THE FICTION THAT RESULTS FROM FEELING: A STUDY OF WALLACE STEVENS

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CONTENTS

NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens will be referred to throughout as CP and followed by the appropriate page number. Similarly, Opus Posthumous will be referred to as OP, The Necessary Angel as NA, and the Letters of Wallace Stevens as L. Full references are given in the bibliography.

One of the great interests of Wallace Stevens as an object of study lies in the fact that he does not merely present us with a body of poetry, but goes on to present us with a paradigm of which his own poetry is but one possible exemplification. This paradigm, called into being by the particular conditions of the twentieth century, is a prescriptive programme for action, a set of rules sanctioned by their efficiency, in operating in everyday life. Stevens begins by placing modern man in terms of his psycho-social predicament and then goes on to explore the implications of this predicament with regard to possible action, concluding finally that art will be the major support of man both now and in the foreseeable future. The mode of this artistic support will be the creative process itself, as related to both poet and reader, since the aesthetic theory elaborated by Stevens shifts the emphasis from finished product to the action which culminates in such a product: this aesthetic theory finds its justification in a world view which claims that "the event is the unit of things real".[1] Stevens' continuing relevance is shown by the affinities of his theory of fictions with recent theories about the games we live by, in our language, our institutions and our personal lives.

The claims for efficiency involved in this proffered paradigm are based on what Stevens takes to be an inevitable process of redundancy on the part of individual poems, which are the examples called into being by

[1] A.N. Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (Pelican, 1938), p. 178.

the set rules. Since particular poems must lose their power, the ability to console which is their function,[1] it will be necessary to replace them, and an awareness of the existence of the pattern and the place of poem-examples in it will, hopefully, permit an easy and painless transition from the outmoded fiction to the relevent fiction, without any sentimental clinging to the fiction which has lost its sanction. This replacing process can in theory continue indefinitely and at varying speeds, and natural human conservatism ensures that the process takes place only when necessary. A "sentimental clinging" to old forms cannot in itself be condemned, for given that poems or forms continue to perform their consolatory function, they can legitimately be retained, but unfortunately the desire to cling to previous comforts frequently covers an inner dissatisfaction which could be alleviated by new fictions. For Stevens, the aim must always be the satisfying of the need for order felt by modern man and, according to Stevens, this satisfaction is brought about at present only by art.

Why is art seen by Stevens as the supreme method by which such essentially emotional comfort is given to man and why should this artistic satisfaction take the form of process rather than product? His solution can be traced back to the scientific discoveries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, through their impact on certain philosophers and their popularisers. These discoveries have had profound consequences on twentieth-century thought, particularly with regard to aesthetic theories and the subsequent importance placed upon art in general. The main consequence of these discoveries has been the growth of a distrust in

[1] This diminution of power takes place for both poet and reader, although at different rates. See p. 78.

finality, an enormous step from the early nineteenth-century confidence in the eventual, or at any rate theoretical, establishment by man of full knowledge about his environment. We have now abandoned, even as a possibility, the vision of complete knowledge and as the concept of finality loses its previous value, this value is transferred to the quest for final answers; the action, the seeking, is given the importance which in previous ages had attached to the knowledge gained. The awareness of this, combined with a certain self-effacement on the part of the artist, has led to attempts to make the action available to all, to expand elitism into democracy. And so we see the emergence of cut-up books, fluid theatre, "open" works of art which invite, or demand, active response from the audience. One consequence of this denigration of the product has been the acceptance of the possible impermanence of the work of art, the self-destruct book, for example. Because of this shift in emphasis from the finished product to the process of creation itself, fixed forms have ceased to satisfy us; they seem to betray what we now take to be the truth about the world and our position and power in it.

These scientific discoveries were studied by Stevens in the writings of philosopher-scientists such as Bergson and Whitehead, and through popularisers of their work, such as Joad. Stevens took a great interest in the philosophical implications of these discoveries, particularly the epistemological consequences of new ideas about causality and scientific perception, and went on to examine the psycho-social results for modern man. While examining the scientific aspect, he relies upon Bergson and Whitehead, but the aesthetic conclusions he reaches, with regard to the theory of fictions, owe more to William James. Despite his initial reliance upon other thinkers as a starting point, we must remember Stevens' own disclaimer - "I know of no one who has been particularly important to

me. My reality-imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others." (L. 792) However, his 'reality-imagination complex' did evolve in response to the needs and problems of twentieth-century man and can only be studied with reference to the world view held by Stevens and his society.

Nineteenth-century materialism, then, had given way to a growing awareness of the impossibility of proving or disproving assertions about the nature of the external world. Scientific discoveries can no longer be based upon the evidence given by the senses simply because atomic physics takes us beyond the limitations of everyday perception, and so scientific accounts of the world no longer seem to reinforce the explanations we gather from sense perception. The world built up by modern science may have its own internal "coherence of physicists' patterns",[1] but this change in scientific truth from demonstrability in the everyday world to the coherence of patterns which may seem unrelated to this world is a change which the non-scientist finds difficult to accept.

Another difficulty has been the growing impossibility of even visualising many modern scientific hypotheses. This has the result of placing these hypotheses beyond the understanding of most ordinary people. Our old visualisation of matter as a solid, tangible lump has dissolved into uncertainty, with the presence of matter, instead of being 'demonstrated', having to be inferred in terms of what appears to be happening around it at any given moment in time. The nature of reality has changed. "We must start with the event as the ultimate unit of natural occurrence."[2]

[1] Martin Johnson, Science and the Meanings of Truth (Faber, 1946), p. 17.

[2] Whitehead, p. 125.

Now, we can no longer consider objects as existing in some absolute sense, but must accept that these objects are merely the names we give to particular configurations of events.

The nineteenth-century confidence in science has been eroded also by a new scepticism about the objectivity of the scientist himself, his ability to passively receive new facts about the universe. Thomas Kuhn has shown, in his study of the nature of scientific change, how prevalent, indeed how necessary, is the tendency on the part of the scientist to select facts which will fit in with a pre-determined hypothesis and to ignore discrepant facts, frequently by refusing to award them any status as facts. "No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit into the box arecoften not seen at all."[1] We can no longer believe in a vision of the rational scientist, eagerly seeking out new phenomena and then working towards the formulation of a hypothesis to link them, for we now recognise his human susceptibility to pride and conservatism, both of which tend towards the preservation of work already done.

Even more important, it seems to be in the very nature of modern physics that the observer should alter the thing he is attempting to see clearly, due to the magnitudes involved. "In the end the process of 'knowing' destroys the 'known', and no fantastically imaginable extension of wave-lengths can bring nearer the intrinsically inaccessible knowledge."[2] We simply cannot, at the moment, accurately measure very small entities, and this sets a limit to our knowledge.

[1] T.S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 24.

[2] Johnson, p. 42.

Another major change from the world-view of the nineteenth century has been the loss of belief in mechanical cause and effect. Einstein's Relativity theories undermined the old notion of cause and effect by remarking on the previously ignored factor of the observer's own velocity and the consequences of this velocity on the observer's judgment of space and time. When temporal succession loses its absolute quality, the inference of event being caused by preceding event loses its plausibility. This loss of plausibility has been further accelerated by a new awareness of the statistical nature of mechanical 'laws'. Probability has replaced the old notion of inevitability, and this change is reflected in writings on the philosophy of science. Karl Popper, for example, chronicles the shift with regard to scientific hypotheses from the nineteenth-century assumption of potential verifiability to the twentieth-century acceptance of hypotheses until falsified, this falsifiability being an ever-present possibility.[1] Today, truth in science means the usefulness of a particular proposition, which includes its ability to slip quietly into the scheme composed of other, existing propositions. Our justification of scientific hypotheses has therefore become their practicability rather than their provability. "Science has no value except its effectiveness . . ."[2]

An awareness of the inaccuracy of ordinary sense perception combines with the loss of faith in solid matter and in the concept of cause and effect to produce the dominant vision of the twentieth century, that of a world in flux. Stevens takes from Bergson and James the sense of contingency

[1] Karl Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery (Hutchinson, 1959).

[2] Jean Paulhan, quoted by Stevens, in OP 195.

pervading the world we see ourselves as living in. The constant novelty of phenomena, along with the change of causality into statistical likelihood, gives the impression of a disordered flux, changing incessantly with neither aim nor reason. This view of the universe leads to a psycho-social unease within our society, for it offers people less order than they would like to believe really exists outwith their own selves. The world-view forced upon us by modern science is less comforting than that offered by nineteenth-century materialism and mechanism. "What we have seen happen is the breakdown of the plain model of a world outside ourselves where we simply look on and observe."[1] Since we need the assurance of some such world, which exists outwith our own selves and which does not completely lack stability, the quest of twentieth-century man has been an epistemological quest.

This sense of a split between man and the external world is not, of course, new. The difference between our own age and past ages is the difficulty we have in finding satisfactory solutions. In the past, people have been able to console themselves by believing that various expedients offering certainty have in fact been true. At first we had the transcendental guarantees given by Platonism and Christianity, then the gap created by the loss of faith in these theories was filled by a confidence in the ability of science to reach and describe the external world. Both transcendental guarantees and the supremacy of science have now become discredited: people find it impossible to really believe in them as true, though they may wish to do so. Today the problem of reuniting man and external reality is intensified because we have run out of the easy answers, a unique position historically, for in the past either no problem

[1] J. Bronowski, The Common Sense of Science (Pelican, 1960), pp. 82-3.

was perceived, or cast-iron solutions were both offered and accepted. It is possible that the present situation will always now apply, in that we will find it impossible to throw off our habit of scepticism, and our belief in any new solution will not be the old 'belief as true' but the new, Jamesian 'belief as necessary and useful'. We have matured to the point of rejecting the answers of previous generations, but our emotional needs remain as urgent. "We have fallen victim to our own power to destroy our myths."[1]

One can object that it is not really necessary for people to feel a sense of alienation, a need for order which is not satisfied by their world view. Firstly we could be wrong in our vision of the world as flux - Bergson emphasises that there is never a complete lack of order. However, he also goes on to show that what we choose to call disorder is merely an order which does not happen to appeal to us.[2] At the present moment there is some observable order in the universe, if only in that the events of the past can be arranged into patterns, but this type of minimal order is not what we are looking for. We still yearn for the absolutes which our present state of knowledge denies us. Future scientific discovery, of course, may make the concept of a universe in flux as outdated as the concept of hard lumps of matter now appears to us, but it still remains true that we feel that the amount of order we perceive, as opposed to the amount of order which may exist and await our perception, is not enough for our needs in the modern world.

Even given that our present world-view is accurate, other attitudes could be drawn from it. We do have an element of choice, and at the

[1] Allen Wheelis, The Quest for Identity (Gollancz, 1959), p. 135.

[2] Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution (Macmillan, 1911), pp. 232-49.

moment we have chosen an oppressive world to live in. "The pressure of Life is very great in great cities. But when you think of the ease with which people live and die in the smaller places the horror of the pressure seems self-imposed." (L. 149) It is possible to start with the same base given by twentieth-century science and become a logical positivist, but logical positivism, whether we like it or not, has not been chosen by the majority of people as the philosophy which best expresses our mood. Existentialism, both springing from and expressing a sense of insecurity and futility, is the representative philosophy of the twentieth century. To some extent, our present despair has been wilfully chosen -

> That strange flower, the sun,
> Is just what you say.
> Have it your way.
>
> The world is ugly,
> and the people are sad.
> (CP 85)

On the other hand, our choice of a rather despairing attitude to life is encouraged by the physical conditions of modern life in Stevens' "great cities". It requires some tenacity to continue to see the sun as strange flower when subject to the pressures of crowded urban life, which Stevens sees as almost insupportable. "All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence. This is accompanied by an absence of any authority except force, operative or imminent." (NA 17) The modern world is seen by Stevens, and he assumes that most men share his view, as soulless, oppressive and confusing. It is not a matter of what our present world is really like, since it is obvious that in many ways life has never been as benevolent, but of what we feel the modern world to be like, and how far short of fulfilling our

needs we see it falling. We are "experiencing essential poverty in spite of fortune." (NA 171)

Stevens is concerned with the effect of such unease on 'normal' life, the everyday life we lead with our family and friends in our own homes. This is the domestic level on which our happiness or lack of happiness actually operates and at the moment it is threatened on two fronts. Firstly there is the world-view given to us by science which, while it does not alter the actual commitment we make, in terms of action, to the common-sense world of tables and chairs, affects our ease of mind and thus, indirectly, our capacity for ordinary living. Along with this oppression, on a less philosophical level, goes the noise, the bustle, the loss of privacy caused by large numbers of people living closely together, from which we cannot easily escape. The "ominous and destructive" events from which we were protected in previous ages by the inefficiency of communications are now thrust before us daily. Both of these pressures militate against the joys which make our ordinary life bearable and Stevens' aim is to help us to cope with the life that we are forced to live, by fending off the consequences of our world-view and our living conditions, whether or not they are inevitable.

Stevens' own aesthetic is therefore based on the assumption that the philosophic background he inherited is relevant to most people. He assumes that the world does not appear to offer the sort of order that people require for their psychological ease, in the widest sense of peace of mind. The idea of a world in flux is in fact a prerequisite for a logical theory of fictions, for only if we assume a random flux beneath do all structures become to a greater or lesser extent fictional. Santayana's essences and Vaihinger's fictions are logical characters built up from the flux as a result of the human desire for an order beyond

the minimal order offered by a view of external reality, and possibly even the self, as flux.

Stevens sees that the greatest, the most disturbing, problem facing modern man is the continuing need he feels to believe in the existence of a world outwith the self, in order to escape from the responsibility of solipsism. Stevens himself believes that, practically speaking, we live in a monistic world which can be theoretically split into a dualism, which must then be reassembled, through the process of poetry, into a new, and heightened, monism. We live, in everyday terms, in an inextricable merging of mind and matter, a monism which cannot satisfy our desire to be aware of an underlying dualism. Stevens' aesthetic seeks to solve the two problems of the ding an sich - its existence, and its relation to the human. Stevens assumes that the ding an sich exists, but cannot normally be seen with certainty to exist. He therefore posits, as an essential fiction, a 'pure' external world, free from the distortions of the human mind. This fiction, however, remains in the realm of theory, and would continue to do so were it not for the integrating function of the poetic act, which alone can make us aware of this fiction as real. The poetic act purifies the ding an sich of the human, then returns this purified, but theoretical, fiction to reality by placing it within human consciousness. The dualism caused by an assumption of the ding an sich is resolved by poetry into a new monism which is the consciousness of dualism. Poetry, therefore, being itself the heightened monism, solves both of the problems posed by the ding an sich, for, by its theoretical action, it satisfies our need for a dualism, yet, by virtue of being itself a synthesis of self and world, it also satisfies our need for a sense of reconciliation between self and world.

Poetry is thus endowed with the ability to assuage the unease felt by

twentieth-century man but, in terms of his paradigm, Stevens offers even more than this not inconsiderable achievement, for he promises not merely to abate the misery caused by a loss of certainty, but also to give people the insight by which they can find or create their own forms of order for themselves. He is offering us a blueprint for survival in what he sees to be an essentially hostile and oppressive environment. The sense of order desired by people can only be gained through their participation in the creative process itself and in Stevens' case his proffered blueprint has to be found by entering into the process given to us in the whole of his poetry. In the end, we find Stevens' theory and discover that we have been practising it all along, in the act of discovering the paradigm. Stevens is bringing us a paradigm for finding order and this is done by means of his own poetry, which both incorporates and illustrates the theory. Part of this theory is the idea of the inevitable redundancy of individual poems - Stevens believes that no poem can last indefinitely, various factors will combine to make its consolation lose its power as time passes. This obsolescence theory will apply to poets who merely offer their own particular fictions, the question is whether it can also apply to a poet such as Stevens who incorporates both the fiction-making theory and some examples of it in the same body of work. Surely Stevens has advantages over poets such as Yeats and Eliot, who start with the same problems posed by the situation of the present day, but who can find solace only by fore-doomed attempts to resuscitate previously valid orders by giving them a twentieth-century flavour. The obvious objection to this is the possibility of running out of raw material. Stevens approaches the problem from the other side - he is not content to offer a ready-made order, as "every competent poem" does so, but seeks to make every man his own poet, producing consolations which will fit his peculiar situation perfectly.

II

Before going on to examine how Stevens seeks to do this, and exactly how the poetic process can fulfil the epistemological function he would thrust upon it, we must clarify the two sides of Stevens' dialectic. One side is named 'reality' and at different times can refer to very different concepts, while the other side, the 'imagination', seems to include mind, self, consciousness and the poetic faculty itself. A discussion of these terms is complicated by Stevens' refusal to make any typographical distinctions between the various uses. The term 'reality' falls into two main definitions - his first use, which is generally seen in terms of nature and which is characteristic of Harmonium rather than the later poetry, is the common-sense one of the external, physical world. The reaction to this world on the part of the human is generally rather passive, and consists in a simple acceptance of, and delight in, the joys of the earth. "The most beautiful thing in the world is, of course, the world itself." (OP 167) This world is the ding an sich which ordinary people assume exists and their affection for it is demonstrated by the traditional symbolism used to describe it: frequently the earth is personified as a female figure, sometimes mother, sometimes lover, but in both cases exuding tenderness and love. In the wonderful marriage sequence of Notes: Pleasure IV, the woman is a symbol for the place from which she comes, the earth and is taken by the 'great captain', the human man, because he

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

They married well because the marriage-place
Was what they loved. It was neither heaven nor hell.
(CP 401)

This emphasises the importance of place, the physical surroundings we live in, and the need to accept the earth for what it is - neither heaven nor hell.

In Meditation Celestial & Terrestrial, the happiness induced by this passive, non-questioning acceptance of the nature of the earth and her gifts can stave off the reason and the will: it suspends, although only temporarily, the questing of the mind.

The wild warblers are warbling in the jungle
Of life and spring and of the lustrous inundations,
Flood on flood, of our returning sun.

Day after day, throughout the winter,
We hardened ourselves to live by bluest reason
In a world of wind and frost,

And by will, unshaken and florid
In mornings of angular ice,
That passed beyond us through the narrow sky.

But what are radiant reason and radiant will
To warblings early in the hilarious trees
Of summer, the drunken mother?
(CP 123)

It is an inevitable trait of the human that we should seek out answers by the use of our reason, but Stevens is reminding us that the world of reason can be a barren one, despite the joys brought by the operation of the mind. The icy quality of the reason is contrasted with the 'lustrous inundations' offered by nature, and of course loses by the contrast. Here, as elsewhere in Stevens, the time for cold reason is the winter, and since the seasons change, the use of the reason can be suspended when its season

is not in operation, this suspension being helped along by the mind-satisfying qualities of the Stevensian summer.

The other main symbol used by Stevens for this satisfying time of the year, which does not call for the operation of the reason in the same way as the other seasons, is the sun. The sun represents external, directly experienced reality, and blazes so brightly that we cannot deny it. Nor do we wish to deny it, for it is an assurance of something existing outwith the human mind.

