends to become abstract.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 791.

Being abstract, or unreal, the "old fantoche," the abstraction of man, is timeless in nature. He can hang "his shawl upon the wind" because his presence can be felt, or appreciated, everywhere and anytime. He becomes like a great actor, whose "strutting[s]" through the centuries are studied and admired. But, like the truly great actor, the abstraction of man has its human side, and, despite his unreal nature ("in spite of his manner"), he can be related to the modern man's world. Stevens comments that the "fantoche is used rather arbitrarily for a fantastic actor, poet, who seizes on the realism of a crosspiece on a pole . . . ." <sup>67</sup> The poet, who keeps the abstraction of man uppermost in mind, will be able to create poetry from the banal, simply because the banal surrounds him. It is a part--a large part--of man's world. Throughout modern society, represented in this section by "Oxidia, banal suburb," run "heavy cables" (power lines), which represent man's slavery to the pressure of reality. Man has the benefits of technology, but his chief concern is purely financial ("One-half of all its installments paid"); he has little or no time to concern himself with the imagination, much less with religious beliefs. He is a resident of "Oxidia," which Stevens says is the "antipodes of Olympia." <sup>68</sup> "Oxidia," Stevens reveals, is derived from Oxide and "is the typical industrial suburb, stained and grim." <sup>69</sup> An image of a modern industrial suburb is presented in the sixth couplet, which reads: "Dew-dapper clapper-traps, blazing/From

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<sup>67</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 362.

<sup>68</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 790.

<sup>69</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 790.



crusty stacks above machines." (Stevens explained to Simons that "dew-dapper clapper-trap" is the "lid on a stack pouring out bright (dew-dapper) flame.")<sup>70</sup> The beginning of the seventh couplet borrows a word Pilate used when he presented Christ, crowned with thorns, to his accusers. "Ecce homo" ("Behold the man!") appears in John 19:5. Stevens opens with "Ecce, Oxidia is the seed," which can be interpreted as: Behold, Oxidia (the only thing man has) must be the "seed" for any beliefs he may hope to obtain. "Oxidia," this world, is the beginning of belief. A "soot of fire," or a product of man, Oxidia must also yield to man his spiritual salvation as well as his livelihood. Stevens sums up the section--and the last line specifically--by stating in his letters that "if the only paradise must be here and now, Oxidia is Olympia."<sup>71</sup> The belief, "Olympia," must be created through the realities surrounding man. It is a belief that Stevens maintained throughout his life.

### XXXI

Stevens comments to Simons that Section XXXI "deals with a moment of reaction when one is baffled by the nuances of the imagination and unable to obtain them."<sup>72</sup> In the same letter he makes the following explanation concerning the section's opening line ("How long and late the pheasant sleeps"):

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<sup>70</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 362.

<sup>71</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 789.

<sup>72</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 362.

Occasionally I put something from my neighborhood in a poem. We have wild pheasants in the outskirts of Hartford. They keep close to cover, especially in winter, when one rarely sees them. In the spring they seem to reappear, although they have never really disappeared, and their strident cry becomes common. Thus, toward the end of winter one can say how long and late the pheasant sleeps.<sup>73</sup>

In view of this explanation, then, Section XXXI implies that modern society is in its "winter" stage. The potential for the imagination to bloom--represented by the "pheasant"--is there. (It never really went away.) But it remains hidden--"close to cover." The beauty that the imagination can bring the world, which is comparable to the variety of colors that adorn the pheasant, especially when his wings are spread--cannot, at this time, be seen. Modern men--"the employer and the employee"--contend with each other in the pressure of reality, in "their droll affair." They have not the ear--nor the eye--for the imaginative side of things, even though the "bubbling sun," the imagination, may "bubble up." The spring may "sparkle," the "cock-bird" may "shriek," but the employer and the employee "hear" only in a superficial way. Thus, they will "continue their affair." Although the "shriek" of the pheasant, or the imagination, may "rack the thickets," modern man does not hear it. The man of the imagination, or the poet, is depressed by his society and the fact that he, too, is a product of it. He feels that there "is no place/Here" for the imagination. The cock's shriek serves only to awaken ("claw sleep") men so that they may continue their "droll affair" in the business world. Thus, the beauty of the morning

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<sup>73</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 362.

is not realized in this society "of the nerves." The poet, now the "blunted player," is hampered by business civilization, and he desperately grasps for the "nuances of the blue guitar." In the concluding couplet, the poet must continue to struggle for his "rhapsody"; he must attempt to play the "rhapsody of things as they are." He must work with reality, despite the danger of its dominance over man.

