

In "Advice to a Forest" there are

trees, to whom the darkness is a child
Scampering in and out of your long, green beards,

and in "To Li T' Ai Po,"

Faces where middle age
Sits, tearing a last gardenia.

He is a relatively inward poet, whose elaborations of metaphor capture complex emotional impressions. "Images of Emotions," the title of one of his poems, indicates the intention and method to which he was increasingly attracted.

We come now to three poets who were later to acquire wide reputation—Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore. Of Williams and Stevens we shall here notice only their early careers down to 1923, when Stevens published *Harmonium* and Williams *Spring and All*. Both continued publishing into the second half of the century and became major influences in modern American poetry. Hence it seems useful to postpone a full discussion of their whole career until the forthcoming volume, where they can be viewed along with the younger poets who turned to them for example. With Marianne Moore the case is different. She also continued to publish, and her reputation grew steadily. But her style was so idiosyncratic that other poets could not do much with it, and she was admired without being much emulated.

WALLACE STEVENS

Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) was born in Reading, Pennsylvania. He studied at Harvard (1897–1900), acted as president of the college literary magazine, the *Advocate*, and met other student poets such as Arthur Davison Ficke, Witter Bynner, and Walter Conrad Arensberg. He tried to make a living at journalism in New York City until, yielding to his father's arguments, he entered Law School. He was admitted to the bar in 1904, and for the next twelve years practiced law or did legal work for business firms in New York. In 1909 he married Elsie Kachel of Reading, whom he had long courted and by whom he had a

daughter, Holly Stevens. In 1916 he joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co. and moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he lived for the rest of his life, working with the same firm and concealing his activity as a poet from his business colleagues. At least, he concealed it as well as he was able and until he was well established in his firm. At his office he is said to have hid his poems by writing them on small pieces of paper which he tucked inside large law books.

Through Arensberg, Stevens met the *Others* group in New York. He published in little magazines ("Peter Quince at the Clovier" and "Sunday Morning" in 1915, "Letters d'un Soldat" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" in 1918, for instance) and wrote three experimental, hopelessly undramatic plays.

In 1923 *Harmonium* appeared in an edition of 1,500 copies. The book aroused little interest and was soon remaindered. For the next few years Stevens wrote very little. He devoted his energies to the insurance business and relaxed with books, music, and gardening. But his reputation as a poet continued to grow, and his sense of this helped revive his imagination or ambition. In his fifties his career entered its second phase. Beginning with *Ideas of Order* in 1935, one book followed another in rapid succession: *Owl's Clover* (1936), *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* (1937), *Parts of a World* (1942), *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), *Esthétique du Mal* (1945), *Transport to Summer* (1947), and *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). *The Necessary Angel* (1951) was a collection of essays on his central theme of "Reality and the Imagination."

Until the 1950s Stevens had enjoyed only a gradually spreading *succès d'estime* as a "poet's poet" or a "critic's poet." He now discovered that graduate students were reading him with enthusiasm, and some wished to write about him. At this academic reception he was wryly ironic as well as incredulous. Honors piled on him in his sixties and early seventies, including the offer, in 1954, to serve as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard. (He turned it down, for he was diffident about lecturing on poetry. He also feared that acceptance would entail retirement from the insurance company.) Despite his growing reputation, he had been unwilling to bring out a collected edition, fearing lest such a climax to his career might also prove a termination. But in 1954 he admitted to his publisher,

Alfred Knopf, that he would "have difficulty in putting together another volume" and authorized publication of the *Collected Poems* (1954). An *Opus Posthumous* of poetry and prose appeared in 1957.

Harmonium contains poems written between 1915 and 1923. Because all his poems from before and many from after 1915 were rejected from this first volume, and because the arrangement of those selected is not chronological, the book does not reflect the stages by which Stevens' art developed. There is no reason why it should. But this mannered and dazzling style was not achieved all at once, and before taking up the poetry of *Harmonium*, I will try to indicate by what steps it came to be what it is.

Stevens began around 1899 as both a Romantic of the period of Keats and an aesthete of the 1890s. Going back to 1896, we find him writing letters in which he exercised himself in impressionistic descriptions, for as a teenager he planned to become a writer. In 1898 he started to keep a journal; during the next few years it reveals that he aspired to sincerity, "great" feelings, and "vigor" of thought and style, qualities he believed necessary for a poet. Inspecting his own character, he criticized himself for artificiality, coldness, and excessive self-analysis. Whether the criticisms were justified or not, they imply his Romantic preference for the opposite qualities of naturalness, warmth, and enthusiasm. He took long walks, during which he conscientiously noted the look of natural things from snails to clouds. He listened to birds "ease their hearts" in song; as he lay in a field to watch a sunset, he thought "that this must have been an old, Greek day, escaped, somehow, from the past." He came home, and began to read the third book of Keats's *Endymion*: "It was intoxicating." This was in 1899, while at Harvard. His college poems are exercises in nineteenth-century styles. The best of them, the "Ballade of the Pink Parasol," was probably influenced by a poem of Austin Dobson's.