> The sun was coming from outside.
>
> That scrawny cry - it was
> A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
> It was part of the colossal sun,
>
> Surrounded by its choral rings,
> Still far away.
>
> (CP 534)

The sun is valued as an object which exists apart from the views which we, of necessity, surround objects with. Its brightness, the reassurance of its freedom from the human, does away with the need for our embellishments, the metaphor which belongs rather to the half-seasons, with the "half colors of quarter-things." The motive for metaphor is a

> shrinking from
> The weight of primary noon,
> The A B C of being,
>
> The ruddy temper, the hammer
> Of red and blue, the hard sound -
> Steel against intimation - the sharp flash,
> The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.
>
> (CP 288)

At this point, Stevens is equating metaphor with a certain evasion of reality, the "dominant X". Forceful reality simply does not require the transformations of the imagination - the bouquet of roses in the sunlight

is so real that any imaginings of it would be both unnecessary and "lesser". The tools of the poet, rhetoric and metaphor, can cause distortions which prevent us from seeing the thing itself and so must be used with care and discarded in seasons which do not require them. Summer, as a part of reality which manages to be immediately present, needs no fictions.

> Mist that is golden is not wholly mist.
> (CP 156)

Much of the satisfaction given by summer springs from its role as a language without words and its consequent freedom from the distortions of metaphor. Its immediacy becomes itself a form of rhetoric, but a rhetoric with the closeness to the object sought by all metaphor.

> And the secondary senses of the ear
> Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,
> Not evocations, but last choirs, last sounds
> With nothing else compounded, carried full,
> Pure rhetoric of a language without words.
> (CP 374)

This is the ideal - to make the "secondary senses" of the human experience something which in itself is not secondary, but immediate. It is the symbol for the desired _ding an sich_, the base upon which all human constructs are placed, the base to which the mind must always adhere if it is not to concern itself solely with its own creations. "We live in a world of imagination in which reality and contact with it are the greatest blessings". (L. 753)

Stevens' summer is satisfying to the mind, and succeeds in postponing the normal activity of the mind, only because it is a special type of reality, more forceful than the other seasons, which demand imaginative activity.

> At twelve, the disintegrations of afternoon
> Began, the return to phantomerei, if not
> To phantoms. Till then, it had been the other way:
>
> One imagined the violet trees but the trees stood
> green,
> At twelve, as green as ever they would be.
> (CP 459)

At high noon, when hot reality crowds in on us, the imagination, normally all-pervasive, proves impotent, unable to change the greenness of reality into the violet of the imagination. As soon as this time has gone, however, the shadows of the imagination are free to change reality as they will.

This type of reality is an extreme, "it is the rock of summer, the extreme", and it has another, terrifying side, as in the figure of the rapacious earth-mother, Madame La Fleurie, who represents the reverse of the fertility of nature, its destructive quality. Nature can be both benevolent and malevolent, creative and destructive, and for this distinction Stevens often employs a darkness/light contrast; Madame La Fleurie is "wicked in her dead light". The destructive side of nature can be symbolised by darkness but more often Stevens continues his naturalistic use of sunlight - light in the sense of warm sunlight is kind towards man, but if it increases in harshness, in intensity, it can become a danger, as in the sunlight of the desert or the jungle. This danger of over-exposure to nature is a reminder that there is an unbridgeable gap between nature and man, a lesson to those who may have been lulled by the softer side of nature into supposing some sort of kinship. The usual symbol used by Stevens for this devouring side of nature is redness, which represents unabstracted reality in all its harshness, reality which has not been civilised by being incorporated into human myth and which consequently threatens these myths.

> Could marble still
> Be marble after the drenching reds, the dark
> And drenching crimsons, or endure?
> (OP 57)

In the same way, the lush greens of the jungle can overpower man and his creations, and this threat is the price we must pay for our desire to have something exist outwith our selves and consequently outwith our control.

> Except that a green plant glares, as you look
> At the legend of the maroon and olive forest,
> Glares, outside of the legend, with the barbarous
> green
> Of the harsh reality of which it is part.
> (CP 506)

Here the fiction created by man - the legend - has no control over the undeniable realness of the non-human plant and the destruction of the legend is to some extent linked to its inadequacy in attempting to reduce the green forest to maroon and olive quietness. The attempt to make nature fit for the human is bound to fail, because nature has a harshness we seek to evade.

The fertility of earth can easily ripen into death and decay, as in the development from the venereal Florida of Harmonium to the Africa of Owl's Clover, but this decay is merely a necessary part of the process of renewal which takes place incessantly in nature, but which man seeks to halt in the interests of his own need for stability. The most important thing for man to recognise about the external world is that it is wholly separate from him, and indifferent to his needs and hopes, and this view of nature as something wholly other leads to the dualistic structure of the Man with the Blue Guitar, in which the world is seen as a monster to be contended with.

> That I may reduce the monster to
> Myself, and then may be myself
>
> In face of the monster, be more than part
> Of it, more than the monstrous player of
>
> One of its monstrous lutes . . .
>
> (CP 175)

Man has firstly to accept that the state of things involves this separation from nature, and then to struggle to maintain the difference between himself and nature without being overwhelmed by the otherness of nature. Man desires a nature which may be comprehended in terms of self, yet a self which is more than a mere part of nature. Nature has a tendency to trick us by encouraging us to extend the sense of communion with nature that we receive from the kindly seasons to nature in general, but man must resist this temptation, must repress the natural human tendency to identify with nature and read intentional benevolence into her chance gifts. We certainly dislike the idea of receiving no help from nature -

> Yet the spaciousness and light
> In which the body walks and is deceived,
> Falls from that fatal and that barer sky,
> And this the spirit sees and is aggrieved.
>
> (CP 108)

The principal objection to any cosy view we may develop of nature as benevolent helper is the refusal of nature to allow us to persist in this view. The "spaciousness and light" given by nature is always countered by the presence of "that fatal and that barer sky". Although nature, as in The Auroras of Autumn VIII, in innocent and devoid of malice towards man, she will not take his wishes into account. An anthropomorphic illusion is not tenable on purely practical grounds - if we rely on nature as a friend, it is entirely probable that this illusion will lead to our death, therefore there is a balance to be made between the psychological need of man to feel

that nature is more than simply indifferent to his fate, and the impracticality of acting on such a view.

This first use of the word 'reality' by Stevens is then the real as it is in its simple existence, free from the conceiving mind, and it is called by Stevens the 'first idea', the term itself giving a clue to the qualification that must be made regarding the physical world, which is that it is an abstraction.

> Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun.
>
> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
> And see it clearly in the idea of it.
> (CP 380)

Clearing the mind of leftover fictions which might distort the view we get of reality still does not enable us to see the object in reality - the sun - itself, but only the clearest possible idea of it. The time of summer is a fiction, in that it is impossible to have a season completely free of the imagination as anything other than a hypothesis. The reason for the choice of summer as a fiction of a time without fiction is a naturalistic one, in that the summer which we, outwith Stevens' poetry, know has indeed certain qualities which lead us to dispense with the diversions of the rest of the year - its real leaves make the leaves of fictions seem unnecessary. Nevertheless, thinking is unavoidable, we even have to think of a time without human thought, for the first idea, of the world outwith the human, can be reached only by an effort of human thought - "If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea." (L. 427) According to Stevens, there does exist this first idea, but he admits that now, in the modern world, it is

impossible in practice, apart from the special insights possible through poetry, to see the first idea clearly. We can only see our own conceivings of it as something outwith the human. This is where Stevens' claims for the value of poetry appear for, in his theory, the poem "refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea . . ."

This particular fiction of an absolute reality which will exist apart from the human mind is in fact the only permissible fiction for Stevens, the one idea which we find it impossible to dispense with.

> To find the real,
> To be stripped of every fiction except one,
> The fiction of an absolute -
> (CP 404)

The very conception of a first idea satisfies a desire in man, his desire to escape from solipsism and it is the only permissible fiction because a desire to go beyond the self is almost a definition of the human.[1] It is this desire which poetry must satisfy.

> But the first idea was not to shape the clouds
> In imitation. The clouds preceded us
>
> There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
> There was a myth before the myth began,
> Venerable and articulate and complete.
> (CP 383)

This at the moment is assertion from Stevens and we will have to see later whether he can succeed in reaching the first idea; just now it remains true that the physical world, Stevens' first form of 'reality', is an idea in the human mind. The first idea as anything but a fiction is destroyed by the realisation that there is no simple common-sense reality, that even

[1] See p. 110.

in the Stevensian summer, the mind's presence is inescapable.

> Yet the absence of the imagination had
> Itself to be imagined.
> (CP 503)

Paradoxically, it requires the effort of the imagination to rid us of the imagination and any solution to the problem of solipsism will have to take this into account. Although the imagination is not overtly active in summer, as it is in other seasons, it is still there, to deny that there can be a reality apart from human imaginings.

> If seeming is description without place,
> The spirit's universe, then a summer's day,
>
> Even the seeming of a summer's day,
> Is description without place . . .
> (CP 343)

Once we admit to ourselves the falsity of the common-sense view of the world as existing outwith ourselves, we must apply this to all parts of reality, even those which appear indubitably real. This process of doubt is simply more difficult to apply to the "seeming of a summer's day."

There must always be an interplay of the imagination and reality, as the spouse Nanzia Nunzio, "stripped more nakedly / Than nakedness", learns.

> Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
> Is never naked. A fictive covering
> Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.
> (CP 396)

Nanzia Nunzio is another of Stevens' personifications of mother earth, but the attempt to divest reality of all imaginative trappings fails because the imagination never ceases to cover reality with its creations, which are doubly effective in springing from both thought and feeling.

Not only is the imagination unavoidably present, but the interplay of

imagination and reality is never entirely clear and there can never be a delineation of the elements brought by either side to the union, as in Desire and the Object.

> It could be that the sun shines
> Because I desire it to shine or else
> That I desire it to shine because it shines.
> (OP 85)

This interplay is the second of Stevens' realities and is a mixture of the reality of the physical world, which in its pure state can only be imagined, and the imagination itself. The most useful way to explain this is to adopt Bernard Heringman's use of typography.[1] Firstly we have "reality", the imagined fiction of an external world existing outwith the human, then we have REALITY, a combination of reality and the imagination. The final formula of this is REALITY = reality (a fiction reached by the use of the imagination) + imagination. His use of the word "reality" therefore ranges from pure sensation, or as near as we can get to direct experience of the physical world, to abstract idea. In Harmonium, "reality" tends to mean the physical world as it is encountered in everyday experience and which we naively assume to contain no imagination, while in the later poetry it includes ideas, memories and reflections, and so is nearer to REALITY. Stevens moves away from a simple contemplation of the natural world to include acts of the mind in his imagery.

This development would seem to be paralleled by his use of the rock symbol, for in the earlier poetry it is used as a symbol for the irreducible external world, while in the poems of the Rock it goes beyond the sensuous world we call reality to include all that we experience, a mixture of reality and imagination. The rock becomes a symbol for being, the life of the mind combined with our direct experience of the world. The first use

[1] Bernard Heringman, "The Critical Angel," Kenyon Review 14 (1954), 520-3.

of the rock symbol, as the ding an sich, can be seen in How to Live. What to Do, where the "tufted rock / Massively rising high and bare" lies beyond the human, free from the intervention of the mind. This version of the rock is seen most clearly in Credences of Summer.

> It is the visible rock, the audible,
> The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
> On this present ground, the vividest repose,
> Things certain sustaining us in certainty.
> (CP 375)

Here the rock is both literally and symbolically made out of earth, and is a projection of the desire of Stevens for an established extra-human reality: it is nothing more than a fabricated fiction, with the advantages and disadvantages of the purely fictional. The major advantage of this particular fiction is of course its closeness to human desire, its ability to console, which is aided by the solidity of a symbol such as a massive rock. It lacks the subtlety of the later uses of the rock, but does perform a necessary task, given that this type of certainty is what the quest is for.

The later uses of the rock symbol would suggest that it has widened in its representation to include everything that exists, rather than simply the base we seek beneath existence.

> Perhaps we might best think of a set of mirrors (imagination and reality) facing each other, which in-between themselves make a habitable world out of their blending reflections. The rock is the space of that world . . .[1]

The rock is not limited to the self or to the world, but is "the habitation of the whole" (CP 528), the relationship between self and world which makes

[1] Ralph J. Mills, "Wallace Stevens: The Image of the Rock," Accent XVIII (Spring 1958), pp. 75-89.

ur theoretical needs.[1]

up our practical experience, as opposed to ding an sich reflects.[1]

The first use of the rock symbol as the ding an sich reflects Stevens' insistence that there is a base upon which the imagination works its changes. "The real is only the base. But it is the base." (OP 160) The 'real' in this case is the external world and Stevens' subsequent comments on the operation of the imagination must be seen in the light of this adherence to a belief that there is an external world to be apprehended. An Ordinary Evening in New Haven demonstrates the process of building with the imagination upon the base of the real, a process that Stevens places at the very heart of human activity.

> The self, the chrysalis of all men
>
> Became divided in the leisure of blue day
> And more, in branchings after day. One part
> Held fast tenaciously in common earth
>
> And one from central earth to central sky
> And in moonlight extensions of them in the mind
> Searched out such majesty as it could find.
> (CP 468-9)

The self is free to weave its illusions, but only after realising that a part of the self must remain rooted in 'common earth'. The imaginative side of man can move into ideas, abstractions, fantasies, if it does not divorce itself completely from the true state of man, which begins in reality, for to do so becomes ultimately unsatisfying.

This is Stevens' theoretical dualism, the assumption he makes about the world we live in, but this becomes in our own experience a monistic realm of the merging of mind and world. Since the external world, though it exists and exerts a perceptible influence on us, can only be known

[1] Frank Doggett stays with the first use of the symbol, and calls it the "unrealised natural world." Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Johns Hopkins 1966), p. 170.

through the mind, our desire for certain reality will have to be satisfied in terms of mind.

> Through the interdependence of personal experience and common experience, through the paradox of the world as personally conceived and as encompassing all conceivers, the apparent dualism of Stevens is compounded into a kind of monism of the inextricable merging of mind within world and world within mind.[1]

An acceptance of this monism throws the emphasis on the self and the specific moment of experience, for reality is no longer to be regarded as a quality possessed by objects but as an experience in the observer himself which has been stimulated by reality. This experience is subject always to the correction of the external world for, although reality has to be imagined, to be experienced in terms of mind, the imagination adds nothing and the structures and relations of reality remain. So we are dealing with the experience of reality rather than simply "reality", and poetry will concern itself with this experience in its attempt to bring us the sense of a ding an sich.

> The subject-matter of poetry is not that 'collection of solid static objects extended in space' but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it.
> (NA 25)

If the principal meaning given to the word reality in Stevens is this inseparable interplay of imagination and the physical world, where does epistemology fit in? Reality as an abstract concept of something apart from the human mind - Stevens' "first idea" - would seem to be a necessary corrective to the imagination. Stevens himself is certainly attracted to the idea of a ding an sich which will limit the excesses of the human

[1] Doggett, p. 5.

imagination -

> Poetry is a passion, not a habit. This passion nourishes itself on reality. Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality.
>
> (L. 364)

Faithfulness to the world of things, epistemologically speaking, will involve catching the moment in which mind and thing marry; there is no ultimate reality which can in practice be separated from the "act of the mind" experiencing such a reality.

> Reality is just that; a state of suspended tension between being and non-being, in which both being and non-being are unreal and only their incessant interaction, their becoming, is real.[1]

The fiction of a _ding an sich_ may be an indispensable one, but the struggle for an awareness of this fiction as it operates in reality must involve an examination of the moment of experience, for the world does not exist in itself but is created through the description of it, which occurs by a conjunction of the imagination and reality. Reality is description and this is a different sphere from either imagination or reality as _ding an sich_ taken alone.

> Description is revelation. It is not
> The thing described, nor false facsimile.
>
> It is an artificial thing that exists
> In its own seeming, plainly visible,
>
> Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
> Intenser than any actual life could be,
>
> A text we should be born that we might read,
> More explicit than the experience of sun

[1] Ernst Fischer, _The Necessity of Art_ (Pelican 1959), p. 124.

> And moon, the book of reconciliation,
> Book of a concept only possible
>
> In description, canon central in itself,
> The thesis of the plentifullest John.
> (CP 344-5)

This world in the middle, the description of reality, is the land in which humans must find their consolation, and it is also the realm of poetry, which requires a similar conjunction of imagination and reality to function, this similarity of operation being an important point in poetry's favour when we come to choose the means we will use for our consolation. Since we cannot ever grasp reality in its naked state, we are forced to seek instead a sense of reality being there. We are seeking the "sense that we can touch and feel a solid reality which does not wholly dissolve itself into the conceptions of our own minds." (OP 236-7) To get this sense we will have to turn to the imagination, specifically the imagination as it operates in the act of poetic creation. In fact, poetry's "function . . . is precisely this contact with reality as it impinges upon us from outside." (NA 96)

There are many statements, both in the poetry and in the prose, which might suggest that Stevens' view of the imagination and its powers was in direct contradiction with his view of the external world, for at times he seems to give the mind creative powers over the entire world, which consequently is reduced to an imaginative fiction, fabricated to satisfy man's continued desire for a reality outwith the self.

> The magnificent cause of being,
> The imagination, the one reality
> In this imagined world
> (CP 25)

This vision of the all-powerful imagination has certain attractions, of

course - along with the desire for a truly external reality goes the contradictory desire for a certainty springing from the self, given the assumption bequeathed by Descartes that the self is the surest possible guarantee of existence and clarification. Given that the self is stable and has created its own reality, man can hope both to know reality and to control the wilderness lying beyond the self, as in Puella Parvula.

> Every thread of summer is at last unwoven.
> By one caterpillar is great Africa devoured
> And Gibraltar is dissolved like spit in the wind.
>
> But over the wind, over the legends of its roaring,
> The elephant on the roof and its elephantine blaring,
> The bloody lion in the yard at night or ready to
> spring
>
> From the clouds in the midst of trembling trees
> Making a great gnashing, over the water wallows
> Of a vacant sea declaiming with wide throat,
>
> Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs
> Like a trumpet and says, in this season of memory,
> When the leaves fall like things mournful of the past,
>
> Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch. O mind
> Gone wild, be what he tells you to be: Puella.
> Write pax across the window pane. And then
>
> Be still. The summarium in excelsis begins . . .
> Flame, sound, fury composed . . . Hear what he
> says,
> The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale.
> (CP 456)

This magnificent arrogance shows the extreme of Stevens' love of the human. The fierceness of the natural world which threatens to engulf man, its perpetual dissolution, its disrupting effect upon the mind, all these are triumphantly controlled by the "mighty imagination", which forces nature into the service of the human. The incoherence of the beasts of nature has been replaced by the clear, human speech of the imagination. The massiveness of the task confronting the imagination, shown by the fabulous scale of the

forces of the natural world, serves only to underline the greatness of its triumph in imposing order.

The predisposition to rely on the mind elevates it to a state of pure imagination; the world becomes completely satisfying because the figurations springing from the self have no need of checks on external reality. Love of self ensures the attraction of such a view.