### XXXII

In an extension of Section XXXI, Section XXXII exhorts modern man to become receptive to the imagination. In order to do so, he must first eliminate his preconceptions. Then he will find that the imagination brings a new awareness and a new appreciation of reality. He must, therefore, "throw away the lights," or the old doctrines, and the "definitions" of past generations. Once he does this, he will perceive reality in an imaginative manner; he will relate to reality as an individual ("say what you see in the dark"), on his own terms. Reality will not then be distorted by preconceived ideas. Thus, as in the preceding section, the world offers unlimited opportunities for the imagination to flourish, but these opportunities are clogged by businesslike society. It is the same society that prompted one of Stevens' contemporaries, E. E. Cummings, to write:

and it is dawn  
the world  
goes forth to murder dreams . . .

i see in the street where strong  
men are digging bread

and i see the brutal faces of  
people contented hideous hopeless cruel happy<sup>74</sup>

To Stevens, it is incomprehensible that we can live in this world ("walk in that space") and know nothing of the imaginative joys ("jocular procreations") that the world is capable of creating. We must somehow remove the barriers, for when we do, when the old dogmas have been cast aside, we will be able to accept the direct response of the senses to the stimuli of our milieu--without the intervention of old definitions. In a typically Emersonian statement, the poet informs the reader, "You are yourself." By truly being yourself, he says, "the blue guitar surprises you" because it will offer new, pleasant experiences.

### XXXIII

Section XXXIII, the last section of "Guitar," expands the argument begun in Section XXXI; it calls upon man to broaden his range of concerns to include the imagination as well as the reality of business civilization--the "Oxidial"--in which he resides. The poet proposes a "wrangling of two dreams"--reality and the imagination--as the means to an acceptable belief, the "bread of time to come." The "dream" of the present work-a-day society ("That generation's dream") was "aviled" without any sense of true values ("in the mud"). It was created in the light of the secular business world ("Monday's dirty light"). It is inadequate because it, being "the only dream they knew," is static and

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<sup>74</sup>E. E. Cummings, "The Hours Rise Up Putting Off Stars and It Is," in Chief Modern Poets of England and America, ed. by Gerald P. Sanders, John H. Nelson, and M. L. Rosenthal, p. 344-II.

final; it encompasses "Time in its final block," not "time/To come." The answer is a marriage of the two dreams--reality and the imagination. This would be the "bread of time to come." An acceptance of this marriage festival, which should take place here on earth, here in "its actual stone," is our only chance for happiness, and the poet, in an evangelical style, declares that then "The bread/Will be our bread, the stone will be/Our bed and we shall sleep by night." We will then be able to forget--on occasions--the concerns of business and "at moments" when we "choose" we may "play," or exercise our imaginative faculty, and thus gain a certain amount of freedom from the pressures of reality. During these creative moments, the imaginative person, especially the poet, may "play/The imagined pine, the imagined jay." Thus Stevens closes "Guitar" on an optimistic note:

The bread  
Will be our bread, the stone will be  
  
Our bed and we shall sleep by night.  
We shall forget by day, except  
  
The moments when we choose to play  
The imagined pine, the imagined jay.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE REWARDS

After completing a study of a poet as difficult as Stevens, one is likely to ask himself, "Is he worth the labor and the pain?" When the student remembers the endless trips to the dictionary, the numerous searches through the explications of various critics, the hours of ruminating over poems--some of which remain totally incomprehensible--and the enigma of a man's peculiar concept of the relationship between imagination and reality, the question of value is bound to emerge. That much of his poetry is frustratingly abstruse is, without doubt, true. Stevens himself felt that "one is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry"--one being the "true subject" and the other, the "poetry of the subject," and to Stevens, the latter is "paramount in one's mind."<sup>1</sup> It is in placing the emphasis upon the "poetry of the subject" that generates the most baffling obscurities. To Stevens, the meaning of the poem is secondary to the experience of the poem. In this sense, the "poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man."<sup>2</sup> In other words, one must be able to free himself of the rational urge which asks: "Now what, exactly, does this poem mean?" Thus, an obsession for meaning may hinder the desired communion with the poem.

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<sup>1</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 160.