As a journalist and law student in New York Stevens continued to produce poems. A typical example is "A Window in the Slums," four trim stanzas with inverted syntax and an interjected "Ah!":

I think I hear beyond the walls
The sound of late birds singing.
Ah! what a sadness those dim calls
To city streets are bringing.

In 1901 he drafted a four-act play to be called "Olivia: A Romantic Comedy." He read a great deal of poetry in English and French and continued to find pleasure in long walks, on one of which the future author of "The Snow Man" beheld "every leaf and blade of grass revealing or rather betokening the Invisible."

As early as 1896 he had signed a letter to his mother, "Forever with supernal affection, thy rosy-lipped arch-angelic jeune"; in the playfulness, ironic affectation, and self-protective somersaults of this one glimpses the future author of *Harmonium*. At least until he was thirty his informal prose in letters and journals is more characteristic than his poetry. His self-analysis is minute and sometimes boring, especially when he shows himself fascinated and relentless in discriminating the nuances of his sensations. But the rendering of sensations is vivid and the play of mind often subtle and rapid. He is remarkably likely to hold diverse, opposed points of view in one perspective, or suddenly to confront one with another.

By 1906 Stevens' jotted descriptions of nature in his journal, which had previously been more or less close and Keatsian, began to reflect a Dandy's pose. One day in March the clouds "were a most fashionable shade . . . Poor, dear, silly Spring, preparing her annual surprise!"; "Clear sky," goes another notation, "the twilight subtly medieval—pre-Copernican." In 1907, writing to his future wife, he identifies himself with Pierrot. His poetry was developing along similar lines, though more slowly. He was still writing sonnets. Incidentally, he continued to say his prayers every night, though he was reading Nietzsche and prayed without belief. He was still reading a great deal of poetry and enjoying most of what he read. He mentions Campion, Binyon, Verlaine, Keats, and Bliss Carman. Santayana's sonnets struck him, in 1906, as poems that fill the mind with Life and Truth. Some of his poems of this period are of the conventional type already sampled. Others emulate the terse, sometimes elliptical "sculpture of rhyme" of the 1890s. Some also show the influence of the exotic orientalism and poetic impressionism of those days. A poem of 1909 indicates how far he had developed:

She that winked her sandal fan
Long ago in gray Japan—
She that heard the bell intone
Rendezvous by rolling Rhone—

How wide the spectacle of sleep,
Hands folded, eyes too still to weep.

Between his years in college and the outbreak of the First World War, Stevens must also have read in the French symboliste poets. Possibly he owes something to Mallarmé for his exotic images and colors and to Verlaine for his word music. But chiefly, I think, the symboliste poets accentuated tendencies of his literary personality that we already remarked in his youthful letters and journalizings—his sudden transitions and ironic reversals, his oblique modes of statement, and his foppish pose. If in connection with the French symbolistes these phrases especially recall Laforgue, Stevens suggested that he got “a great deal” from Laforgue because he felt an affinity of “attitude.”

Stevens had been pursuing the affectations of the 1890s ever since his last year at college, and, by 1915, in “Cy Est Pourtraicte . . .” he was able to equal the Aesthetes in naughtiness. The poem portrays God as a decadent artist, moved to the “subtle quiver” of a suppressed snicker by the simplicity and naive goodness of Saint Ursula, who offers Him radishes. “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (1918) was his single most brilliant exploitation of the literary possibilities of foppery. The character of the speaker—precious, self-mocking, yet with a serious meaning amid his persiflage and a kind of heroism in his affectation—owes something to Baudelaire’s presentation of the Dandy and more to Laforgue’s. (The poem may also owe something to Donald Evans, who had read his Laforguan “En Monocle” at a party Stevens attended.) The *ubi-sunt* meditation on hairdos in the third stanza of “Le Monocle . . .” illustrates the point:

Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese
Sat tittivating by their mountain pools
Or in the Yangtse studied out their beards?
I shall not play the flat historic scale.
You know how Utamaro’s beauties sought
The end of love in their all-speaking braids.
You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
That not one curl in nature has survived?
Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,
Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?