> the mind
> Turns to its own figurations and declares,
> "This image, this love, I compose myself
> Of these. In these, I come forth outwardly.
> In these, I wear a vital cleanliness,
> Not as in air, bright-blue-resembling air,
> But as in the powerful mirror of my wish and will."
> (CP 246)

In this solipsistic mood, Stevens frequently sees reality as springing entirely from the mind - "Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves." (CP 466) The advantage of this proposition is a purely psychological one, in giving us a sense of security and power, for epistemologically it is, according to Stevens, simply an evasion, just as many of the creations of the mind are evasive.

> These external regions, what do we fill them with
> Except reflections, the escapades of death,
> Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?
> (CP 405)

Quite apart from the epistemological consequences of solipsism, its emotional comfort comes to be seen as a sham by the very believer in solipsism the "mountain-minded Hoon" -

> Now, for him, his forms have vanished.
> (CP 121)

The Cartesian doubt is seen by Stevens as a mean thing which rejects the

here and now, the present which is man's sole asset, for the sake of an unrealisable and effete purity. Both the floribund ascetic of Landscape with Boat and Mrs. Alfred Uruguay are misguided in their efforts, for the idea that reality is solely a thing seen and controlled by the mind is simply "disillusion as the last illusion". (CP 468)

The first objection to solipsism concerns the view of self which it demands. It requires a self of greater certainty than the flux outwith the self, but it is now difficult to believe in a self which is not subject to the flux of the world: a non-transcendent self becomes just another discrete particular subject to the changing flux which is the world, "in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains." (NA 171) The self is simply one of the fictions which we find it almost impossible, perhaps completely impossible, to dispense with.

> 'Self', 'body', in the substantial or metaphysical sense - no one escapes subjection to those forms of thought. In practice, the common-sense denkmittel are uniformly victorious.[1]

Bergson assures us that the self is really only a series of psychic states, held together by the concept of the ego.

> But, as our attention has distinguished and separated them (the psychic states) artificially, it is obliged next to reunite them by an artificial bond. It imagines, therefore, a formless ego, indifferent and unchangeable, on which it threads the psychic states which it has set up as independent entities.[2]

The self can be seen as a series of states, a process, which is fictionalised into an object, just as we fictionalise our series of discrete sense

[1] William James, Pragmatism (Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), pp. 180-1.

[2] Bergson, p. 3.

perceptions into independent and consistent objects. Vaihinger calls this the 'personificatory fiction'.[1] The self remains one of our most indispensable fictions, but it must not be elevated into an absolute.

Stevens' main objection to solipsism is rooted in his faith that the world exists outwith the self, and he continually opposes any attempt to impose imaginative views on the world, insisting that imaginative order must spring from reality, for "to impose is not / To discover." (CP 403) Anecdote of the Jar shows the ambivalence of the relationship between the ordering form and the reality ordered by it.

> 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.
>
> (CP 76)

The landscape of Tennessee needs to be forced into order, to accept the ordering power of the human mind, and the first two stanzas show the positive value of the jar, which can succeed in changing the slovenly aspect of the natural world into the calm and symmetry of the artifact. The final stanza, however, qualifies this praise by pushing the sparseness, the control, of the jar over into barrenness. Stevens is making a gentle comment on the non-naturalness of the jar by remarking on its separation

[1] H. Vaihinger, The Philosophy of 'As If' (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924), pp. 36-38.

in terms of characteristics from the natural world around it. The wilderness requires the jar, yet the jar is an intruder in the landscape. The great problem for the poet is to find ordering forms which can come as close as possible to the natural world without being engulfed in its formlessness.

The imposition of the imagination on reality is not the true function of the poet: if a poet seeks to use the power of imagination to change reality in some way, to "put it to his own uses" (NA 115), he will produce "marginal" poetry instead of the "central" poetry which is possible when the imagination is properly employed in gaining a sense of reality as it in fact is. The aim of poetry is to reach reality, not to create a new and satisfying reality for ourselves. The abnegation of the responsibility of finding reality is connected with the reliance on ready-made forms of order, the products of the fancy rather than the imagination.

> Fancy, then, is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have already been fixed.
>
> (NA 10-11)

The imagination is a faculty, which produces objects, fictions, which in time are degraded to the level of the fancy, which is not in itself creative, but is merely an organising function.[1]

This false imagination and the distortions it produces can be avoided by a commitment to the real. We escape from solipsism primarily through our own desire to return to the _ding an sich_, to forsake our ideas about the thing for the thing itself.

[1] cf. Coleridge, _Biographia Literaria_ (Everyman, 1956), p. 167.

> To be without a description of to be,
> For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,
> To have the ant of the self changed to an ox
> With its organic boomings, to be changed
> From a doctor into an ox, before standing up,
> To know that the change and that the ox-like struggle
> Come from the strength that is the strength of the sun,
> Whether it comes directly or from the sun.
>
> (CP 205)

We desire to leave behind the cloak of the sceptic, to feel the joy given by a full certainty of reality, the joy of a freedom from doubt. "The very thing and nothing else" is being sought, and any imaginative construct that does not head in this direction is an evasion to be rejected. Imagination includes in its functions the ability to remove every hindrance in the way of our reaching the immediate idea of the thing, the nearest we can approach to the thing itself. The imagination must "burn everything not part of it to ash." (CP 373)

The imagination, if it is to succeed at all, must accept that it has its roots in the reality it seeks to capture. The poet must "create his unreal out of what is real." (NA 58) The imagination may be able to give glimpses of the desired reality but it is incapable of creating a wholly new nature; its fabrications are always traceable back to reality.[1] The dependence of the imagination on reality is matched by an equal dependence of reality upon the imagination in order that it be perceived.

> Yet the absence of the imagination had
> Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
> The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
> Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence
>
> Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
> The great pond and its waste of lilies, all this
> Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
> Required, as a necessity requires.
>
> (CP 503)

[1] See pp. 75-6.

There can never be anything but a 'sense' of the great pond of reality. We can never directly experience reality without the help of the imagination which alone enables us to clear away the reflections, the leaves, of our own distortions, to see the thing clearly.

In practice, reality and the imagination intermingle and cannot be separated.

> Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
> On one another, as a man depends
> On a woman, day on night, the imagined
>
> On the real.
>
> (CP 392)

There is only one mode of existence, the consciousness of reality, which defines both self and world in terms of their interaction. Instead of an extraneous reality at which the imagination makes guesses, there is a mingling of the two realms in an inseparable conjunction. Appearance is composed of the nature of the thing at a specific instant combined with the perceiving mind at that same instant, and appearance is the world in which we live.

> The world is a compact of real things so like the unreal things of the imagination that they are indistinguishable from one another.
>
> (NA 65)

The elements which go to make up a proper conjunction of imagination and reality can never be accurately separated; we cannot know "how much of it was light and how much thought" (CP 257). Both sides of the relationship, moreover, are affected by this union - "the transformer, himself transformed" (CP 269). "The final projection, C" (CP 295) is a fusion of creator and created.

Stevens stresses the necessity for imagination as an ability which will

enable us to tolerate the conditions of modern life: "I want man's imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality" (L. 790). It helps us by being able to organise things which appear formless and chaotic.

> The imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos. (NA 153)

Instead of obscuring the glimpses we seek of the world as it really is, the imagination in its proper role is the only means available to us to achieve this comfort.[1] Imagination is a form-giving function, mainly, although it also acts as a destroyer of previously made forms where necessary,[2] and it operates by the creation of fictions which carry the idea of the thing into the mind. It removes everything which is not in the immediate idea of the thing and thereby enables us to see this idea with greater clarity.

The grasping of reality by imagination seems to take place for Stevens by a coincidence of imaginative views of reality with reality itself. The fact that reality so grasped can only be communicated through the idea of it, due to the type of process imagination is, namely a mental process, does not alter the fact that we can rely on this idea of the thing as giving an accurate and reliable sense of reality.

> Perhaps there is a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation accessible or possibly accessible to the poet or, say, the acutest poet. (OP 166)

[1] The imagination also creates the very problems it seeks to solve. See p. 110.

[2] See p. 42.

Even with all Stevens' qualifications, this seems to offer a practical escape from an imagined universe.[1] The first idea is sanctioned as more than a mere idea by this grounding in reality.

Stevens is claiming, therefore, that the ding an sich exists and can be reached by means of the operation of the imagination in poetry and so "poetry is to a large extent an art of perception." (OP 191) Poetry is the most suitable vehicle for the transmission of these coincidences of imagination with reality because of poetry's peculiar position as a conjunction of imagination and reality, comparable to the same conjunction which is life itself.

[1] cf. Vaihinger's comments on the union of mind and world - "Although the course of thought deviates from that of reality, thought tends constantly to reunite with reality." (Vaihinger, p. 158) The problem is to know when this takes place.

III

The first step in the process of poetry is 'decreation', which is essentially positive in purpose. In the Necessary Angel, Stevens says -

> Simone Weil in La Pesanteur et la Grâce has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. (NA 174-5)

It is instructive to compare what Weil and Stevens are aiming at with this process of decreation. Stevens in fact decreates to "nothing" but it is a Stevensian nothingness which differs from that of Weil. When Weil is talking about decreation she means, as does Stevens, the removal of old fictions which may mislead, and obscure the "true" state of the universe. The difference is what we are left with in Stevens and Weil respectively after this process has taken its course. What we are left with in Weil is an acceptance that we do not exist, that our existence is something conferred upon us by God. Her "increé" would seem to be God, minus us. Stevens of course reverses this. Decreation is creative for Weil -

> Nous participons à la création du monde en nous décréant nous-mêmes.[1]

This process is more creative in Weil than in Stevens, where creativity is rather linked to the fact that decreation takes place by means of the

[1] Simone Weil, La Pesanteur et La Grâce (Librairie Plon, 1947), p. 43.

creative imagination. Decreation is an end for Weil, but a first step for Stevens, who finds value in its preparatory quality. What Weil is attacking is le moi, which Stevens does not really concern himself with, although he acknowledges that it may be fictional.

Stevens is seeking a view of what the universe is really like, apart from the wildly varying visions of it which different men have fabricated. "It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false." (L. 636) Reality apart from human conceivings of it is Stevens' "nothing". "The first step toward a supreme fiction would be to get rid of all existing fictions. A thing stands out in clear air better than it does in soot." (L. 431) Given that the aim of poetry is to reveal reality in some way, all fictions which might impede this must be swept away. As a first step, Stevens wants to "project the naked man in a state of fact." (OP 263) He emphasises the selectivity of his decreation, which dispenses only with those fictions which have outlived their usefulness as revealers of reality, or which never managed to perform this function at all.

The value or lack of value of a particular fiction is frequently related to its position in time, in history. Irrelevant or misleading fictions tend to be fictions carried over into the present age from a previous one. This is based on one of Stevens' laws: all fictions are place and time bound, fully appropriate only for a short duration and thereafter subject to the process of decreation. Unadaptable fictions, such as Marxism, which claim relevance beyond their own time and applicability beyond their own limitations are therefore dangerous. In some poems, Stevens symbolises such stultifying fictions by the statue of stone,[1] a

[1] The statue symbol differs throughout Stevens' work. "In one poem it is a symbol for art; in another for society, etc." (L. 355) The use I am referring to is characteristically seen in Ideas of Order rather than in Owl's Clover.

fiction trapped in an unmoving and fixed medium. The statue "is irrelevant, hence dead, a dead thing in a dead time. It will be replaced, as part of incessant change." (L. 366) The "great statue of the General Du Pay" has frozen into a form which no longer means anything, and as Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction will demonstrate, the ability to change is one of the great virtues of the supreme fiction.

> the nerveless frame
> Of a suspension, a permanence, so rigid
> That it made the General a bit absurd,
>
> Changed his true flesh to an inhuman bronze.
> There never had been, never could be, such
> A man.
>
> (CP 391)

The non-humanness of such a symbol is what makes it irrelevant to men who seek reflections of themselves and their own predicament rather than some lofty image.

The lack of relevance of the statue in The Greenest Continent is due not to the intrinsic wrongness of the symbol, but to the fact that it has not been designed for that particular place; Stevens believes that fictions spring naturally from specific geographical and cultural surroundings and are therefore compatible with these surroundings. The statue has a place which it can adequately represent but the problem is that it is not at the moment in that place -

> and it
> Was meant to stand, not in a tumbling green,
> Intensified and grandiose, but among
> The common-places of which it formed a part
>
> (OP 57)

Although this symbol would be capable of performing its ordering function in the correct surroundings, it is overwhelmed by the "drenching reds" of

Africa and so fails. Fictions are symbolic representations chosen specifically because of their relevance, because they sum up their place and time. This base in place and time in fact is what protects them against the imminent disintegration threatened by the world around them. Yet such protection given by relevance merely postpones the inevitable loss of credence.

> The Founder of the State. Whoever founded
> A state that was free, in the dead of winter, from mice?
> (CP 123)

The decreating, mocking little mice have absolute power over all fictions, given that the time has come when men can no longer accept the outworn symbols. Sooner or later the scepticism here expressed as the winter mind is brought to bear. It is both natural and desirable that every fiction should in its turn become outmoded and replaced, for this ensures that the ever-changing present will be accurately represented.

> But the integrations of the past are like
>
> A Museo Olimpico, so much
> So little, our affair, which is the affair
>
> Of the possible:
>
> (CP 342)

Only when the human desire for stability leads to an ossification of previous fictional forms is the decreating power of the imagination called for. "To sing jubilas at exact, accustomed times" is seen by Stevens as a "facile exercise." (CP 398) We must know what we are doing, and why, not just carry on blindly as before. It is a matter firstly of self respect, in that relying on received fictions without knowing why is a feeble thing to do, and secondly it is a matter of expediency, in that old fictions tend to become inefficient and consequently pointless.

> Everything depends on its sanction; and when its sanction is lost that is the end of it.
>
> (L. 347)

To have ever-changing fictions means that we can never have a wholly creative imagination - part of its creativity must always be diverted into its decreating role. The cyclical aspect of imaginative creation is shown in Valley Candle -

> My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
> Beams of the huge night converged upon it,
> Until the wind blew.
> Then beams of the huge night
> Converged upon its image,
> Until the wind blew.
>
> (CP 51)

This apparantly simple poem uses a favourite trick of Stevens, the blending of naturalistic and symbolic levels, with great subtlety. The chaos of the natural world, the "immense valley" is successfully controlled by the living fiction of the candle, just as, in life, expanses of darkness can become defined by a point of light. The destruction of the fiction by the inexorable forces of the natural world leaves its after-image behind with the remnants of its ordering power. Again this is completely plausible in naturalistic terms - the wind blowing out a candle which, for a split second, continues to dazzle our eyes. The ordering of one group of natural phenomena, the beams, is destroyed by uncontrolled natural phenomena, in this case the wind which is not amenable to the sort of control offered by the candle. We are left, finally, with the stage after decreation, the world bereft of human orderings, the "immense valley". In fictional terms, this shows the original creation of a relevent fiction and its successful operation, then the decreation of this fiction, reducing it to myth perhaps, leaving behind the remnants of the fiction, which manage still to console because of human

conservatism, and finally the loss of both fiction and myth, leaving the way clear for the whole process to begin again.

The tendency towards decreating a particular fiction is often associated, or has been so in the past, with becoming aware of the fiction as fiction and not truth.[1] This is seen most clearly in the major decreation of our day, the loss of belief in God. Here the gradual acceptance of the notion of the gods as man-made, springing from and corresponding to human need, has led to a total scepticism with regard to any deity.

> It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing.
>
> (OP 206)

Man is thrown firmly back upon the "increasingly human self." (OP 207)

The first step in this loss of belief in the gods was the awareness of their humanistic base. "God is a postulate of the ego". (OP 171) Man has created the gods in the past because he needed a fiction of this sort, and he needed to believe in it as true.

> If we say these things and if we are able to see the poet who achieved God and placed Him in His seat in heaven in all His glory, the poet himself, still in the ecstasy of the poem that completely accomplished his purpose, would have seemed . . . a man who needed what he had created. . . .
>
> (NA 51)

There is of course a vast difference between a transcendent, omniscient being and a creation springing from human need, and dependent on the human for its very existence. He is no longer inevitable and the form that He has taken previously may be changed: "God is a symbol for something that

[1] See p. 100.

can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry." (OP 167) The idea of God has become an outworn fiction and this is a cultural move against which the believing individual is largely powerless. The world has moved on.

> One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary.
>
> (L. 378)

If the idea of God is to persist at all, it must be "less and less human". As a projection of desire, an obviously humanistic God is of limited value, since what men are seeking is transcendental comfort, which they cannot obtain from their own creation. Man wishes to go beyond the human but remains limited by it if he sees the gods as his own creation -

> The fault lies with an over-human god,
> Who by sympathy has made himself a man
> And is not to be distinguished
>
> (CP 315)

Man must, however wistfully, discard the old fictions of gods, and turn to himself and his own powers for comfort, as in the Man With the Blue Guitar XXI -

> A substitute for all the gods:
> This self, not that gold self aloft
>
> (CP 176)

Clinging to the old gods has now been exposed as a rather obvious psychological prop which can no longer be disguised as anything but a prop. The twentieth-century seeker after comfort will have to find his own substitute for these lost fictions.

As with most of the fictions which Stevens subjects to decreation, it

is the historical aspect rather than the intrinsic theory which must be rejected. The idea of creating a transcendental comfort is perfectly tenable - both poetry and religion have much in common, when both are seen as products of man's needs. "Both have to mediate for us a reality not ourselves." (OP 238) It remains true, however, that the historical formulation of this need, in our case leading to Christianity, has lost its power. A new religion might perhaps be acceptable, the old one we inherited is not. Despite Stevens' distinction between the particular form the impulse happened to take and the impulse itself, he lacks William James' tolerance with regard to the religious temperament. "On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true."[1]

Another fiction, similar in origin to that of the gods, is the notion of man's community with nature. Stevens rejects anthropomorphism firmly, although he acknowledges that it evolved in response to the human desire to escape complete isolation. The mind has a tendency to project the human image on to the world, both for this sense of companionship, and for a sense of unity, in that the bewildering particulars of the phenomenal world are at least connected through the perceiving consciousness moulding them into his image. The Wind Shifts gives an ironical picture of this foisting of human terminology upon nature.

> This is how the wind shifts:
> Like the thoughts of an old human,
> Who still thinks eagerly
> And despairingly.
> The wind shifts like this:
> Like a human without illusions,
> Who still feels irrational things within her.
> The wind shifts like this:

[1] James, p. 299.

Like humans approaching proudly,
Like humans approaching angrily.
This is how the wind shifts:
Like a human, heavy and heavy,
Who does not care.
(CP 83-84)

After the long, lulling comparison of an element of nature to the human, Stevens traps us in the last three lines on our own terms - the uncaring, non-human aspect of nature is paradoxically asserted by yet another human analogy.