"The thing said," he once wrote, "must be the poem not the language used in saying it."<sup>3</sup>

In searching for the right language to create "the thing said," Stevens, as Marie Borroff notes, developed a poetry of "the most lavish variety . . . of the most baffling obscurity."<sup>4</sup> The variety of his poems is apparent to even the most casual reader. They range in length from two to thirty-odd pages, taking the form of parables, aphorisms, images, soliloquies, dialogues, anecdotes, myths, invocations, lectures, pedagogical treatises, and logical demonstrations. They consist of every sort of language, from the most common monosyllables to an arcane verbiage which sends the reader repeatedly to the dictionary, and, as Miss Borroff notes, "frequently in vain." They frequently use and discard such devices as metaphor and simile, rhetorical repetition and balance, meter, rhyme, and patterns of consonant sound. They are peopled by a host of characters, most of whom are abstractions, and most of which have fictional, historical, or fabricated names. The poems often have titles which apparently have no relation whatsoever to the subject matter. They often indulge in loose philosophical meditations, most of which rather vaguely point "toward" some kind of abstraction of mankind, and they often fluctuate rather haphazardly between opposite poles--imagination and reality. They often are "poems about poetry," quite barren of real people with real emotions and desires. It is quite understandable why

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<sup>3</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup>Marie Borroff, "Introduction; Wallace Stevens: The World and the Poet," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Marie Borroff, p. 1.

many readers simply throw up their hands in utter confusion and abandon his poetry in favor of verse from someone more concrete and predictable.

Yet, despite these difficulties, Stevens is worth the effort necessary in reading him. For those who prefer serious poetry, Stevens is worth the time and mind stretching it takes to begin to understand his works. His poems offer at least five rewards. They are as follows:

1. The pure fascination of following a man's search for meaning in life. Stevens, in his poetry and his prose, tried to develop an answer for man's "passion for yes." Apparently, he sincerely believed that the old religious dogmas were no longer acceptable. He also believed--intensely--that men must turn their eyes back toward the earth in their search for an acceptable belief, for there, Stevens felt, lies their only source for happiness. As he stated in one of his poems, man must "mark the virtue of the commonplace."<sup>5</sup> Stevens' longing for security, for the static, and at the same time his realization of the impermanence of everything led to a fascinating sense of frustration in his poetry. His attempt--whether successful or not--to elevate poetry to a position where it would take the place of lost religious beliefs is both admirable and intriguing. His attempt to find a center-point--or an agreement--between imagination and reality gives the poems a refreshing sense of improvisation and spontaneity that is almost ironical, for his verse is, for the most part, scannable. His attempt to develop a "major-man" abstraction to serve as an ideal for all mankind is bold, idealistic, fascinating. Finally, Stevens' search, since it centered on

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<sup>5</sup>Opus Posthumous, p. 11.



earth, provides for his poetry an endless number of metaphors, similes, and other forms of comparisons--all which must be an integral part of good poetry. When we read Stevens, the earth becomes a more fascinating place to live. In one of his best short poems, Stevens depicts the earth as a "bowl" and aptly captures the feeling that he--and his responsive readers--have for it:

For what emperor  
Was this bowl Earth designed?  
Here are more things  
Than on any bowl of the Sungs,  
Even the rarest--  
Vines that take the rarest obscurities of the moon,  
Approaching rain  
And leaves that would be loose upon the wind,  
Pears on painted trees,  
The dresses of women,  
Oxen . . .  
I never tire to think of this.<sup>6</sup>

2. The pleasure of reading the work of a poet who is sincerely--even passionately--dedicated to the task of defining the proper role of poetry and the form that a successful poem must have. Although Stevens can justifiably be criticized for maintaining an impersonal, aloof tone in his poetry, he offset this by developing an intriguing theory of poetry. He attempted (and with admirable determination) to move toward the creation of the "ideal poem," or "pure poetry." Even his harshest critics have to admire his final goal. Quite possibly no poet in history wrote as many "poems about poetry" as Stevens did. This in itself is an effort rare enough to merit study, especially since

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<sup>6</sup>Opus Posthumous, pp. 6-7.

Stevens has been acknowledged as one of the twentieth century's major poets. Perhaps it is true that Stevens is a "poet's poet." But it is also very likely true that most readers of modern poetry have a secret desire to write poetry themselves. Thus the size of Stevens' audience is quite possibly underestimated.