The lines illustrate the wit, high spirits, freshness, and fantasticality of Stevens in this period, as well as his ability to convey subtle and complex attitudes. Perhaps they also illustrate a remark of his wife: “I like Mr. Stevens’ things when they are not affected; but he writes so much that is affected.”

Although Stevens was never an Imagist, he read *Poetry* and was a friend of Williams, Kreymborg, and Arensberg—all “enthusiasts for Pound and the imagists,” as Kreymborg phrased it. Because of the doctrine and example of the early Imagists, Stevens may have appreciated the poetic uses of spare, close, sensory particularities more than he otherwise would have. In “The Snow Man” he catches in a fresh, arresting way the look of “junipers shagged with ice” and “spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun.” Imagist poetry may also have contributed something to his impersonal presentation and emotional restraint. And he was now writing free as well as stanzaic verse. But Imagism was antithetical to fundamental habits of his mind and imagination—to his abstraction and meditative onflowingness—and few passages in *Harmonium* could be called Imagist in their total effect.

Many of the poems in *Harmonium* bring the art of painting vaguely to mind. There are such titles as “Domination of Black,” “Floral Decorations for Bananas,” “Six Significant Landscapes,” “Bantams in Pine-Woods,” and “Sea Surface Full of Clouds.” Stevens’ bright, fresh colors are pleasing and sometimes recall a particular painter. In “Sunday Morning” the “sunny chair,” oranges, and “bright, green wings” of a “cockatoo / Upon a rug” suggest Matisse to some readers. “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” resembles Impressionist painting:

The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm
And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green
And in its watery radiance.

Sometimes Stevens lays on colors in slabs. The sky in “Banal Sojourn” is a “blue gum streaked with rose. The trees are black”; in “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night” the “palms are clear in a total blue”; in “Anecdote of the Prince of the Peacocks” the plain is a “blue ground,” and Beserk is a patch of “red / In this milky blue.”

Stevens shared the interest of his fellow poets in Modernist

technique in painting. He would have been struck by the tendency in this painting and in art theory to reject naturalism or illusionism. Transposed into literary terms, this would mean the rejection of the representation of reality as an aim. If "abstract" means nonrepresentational, art or literature of this kind is abstract, although in other respects it may be intensely sensuous, rhythmical, concrete, and expressive. If the representation of nature or reality introduces an impurity into aesthetic experience, such art may be called pure.

Whether or not Stevens sought to create something analogous to abstract or "pure" art cannot be known. In later years he collected that "when *Harmonium* was in the making there was a time when I believed in *pure poetry*, as it was called," but on this occasion he identified the "pure" with the merely "decorative." Whatever his intention, his poems often remind readers of modern painting and are viewed as analogous works in a different medium. "Earthly Anecdote," for example, typically tells no anecdote. It speaks of "bucks" and a "firecat" who "bristled in the way" of the bucks. Because of the firecat, the bucks

swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the right,

or to the left:

The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.

In this representation there is no mention of horns, hooves, rolling eyes, claws, or blood. The bucks and the firecat are rendered without naturalistic detail in a few simple, repeated images. Their encounters are perceived as shaping a system of lines in dynamic opposition—as aesthetic design.

By all these explorations and undergoings—his youthful Romanticism, his wide reading in other past and present poets, his sympathies with the aesthetic sensibility of the 1890s, with oriental art, Imagism, Symbolisme, Dandyism, and modern painting and art theory—Stevens came to the age of thirty-six, by which

time he was writing such famous poems as "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Sunday Morning." His restless experiment continued between 1915 and 1923, when *Harmonium* was published. I shall discuss Stevens' production from his first mature work to the end of his life in the forthcoming volume. Here I will merely amplify a few points already suggested: the poems in *Harmonium* tend to be comic, abstract, and meditative, and the meditation centers on the interrelations of reality and the imagination. As the title indicates, Stevens wishes us to regard them as the poetic, quasi-musical meditations of an amateur. The "harmonium" was the small parlor organ to which one sat down in leisure hours.

Stevens' comedy ranges from high spirits, exaggeration, and play to complex irony and sophisticated wit. To sample these qualities we need only glance through the table of contents. Most of the titles are conventional enough, but "The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade" is intriguing, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" incongruous, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" a verbal game, "Floral Decorations for Bananas" spritely silliness. One title is itself a lyric: "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs." "Gubbinal" must voice a depressed inarticulate state of mind. "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," on the other hand, suggests a special treat. Hoon may be the name of a person or a place, but if it is a place, Hoon is no home, for the name is exotic and foreign. The sound associates itself with hoot, hooley, hooray, and the like, and the vocable, *hoo*, appears elsewhere in Stevens as a cry of self-assertion. Palaz is also exotic and suggests gaudy facades and stucco work, bedizened, overdone, and blowsy. Nevertheless, a brief visit for tea must be a fine experience.

"Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" is a bohemian sally, pointing out the prevalence of stereotyped conventionality or unimaginative dullness. It is an elaborate, foppish complaint that throughout the entire town there are only white nightgowns. No one is wearing a green gown:

Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace

And beaded ceintures.
 People are not going
 To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
 Only, here and there, an old sailor,
 Drunk and asleep in his boots,
 Catches tigers
 In red weather.

The poem is typical of *Others* in its fantasticality, and to select a drunken sailor as an image of vital imaginativeness is a further gesture in the convention of *épater le bourgeois*.

Stevens' poetry is abstract not only in painterly senses but also in the more general, overlapping sense that it rarely dwells on the concrete case. Vivid images compose brief scenes or still lifes, but there is nothing like the rich, circumstantial representation of people and actions found in *The Waste Land*, "The Death of the Hired Man," or many of the *Cantos*. In "Peter Quince at the Clavier" the speaker desires a woman and thinks of her "blue-shadowed silk." But this bit of present actuality is noted briefly and generally and not allowed to hold attention. The speaker's desire is expressed obliquely and put at a distance by being represented in the desire of the elders for the biblical Susanna. This story, furthermore, is not told in Stevens' poem but rendered with further obliquity as an orchestral composition, which the poem suggests through metaphors. The composition is being played at the clavier by Peter Quince, the comic play director in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*.

Or there is Stevens' "The Snow Man." When we think of a snowman, most of us visualize balls of snow placed on top of each other, coals for eyes, a carrot nose, and the like. I mention these details only to point out that Stevens does not. His poem does not describe but merely invokes "The Snow Man" by mentioning him in the title; thereafter the snowman is involved in the poem only as a metaphor of a metaphor. He is a metaphor of "a mind of winter," and this, in turn, is a metaphor of something even more abstract: a mind that entertains nothingness.

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.

But it is easy to imagine that whoever speaks or thinks this poem is himself looking at a snowman. In this case the poem may be related to the descriptive-meditative tradition in English poetry that comes down to us from the eighteenth century and the Romantic period. Poems embraced within this genre would include Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard," Wordsworth's "Lines . . . Above Tintern Abbey," and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." A convention organizing all such poems is that the poet finds himself at some place or views some prospect or object. The poem describes what is seen and, as it proceeds, enacts a train of thought and feeling occasioned immediately by the place or object and referring repeatedly to it. Stevens' "The Snow Man" presents the meditation with the description omitted. As "meditation," its form is thinking, the mind in activity, and this is also in part its subject. The poem is one sentence. It proceeds by amplification, illustrating the inherent dynamism of the mind, its fertile power to proceed on its own impulse.

Still dwelling on "The Snow Man," we may note that the poem posits two types of listener. One would hear a "misery in the sound of the wind." Through his own imaginative creativity he would project a human emotion into the scene and locate it there. Thus, he would make the landscape one with which human beings can feel sympathy. The other listener would hear nothing more than the sound of the wind. He would exert none of this spontaneous and almost inevitable creativity. The poem

embodies Stevens' central theme, the relation between imagination and reality. Endless permutations of this theme were possible. Was reality the world seen without imagination? If so, was imagination the world seen without reality? That was a bitter truth, if it was a truth. But perhaps the snowman, who heard no "misery" in the wind, was projecting himself into the scene just as much as the other listener. Perhaps the snowman beheld nothing only because he was "nothing himself," since, to cite a later poem, whoever "puts a pineapple together" always sees it "in the tangent of himself." "Crow is realist," but "Oriole, also, may be realist." Perhaps imagination was not the opposite but the reordering of reality, like the "mountainous coiffures of Bath" in relation to the natural mop of hair. Coiffures express human creativity, but that does not make them less real. Was the important distinction simply that the mop of hair is always the same, while its rearrangements into coiffures vary with time and place? Perhaps religion was like a hairdo. It was a myth that humanized the facts of man's situation and fate. The facts never changed essentially, but the myth did and must. Perhaps the role of poetry now was to create a new myth. But in sketching some aspects of this central theme, we have already gone beyond *Harmonium* and drawn on poems of a later period, and further elaboration must be deferred.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Since William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is also discussed at some length in my forthcoming volume, along with the younger poets he strongly influenced, the account given here confines itself to his early career down to 1923. He belonged to the Modernist avant-garde of writers and painters and shared their point of view to an extreme degree. No poet was more imbued with the idea that the modern age required a new style "consonant" with modern sensibility. Yet in some essential respects the appeal of his poetry resembles that of the Georgians and Robert Frost. Common sources of appeal may be suggested by noting that Williams, Frost, and the Georgians were all accessible and entertaining; they possessed or cultivated poetic personalities that have much charm; and they discovered "poetry" in the