There is a great temptation to see the world as human, as in the beautiful poem, The Woman in Sunshine, where the softness which can be displayed by the natural world softly beguiles us. It may be cold fact that the external, physical world is divorced from us, and wholly indifferent to our fate and yet, there is the "woman in threadless gold" (CP 445). Nevertheless we must repress this tenderness and accept the separation of place from person. There are consolations available: Wild Ducks, People and Distances shows how the fabrications of man, in this case the villages, can ameliorate his situation -

the villages
Held off the final, fatal distances,
Between us and the place in which we stood.
(CP 329)

The urge for transcendence and the desire for a community with nature are the two principal human needs which have tended to cloud man's vision, but there are other impediments which, rather than being swept away completely, must be treated with caution, with due awareness of their potential usefulness. The abuse to which they have been put is largely due to historical circumstance, and they are not therefore cast out irretrievably from Stevens' scheme of things. The basic paradigm may be

acceptable, while the examples have been outmoded.[1] There is, for example, the reason, which can lead us into error. The reason, by its very nature,[2] leads us to unify and explain nature, to attempt to escape from a world of discrete particulars, by postulating a world besides that of the senses. The reason is an aspect of the mind which is well suited to the Stevensian winter, but which is inadequate for the rest of the year. It is incapable of producing, by its action alone, the longed-for agreement with reality.

> It is the mundo of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of the reason. The pleasure is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation.
>
> (NA 58)

Given that the reason cannot be self-sufficient in this way, the error to be avoided is the elevation of the reason from being an element in the search for Stevens' truth to being the sole path. "There are things in a man besides his reason." (CP 351) As in Anglais Mort À Florence, the reason and the will have only limited value, in that although they do manage to produce some sort of order, it is far from being the most satisfactory order possible.

On the other hand, Stevens reminds us that the reason is an inescapable part of the human and so must not be ignored in definitions of the path to order. Ideas which satisfy both the imagination and the reason are seen as superior to those which satisfy only one -

[1] cf. Whitehead on religion - "Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires constant development." Whitehead, p. 219.

[2] Bergson suggests that the reason, because it is a mental function, would trap us in the mind. "It is of the essence of reason to shut us up in the circle of the given." Bergson, p. 202.

> . . . we deduce that an idea that satisfies both the reason and the imagination, if it happened, for instance, to be an idea of God, would establish a divine beginning and end for us which, at the moment, the reason, singly, merely meditates. This is an illustration. It seems to be elementary, from this point of view, that the poet, in order to fulfill himself, must accomplish a poetry that satisfies both the reason and the imagination.
>
> (NA 42)

This alliance between the imagination and the reason is a necessary one, for if imaginative ideas do not satisfy the reason, the reason will try to destroy them - "Only the reason stands between it (the imagination) and the reality for which the two are engaged in a struggle." (NA 141) Including the reason in imaginative constructions of order is a safeguard against premature decreation. This acceptance of the reason includes a refusal on Stevens' part to place the reason beneath the imagination in his value system.

> To call attention to ideas in which the reason and the imagination have been acting in concert is a way of saying that when they act in concert they are supreme and is not the same thing as to say that one is supreme over the other.
>
> (OP 200-1)

So, despite Stevens' much-publicised reliance upon the imagination, he in no way neglects the other approaches which may be made by the mind; he is even insisting on the inclusion of the reason in the highest poetry.

His opposition, in fact, is more to rationalism as a historical manifestation than to the reason itself, as a faculty.

> Night nursed not him in whose dark mind
> The clambering wings of birds of black revolved,
> Making harsh torment of the solitude.
>
> The walker in the moonlight walked alone,
> And in his heart his disbelief lay cold.
> His broad-brimmed hat came close upon his eyes.
>
> (CP 77)

The sceptic in the palace of the babies is disapproved of by Stevens - the use of "dark" or "black" is usually a sign of disapproval, as in Banal Sojourn - because his rejection is stretched as far as the imagination, his broad hat keeping the moonlight, and hence the redeeming power of the imagination, from reaching him. It is a question of moderation; one must know when to stop the decreating power of the reason, so that it may help to remove outworn fictions, but then join with the imagination in a creative enterprise.

Just as the rational can hamper the imagination, the irrational can foster it. While warning us to be careful of the reason, Stevens reminds us of the glories of the irrational.

> But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
> On the image of what we see, to catch from that
>
> Irrational moment its unreasoning,
> As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
> Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall
>
> Of heaven-haven.
>
> (CP 398)

This is Stevens' aim - to experience keenly the beauty of natural phenomena, to love the rising sun, the sea, the moon, for the 'catching' of such moments constitutes the chief joy of life. The irrational lies in the lack of explanation or plan with which these moments are offered to us. In view of this aim of capturing what are essentially irrational appearances, the reason falls into perspective: if it does not help us to capture the impermanent flashes of life, then it must be dispensed with. As we will see later,[1] the irrational is closely linked to the ability of the imagination to reach the first idea. "Poetry must be irrational." (OP 162)

[1] See p. 82.

Another historical problem for Stevens is the legacy left by the Romantics. Again Stevens is objecting to particular aspects rather than the spirit of the thing. Romantic poetry is no longer viable because an idealistic theory of reality, and hence of art, has ceased to be meaningful. Our world view is not that of the Romantics and we do not assume that the powers of the imagination will reveal for us the ideal world lying behind that of the senses. In rejecting the Romantics' imagination, Stevens is rejecting any Platonic or transcendent view of the world. When he himself uses the word transcendence, as in the Effects of Analogy, he is talking about his process of abstracting from the flow of particulars, not about reaching through the particulars to a form existing behind them.

> Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense.
>
> (NA 130)

Stevens dislikes the ideal, seeing it as a falsification of the actual state of man in the world, as yet another man-made evasion taken as true. "The ideal is the actual become anaemic." (OP 164) His objections are based on his fidelity to the "full flower of the actual": the ideal leads away from the actual into a rarefied realm. It is a betrayal of how things are and, as such, doomed to failure -

> Too vague idealist, overwhelmed
> By an afflatus that persists.
>
> (CP 98)

The idealist will always fail because he is trying to deny the existence of the "afflatus", the variety, of the world, and this chaos refuses to be denied. Plato's aim, "to draw ourselves away as much as possible from the unsubstantial, fluctuating facts of the world about us and establish some

communion with the objects which are apprehended by thought and not sense" (OP 236), is the exact opposite of Stevens' aim, which is to acknowledge the changing, formless nature of our world and to contend with it on this basis of what it actually is. The final condemnation of Plato comes from Stevens -

> It must suffice here to note the dismissal of the individual and particular facts of experience as of no importance in themselves.
>
> (OP 236)

Not only would Stevens deny that these particulars are of no importance, he would also claim that their importance is guaranteed by their lack of competition; since they are all that exist, they can hardly be placed in a hierarchy of value. We have to reject Platonic idealism even as a useful fiction, because it cannot be reconciled with our present world view. Stevens is committed to the changing phenomena which the Platonist rejects as shadows.

In A Rabbit as King of Ghosts, the ghostly quality is condemned for its tendency to twist reality for idealistic purposes, with a disregard for its proper nature. The mind-dwelling rabbit has, it is true, a satisfying environment, where nothing matters when the grass is "full of yourself." This attitude is satirised by Stevens, because of the isolation from reality it leads to.

> You are humped higher and higher, black as
> stone -
> You sit with your head like a carving in space
> And the little green cat is a bug in the grass.
> (CP 209-10)

The sad fact is that the cat is not a bug in the grass, and to see it as anything but a "fat cat, red tongue, green mind" is to invite danger by

being oblivious to the facts; in this case the rabbit who rests content in his vision of invulnerability may well discover that real cats show little respect for the visions of rabbits. The objection to ignoring reality is a pragmatic one.

The Platonic ideal, of an enduring entity behind the particulars of the world, is contradicted not only by the particularity of our world, but also by its mutability. The essence of Platonism is fixity, which our world view must see as betrayal.

> If we propose
> A large-sculptured, platonic person, free from time,
> And imagine for him the speech he cannot speak,
>
> A form, then, protected from the battering, may
> Nature: A capable being may replace
> Dark horse and walker walking rapidly.
>
> Felicity, ah! Time is the hooded enemy,
> The inimical music, the enchantered space
> In which the enchanted preludes have their place.
> (CP 330)

This magnificent ideal figure which will be immune to the unpredictability and non-humanness of the world - the "battering" - contains the contradictions of idealism. He may be free from the ravages of time, yet he cannot speak; he may be proposed, but he cannot exist. A figure not subject to time can only be a proposition, a fiction. Stevens welcomes the "hooded enemy" for the goodness that it also brings - the music, the enchantment of actual life. The possible form offered by the imagined person becomes irrelevant, since an acceptance of the good requires an acceptance of the impossibility of lasting form.

> the mind, silent and proud,
> The mind that knows it is destroyed by time.
> (CP 329)

The mind itself cannot accept the consolations of idealistic forms, for it is through the mind that we have come to a view of a world which will not permit such forms.

Stevens sees that the human mind desires an absolute, a unity behind change, but the problem is that our world view forbids us the comfort of believing in the absolute as true. As with all ideal creations, it is false to the particular. Stevens himself seems able to face up to the impermanence of all things -

> Ariel was glad he had written his poems
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It was not important that they survive.
> (CP 532)

He classes the absolute as a fiction, one that we cannot dispense with, perhaps, but a fiction nonetheless.[1] The Bird With the Coppery, Keen Claws shows Stevens' ambivalent attitude towards idealist absolutes.

> But though the turbulent tinges undulate
> As his pure intellect applies its laws,
> He moves not on his coppery, keen claws.
>
> He munches a dry shell while he exerts
> His will, yet never ceases, perfect cook,
> To flare, in the sun-pallor of his rock.
> (CP 82)

Here the bird is referred to both in Stevensian terms of approbation and in Stevensian terms of disapproval, reflecting the double-sided nature of the absolute, which may betray the mutability of the natural world, but which does succeed in establishing order. The bird "flares", without ceasing, which would suggest that it was some kind of flashing particular.

[1] Stevens has his own fiction of an absolute. See p. 88.

However, the rest of the description contradicts this. Earlier in the poem the bird is shown to be blind and this, as in Negation, is a condemnation, since he will be unable to observe the changes taking place around him. He "moves not", and "munches a dry shell" - both images of sterility in Stevens. He is reduced to an impassive pure intellect, whose only function and claim to value is that "he broods there and is still". For Stevens, there is a failure involved in the mere exercise of the reason without constant reference back to the particulars of experience.

One important distinction is that between the sentimental romantic, "what people speak of as the romantic" (L. 277), and the true romantic, which manifests itself in different ways at different periods in time. To be romantic is not necessarily a bad thing, since there is something inescapably romantic about the very act of writing poetry, but there exists also a degenerate romantic which leads only to sentimentality and which must therefore be rejected. It is the romantic in its role as the fiction of a past age that is condemned by Stevens when he says "we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic." (NA 138) As with any outworn fiction, the sentimental romantic, if adhered to, will lead to a distortion of vision and a prevention of the formulation of relevant fictions. "A dead romantic is a falsification." (OP 160) The rejection of the romantic applies only to this aspect.

> It should be said of poetry that it is essentially romantic as if one were recognising the truth about poetry for the first time. Although the romantic is referred to, most often, in a pejorative sense, this sense attaches, or should attach, not to the romantic in general but to some phase of the romantic that has become stale. Just as there is always a romantic that is potent, so there is always a romantic that is impotent.
>
> (OP 180)

The true romantic, inescapably bound up with the process of writing poetry,

concerns the attempt to find the meaning of life through art, to go beyond the self in some way by means of art. Since the true romantic is so involved with a process which is of great importance to us, it is likely that a new, invigorated romantic will emerge.

> The romantic, however, has a way of renewing itself. . . . When, therefore, the romantic is in abeyance, when it is discredited, it remains true that there is always an unknown romantic and that the imagination will not be forever denied. (OP 215)

Once we accept that our notion of romantic has been conditioned by the degenerate romantic which has followed on from the historical Romantics, we can cast this aside and agree to formulate a new expression of the valuable aspects of Romanticism, such as the importance placed upon the process of artistic creation, while rejecting the no longer acceptable side of Romanticism, its transcendentalism.

Parallel with the desire, seen in the Romantics, to give transcendent backing to the flux of life goes the desire to evade the reality of death, the temptation being to soften this reality by suggestions of immortality. Stevens' consistent message here is that we must accept death without recoiling in unnecessary fear. "We should not die like a poor parishioner; a man should meet death for what it is." (L. 349) The Death of a Soldier is a homily on how to die -

> Life contracts and death is expected,
> As in a season of autumn.
> The soldier falls.
>
> He does not become a three-days personage,
> Imposing his separation,
> Calling for 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.

(CP 97)

This poem places death as part of the process of nature, which moves on with its customary disregard for human wishes. The same contractions which led to birth are employed as life draws to its expected end, an end which, by virtue of its naturalness, does not call for the unrealistic aggrandisement of the death of Christ. The fuss made over the death of Christ merely demonstrates his lack of human characteristics, his separation from the world of men, for whom death marks an end. Even the secondary wish, for a memorial to make up for the lack of personal survival, a pale guarantee of permanence, is seen as absurd. The insignificance of any one death is underlined by the unconcern of the clouds which pass remorselessly on, ignoring the death of the soldier below.

Similarly the death of the man in Flyer's Fall takes place in the "dimension in which / We believe without belief, beyond belief." He enters the "nothingness of human after-death", and this nothingness, this lack of heaven, must be accepted as our fate. The spectacle of the lack of existence is naturally upsetting, and humans frequently attempt to evade this, but are mocked by Stevens in their pitiful attempts at evasion.

Rosenbloom is dead.
The tread of the carriers does not halt
On the hill, but turns
Up the sky.
They are bearing his body into the sky.

(CP 80)

Carrying the physical body of an indubitably dead man into the sky, the spiritual home beyond earth, is merely satisfying the sensibilities of the

carriers, who wish to perpetuate the myth of a heavenly kingdom in anticipation of their own deaths, rather than helping Rosenbloom, whose fate is baldly stated in the very first line.

Stevens' usual reaction to the human attitude to death is ironical, since he is trying to mock away man's pretensions to immortality.

> Make hue among the dark comedians,
> Halloo them in the topmost distances
> For answer from their icy Elysée.
> (CP 56)

There is a lack of dignity involved in considering heaven as a tomb, populated by caricatures of humanity, for no answer ever can be forthcoming from such comically inhuman projections.

The Emperor of Ice-Cream bursts over with this gleeful insistence upon the facts of death: death is fully incorporated into the household routine as just another daily event. Since death is not, or should not be, a special occasion not to be looked for in the normal run of events, no-one must dress up, act abnormally or elevate the incident into something remarkable. The transience and sweetness of the ice-cream of the title symbolises the quality of our own lives, and the sweetness is the consolation offered by Stevens; along with the transience goes the joy of life and to accept one is also to accept the other. "The imperfect is our paradise." (CP 194)

Sunday Morning shows the ambivalent nature of death in its double role as destroyer and bringer of happiness.

> Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
> Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
> And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
> Of sure obliteration on our paths,
> The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
> Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
> Whispered a little out of tenderness,

She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.
(CP 68-9)

This is Stevens' major statement of the theme of death and it combines a beautiful evocation of the glories and joys of the physical world and our life in it with the moral that such a life depends on the existence of death and the inevitability of death. Inevitably, death brings sadness and obliteration and in this sense it constantly destroys the happiness of the world. Yet, it atones completely. "Death releases and renews. What the old have come to disregard, the young inherit and make us of." (L. 183 Stevens' explanation of "on disregarded plate.") Not only does death offer this changing function, it also promises not to forget our dreams, though these dreams must now be based upon an awareness that this process of decay and renewal goes on without ceasing and without exception. In other words, the joys of life have their price. Conversely, the horror produced by an awareness of the inexorable and final quality of death is mitigated by an awareness of the benefits conferred on us by the existence of death, namely the lack of staleness produced by a constant process of replacement.

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
(CP 69)

Another major consolation in the problem of death is the community which, in this respect at least, we enjoy with nature: we may die ourselves, but everything else in nature dies in its turn.

Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows
The same. We parallel the mother's death.
(CP 108)

Again Stevens uses his enormously successful female, specifically mother, image to convey a sense of comfortable belonging. The most powerful linking of the themes of fertility and death is found is Owl's Clover, where the geographical myth of Africa expresses the imminent decay present in the lush ripeness of the natural world. In Owl's Clover, however, the balance is not quite right and the lushness of the vegetation loses its attraction because of the overwhelming presence of death.

> No god rules over Africa, no throne,
> . . . except a throne raised up beyond
> Men's bones, beyond their breaths, the black sublime,
> Toward which, in the nights, the glittering serpents climb,
> Dark-skinned and sinuous, winding upwardly,
> Winding and waving, slowly, waving in air,
> Darting envenomed eyes about, like fangs,
> Hissing, across the silence, puissant sounds.
> Death, only, sits upon the serpent throne;
>
> (OP 55)

Death is seen here as something completely outwith the human and consequently to be feared. This is an unusual evocation for Stevens, who normally sees death as inextricably linked with the world of the living and subordinate to it. Our image of death ought to link it with life, rather than divorce the two.

> What a ghastly situation it would be if the world of the dead was actually different from the world of the living and, if as life ends, instead of passing to a former Victorian sphere, we passed into a land in which none of our problems had been solved, after all, and nothing resembled anything we have ever known . . .
>
> (NA 76-7)

Along with the acceptance of death goes the acceptance of evil as a necessary part of the human condition.

> How can
> We chant if we live in evil and afterward
> Lie harshly buried there?

> If earth dissolves
> Its evil after death, it dissolves it while
> We live.
> (CP 259)

Evil as a part of life becomes bearable when we realise that it, too, is subject to the transcience of all things. Death itself assures us that we need never suffer eternal pain, if we accept that evil does not continue in the nothingness of our life after death. Once again it is a question of accepting the bad in order fully to appreciate the good.

> In the third world, then, there is no pain. Yes, but
> What lover has one in such rocks, what woman,
> However known, at the centre of the heart?
> (CP 323)

The loss of pain, which people at times desire, would also mean a loss of everything at the centre of the heart, all the things we hold dear and which make the very existence of pain bearable. The great advantage of admitting this view of pain and evil is that we thereby reach knowledge of the true state of our condition and will, hopefully, find this condition easier to bear, by virtue of this awareness. It is pointless to posit an 'ideal' world without pain, firstly because such a world does not in fact exist and is not permitted to exist as a plausible fiction to believe in by the harshness of our actual world. We can posit such a world, but can never apply it to our own undeniable experience of pain in the world. Secondly, a world without pain would be like Stevens' paradise without change - flat and lacking in life, for the existence of pain emphasises the satisfactions of a time without pain. Things are defined by the existence of opposites.

> We found,
> If we found the central evil, the central good.
> (CP 251)

It is here, in this bad, that we reach
The last purity of the knowledge of good.
(CP 294)

Evil and pain, far from being deplored, must be embraced as necessary parts of the process of life.