3. The exhilaration of reading poetry that links the resemblances between things in a remarkably fresh, effective, and unpredictable manner. Stevens used the age-old devices of metaphor, simile, and personification to perfection. He proved in his poetry that the same subject can be touched upon many times, and--with a slightly altered approach--the poet can create a new experience each time. The most famous example of this is his "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," a series of short, related poems, or images, which illustrate the workings of the imagination. In the poem, Stevens drives home the point that the poet--in contrast to the pure rationalist--constantly searches for more than one interpretation of the "things as they are" which surround him. He lets his imagination come to him, and like light, it broadens his conception of reality, and he sees resemblances between things that, to most people, are completely unrelated. In another excellent poem, "Six Significant Landscapes," Stevens suggests that the poet is unlike the rationalists. They are shackled by one narrow interpretation of life. They wear "square hats" and

Think, in square rooms,  
Looking at the floor,  
Looking at the ceiling.

They confine themselves  
To right-angled triangles.<sup>7</sup>

Stevens' poetry shows that the world has more to offer than "right-angled triangles." The reënforcement of this truth is a valuable reward in itself.

4. The pleasure of reading the work of a poet who truly delighted in words, who experimented, who really "played" with language. Stevens had high aims for his poetry and he recognized the inadequacy of language, which he once described as "the murderous alphabet." But he also realized that the poet must work with words simply because that is all he has to work with. To borrow Stevens' phrase, they simply will have to suffice. Thus, like all good poets, he cherished words; he listened for their sounds; he (in a manner of speaking) "touched" them and felt their shape and texture. He constantly experimented with them, often relying on their sounds as much as their meaning, often relying more on sound. An excellent example of word experimentation is his "Emperor of Ice Cream." In this poem, his "emperor," the "muscular one" who rolls "big cigars," whips in "kitchen cups concupiscent curds." Here, the poet capitalizes on the sensual overtones of "concupiscent" and, in his alliteration, blends it in with the suggested lewdness of "cups" and "curds." In another poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C," his introspective voyager, Crispin, who is engaged in a desperate search for the imaginative way of life, crosses the "sea" with his eye "on porpoises, instead of

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<sup>7</sup>Collected Poems, p. 75.

apricots," and the poet thus indicates the transition from land to sea with not only the physical objects mentioned but also with the sharp contrast in the sounds of the rolling syllables of "porpoises" and the rather abrupt, shorter syllables of "apricots." In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" the image of two aging lovers is brilliantly depicted with "two golden gourds distended on our vines." Later, the lovers "hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed." In a poem he wrote late in life, "Long and Sluggish Lines," Stevens refers to his earlier poetry as the "Babyishness of forsythia" and the reader enjoys the image of the naivet   of a budding young poet. Throughout Stevens' work, then, the reader is bedazzled by the constant experimentation of a man bedazzled by words. The reader constantly runs across such expressions as "Nanzia Nuzio/Confronted Ozymandias," "Teaching a fussy alphabet," "Chieftain Ifucan of Ascan in Calftan/Of tan with henna hackles, halt!" and "The softest word went gurrituck in his skull." Not all of the innovations and new creations are, to be sure, successful. But often enough the new word or phrase is a happy piece of craftsmanship and brings delight to the reader.

5. The reward of reading some truly great poetry. Stevens has several poems (and several portions of poems) which, without doubt, can be called truly good poetry. Some of these passages have been quoted in previous sections of this study--passages, for example, from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "Sunday Morning," "The Death of a Soldier," "The Man With the Blue Guitar," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and "The Snow Man." Another poem which merits mention is "The Idea of Order at Key West," a work which effectively illustrates Stevens' idea that man must introduce

his own order into the world that surrounds him. In the poem, the poet depicts a woman singing a song beside the sea. The woman uses the "sea," or reality, as both a background for her song and a launchpad for the imaginative urge which created the song in the first place. The poem presents an agreement, then, between reality (the sea) and the imagination (the song) and suggests that the two together form a union. This union is suggested by the lines ". . . when she sang, the sea,/Whatever self it had, became the self/That was her song, for she was the maker." Thus, the poet searches for not the song, but the "spirit" behind the song. In a particularly poetic passage, the poet writes:

More even than her voice, and ours, among  
The meaningless plungings of water and wind,  
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
Of sky and sea.<sup>8</sup>

That the creation of a song is a creation of another reality is suggested by these moving lines:

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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Collected Poems, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup>Collected Poems, pp. 129-130.

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