familiar circumstances of contemporary life. An additional reason for their rising reputations in the 1950s was the attraction readers found at that time in the deliberately scaled down, the unassuming. Williams' emotions are not romantically intense; his profundities, if any can be claimed for him, are not insisted on. Hence he was not much recognized in the 1920s. But precisely these qualities contributed to the eager discovery of his poetry later.

He was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, and went to secondary schools there and in New York City, with a two-year interval in Europe. By the time he enrolled in medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, he hoped to become a poet as well as a doctor. At the university he became a friend of Ezra Pound, a "fine fellow . . . a brilliant talker and thinker," he wrote his mother, and through Pound met Hilda Doolittle, a "rather bony" but "bright" girl of nineteen. With Miss Doolittle, Williams took long country walks in suburban Philadelphia and "talked of the finest things: of Shakespeare, of flowers, trees, books, and pictures." Conversing with Pound, he already felt how difficult it was for him to compete. He lacked time to study literature and was doomed to an amateur role, whereas Pound was "making a life work" of it. In later years Williams struggled to overcome this sense of inferiority; parts of his theory of poetry—for example, the emphasis he placed on immediacy and spontaneity—were motivated, among other considerations, by the need of a busy doctor to justify a type of poetry he had time to write.

He received his medical degree in 1906 and became an intern in a New York City hospital. He specialized in obstetrics and pediatrics. In 1909 and 1910 he was in Europe for medical study and for travel. Returning, he married and settled for the rest of his life in Rutherford. He wrote much of his prose and some of his poetry late at night or between patients. The total number of his books amounts to more than forty titles, including fiction, drama, and essays, as well as poetry.

In London he had visited Pound, who had escorted him to the literary haunts, including a visit to Yeats's lodgings, where the famous older poet had read his own verse by candlelight. Characteristically, Williams tried not to feel intimidated by London glamour and sophistication. He was already telling himself that

THE LATER POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

BORN in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, Stevens grew up in comfortable, middle-class circumstances. Everyone in the family spent his time, he later said, reading in a separate room. At Harvard he was president of the college literary magazine, the *Advocate*. He wanted to become a writer, but, like Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C," he also wanted "A Nice Shady Home." After a brief try at journalism in New York City he became a lawyer. He married Elsie Kachel of Reading in 1909 and had one daughter, Holly. In 1916 Stevens joined an insurance firm, the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he lived until his death in 1955.

His first volume, *Harmonium* (1923), suggests that he had been reading the English Romantics and French *symbolistes*, the late Victorian Aesthetes and Dandies, the Impressionists and Imagists, but, like most lovers of poetry, he read all kinds and enjoyed most that he read. Around 1907 he even felt a brief but strong enthusiasm for the "vagabondia" verses of Bliss Carman and Richard Hovey. He was not a fast developer, and was still capable in his late twenties of writing hopelessly conventional poems. "Quick, Time, go by—and let me to an end. / To-morrow, oh to-morrow," begins one genteel sonnet. Several of his early poems

were composed for his "Little June Books," manuscript collections of his verse that he presented to Elsie Kachel on her birthday in 1908 and 1909. In later years she did not read his writings.

Everything in the world, as Goethe said, can be endured except a succession of fine days. Once he had married and become a lawyer, Stevens' methodically capable, secure, well-fed, affluent, detached, orderly existence left him glum. He found his days at the office satisfying, on the whole, but his satisfaction seems to have been in the routine. The office did not fill him with zest. Of course it is hard to find zest in a career you did not really want. What someone else might have made out of Stevens' professional days I do not know, but Stevens had already invested his hopes for glamour and purpose in an earlier, quite different plan of life, for he had intended to proceed from college to romantic *Wanderjahre* and a writer's life in the cultural center. He continued in later years to feel the pull of this prudently renounced dream. "You have so thoroughly lived the life that I should have been glad to live," he wrote to the wealthy Henry Church, who had made his home in Paris, read many books, and edited a little magazine. But Stevens had not wholly surrendered his plan; he pursued it so far as evening leisure, provincial Hartford, and the limitations of his purse allowed. His evening and weekend avocations—serious literature, Parisian paintings and bookbindings, wine and cheese from France, little magazines, poetry—were tokens and samplings, keeping him in touch with a way of life that remained his ideal.