Where does all this acceptance lead to in Stevens? The end of the process of decreation should be a clearing of the vision, an awareness of what is inevitable in the human condition and what has merely been placed there by man in an evasion of the true state, and which therefore can safely be removed. The value of decreation lies in preparing the surface upon which man will paint fictions. "If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea." (L. 427) This basic slate we come to after decreation is Stevens' first definition of reality, as a _ding an sich_ free from the creations of the human. An awareness of it enables us to evolve fictions for all seasons, since we can recognise anything added to the base as a fiction and be more willing than we have been in the past to discard fictions which, though of use once, are merely getting in the way of the formation of today's fictions. The recognition of a fiction as fiction and not "truth"[1] is an important step in decreation, but even though they are no longer believed in fully as true, old fictions can still stand between men and the sun they desire. It is therefore vital that they be swept away with regularity, without undue concessions being made to our misguided attempts at conservation.

The wheel survives the myths.
The fire eye in the clouds survives the gods.
(CP 222)

The reality which these fictions are helping us to deal with exists always

[1] See p. 100.

and will continue to do so regardless of the particular fictions we employ at any one time to explain it. This is a fact that must be taken into constant consideration in the fiction-making process.

> You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
> Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
> That not one curl in nature has survived?
> (OP 14)

The task of the barbers never was to make curls survive in nature and disillusion with the work of the barbers will follow only when people develop unrealistic expectations from their fictions, such as wishing reality to conform to their view of what reality is or should be. Fictions cannot in themselves change reality, which continues to come obstinately "dripping in your hair from sleep", they can only mould our reactions to reality.

Stevens calls the state of mind following decreation 'winter'. Like Stevens' summer, this is a time of the year marked by an absence of the imagination, a time when reality simply <u>is</u>.

> The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
> Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
> It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,
>
> In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
> Than they are in the final finding of the air, in the thing
> Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.
> (OP 96-7)

When we have discarded the fictions of religion, humanism, anthropomorphism and transcendence, and succeeded in seeing reality through the transparent medium of the air, we are left with a true vision of nature as entirely other, with no meaning and no value beyond that of bare existence. This reduction is a necessary process and the nothingness it leads to still offers a certain consolation to the human, as in <u>Snow Men</u>, Stevens' main

poem of the winter mind.

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,
>
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place
>
> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.
> (CP 9-10)

Stevens is asking us to cultivate a mind of winter, to see the natural world as it really is, without reading human thoughts and feelings into it. It may be a difficult task, requiring a "long time" before the habits of wishing can be dispensed with, but in the final stanza Stevens awards the prize for this effort; both the listener and the landscape share the quality of nothingness. Ironically, in the very process of denying a personal relationship between man and the world, Stevens asserts a resemblance. Realising the lack of significance, in a transcendental sense apart from the value of simple existence, in both nature and the human brings a sense of community, but a community based upon an awareness of the fact of mutual nothingness, rather than, as before, based on a misrepresentation of nature. "I shall explain the Snow Man as an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it." (L. 464) It is permissible to see man as part of nature, but wrong to see nature as subsumed under the human. This mutual

"nothingness" is the Stevensian nothingness, which refers to a lack of transcendence, not to a lack of existence. The nothingness is the state of things as they are, a reality which includes the human and which is neither benevolent nor malevolent.

The stripping away of illusions leaves a clearness which makes the following task, that of the poet, easier, for the achieving of the winter mind is but the first step. The winter mind uncovers a vision of reality as it is - "the dominant blank, the unapproachable" (CP 477), but this awareness, because of the qualities of this reality, such as its separation from the human, is psychologically unsatisfying. This barrenness is promptly worked upon by the imagination because the state of things as they are is something we cannot cope with.

> Still one would want more, one would need more,
> More than a world of white and snowy scents.
> (CP 194)

The winter mind tends to move on towards summer because the reality that it discovers is one of poverty. "Winter devising summer in its breast." (CP 186) The two extremes of winter and summer are both unsatisfactory, winter emotionally, summer cognitively.

Quite apart from the emotionally unsatisfactory nature of this vision of a barren world, it falls into the same difficulty as Stevens' summer - they both rely on the idea of a reality free from the imagination, and this reality is impossible to achieve, as opposed to being posited in a fiction, whether summer or winter. To see the world as barren requires the use of the imagination, and so the adoption of the winter mind still leaves us trapped in a fiction. What the winter mind can do, while unable itself to grasp the first idea, is to clear the way for the imagination, which will reach the desired 'centre'.

> The greater part of the imaginative life of people is both created and enjoyed in polar circumstances. However, I suppose that without being contrary, one can say that the right spot is the middle spot between the polar and the anti-polar. It is the true centre that is unapproachable or, rather, extremely difficult to approach. (L. 740)

The imagination has been used in its decreating capacity to reach this extreme of the winter mind, an extreme which must be reached as a first step towards the centre, the union of self and world. This union will be effected by the creative imagination, which finds its mode of operation in the process of poetry.

IV

In a practical sense, how does poetry achieve the union of self and world which Stevens claims for it? The process of poetry begins, as it must in Stevens' aesthetic, with the particulars of the world, unconnected in themselves,[1] but amenable to the integrating tendency of the mind. They are the constituents of Stevens' reality as objects existing apart from the perceiving consciousness and as such are valued for their independence.

> . . . poetry has to do with reality in that concrete and individual aspect of it which the mind can never tackle altogether on its own terms, with matter that is foreign and alien in a way in which abstract systems, ideas in which we detect an inherent pattern, a structure that belongs to the ideas themselves, can never be.
> (OP 236)

The escape from solipsism will be achieved if poetry can succeed in remaining true to these particulars, while giving us the emotional satisfaction found only in the orderings of our own minds. Abstract ideas have the advantage of immediacy and clarity, but they are in the long run dissatisfying because men will not rest content with what they assume to be the mere fabrications of their own minds. Men feel that their own creations are divorced from the reality they are seeking, and so turn the powers of the mind to the pursuit of the particular, "for the imagination, while it might have led him (the poet) to purities beyond

[1] The particulars are in fact connected in a minimal way by Stevens' theory of resemblance. This minimal connection is insufficient for man. See p. 70.

definition, never yet progressed except by particulars." (OP 241)[1]

> Always and always, the difficult inch,
> On which the vast arches of space
> Repose
>
> (OP 103)

Poetry, as with all mental constructs, is based upon the particular, although it is free to move beyond the particular. Its task is to grasp the particular. "A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it . . . " (NA 65)

Our divorce from the particulars of the world is connected with the problem of language and its function of revealing the world to us. For us, now, there is a gap between word and thing, a gap which may not have existed at the moment of naming, but which has since arisen. Now, words symbolise the object and are not identical with it. "The word must be the thing it represents; otherwise it is a symbol. It is a question of identity." (OP 168) The change in language from identity to representation is a degeneration which grieves us, for we are aware of the importance of language in our attempts to reach the external world. The gap between word and thing is dangerous because of the power over nature which language possesses, a power which will mislead us if we can no longer count upon the identity of name and object.

> It was the same,
> Except for the adjectives, an alteration
> Of words that was a change of nature, more
>
> Than the difference that clouds make over a town.
>
> (CP 487)

[1] cf. Vaihinger, p. 54. "By the formation of such spaces, of such conceptual constructs . . . it is then possible to grasp the particular in its relationships more definitely."

Much of our experience of reality is completely dependent upon language,[1] notably the things of the past and of the future, which exist only in our articulated memories.

> It matters, because everything we say
> Of the past is description without place, a cast
>
> Of the imagination, made in sound;
> And because what we say of the future must portend,
>
> Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be
> Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening.
> (CP 345-6)

Words spring from the self, which must find an objectification for them. We now feel that words don't reach reality because they are trapped in the self, in humanness; as the self feels divorced from reality, this spreads to the words chosen by the self. This gap is to some extent an illusion, for words remain linked to things through the intuition of reality which was involved in the initial naming process. When Adam named the animals, he began with an intuition of the object, added his own perception of it, and created the word, the embodiment of the relation of Adam to the animals. In this sense, words are creative, making the thing as they join the self to it, and thus they approximate to being itself, which, too, is a mixture of self and world.

> You were created of your name, the word
> Is that of which you were the personage.
> There is no life except in the word of it.
> (CP 287)

There is an inseparable intermingling of two things, the name and the thing, Eulalia existing only through her name, and the name being entirely

[1] cf. Vaihinger, p. 169.

dependent on her. Being, life, consists of this conjunction of objects and human fabrications, in this case, language.

There is, in fact, a link remaining between the self and reality, but ordinary language, because of its staleness, no longer convinces us that both sides of the union are present: we have lost the object. Although we are intellectually aware that language, as a product of the human imagination, cannot be wholly divorced from reality,[1] we feel that it does not reach reality accurately. We are seeking an assurance about the external world which ordinary language no longer provides. Poetry's function is to use this unsatisfactory medium, with its split from reality, and, by revitalising the language, to restore it to its original task of possessing and transmitting reality.

> The poet records his experience as poet in subjects and words which are part of that experience . . . Experiment in respect to subjects and words is the effort on his part to record the truth of that experience.
>
> (L. 589)

The special qualities of poetry make it the only way in which this revitalising process can take place. Only in poetry can we get what ordinary language fails to give us, namely a sense of reaching reality through words. We are seeking "not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands." (CP 238) Words in poetry have the power to intensify perception itself.

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

[1] See pp. 75-6.

Stevens claims that words can adequately bring us the external world, but this claim does not extend beyond the special conditions of language within poetry, for in the act of writing poetry the poet can convey his intuition of the existence and nature of reality. In the process of poetry, reality can be grasped.

> Their words are chosen out of their desire,
> The joy of language, when it is themselves.
> With these they celebrate the central poem . . .
>
> It is
> As if the central poem became the world,
>
> VI
>
> And the world became the central poem, each one the mate
> Of the other
>
> (CP 441)

The poem does contain words which are things, or to be more precise, it is as if this were so, as if the world is contained within the central poem, and this semblance is enough.

What poetry is doing is reminding us of the creative function of language as it joins self and object. Poetry begins with resemblance; the perception of resemblances is a major link between the world of reality and that of the imagination for, according to Stevens, all natural things are in some way connected and this connection may be perceived through the agency of the imagination.

> First, then, as to the resemblance between things in nature, it should be observed that resemblance constitutes a relation between them since, in some sense, all things resemble each other.[1]
>
> (NA 71)

[1] Apart from his reading of artists such as Duthuit on light, Stevens seems to have taken this idea of connection from William James. cf. James, pp.127-162.

This basic connection is a necessary one for our everyday perception; it is "the base of appearance" (NA 72). The imagination comes into its own when it is asked to supply rather than to perceive resemblances. "The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in resemblance . . . " (NA 76) People derive pleasure from the perception of resemblances, whether they are there in nature, or created for them by the imagination, because of the wish for a greater coherence than they themselves find in the world. "Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance." (NA 77)

More than satisfying this need for coherence, the elaboration of similarities "enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it." (NA 77) To be able to call attention to aspects which objects have in common means that one is forced to know the attributes of the respective objects well. The linking of a natural object in metaphor is one way of knowing reality with greater accuracy. "The proliferation of resemblances extends an object." (NA 78)

Along with the pleasure to be found in resemblance goes a pleasure in repetition. One may have an intellectual conviction that the particulars of the world appear fortuitously and without reason, but in everyday life we rely, of necessity, upon the recurrence of set patterns. Although the universe is seen as discrete, chaotic, with no necessary connections, it is possible, through time, to perceive order. The past allows this for, although purpose is absent, one can look back and see the unavoidable connections caused by co-existence in the world, and this pragmatic arrangement of the events of the past is what we build our present lives on. Some change is both necessary and desirable, in that identical recurrence would become stultifying, but there is great reassurance to be found in patterns.

> It is unnecessary to labour the point, that in broad outline certain general states of nature recur, and that our very natures have adapted themselves to such repetitions. But . . . nothing ever really recurs in exact detail.[1]

This theoretically inexplicable phenomenon of recurrence finds a direct echo in the creations of metaphor.[2] Metaphor is one of the agents whereby we satisfy our desire for stability yet if it ceases to change, if it remains in a fixed form, it becomes oppressive and loses its appeal.

> All are evasions like a repeated phrase,
> Which, by its repetition, comes to bear
> A meaning without a meaning.
>
> (OP 65)

Stevens is wary of repetition for, while he recognises its therapeutic value, he dislikes its tendency to resist change with reference to the particular examples it employs.

> One of the vast repetitions final in
> Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round
>
> And round and round, the merely going round,
> Until merely going round is a final good,
>
> (CP 405)

In this case there is a repetition of a pattern rather than of the details of the pattern. When there is not a constant process of replacement of at least one aspect, there is an intolerable fixity.

> It means the distaste we feel for this withered scene
>
> Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,
> It is a repetition.
>
> (CP 390)

[1] Whitehead, p. 15.

[2] See p. 77.

Combining these two tendencies towards resemblance and repetition, we have Stevens' statement, in NA 81 -

> Since, as between resemblances, one is always a little more nearly perfect than another and since, from this, it is easy for perfectionism of a sort to evolve, it is not too extravagant to think of resemblances and of the repetition of resemblances as a source of the ideal.

Poetry's role is to select from all the available resemblances in nature, assuming that all things are at least remotely connected, those which will please us and give us a sense that the universe goes on in an orderly fashion. To do this, it utilises various traditional poetic devices, analogy and metaphor in particular, because of Stevens' emphasis on unifying separate elements. The first step follows on from decreation and is called by Stevens 'abstraction': this involves seeing the world as clearly as possible (as we should do after the decreating process), apart from man's previous conceptions of it, and then placing the perceived particulars of it in the mind.

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

The ultimate poem must be abstract[1] because the first idea can only be reached by an effort of the mind in poetry. Simple perception will not bring us into contact with reality, this contact requires a mental discipline, an effort of the mind. So we have the apparent paradox of

[1] Stevens at times refers to the abstract in its ordinary sense of the non-particular, and disapproves of this abstract as falsifying. cf. CP 276, OP 65.

seeing the thing clearly only in the idea of it.

> How clean the sun when seen in its idea
> (CP 381)

We may dislike the thought of being so utterly dependent on the abstract but, since we have rejected naive sense-perception in our epistemology, this dependence is inevitable, and the poet can help us by making this palatable.

> The long and short of it is that we have to fix abstract objectives and then to conceal the abstract figures in actual appearance. A hero won't do, but we like him much better when he doesn't look it and, of course, it is only when he doesn't look it that we can believe in him.
> (L. 489)

This is the beginning of an explanation of fictional structures. "Actual appearance" is, according to Stevens, cognitively unreliable, but its appeal, based on the strength of our naive assumptions about the world, is understandable. It is acceptable when backed up by the integration with reality brought about by the poetic fiction, which is given the cloak of "actual appearance".

At times, as in Contrary Theses (II), one may become aware of the abstract lying behind our ordinary perceptions.

> The abstract was suddenly there and gone again.
> The negroes were playing football in the park.
> The abstract that he saw, like the locust-leaves, plainly:
> (CP 270)

For most people, this awareness of the world of theory apart from our ordinary sensual experience, if it comes at all, is momentary. The perceptions which normally obscure such an insight return with all the force of their immediacy, an immediacy shared, for a time, by the recognition

of the abstract.

In Contrary Theses (II), this intuition of the abstract came spontaneously and did not involve the poetic process. Most of the time, however, the awareness of a world of correspondence between the self and material phenomena is brought about by poetry. Both analogy and metaphor are affirmations and elaborations of intuited resemblances between the particulars of the world. "Every image is the elaboration of a particular of the subject of that image." (NA 127) Stevens defines his use of the word analogy -

> We are thinking of it as likeness, as resemblance between parallels and yet parallels that are parallels only in the imagination, and we are thinking of it in its relation to poetry.
>
> (NA 110)

Analogy is the linking process that precedes the incorporation of these fabricated links in actual poetry, and so analogy is not in itself poetry, but is productive of it.

> Poetry is almost incredibly one of the effects of analogy . . . it is almost incredibly the outcome of figures of speech or, what is the same thing, the outcome of the operation of one imagination on another through the instrumentality of the figures.
>
> (NA 117-8)

Like metaphor, analogy is used by the poet in his search for reality, and these figures of speech, which draw together disparate elements of reality, succeed, by this new juxtaposition, in heightening the sense of reality. The grain of reality is more easily grasped when its nature has been illuminated by the weaving of an image around it. This revelation of reality through the elaboration of images is only possible if we accept Stevens' assertion that the imagination "creates nothing. We are able to

romanticize and to give blue jays fifteen toes, but if there were no such thing as a bird we could not create it." (L. 465)

Just as the constructions of analogy must, in the end, be traceable back, if only in theory, to their source in reality, so too with metaphor, which is far from being an autonomous realm of figures.

> There is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor. One does not progress through metaphors. Thus reality is the indispensable element of each metaphor.
>
> (OP 179)

Metaphor unifies by being a single image composed of separate objects and is therefore valuable as a means of bringing greater coherence to the particulars of the world; it selects, as we are forced to constantly, from the chaos of the world.

> A few words, a memorandum voluble
> Of the giant sense, the enormous harnesses
> And writhing wheels of this world's business
>
> (CP 308)

Metaphor is not in itself the base, the ding an sich, though it draws from it - "The degrees of reality. The absolute object slightly turned is a metaphor of the object." (OP 179) Metaphor works upon Stevens' base and gives us a greater awareness of that base. Metaphor is actually preferable in some ways to the naked perception of the first idea, even if this were possible, for individual metaphors can be constantly replaced, avoiding the "ennui" of the basic slate, which simply is.

> and yet so poisonous
>
> Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
> The truth itself, the first idea becomes
> The hermit in a poet's metaphors,
>
> Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.
> May there be an ennui of the first idea?
> What else, prodigious scholar, should there be?
>
> (CP 381)

Metaphor is a part of the process of poetry, part of the paradigm, and as such must constantly find new examples, to avoid fixity. It should be a way of thought rather than an object. "The disposition to metaphor cannot be kept concealed by the choice of metaphor." (OP 186) Individual, formed metaphors swiftly become fixed, but this must never extend to the metaphor-making process, whose very task is to get rid of dangerous, fixed metaphors and replace them with new integrations. It is a process by which the imagination explores the resemblance between two or more parts of reality - "Resemblance in metaphor is an activity of the imagination; and in metaphor the imagination is life." (NA 73) Momentary order may be brought to chaos by the imagination's operation in metaphor, but the relations of metaphor are purely temporary and, once fabricated and elaborated, are subject to the decreating power of the mind. The metaphor which, instead of springing from a sense of the world, has been foisted upon it must be rejected, along with metaphor which has been relevant once, but which has lost its usefulness by virtue of its staleness.

> In the way you speak
> You arrange, the thing is posed,
> What in nature merely grows.
>
> To-morrow when the sun,
> For all your images,
> Comes up as the sun, bull fire,
> Your images will have left
> No shadow of themselves.
>
> (CP 198)

Nature will always tend to break free of the constrictions of man-made metaphor and new apprehensions of reality will have to be made. Images of the world are necessary, and we must accept them, but we are free to reject stale images, which no longer capture the essence of reality, and to select more suitable representations, in this case, "bull fire". The

main objection to stale metaphor is in terms of this failure to perform a function, the function for which it exists - to give a sense of the freshness and individuality of reality. The images in The Man on the Dump are repugnant because they have been worn out by over-use.

> how many men have copied dew
> For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
> With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
> Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
> One grows to hate these things except on the dump.
> (CP 202)

This staleness in metaphor is unavoidable as long as poetry does not perform in isolation, as long as it is forced to employ a medium which is not exclusively reserved for poetry. The cultural sharing of particular images, which cannot be avoided by virtue of the fact that the poet is using a language shared by others, leads to a loss of effectiveness, if only in that readers miss out on the poet's experience to a greater or lesser extent. This loss stimulates the poet, who goes on to create new metaphors, new apprehensions of reality, out of his own need rather than out of social obligation.[1] These new metaphors in turn become available to the people who are unable to make their own integrations, the same loss of effectiveness due to repetition takes place, and so the poet becomes, once again, dissatisfied and impelled towards new images. This cycle never ends, and is a re-enactment of the story of language itself. The poet's words, his "gibberish", reunites self and thing in language, and so is a return to the Adamic state. But, because of the social nature of a common language, this gibberish becomes reduced, by incorporation, to the vulgate, the ordinary speech which troubles people by its separation from

[1] See p. 104.

reality.[1] Men destroy the very thing they wish to preserve: by seeking to preserve the integration wrought by the poet, they make it stale by repetition, and destroy its capture of reality. As in all forms of language, this conservatism in metaphor, while understandable, falsifies the flux of reality and as such must be warned against, for

> We seek
> The poem of pure reality, untouched
> By trope or deviation
> (CP 471)

However, metaphor in its true function as grasper of reality, cannot be condemned.

> How, then, is metaphor degeneration,
> When Swatara becomes this undulant river
> And the river becomes the landless, waterless
> ocean?
> (CP 444)

The use of metaphor enables us to return to the state when the word is the thing itself, when Swatara becomes the river.

Metaphor and analogy are the means by which the two sides of the poetic process are reconciled - the world itself and the personality of the poet. The poet perceives the resemblances and relations which exist in the world but which are ignored in everyday perception, and then expresses these relations, through the "irrational" working of his imagination, in the language of poetry. He is never prompted to seek integrations through a sense of obligation to other, less able people.

[1] cf. T.E. Hulme., "Prose is in fact the museum where the dead metaphors of the poets are preserved." Speculations (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924), p. 152.

> There is not the slightest doubt that egotism is at the bottom of what a good many poets do . . . The truth is that egotism is at the bottom of everything everybody does . . .
>
> (L. 305)

This has a certain pragmatic backing, for poets are oppressed by the world they live in, and this includes other people, to the point, at times of great pressure, of making creation impossible. It is inefficient for the poet to become unduly concerned about what his poetry may or may not do for others.

> The ivory tower was offensive if the man who lived in it wrote, there, of himself for himself. It was not offensive if he used it because he could do nothing without concentration . . .
>
> (NA 123)

If ordinary people need and desire the illuminations of the poet, they must accept his apparent indifference, and as we will see, Stevens is the last person who can be accused of an uncaring attitude towards the problems of ordinary people. It remains true, nevertheless, that the poet is a man apart from ordinary men, a man whose task has been created by the actions of these men, for the poet would not be necessary, epistemologically, if men did not divorce word from thing. Given that the poet differs from most people in this ability to recreate the freshness of language, it is predictable that he will feel alienated from those who see a different version of the world.

> Shall I grapple with my destroyers
> In the muscular poses of the museums?
> But my destroyers avoid the museums.
>
> (CP 153)

Those who do not acknowledge their need for poetry can never be made to confront it on its own terms and are best ignored. Their danger lies in

the suffocating effect they might have upon the poet, whose first duty must be to himself, and hence to his poetry.

> The second phase of the poet's problem, then, is to maintain his freedom, the only condition in which he can hope to produce significant poetry.
>
> (L. 526)

Stevens believes in the greatness of the poet's mind as a relevant factor, since poetry is "a process of the personality of the poet." (NA 45) The poet himself has little control over his world view, which is formed over the years by a series of intangibles, and which is inescapably his according to the cast of his mind. "These sayings are another form of the saying that poets are born not made." (NA 122) It is not so much the avowed system of belief of a poet that concerns us, but rather his imagination in a general sense, the way in which he feels impelled to see the world. This particular vision of the world is what is revealed by his poetry. "The poet's native sphere . . . is what he can make of the world." (OP 198) As far as the poet himself is concerned, he feels an irresistible impulse to participate in the act of writing poetry, largely because of a world view which lays a certain burden on art. There is also the impulse to corroborate such a world view in the poetry itself.

> In all his poems with all their enchantments for the poet himself, there is the final enchantment that they are true. The significance of the poetic act then is that it is evidence.
>
> (OP 241)

What the poet himself gains is a certain fulfilment, but part of that fulfilment is the knowledge that it can be communicated.

> I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs, and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others.
>
> (NA 29)

Our sense of the world is inadequate in some respect, as is evinced by our continuing to turn to poetry for consolation, and the poet's task is to modify our world view by the effect of his own, and by so doing "he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it." (NA 31)

His poetry, by which our lives are changed, is not, however, simply a product of his personality, for the poet is governed to some extent by the irrational.

> What interests us is a particular process in the rational mind which we recognise as irrational in the sense that it takes place unaccountably.
>
> (OP 218)

We cannot specify what quality in the poet's mind gives him the power to gain insight into reality, nor can we examine too closely the reasons for the particular form this insight is expressed in.

> If each of us is a biological mechanism, each poet is a poetic mechanism. To the extent that what he produces is mechanical: that is to say, beyond his power to change, it is irrational.
>
> (OP 220)

Because of this irrational aspect of the imagination, which is not open to explanation, it is free from the complete control either of external nature or of the poet. It is the moment of poetic inspiration that is irrational, the actual perception of an integration, in that we cannot explain why that particular integration should have appeared at that time.

The elaboration, for the purpose of communication, of such an inspiration is, on the contrary, controlled by the poet. It is only in this second stage, of elaboration, that the personality of the poet becomes apparent although, of course, his personality is the determining factor as

to whether a perception will take place at all. Here what is required is an "effort of the mind not dependent on the vicissitudes of the sensibility." (NA 165) There is a "laborious element" involved in the actual shaping of a poem.

> Writing poetry is a conscious activity. While poems may very well occur, they had much better be caused. (L. 274)

Even in this shaping process there are elements of inevitability, for the poet's style is a product of the personality over which he has little control. "A man has no choice about his style." (OP 210) Similarly, with regard to subject, he is compelled to concern himself with selected things. "A poet writes of twilight because he shrinks from noon-day." (NA 122) This is subject in the widest sense of what a poet's total body of work concerns itself with, as opposed to the subject of a particular poem, where the "choice of subject-matter is a completely irrational thing." (OP 220)

Stevens continually emphasises the importance of poetry as a process rather than as a fixed, completed body of poems. "Poetry is the spirit, as the poem is the body." (L. 363) Writing poetry becomes an activity which never ceases, an activity which never fixes itself in the poem: the poet can therefore write notes towards a supreme fiction rather than the fictional structure itself. Accepting a vision of reality as flux means that the poet must try to reflect this flux by never ending the process of poetry, which is "to a large extent an art of perception". (OP 191) Poetry becomes an act, a gesture, the activity of a perception instead of the form of a perception, since only in this way can the mind feel assured that it has reached a true vision of reality as it is. To quote Ernst Fischer again -

> Reality is just that: a state of suspended tension between being and non-being, in which both being and non-being are unreal and only their incessant interaction, their becoming, is real.[1]

We are part of the action, whereas forms may exclude us. The personality of the poet, "the incidence of the nervous sensitiveness of the poet in the act of creating the poem" (NA 48), and the world outside are both processes which join to create a third process, the perception of reality. What this activity gives us is an all-important sense of union between self and world. "The center that he sought was a state of mind" (OP 112). We long for the ease of mind which even a sense of belonging would bring.

> It would be enough
> If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
> In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,
>
> Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
> Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
> And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy.
> (CP 430)

This reconciliation is the aim of poetry and Stevens' use of "sense" establishes the criterion by which his poetry and his aesthetic must be judged - pragmatically, in their effects on people's happiness, and not philosophically, in the persuasiveness of the suggestion that an actual reunion has taken place. His claims are only to an "as if."

> As if, as if, as if the disparate halves
> Of things were waiting in a betrothal known
> To none, awaiting espousal to the sound
>
> Of right joining, a music of ideas, the burning
> And breeding and bearing birth of harmony,
> The final relation, the marriage of the rest.
> (CP 464-5)

[1] Fischer, p. 124.

This sense of amassing harmony gives us pleasure - "there is an exquisite pleasure and harmony in these inter-relations, circuits" (L. 368) - and pleasure in the widest and highest sense of satisfaction with living is the purpose lying behind the act of poetry for Stevens.

V

The integration felt by the poet must be communicated, because this communication is a part of his sense of fulfilment,[1] and this can only be done by the elaboration and articulation of the moment of insight in some culturally acceptable form.

> Not only must art derive from an intense experience of reality, it must also be constructed, it must gain form through objectivity.[2]

The first stage in this form is the poem itself but, beyond that, the whole social aspect of poetry calls for elaborated fictions. These are only necessary because of the inability of the ordinary man firstly to have integrations of his own, and secondly to accept the insight of the poet unless put in a palatable form. This is one sense of fiction in Stevens and is closely linked to traditional poetic devices such as metaphor and symbol: in his own poetry he uses the fictions of central man, summer, marriage, the woman of earth, and so on. These are expedient devices, to enable the reader to reach approximately the same process of integration as the poet achieved in the act of writing the poem.

On quite another level there is the fiction as belief. Actual poetry, the body of a poet's poems, incorporating a structure of fictions, is itself the embodiment of a theory of poetry, which in turn is based upon a number of views about the world, views which are probably fictional. There

[1] See p. 81.

[2] Fischer, p. 9.

are three levels involved. Firstly there is the superstructure of the poetry itself, with its relatively traditional figures and images. Then we have the underlying aesthetic, which in Stevens' case is a theory of fiction-making. Beneath this aesthetic we have the world view which justifies it; for Stevens this involves a vision of the state of things which necessitates his theory of fictions. All of these senses of the word fiction involve willed belief, the difference being the degree of belief we accord to the respective levels. The aesthetic and the underlying world view are obviously closely linked, the superstructure of the poems is more arbitrary and expedient. To the extent that we wish to appreciate and react to the poetry at all, we must respond to the images used by the poet, and will our belief in them as effective poetic devices. However, this willed belief need not be extended either to the aesthetic theory, or to the world view which was necessary on the poet's part before he could begin to write the poems. Naturally, at some point in our final assessment of any poet, all three levels must be taken into account, and it is likely that we will rate more highly the poet who happens to hold the same world view and aesthetic as ourselves and who also manages to communicate these in a form which appeals to us.

The superstructure, the web of images, symbols and words that goes to make up the body of a poet's work, is the public means by which we reach the underlying aesthetic and philosophy. Starting with the given poems, we infer from them the views which are incorporated in them to await our discovery. We reach the theory through the actual experience of the poems. Good poetry allows us to reach through it in this way, but after this process of inference has taken place, it is up to us whether or not we assent fully to all that the poet is offering, and this assent is largely dependent on how much in tune with the poet's mind we happen to be. Thus

we have Stevens' fictional representation of a marriage of self and reality, as in the Captain and Bawda, which we can accept on the level of poetic response, but beneath this figure lies Stevens' belief that a union between imagination and reality can take place in poetry. This in turn demands a world view which sees a separation in normal life between the self and world. We can either assent to Stevens' ready-made consolation in the effective marriage image, and feel a sense of peace from this, or go further, and assent also to the reasoning which has led him to such a figure. This is obviously preferable in that an appreciation of a poet's underlying world view and aesthetic can often have the effect of heightening the response to the surface imagery, and this is particularly true in regard to Stevens. There is the added complication in Stevens' case that his aesthetic is based on the very process we have gone through to reach the aesthetic. He is writing poetry about the act of writing poetry, which is less simple than the poet with a world view which commits him to poetry, but does not demand the incorporation of aesthetic in act.

The most important fiction in Stevens is the fiction that there is an absolute reality existing outwith the human mind, a reality which can be reached by an effort of the mind in imagination. His whole theory of the elaboration and subsequent destruction of fictional constructs is itself based on a fiction, albeit a fiction which cannot be rejected. When Stevens says - "To be stripped of every fiction except one / The fiction of an absolute" (CP 404), the problem is to find out the degree of assent Stevens gives to this basic fiction, for Stevens' fictions are arranged in a hierarchy of degrees of assent. The fictions employed in the actual poems, for example the figure of the glass man, are permitted provisional assent, and are based on fictions to which Stevens grants more durable assent. Stevens' world view is such that he cannot legitimately claim eternal belief

in any fiction, even those of self and world: he must always allow the possibility at least that we could continue to live, even if very differently, without these fictions.

In practice, we form a particular world view and then endeavour to express the beliefs arising from this world view in a credible form. These beliefs, in Stevens' own case, are non-absolute beliefs, not beliefs as true, but part of the expediency of expressing them involves the fiction of truth.[1] We are psychologically impelled both to cloak the naked fiction in comforting images and to give it an assent which it does not command epistemologically. Stevens' 'supreme fiction' could be represented by almost anything; Stevens suggests a human figure as being the most acceptable form.

> If we are to think of a supreme fiction, instead of creating it, as the Greeks did, for example in the form of a mythology, we might choose to create it in the image of a man: an agreed-on superman.
>
> (M.D. 176)

This leads to the creation in Stevens' own poetry of the figure of the central man, the man who will symbolise for us the integrations achieved by the poet. The choice of this particular figure is to some extent arbitrary, although, as we shall see, there are reasons why this form should have a lasting appeal, or rather an appeal which will endure beyond other forms.

> I have at least trifled with the idea of some arbitrary object of belief: some artificial subject for poetry, a source of poetry. The major men are part of the entourage of that artificial object.
>
> (L. 485)

[1] See p. 95.

The creation of the figure of central man is designed to comfort the central man manqué of A Weak Mind in the Mountains, who is potentially capable of doing all that the central man can do, but who finds himself, at the moment of crisis, impotent. Such people need help from a figure not too far removed from the image they have of their own selves, and so they rely upon abstractions from the sum of the human.

> The major men -
> That is different. They are characters beyond
> Reality, composed thereof. They are
> The fictive man created out of men.
> They are men but artificial men. They are
> Nothing in which it is not possible
> To believe
>
> (CP 335)

Drawn from the human, yet going beyond the human, major men are satisfying figures because of man's quest for an assurance of something outwith the human, but not too far away from it. Man's logical nature demands an answer to doubts about the external world, while his emotional nature calls for an answer which will not horrify by its distance from the familiarity of the human. Major man has the ability to discover the supreme fiction in the flux of reality and to make it available to us all: he is in no way an evolutionary superman, a projection into the future, for he is drawn as a fiction from the characteristics of men here on earth. He is no more than the image for a particular society, an abstract which can act as its principle. This society is peopled by "medium man", who

> In February hears the imagination's hymns
> And sees its images, its motions
> And multitudes of motions
>
> And feels the imagination's mercies
>
> (CP 439)

Although the hero exists only as an abstraction, the very concept of the

hero can help the ordinary man to reach the imagination's saving revelations. Just as poetry is distilled from the speech of the multitude and given back to the multitude, so the hero is drawn from the mass, to sum it up, and then given back for their use. He is the most suitable image for a society, for one of our most basic needs is for an ideal man, one of the roughs made good. This need appears not to be satisfied by our modern society -

> What is terribly lacking from life today is the well developed individual, the master of life; or the man who by his mere appearance convinces you that a mastery of life is possible.
>
> (L. 518)

Since we no longer seem to possess in real life the heroes we need, poetry must incorporate such figures in its fictional systems. Stevens continues to emphasise that the major men are of human origin and exist to satisfy a need in the human.

> The major abstraction is the idea of man
> And major man is its exponent, abler
> In the abstract than in his singular,
>
> More fecund as principle than particle,
> Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,
> In being more than an exception, part,
>
> Though a heroic part, of the commonal.
>
> (CP 388)

Major man exists only because it is efficient that he should exist to demonstrate the union possible for all men, the successful conjoining of imagination and reality. We require a "principle" only because bitter experience has taught us that the lone "particle" has no certainty of reaching this desired union. The fiction of major man confirms our dependency on him by refusing to wear away as other, less relevant,

fictions do.

> That obsolete fiction of the wide river in
> An empty land; the gods that Boucher killed;
> And the metal heroes that time granulates -
> The philosophers' man alone still walks in dew,
> Still by the sea-side mutters milky lines
> Concerning an immaculate imagery.
>
> (CP 250)

Although in theory major man is subject to the same decreating power as all our fictions, he is a fiction so moulded to our desires that he outlasts the others. He is a result of the inadequacy of the human in this place and time - "Since humanism is not enough, it is necessary to piece out its characters fictively." (L. 489)

Stevens has a rather surprising attitude towards humanism. He himself is a firm believer in the ability of man to solve problems which are often posed unwittingly by man himself, yet he recognises that for medium man, humanism alone remains unsatisfactory. The merely human is simply not enough for our irrepressible transcendental longings. We are only too well aware that man does not possess the attributes of a god.

> The trouble with humanism is that man as God remains man, but there is an extension of man, the leaner being, in fiction, a possibly more than human human, a composite human.
>
> (L. 434)

To make the individual man the supreme value leaves a disturbing sense that this value is too low, that man as god is a poor specimen. We cannot return to a plausible god-like figure, but we need not rest at the merely human.

> The chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction.
>
> (L. 449)

Humanism binds us to man as he is, God takes us too far beyond the human to be credible, but in the middle we have a fiction which will satisfy by being beyond the human, but not alien. Major man is a myth outwith the human, yet created by it, and is a satisfactory compromise between the incredible heights of a god, and the depressing depths of an ordinary human being.

This "composite human" shows us how we may live by the imagination, find a sense of the world of which we are part, and so find tranquillity.

> He is the transparence of the place in which
> He is and in his poems we find peace.
> (CP 251)

The central man, who is frequently described in terms of glass, is a personification of the fusion of subject and object which is the chief aim of poetry.

> He was a shell of dark blue glass, or ice,
> Of air collected in a deep essay,
> Or light embodied, or almost, a flash
> On more than muscular shoulders, arms and chest,
> Blue's last transparence as it turned to black,
>
> VI
>
> The glitter of a being, which the eye
> Accepted yet which nothing understood,
> A fusion of night, its blue of the pole of blue
> And of the brooding mind, fixed but for a slight
> Illumination of movement as he breathed.
> (CP 297)

The glass is the transparent medium in which there can be a pure mingling of perception and what is perceived.

> The mannerism of nature caught in a glass
> And there become a spirit's mannerism,
> A glass as warm with things going as far as they can.
> (CP 519)

As a fusion of subject and object the glass man is nothing less than the supreme fiction of poetry, and we are back again to the problem of belief. The glass man belongs to the ever-changing fictional superstructure, but represents Stevens' more durable belief in the efficacy of poetry. We are asked to accept the representation of this in the particular form of the major man only because such a figure works -

> Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination.
> (L. 370)

Strictly speaking everything becomes reduced to matters of faith: Crispin deludes himself by thinking that he has settled for certainty when he chooses plums rather than the fictions of plums, for both the plum and the representation of it are in varying degrees fictional. We ought to be aware that when we settle for plums we are merely choosing a different sort of fiction, one better disguised as something which is not a fiction.