The deeper truth, however, is that Stevens, at least by the time he reached middle age, felt that his professional routine and his imaginative escapes from it were interdependent; one would have been less desirable without the other. He would not have wanted these separate spheres of his life to unite, supposing that had been possible. (Stevens differs strikingly from William Carlos Williams or T. S. Eliot in that his professional work seems not to have entered into his poetry.) What he valued was the going back and forth from one to the other, so that each pleased and refreshed in its turn. In one of his letters Stevens mentions "the energizing that comes from mere interplay, interaction. . . . Cross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking are illimitable. They make things inter-

dependent, and their inter-dependence sustains them and gives them pleasure. While it may be the cause of other things, I am thinking of it as a source of pleasure, and therefore I repeat that there is an exquisite pleasure and harmony in these interrelations, circuits." His going from office day to evening avocations was a "circuit." It connects with the central, continuing topic of his poetry, which revolved incessantly in meditation from "things as they are" to "things imagined" and back again.

His verse had appeared in little magazines since 1914, and a few friends and editors valued his talents, but to the larger literary world he was unknown. Brilliant books of Modernist poetry by Pound, Eliot, Marianne Moore, Williams, and D. H. Lawrence had appeared between 1918 and 1923. Thus when Stevens brought out *Harmonium* at the age of forty-four, it may have been lost in the dazzle. Certainly it stirred little interest. For the next few years Stevens wrote almost nothing. *Harmonium* seemed an end rather than a beginning.

HARMONIUM

Though I discussed this now famous book in the first volume, I briefly notice it again in order to highlight the enormous change in Stevens' work as he grew older. Among the brilliant poems included in *Harmonium* were "The Snow Man," "The Emperor of Ice Cream," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Sunday Morning," "Anecdote of the Jar," "Domination of Black," and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Longer poems, such as "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" also contained stunning passages. Many less significant poems were attractive and fascinating, for example, "Earthly Anecdote," "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks," and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon." Some poems were hardly more than exercises, yet were flawless performances, such as "The Load of Sugar-Cane" and "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock." Naturally among 125 pages of verse there was occasional dullness, but on the whole the poems were fresh, exuberantly decorated, inventive, and intriguing. And though one or another poem might faintly recall Mallarmé, Laforgue, Valéry, Alfred Kreyborg,

Williams, or Donald Evans, the book had its own voice throughout, idiosyncratic and unmistakable.

Harmonium created a comic world of artificial simplicity, high spirits, humorous exaggeration, parody, Dandy sophistication, affectation, archness, burlesque, and fairytale fantasy. Wit and irony were omnipresent. Images or props were cheery—stupid giants, angels on muleback, the Palaz of Hoon, watermelon pavilions, portly Azcan and his hoos, floral decorations for bananas. Nonsense syllables and happy bangings were heard, as in "Ploughing on Sunday":

Tum-ti-tum,
Ti-tum-tum-tum!
The turkey-cock's tail
Spreads to the sun.

The comedy of *Harmonium* was showmanship, however. "Whatever life may be . . . here we are and *il faut être aimable*," as Stevens had put it in a 1908 letter. Behind the show his mood was much less blithe or complaisant than hurt, bitter, cold, and despairing.

His style had a deliberately affected and fantastic obliquity. "Invective against Swans" is about the coming on of "winter" and presumably had its basis in the personal feelings of the middle-aged poet. In elaborately pompous address ("The soul, O ganders . . .") it explains that as autumn begins the soul rejects parks, moonlight, sex, and swans, and seeks a reality beyond. Despite the zany title, the poem contains no invective, though it strikes an attitude of superior condescension and mockery. "The Plot against the Giant" can be read as a metaphor of Stevens' own plan of life. Refined objects and pleasures, personified as three girls, counteract the impoverished, boorish giant of quotidian reality. The poem is arch, tittery, and adroit; for example, the third girl will whisper

Heavenly labials in a world of gutterals.
It will undo him.

A mood of "Depression before Spring" is expressed in a disjunctive sequence of images: the disenchanting comparison of "The hair of my blonde" to "the spittle of cows / Threading the wind" is plain enough, however disagreeable. But the next image,

ki-ki-ri-ki
Brings no rou-cou,
No rou-cou-cou

(the cock speaks German, the dove, French), has Stevens' far-fetched fantasticality, and the final image in the sequence exhibits a familiar item from his stock:

But no queen comes
In slipper green.