Stevens himself faces up to the consequences of his system of beliefs - he himself believes in a fiction, in that he gives a great deal of assent to the idea that a union of imagination and reality is achieved through the act of poetry. This commitment in terms of belief to something known to be fictional may "seem a negation, or, rather, a paradox", but "I think that the history of belief will show that it has always been in a fiction." (L. 370) For Stevens, and those who accept his world view, it is simply a question of which fiction one ought to choose as principal repository of belief. In Stevens' system, the poem bridges the gap between fiction as structure and fiction as belief in that as a representative of the poet's insight it is social, fabricated, yet in that it is itself part of the insight, and capable of arousing this insight in others, it is allied to

belief. The main thing to remember when entering into Stevens' system is that both the paradigm and the examples are in differing ways fictional, and both are in theory subject to change.

The paradigm underlying the fictional superstructure is subject to change from the same source as is the overt surface. Since both are fictional, in time the imagination will decreate them both. However, there are many reasons why this paradigm will tend to change at a greatly reduced speed. Firstly, we seldom see our deepest beliefs as fictional in the way that we do become aware of the structures as fictions which have been arbitrarily employed to express these beliefs. We have a psycho-social need to see some things as fixed and stable. Our beliefs are inextricably part of our personality and our conservative tendencies unite with our self-esteem to preserve such views, by giving them the status of beliefs as true and not beliefs in so far forth. Conservatism is aided by the fact that we form our basic world view with great deference to the society of which we are part; in Stevens' case this has led to a disposition towards scepticism about any creed but scepticism. One may believe that all beliefs are provisional, but it is difficult to apply this to the belief that all beliefs are provisional.[1] This leads us to the basic objection to frequent changes in belief paradigms, which is that the actual beliefs are far less important than the act of believing. Socially and psychologically, we need fictions, even though their epistemological functions may themselves be fictions. What we are, of necessity, left with is the "willed belief" of William James, which accepts with tolerance the needs and inadequacies of men, and permits them to find consolation in provisional,

[1] The greatness of Stevens lies in his ability to take the final step and submit his own theory to the scepticism forced upon us by our world view. See p. 121.

non-absolute constructs. Our needs remain remarkably similar through time, and we can simply choose firstly the paradigm we feel best suits our age, and secondly the examples, again with the advantage of relevance.

> There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief; if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else.
>
> (L. 430)

This tolerance with regard to fictions is backed up by, indeed stems from, the world view of our own age, which has blurred the distinction between aesthetic fictions and our other ways of ordering the world. Illusion has derogatory overtones only when people insist on clinging to a belief that old ideas of "truth" can be found in the world. We must revise our idea of knowledge in the light of what we see human nature to be today.

> It may be lawful to wonder whether the various kinds of union now realised in the universe that we inhabit may not possibly have been successively evolved after the fashion in which we now see human systems evolving in consequence of human needs.[1]

"True" ideas are traditionally held to be those which correspond to an external reality, but our present awareness of the impossibility of verifying this type of truth ought to make us acknowledge it as a fiction in which we desire to believe. Our problems will be, if not eased, simplified when we cease to yearn for the impossible.

> For so long as these ideational constructs are supposed to have objective value, contradictions and difficulties

[1] James, p. 158.

arise which disappear if we regard them as mere fictions.[1]

Rather than being an absolute, truth is one's own experience at a given time and it changes with the perceiver and with the world as perceived. Rather than "true" ideas we have ideas which work, which are valuable for us to retain and this must be the standard by which ideas are judged. Unfortunately, man has a desire to cling to the delusion of truth in the old sense.

> The unquenchable interest in truth that burns in the breast of every thinking man will demand, for all eternity, that he should combat error with all his power and spread truth in every direction, i.e. behave exactly as if error must some day be completely extirpated and we might look forward to a time when truth will reign in undisputed sovereignty. This indeed is characteristic of a nature like that of man, designed to be for ever approximating to unattainable ideals.[2]

This, however, is based on the impossible, the certainty of grasping truth. Problems are caused only by man's immaturity in his unwillingness to give up what he considers to be external sanctions for his conduct, for a refusal to seek this unattainable truth leads to a new ability to face the challenge offered by the world as it really is. We are forced now to abandon many notions previously held dear, such as our traditional elevation of the reason above faith.

> There is, in fact, at bottom very little difference between reason and faith, for, if faith be defined as the power of believing what we know to be untrue, reason is the power of kidding ourselves into believing that what we want to think is true.[3]

[1] Vaihinger, p. 133.

[2] Forberg, quoted in Vaihinger, p. 322.

[3] C.E.M. Joad, Guide to Modern Thought (Faber, 1933), p. 199.

We can no longer assume an absolute truth which exists outwith man and merely awaits his perception of it, and so we are flung back on a new, and at times disturbing, perspectivism.

> For both art and life depend wholly on the laws of optics, on perspective and illusion; both to be blunt, depend on the necessity of error.[1]

This new awareness of the lack of absolute sanctions throws the emphasis on the human origin of what we term truth, and on its subservience to human needs.

> You . . . You said,
> "There are many truths,
> But they are not parts of a truth."
> Then the tree, at night, began to change,
>
> Smoking through green and smoking blue.
> (CP 203)

A rejection of the absolute unity of truth brings a new awareness of the natural, contingent world we live in, where reality is a shifting composition of green and blue, world and self. We are left with a purely human truth.

> Truths don't exist before we invent them. They respond to man's need of economy, just as beliefs to his need of faith.[2]

The awareness that there is no absolute truth to discover gives a new value to what has previously been condemned as illusion. If we live always in illusion of some sort, it can no longer be rejected as non-

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, transl. Golffing. (Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p. 10.

[2] Hulme, p. 240.

cognitive, and the use of illusion need no longer be seen as a flight from reality.

> The use of the word illusion suggests the simplest way to define the difference between escapism in a pejorative sense and in a non-pejorative sense: that is to say: it is the difference between elusion and illusion, or benign illusion. Of course, I believe in benign illusion.
> (L. 402)

All our orderings are to some extent arbitrary and illusory, but this fades into insignificance beside the massive consolatory task they perform.

> If poetry introduces order, and every competent poem introduces order, and if order means peace, even though that particular peace is an illusion, is it any less an illusion than a good many other things that everyone high and low now-a-days concedes to be no longer of any account?
> (L. 293)

The exposure of all human systems as fictional can, of course, create a depressing scepticism, even a nihilism and in theoretical terms this is inevitable, given our previous high pretensions. Optimism and creativity come in when we reach the problem of which fictions we are to guide our lives by. If all our systems are illusory, what is there to choose between them? Stevens seems to prefer consciously held illusions to illusions plain and simple, because it is part of his world view to prefer being aware of the psychological props he is using; for Stevens the ultimate test of maturity in the present age is the ability to accept the fictional as a necessary object of belief, without cloaking its true nature by calling it "true" in the old sense.

> It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of
> Belief, that what it believes in is not true.
> (CP 332)

Fictionalism as a creed involves the awareness of fictions as they operate in our lives, and its advantage is that, once accepted as a persuasive view of things, all other systems rest upon it. This preference for awareness on Stevens' part is justified by its accuracy in the modern situation. Pragmatically, it is likely that the process of gradual disillusionment will work upon all of our beliefs in turn; if we start off by being aware that these beliefs are non-absolute and contingent, we will suffer little shock when their lack of truth is openly revealed, since this is something we will have known implicitly for some time before. We will be ready for the inevitable moment when one fiction becomes outmoded and therefore ineffective as a form of order, and we will be able to make a smooth transition to our next suspension of disbelief in the next fiction. If the purpose of fiction-weaving is to satisfy human need rather than to pursue fruitlessly an unreachable certainty, then the fact that we employ fictions with no truth value in the traditional sense should not bother us.

What becomes important in this system is the choice of illusion. There seems little point in choosing illusions which will make us unhappy rather than happy.

> There may be an attitude which sees that most things are illusions, that experience is merely the gradual process of disillusionment, that the new as well as the old ideals turn out to be partial, non-continuous or infinite, but then in face of this decides that certain illusions or moods are pleasurable and exhilarating, and deliberately and knowlingly encourages them. A judicious choice of illusions, leading to activities planned and carried out, is the only means of happiness.[1]

Once we accept the unalterable facts about the human condition, we have a degree of freedom with respect to which fictions we live by. For our own

[1] Hulme, p. 232. (My italics.)

sakes, we ought to choose illusions which will satisfy the needs we are aware of. However, as Frank Kermode has shown, the choice of illusions is far from being a simple matter: we require, psychologically, fictions which fit in with what we take to be the state of the universe (regardless of how accurate our view may be),[1] and this in turn is closely linked to the society in which we happen to live. Not only is it very difficult to genuinely form a world view which is at odds with our society, it is very difficult to adhere to such a view while living in that society, regardless of any superiority of our personal view to that of the society itself. So our choice of illusion is limited by our society, at times forcibly. Blanche Du Bois, given the society she is forced to live in, falls back on an illusion which commands understanding at least, if not overt sympathy. This illusion, however, is totally untenable in that society, and a determined effort is made by the society, in the form of Stanley Kowalski, to force Blanche to accept its world view in place of her own. In such cases, one possibility is to find a society which will permit your particular illusion to flourish. Blanche cannot find such a society, for it has disappeared in time, but Conrad's Lord Jim is lucky enough to find a community which not only allows his illusion but which actually fosters it for its own reasons.

All the pressures are towards the formation of group fictions, for the justification of fictions is their utility in the world, how much they can ease life for us. Kermode objects to a radically pragmatic gradation of fictions -

> If the value of an opinion is to be tested only by its

[1] Frank Kermode, "The New Apocalyptists," Partisan Review, 1966 (Vol 33, no. 3), p. 361. "Our order, our form, is necessary; our skepticism as to fictions requires that it shall not be spurious."

> success in the world, the propositions of dementia can become as valuable as any other fictions.[1]

For the individual who holds them the propositions of dementia are indeed as valuable, or rather more valuable, than any other possible fictions, and he is quite entitled to hold to such views. If everyone accepted these propositions, they would do as well as anything to live by; our objections to radically different world views spring only from the preconceptions of the world view we happen to have at the time. Camus' Caligula, for example, begins by enjoying himself in a world which is a nightmare for anyone who isn't Caligula. His world view is finally challenged by people with differing world views, in this case, including a belief that they ought not to die merely to satisfy Caligula's view. But the reign of terror of Caligula could only take place by a number of people accepting his view of things enough to carry out his wishes. The objection to radically individualistic fictions is a purely pragmatic one: most people rest content with group fictions because it is more convenient, more comfortable, for them to do so. The individual who decides to form a varying view must be prepared for the group's opposition if they see their group fictions threatened. We are back to the pragmatic objections to the rabbit as king of the ghosts.[2]

This pragmatism extends widely in the choice of illusions: if all our orderings systems are arbitrary, why do Stevens, Vaihinger and Kermode all emphasise that they must not simply mould a new, and more pleasurable, reality? Again, this is impossible pragmatically - we cannot escape

[1] Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending, (O.U.P., 1967), p. 38.

[2] See pp. 51-2.

completely from the world view which we largely inherit. We will feel dissatisfied with any fiction which we feel is too far divorced from what we assume to be the true state of things. This vision we have of the true state of things is given to us by our experience in the world and is largely conditioned by the particular experiences we have had.[1] As social creatures, a purely personal philosophy is not enough. We are incapable, alone, of changing to any great extent the world view we are conditioned into having. Collectively, of course, we can change the world beyond recognition, but the task of rearranging the orders of previous generations is a massive one, and runs counter to the desire to believe that such systems are fixed and not subject to our whims. Nevertheless this process takes place with gradual inevitability as new "facts" are brought to light which prove to be incompatible with our previous systems: the social process thus parallels the process of scientific discovery.

We must be prepared to acknowledge our need for a form created by ourselves, since that offered by the world we believe in is insufficient, and also be prepared to change that form when it ceases to reflect adequately our view of the world. Given our present world view, a purely mimetic art will no longer suffice, for we are fleeing from the pressure of such a world view.

> Also we find that there is an irreducible minimum of geometry - of humanly needed shape or structure - which finally limits our ability to accept the mimesis of pure contingency.[2]

[1] For example, there are the physical limitations placed upon our very sight by our early experiences. cf. Colin Blakemore, "Why We See What We See," New Scientist (16 Sept. 1971), Vol 51, no 769, p. 617. "It is a sobering thought that real things in the real world may literally be beyond our comprehension because we have no neural apparatus to handle them."

[2] Kermode, Sense of an Ending, p. 132.

Now, we depend on forms which to some extent impose on reality, but the nature of the world itself forces this upon us. If we accept that the forms we live by are largely created by ourselves, and that we have a virtually inescapable world view, we must also accept that these forms must remain in consonance with the world view and that they must be discarded if they cease to be so. Although world views change slowly, the forms which spring from them, the fictional superstructure, will change with greater speed. This is due to the attitude both of the poet and of his public. The poet himself sees that the forms imposed on the flux are unfaithful to it and seeks always to find some means of adequately representing the flux. He is thereby impelled to the creation of new forms, a never-ending task since none of his forms, simply by virtue of being forms and not flux, will ever completely satisfy him. As we have seen, this is linked to the problem of representing the poet's sensation of reality in language. The poet may succeed in sensing reality, but rapidly becomes dissatisfied with the expression of this in the public medium of language. Just as the social aspect of language leads to the dissatisfaction of the poet, so for ordinary people the common possession of images and forms leads eventually to a sense of their staleness and irrelevance: both the poet and the public go through this similar process.

> As a man becomes familiar with his own poetry, it becomes as obsolete for himself as for anyone else. From this it follows that one of the motives in writing is renewal.
> (OP 220)

Therefore, in the culture, there is a never-ending cycle of the poet creating integrations which speedily dissatisfy him: these integrations are passed on through the social medium of language and articulated

fiction to become the property of ordinary non-poets, but again lose their effectiveness. By this time, the poet has created a new set of forms and so on. This cyclical aspect is appropriate in terms of twentieth-century aesthetics, in its continual rejection of the fixed form in favour of a constantly changing process of reaction to new stimuli.

Our forms must strive to avoid the fixity imposed upon them by their very nature, because of our inability to accept consolations which appear to be at variance with our world view, as fixed forms must be when seen in the context of the twentieth-century impression of the universe in flux.

> The contingency must be there, or our as if will be mere fantasy and unrelated to the basic human task of imaginative self-invention.[1]

So, while we cannot accept "the mimesis of pure contingency", we require a dash of contingency to assuage the reason, to convince ourselves intellectually that the projections of our desires are given respectability by their accurate relation to the state of things as they are, which, of course, is merely the state of things as we have decided them to be. However, the forms of art have certain points in their favour with respect to this con-trick we consistently perform upon ourselves. Firstly, they are particularly effective in their staying power because of their closeness to the most lasting characteristics of the human.

> . . . all art is conditioned by time, and represents humanity in so far as it corresponds to the ideas and aspirations, the needs and hopes of a particular historical situation. But, at the same time, art goes beyond this limitation and, within the historical moment, also creates a moment of humanity, promising constant development.[2]

[1] Kermode, Sense of an Ending, p. 146.

[2] Fischer, p. 12.

Despite the continual renewal of the individual particulars of the world, given a universe in flux, the patterns of human need remain remarkably stable and, if art caters for and expresses these recurring needs, artistic forms will be retained for longer periods of time than other forms. In any case, the work of art's fixity is more apparent than real, for as an object in reality, it is subject to the flux as all other objects are. This tendency towards change is seen in terms of history; for example, the effect on the work of art of the gradual obsolescence of language and the change in the reader as time passes. As Stevens says, "why should a poem not change in sense when there is a fluctuation of the whole of experience?" (OP 213) The major source of change involved in the created artifact lies, however, in the mode of its operation: if it enters into the reader-poem process, and becomes transformed by this, it avoids fixity. The very nature of the poetic process ensures that the poem never remains totally fixed while it continues to operate effectively as a stimulus for the reconciliation of self and world.

Stevens himself emphasises the inexorability of change, which renders any fiction, including his own, impermanent.

> And yet what good were yesterday's devotions?
>
> I affirm and then at midnight the great cat
> Leaps quickly from the fireside and is gone.
> (CP 264)

The capture of reality must, because of the mutability of reality, be a fleeting and difficult task - "Poetry is a finikin thing of air." (CP 155) The integrations made by the poet do not last for any great length of time, their only advantage being that they still endure more than any other form.

> The close approach to reality has always been the supreme difficulty of any art: the communication of actuality,

> as (poetics?) has been not only impossible but has never appeared to be worth while because it loses identity as the event passes.
>
> (L. 760)

Our grasping of reality is bound up with Whitehead's "event as the unit of things real", for our forms of order are merely the stimuli by means of which we participate in the process which alone can lead us to a sense of the existence of reality.

If forms are so shifting, almost as shifting as the reality they seek to convey to us, why does man continue to create such forms? This is partly because of the tendency, already discussed, to present solutions in palatable forms, for example, expressing the desire for form in a structured fiction. More important, he has a rage for order which his present world view does not satisfy, and this seems inevitably bound up with the creation of fixed forms. Although we may admit that fixed forms are in theory unsatisfactory, in that our allegiance must be to process, they do satisfy a psychological, a spiritual need in man; "order means peace." (L. 293) We are unable to face up fully to the consequences on our minds of our world view. "Above all agitation and change there must be a dominant, a metropolitan of the mind." (L. 372) The decreation of previously valid orders results in the creation of new orders, rather than leaving us in a situation where we face naked reality without the help of fictions, simply because we cannot live in everyday terms in this way.

> It is true that, if we are to eliminate systems as we go along (and it is obvious that everyone is fairly busy at that) we have got to replace them, unless we are to live like Abyssinians. System of some sort is inescapable.
>
> (L. 300)

Although all the efforts of the poet are towards satisfying the mind, his own mind and the minds of others, he realises only too well that complete

satisfaction, or at any rate enduring satisfaction, is impossible; this is due firstly to the world view of the present age with its conviction that all fabrications of the mind are false to what we assume to be reality. This means that the imagination will continue to seek out new forms, while remaining aware, in advance, that they will not suffice.

> Again, it would be the merest improvisation to say of any image of the world, even though it was an image with which a vast accumulation of imaginations had been content, that it was the chief image. The imagination itself would not remain content with it nor allow us to do so. It is the irrepressible revolutionist.
>
> (NA 151-2)

So, in a historical sense, imagination will continue the process of image making, with regard both to small details and to grand world views.

Apart from a source of dissatisfaction in the nature of forms, there is the nature of man himself to consider. Pragmatically, man refuses to yield up certain epistemologically dubious concepts, for without these both action and thought would be difficult, perhaps impossible.