The reasons for Stevens' obliquity were partly temperamental and partly historical. He was a reserved man for whom intimate and direct emotional expression was not natural, though some of his early poems are in this vein. By 1913 the convention of sincere, personal utterance had lost its grip on the avant-garde centered in New York City. A poem was an image, a metaphor, an impersonal construction. For Stevens it was an escape into fantasy that lifted the pressure of reality, while also highlighting reality in some aspect. To present a boorish giant rather than, in an Eliot image, the "smell of steaks in passageways," sets the quotidian at a distance. The coarseness and ennui of actual life are "transformed," "metamorphosed," "placed in the imagination"—the terms are Stevens' usual ones—where, as a boorish giant, they can be contemplated with happy interest. To the end of his life his obliquities served this fundamental need to remove, to abstract, to transform, and thus to create a no longer depressing, a pleasurable "mundo" of his own.

Stevens was unlike any other American poet in the combination of qualities shaping the poems of *Harmonium*—irony, deliberate affectation, humorous fantasticality, obliquity, lightness, brilliance, and cool, impersonal performance as of a show arranged or a Pierrot's clowning. His work seemed exotic, Parisian, and thus for some readers acquired an extra cachet. But that his manner kept his matter at an enormous distance also troubled readers from the start. Moreover, his matter did not include human beings. To relishers of character and action his poems seemed glassy glitters of a kaleidoscope. Dexterity of style and dazzle-dazzle of wit—but what of life? what of the heart?

The poems in *Harmonium* had been written over the previous nine years and there was much variety. "Sunday Morning" was a richly imaged, meditative poem of a traditional Romantic kind.

Passages of a Keatsian concrete density, toned toward comedy, could be found in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle":

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

"To the One of Fictive Music" and a few other poems were voluble, rhetorical, and abstract in ways that most modern poets repudiated. At times Stevens mentioned the need to speak with sinewy directness, gripping

more closely the essential prose
As being, in a world so falsified,
The one integrity for him, the one
Discovery still possible to make.

He could write with aphoristic brevity, and he could shape in few words a concrete, sharply focused image. The free-verse, haiku-like austerities of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," first published in 1917, exemplified brilliantly one stylistic ideal of the avant-garde at that time.

Goethe, to cite him again, would not express or not publish some of his particularly disagreeable insights, for why trouble good and useful citizens with useless truths? Despite the obliquity of his style, Stevens conveyed his somber vision of things. "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" says that ice cream, or the tawdry, concupiscent pleasures it represents, is the only pleasure that is real. "The Snow Man" is "nothing himself" and beholds "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs," as the title of another poem sums up. In "The Comedian as the Letter C" Stevens' protagonist and alter ego, Crispin, achieves middle-class comforts and gradually gives up his grand ambitions as a poet. His failure, as Stevens presents it with his typically depressed honesty, is not tragic or even pathetic. Neither is it ironic. It is simply of no interest or importance whatsoever. Any significance it might have had dissolves in Gerontian-like questioning:

What is one man among so many men?
 What are so many men in such a world?
 Can one man think one thing and think it long?
 Can one man be one thing and be it long?

Such middle-aged awareness made Stevens formidable and impressive, but, still more impressively, his sense of things was also complex and qualified. Even the most unpleasant truths, such as those of "The Snow Man" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" were represented as true only within a particular context or from a particular perspective. Stevens was never sentimental, but neither was he tough-minded in a simplistic or reductive way. "Crow is realist," as he once said. "But, then, / Oriole, also, may be realist." His finest poems preserve a remarkable balance between opposed truths. "The Death of a Soldier," for example, considers both the disturbances and also the lack of disturbance a death makes:

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.

The attitude here is objective, poised, and final in a way that might be called classical.

Harmonium was published in a second edition in 1931 with fourteen new poems, of which the most notable was "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Four years later Stevens had composed enough lyrics to make a second book, *Ideas of Order* (1935). His gaudiness had diminished somewhat, and his "Gubbinal" mood of slight depression was more visible and frequent. "Anglais Mort à Florence" took stock of the dwindling into middle age—"A little less returned for him each spring"—more directly and bitterly than "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," and it lacked the comic brio of the earlier poem. The imagery of the Deep South and the tropics had largely gone, as "Farewell to Florida" announced, and his landscape and climate were now of the North, usually in a season extending from late autumn to early spring. His convictions had not changed in the years since *Harmonium*, but he now dealt more persistently and more directly with the