> Thought would be impossible if it did not fundamentally misconceive the nature of being: it must predicate substance and equality, because a knowledge of complete flux is impossible; it must ascribe attributes to reality, in order to exist itself. No subject and no object need necessarily exist to make thought possible but thought must believe in both.[1]

The notions of self and not-self are at the moment necessary concepts for man to give a great deal of assent to.

> it is enough
> To believe in the weather and in the things and men
> Of the weather and in one's self, as part of that
> And nothing more.
>
> (CP 258)

[1] Nietzsche, quoted in Vaihinger, pp. 349-50.

Although it is conceivable that these concepts, which are themselves fictions built up from the flux of sensational reality, may some day be dispensed with, this possibility is at our present level of psychic development as much a product of the imagination as are the ideas of self and body. Some day "our almost inevitable conception of ourselves as receiving our impressions from an external complex reality beyond ourselves"[1] may change, and we will be able to accept emotionally a reality which is shifting, without separation into subject and object. This future is, however, pragmatically irrelevant, and we are left with the problem of coming to terms with these unavoidable concepts which have to be reconciled with our vision of reality in a state of flux.

In any case, it may well be that it is in the nature of the human always to have such concepts. The existence of consciousness may in its very definition involve the creation of form, as Stevens quotes from Focillon - "To assume consciousness is at once to assume form." (NA 46) If form making is a part of the human, then it is likely that fictionalism as a system will not easily become outmoded, at least not until a world view comes along with a convincing view of form existing in reality itself, the very thing we lack at the moment. The gap between man as an entity and the outside world may also be a result of the nature of the human, in that the notion of human consciousness involves in its essence the consciousness of something beyond the isolated act of consciousness.

> All consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness which is not a positing of a transcendent object, or, if you prefer, that consciousness has no "content".[2]

[1] A.N. Whitehead, The Aims of Education, (London, 1962), p. 161.

[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, transl. H. Barnes, (Methuen, 1957), p. li.

If this is so, then man will always strive beyond the human and so set himself the very problems which upset him: we thereby have the paradox of the mind posing problems which it will then be the task of the mind to solve.

> The mind is the terriblest force in the world, father,
> Because, in chief, it, only, can defend
> Against itself. At its mercy, we depend
> Upon it.
>
> (CP 436)

Our dissatisfactions are caused by the nature of the mind in its ability always to imagine beyond the immediately known, and the mind is the only force capable of offering us comfort, because of the "power over the mind that lies in the mind itself." (OP 246)

The aim is the satisfaction of this troublesome mind.

> until the mind has been satisfied
> Until, for him, his mind is satisfied.
>
> (CP 257)

It is of little importance what form this satisfaction will take, provided that it performs its task of appeasing the mind, although in practice, we seek satisfactions which at least appear to be of the cognitive order. In theory, however, there is only one criterion for these forms.

> What difference would it make,
> So long as the mind, for once, fulfilled itself?
>
> (OP 91)

Our present world view has instilled a humility with regard to the satisfying of the mind: we no longer dare insist on an absolute knowledge, and are prepared to seize upon any idea which will ease the torment of a mind which continually longs for the unattainable. If the mind will always imagine beyond the immediately knowable, knowledge for its own sake is no

longer the ultimate aim, quite apart from the fact that some of the problems posed by the mind are insoluble; "the emancipated thought sets itself problems which in themselves are senseless."[1]

The reduction in importance of traditional cognition throws the emphasis on action rather than achieved knowledge. If the mind can never be satisfied, then the process of attempting to satisfy it will never come to a fixed conclusion, and thought becomes involved with activity rather than with cognition. Action also helps to satisfy our desire to escape from the self; it gives us the impression that we are influencing something in the external world. "Action seems to issue in an instinct for self-transcendence. The activity passes beyond self into the known transcendent world."[2]

This shift to action rather than completion leads to the most important phrase in Stevens with regard to his theory - the poem of the act of the mind.

> It must
> Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
> Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
> Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.
> (CP 240)

The poem of Stevens' act of mind is of course the whole of the collected poems, but on an individual level, each poem is the product of the act of the poet's mind in his attempt to gain a personal sense of ease, the momentary faith that one has indeed grasped reality. The products of the poet's creative process are of less importance to him than the act of

[1] Vaihinger, p. xliii.

[2] Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, p. 109.

creation, in which he involves himself constantly and similarly, for the reader, what matters is the process which the completed poem succeeds in initiating for him. For both poet and reader, the object of the creative process is survival as contented human beings in circumstances which appear to militate against this.

VI

The satisfaction, through the poetic process, of the need for order comes down, as far as Stevens himself is concerned, to the question of getting through each day of life, of merely living. "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right." (OP 176) For Stevens the act of writing poetry became a major solace in his own life, enabling him to survive as he wished to survive, and he describes poetry's importance to him in domestic terms -

> One of the really significant reasons for devoting one's whole life to poetry in the same way that people devote their whole lives to music or painting is that this steady application brings about a general moving forward. (L. 639)

Therefore, quite apart from the possible epistemological support offered by poetry, Stevens is unapologetic about the therapeutic use to which he puts the writing of poetry in his life, claiming that "having elected to regard poetry as a form of retreat, the judgment of people is neither here nor there." (L. 230) From the poet's point of view, poetry is directly linked to his own satisfaction, since he is impelled to write poetry out of his personal quest for happiness; "the need of the poet for poetry is a dynamic cause of the poetry that he writes." (OP 229)

However, the artifacts produced by the poet, which he tends to neglect after their creation, are of supreme value to the ordinary people who, unable to initiate their own creative process, seize upon the articulations of the poet as necessary stimuli. These ordinary people enter into their own creative process by responding to the products of a previous process,

that of the poet, thereby, to a greater or lesser extent according to the nearness of their mind to the poet's, inferring the original process. We choose the poet whose mind seems closest to our own, whose poetry succeeds best in this process of stimulating creation.

> If we were all alike; if we were millions of people saying do, re, mi in unison, one poet would be enough and Hesiod himself would do very well. . . . But we are not all alike.
>
> (OP 267)

The ultimate aim is not to present the ordinary man with ready-made fictions, but to encourage him to create his own, the advantage in this being that they will then satisfy more fully by being appropriate to his own particular personality and needs, since there is an inevitable gap between the reader and even the most compatible of poets.

> Problems change and there is no end to them; and if one is ever to be independent of professional insight-makers one needs, not specific solutions, but the capacity for creating them as occasion requires.[1]

At the moment, the poet's importance lies in the gulf between the assuagement that people seek and their personal ability to create the means to such comfort: Stevens sees the poet as an almost paternalistic figure, leading people to the fulfilment they desire but cannot find. This is necessary until the time when all men have the confidence to be their own poet.

> The world never moves at a very high level, but a few men should always move at a very high level; whether these two levels will ever sufficiently approach each other and poetry regain what you call its loss, remains to be seen.
>
> (L. 299)

[1] Wheelis, p. 224.

Stevens accepts it as given that not all men are capable of the insights reached by the poet and is surprisingly (for those who consider him detached) concerned with the giving of satisfaction to the ordinary people who feel that they are unable to go through an original creative process by themselves.

> Isn't it the function of every poet . . . to take his station in the midst of the circumstances in which people actually live and to endeavor to give them, as well as himself, the poetry that they need in those very circumstances?
>
> (L. 711)

Stevens' aim is purely pragmatic; he is out to help people live their lives, believing that these lives are set in intolerable circumstances, where the satisfying of the mind has become an extremely difficult task. He seeks to bring about a certain harmony between the individual and the world he has inherited, the "archetypes of experience" he cannot easily escape from. Being himself aware of the effects on the mind of reaching certain beliefs about the world, Stevens has a great respect for the ability of "medium man" to survive the damaging revelation of how little we can know of the world.

> Their nobility does not lie in what they look like but in what they endure and in the manner in which they endure it. For instance, everybody except a child appreciates that 'things are not what they seem'; and the result of disillusion might be fatal to content were it not for courage, good-will, and the like.
>
> (L. 144)

The world is largely composed of these brave, non-exceptional men who suffer from an insecurity they lack the ability to assuage, and Stevens pays homage to this "normal" from which he himself feels divorced, in his role as poet. The normal lies behind the act of writing poetry -

> At least what one ought to find is normal life, insight into the commonplace, reconciliation with everyday reality.
>
> (L. 643)

Like Tonio Kröger,[1] Stevens is painfully conscious of the necessary separation of the poet from the normal, everyday world of other men and women, and at times regrets a necessity which is tied to the nature of the poetic process.

> With me, how to write of the normal in a normal way is a problem which I have long since given up trying to solve, because I never feel that I am in the area of poetry until I am a little off the normal.
>
> (L. 287)

As we have seen, the poet's task is in fact made necessary by the actions of the normal people, who divorce word from thing without dispensing with their need for the word to be the thing but, although the poet is separated from the normal by his ability to reunite word and thing in poetry, as a social being he longs to be reconciled to the people his art separates him from.

> For myself, the inaccessible jewel is the normal and all of life, in poetry, is the difficult pursuit of just that.
>
> (L. 521)

Stevens is seeking "life, in all its seductive banality"[2] and, although poetry is divorced from the normal, what it can be is the "abnormal creating an illusion of the normal." (OP 177) Since the world as given

[1] cf. Thomas Mann, Tonio Kröger, transl. H.T. Lowe-Porter, (Penguin, 1955) p. 149. "One must die to life in order to be utterly a creator."

[2] Mann, p. 159.

is in some sense inadequate, the poet can help to change it by utilising the abnormal to improve the conditions of the normal.

> Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance.
>
> (OP 225)

The "amenable circumstance" is always with reference to the everyday lives we lead, for this is the level at which satisfaction is called upon to operate,[1] and the poet's role is therefore to share his gifts in the task of relieving the oppression of the normal. At this moment in time, Stevens sees the major threat to the normal as coming from a cultural uncertainty about the external world.

> This confiance que le poète fait, et nous invite à faire, au monde, of which Jean Paulhan speaks, is the essential value of poetry today.
>
> (L. 725)

Although in the actual creative process, the poet must detach himself ruthlessly from other people, it is the poet who makes the world bearable for these people and he does this by having what is in some sense a superior world view, a world view which is more desirable in that it manages to solve the problems posed by the imagination of modern man. What the poet offers is the sharing of his world view, through the expression of it in his poetry and we have need of this because of the insufficiencies we find in our own vision of things. This transference of world views takes place by the use of the imagination.

[1] cf. Whitehead, Aims p. 160: "You may polish up commonsense, you may contradict in detail, you may surprise it. But ultimately your whole task is to satisfy it."

> When a poet makes his imagination the imagination of other people, he does so by making them see the world through his eyes.
>
> (L. 402)

And the object of this, as before, is that "in prompting mankind to imagine, he (the poet) would be helping them to live."[1] Since it is the imagination which leads us to separate the self from reality, we must use the imagination in the necessary recapture of reality. The ordinary man has enough imagination to appreciate the gulf between man and the external world, but lacks the imagination to bridge the gap, or even to gain a sense of the elements on either side of the gap. The poet, however, by offering us fictions which are both agents and products of synthesis, enables us either to reach the same synthesis of self and world or to have an awareness, itself satisfying, of the elements required for synthesis. As we have seen, the major satisfaction comes from an awareness of the dualism underlying our everyday monism. Poetry is uniquely equipped to give the sense of this distinction because of its mode of operation as process, since both self and the external world can be defined only in terms of their interaction. The one process, the artistic, clarifies the other process, that of life itself.

Some faith is needed before one enters into this artistic process to clarify the process of life; it requires a certain faith in art in general. "If you don't believe in poetry, you cannot write it." (L. 500) This faith in turn depends on whether or not one accepts the world view which suggests that both the self and the external world can only be defined through the event, thereby calling for a process by which this definition may take place. This faith may well reside in fictional things -

[1] George Santayana, The Life of Reason (New York, 1954), p. 343.

the fictions of self and world being defined by the use of the fiction that the world may be grasped in some way by the fiction-making process of poetry. Stevens himself does not object to the reduction of all aspects of his theory to the status of fiction, since he himself is committed to a radical fictionalism: poetry is the "supreme fiction". He accepts that the poetic synthesis gives what is merely one possible version of reality, but claims that one version is all we require.

> Nothing will ever appease this desire (to move in the direction of fact) except a consciousness of fact as everyone is at least satisfied to have it be.[1]

Our modern scepticism has indeed led us to the point at which we find it impossible to assent to a system which rejects the fiction in favour of "truth."

> I said that I thought we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction.
>
> (L. 430)

The problem is one of self-contradiction in accepting a belief in disbelief; "belief in a world in which the conditions and forms of belief are themselves products of the interaction of the believer and his world, of the conjoining of the imagination and reality."[2] Although the theory of illusion may itself be an illusion, as is possible on its own terms, we have an apparently permanent psycho-social desire to believe in something,

[1] A Stevens quote from the dustjacket for the 1942 edition of Parts Of a World, reprinted in Helen Vendler, On Extended Wings (Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 153. My italics.

[2] Roy Harvey Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: the Life of the Imagination," in Wallace Stevens, edited by Marie Borroff (New Jersey, 1963), p. 130.

even in disbelief.

> If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else.
>
> (L. 370)

So, we have decided to put our faith in scepticism, simply because this seems to be the only acceptable course open to us.[1] At the moment we are left with a belief, which we take to be true, that belief in so far forth is the best, indeed the only, type of belief permitted by our present world view.

> It is a question, now,
> Of final belief. So, say that final belief
> Must be in a fiction.
>
> (CP 250)

This theory of disbelief can be reached only through the participation in Stevens' poetic process. We participate and, by means of the examples given - the poems - we reach a theory which teaches us to reject the given form of the poems in favour of our own creations. It also teaches us that the paradigm itself is subject to change. Therefore, according to Stevens, his own fabricated poems will remain meaningful until all men have gleaned from them the theory of fictions, and succeeded in applying it by creating their own forms of order. Then his poems both as fictional structures and as incorporating a system of belief will become outmoded, except perhaps for their historical interest in some future study of the establishment of the theory of fictions as the monopolistic world view.

[1] cf. William James on the limitations placed upon our possible choice of systems. "Mr. Balfour gives the name of 'authority' to all those influences, born of the intellectual climate, that make hypotheses possible or impossible for us, alive or dead." The Will To Believe (Longmans, Green & Co., 1915), p. 9.

What happens if the world veers off in another direction? We must distinguish between the overt system, the assumptions on which it is based, the implications of the system in terms of the supposed greatness of the poet's soul and, finally, the effect of the system and the world view on the poetry itself. Essentially, we would still agree with the world view on which Stevens bases his theory of fictions; that the universe is in flux, that there can be laws of statistical probability but not of cause and effect, and that we seek an order lacking in such a view. We may be less willing to accept his aesthetic, with its claims for an intensification, indeed a discovery, of reality through the act of the mind in poetry, but at the very least we can see it as a possible view under the given circumstances. Both the world view and the aesthetic may, however, be rejected in the future, as Stevens himself allows they may be. In that case we are left in the same situation with regard to Stevens as with any other poet whose system has lost relevance through time - the system becomes useful for the clues it gives us about the poet's mind.

> With a true poet his poetry is the same thing as his vital self . . . The good writers are the good thinkers. They are not able and skillful ink-slingers, but people who put all that they have into what they say in writing.
> (L. 815)

Our assessment of poetry as great is largely connected with the cosmic imagination which we find in it and which we attribute to the poet. Stevens rightly points out that there exists a hierarchy in our concerns, some things being "of first importance" and others being of "secondary or lesser importance." (OP 232) Poets who confine themselves to incorporating things of secondary importance are, sooner or later, placed by us below the poets who deal with our most important preoccupations, since poetry is both

a product and a commodity of man and as such will reflect, from both the creative and from the receptive points of view, what he wishes it to be about, in the widest sense. One obvious example is the continuing respect shown to Milton, despite the unfashionable nature of many of his themes. These themes are not important in themselves, in their details, what matters is the scale on which the poet is working, how many of the essential elements of the human he deals with.

> The measure of the poet is the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent to which it involves the sense of other people.
>
> (NA 123-4)

The problem is that to get this "measure" we have to turn to the poetry itself and the technical success of the poet in putting his sense of the world into the poetry. The elaboration of insight in a poem is the material we are given to work with in the fascinating process of reconstructing the poet's personality and soul.

The inextricable conjoining of theory and expression is particularly marked in Wallace Stevens, not merely because the elaborated theory calls for its own discovery and practice through the process of poetry. This can be seen by comparing the early poetry with the very last poems, when we see the movement from Stevens' tendency to give cameo illustrations of particular aspects of his theory to the massive embodiment of the whole theory that we find in the later poetry. The early poems can almost be given labels according to the particular facet of the theory they happen to be illustrating. A poem like Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction, however, sets the problems, faces them, goes on to offer solutions, and is itself an exemplification of the solution chosen by Stevens. It is impossible to imagine a late Stevens poem apart from the theory, when we realise how

much poems like the mighty Course Of A Particular, the Final Soliloquy Of The Interior Paramour, The Planet On The Table gain from being inextricably involved in the whole body of work which preceeds them, with all the urgent questions explored by it. Regardless of what we think, or may come to think, of Stevens' aesthetic theory, it is impossible not to be glad that Stevens did concern himself in this way simply for the sake of the poetry it enabled him to produce.[1] In any case

> When we find in poetry that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane, is it necessary to ask the meaning of the poem? If the poem had a meaning and if its explanation destroyed the illusion, should we have gained or lost?
>
> (OP 223)

In judging what a poet means to us we must consider firstly the material we are given, the body of poetry itself. Through the poetry we reach the poet's elaborated theory and an examination of both theory and poetry will allow us to decide what a poet is concerning himself with. Our assessment of any poet involves what we think of all these aspects - how universal and lasting his concerns are, how plausible we find the theory, how well the theory is incorporated into the poetry, and finally how beautiful we feel the poetry to be, not simply in terms of how well it conveys either the theory or the poet's sensibility. In Stevens' case, his theory of fictions does indeed reflect our present concerns but beyond that he is concerning himself with nothing less than the mighty theme of the recurrent problems posed by man for his own solving, based on the unchanging quality of the human. He is examining the very nature of man

[1] The appropriate criterion is T.S. Eliot's, his opposition not to system but to damaging system. "The borrowed philosophy of Dante and Lucretius is perhaps not so interesting (as Blake's), but it injures their form less." The Sacred Wood (Methuen University Paperbacks, 1964), p. 156.

and, not resting content with this, goes on to examine the consequences for man of this nature in terms of human happiness and the remedies that may legitimately be sought. He carries out this examination with an acute awareness that the problem does not rest in the realm of theory, that satisfaction must be brought to the "plain men in plain towns" who are "not precise about the appeasement they need." (CP 467) This concern is expressed in a poetry of exceptional beauty and skill, and Stevens' great success lies in his ability to convey both elaborated thought and deep tenderness in such poetry, which does indeed, as Stevens would have it, comfort us.

> Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,
>
> Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
> You remain the more than natural figure. You
> Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational
>
> Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.
>
> They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
> We will return at twilight from the lecture
> Pleased that the irrational is rational,
>
> Until, flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
> I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
> You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.
> (CP 406-7)

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