less of religious belief and the consequences of that loss. Evening is "without angels"; we are "empty spirit / In vacant space"; "vacancy glitters round us everywhere." Traditional moral values of the copybook are no longer puissant or even appropriate, like "Lions in Sweden." Stevens confronted this state of affairs without anguish, however. He was not excitable, and perhaps the collapse of values and beliefs meant that more authentic ones would be devised. His "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" begins with the same perception as Yeats's "The Second Coming." "Too many waltzes have ended," as Stevens puts it, and order—social, imaginative, intellectual, religious—has broken down. There are "sudden mobs of men," "voices crying without knowing for what." But the poem typically lacks Yeats's dramatic immediacy and intense emotion. The "epic of disbelief / Blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant," but in due course the world will be put back together again in a new form. Similarly with the loss of the old, imposing morals. If these "lions" must now be sent back, there are still others alive in the "vegetation." Meanwhile, until the new music has been created, we must learn to live rejoicing in the vacancy, in the "winter" of reality, to cite another favorite metaphor. This question—how we can both confront reality and rejoice—was the urgent object of Stevens' imaginative speculation throughout his life. The answers proposed in *Ideas of Order* are the same as in all his other volumes, but except in "The Idea of Order at Key West," his tone of voice was less assured than it could sometimes later become.

Ideas of Order originally opened with a complaint, in "Sailing after Lunch," that the "old boat" of his imagination will hardly "get under way." What holds it back, the poem says, is doubt whether his "romantic" kind of poetry is appropriate. In fact, Stevens felt himself on the defensive in the 1930s. Since social and political questions dominated intellectual life, literature was often judged by its commitment or, at least, its relevance to such issues, and from "the point of view of social revolution," as Stevens said, *Ideas of Order* was "a book of the most otiose prettiness; and . . . probably quite inadequate from any social point of view." He was commenting on Geoffrey Grigson's notice of his work under the caption, "A Stuffed Goldfinch." He took other hard knocks too, and he made an effort to write about social problems in his own manner.

Owl's Clover (1936), a sequence of longish poems, began by contrasting a statue of marble horses in the park and a destitute woman there. The statues embody the noble elevation of art, at least of much art in the past, and the poverty-stricken woman with her "bitter mind" exemplifies a side of truth not much noticed in such art. The contrast should activate meditation on the proper social responsibility or irresponsibility of art, but as the sequence proceeds it loses specific focus. Argumentative, elaborate, and vague, *Owl's Clover* was otiose without being pretty, and Stevens never republished it after 1937. In his next major poem he retrenched to his own theme.

The Man with the Blue Guitar (1937) presents "reality," the "imagination," and their interrelations from different and changing points of view. Stevens thought it boring at times, but a better book than *Ideas of Order*. The thirty-three poems of this sequence are barer and more direct than Stevens' verse had been hitherto, with, sometimes, short sentences and a driving energy in the syntax. Among all Stevens' volumes this makes his nearest approach to an undecorated, severely "functional" expression. In 1942 he published another collection of lyrics, *Parts of a World*. It contained memorable poems, such as "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," but readers of these last two volumes might have concluded that Stevens, now in his sixties, had made his contribution. Most readers felt, in fact, that no volume since had equaled the brilliant *Harmonium*. After *Ideas of Order*, they agreed, there were not even individual poems to be compared with the finest of the earlier ones—an opinion Stevens sometimes shared.

In fact, a remarkable, ten-year period of poetic energy and renewal had already begun. *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* appeared in 1942 and was included with "Esthétique du Mal," "Credences of Summer," and other poems in *Transport to Summer* (1947). This was followed by *The Auroras of Autumn* in 1950 and by the splendid group of poems included in "The Rock" section of the *Collected Poems* of 1954. Approximately half of all Stevens' verse was written in this final decade. There is no evidence that Stevens ever composed by painful, perfectionist squeezes, and so much verse could not have been produced except by a mind that was quick, practiced, ingenious, resolved to proceed, and ready to be pleased with its own doings. The results are sometimes a little bland and sketchy. Especially in his longer poems

there are always passages that Stevens might have revised more anxiously. Yet in the significance of its central concerns, in its pervading intelligence, fecundity of illustration, original imagination, and unmistakable individuality, it was a major poetry; gradually by the late 1940s Stevens was seen to be among the four or five greatest American poets.

"WINTER DEVISING SUMMER IN ITS BREAST"

Stevens in his sixties was large, heavy, blue eyed, healthy. He went to bed and got up early, and liked "to read a little philosophy after breakfast, before starting downtown." As he walked to the office, he composed his poems, jotting "notes" as he went, since, "otherwise, by the time I got to the end of the poem I should have forgotten the beginning." The notes would then be "arranged" and the "thing" written out, typed, and revised.

He led a stangely isolated existence. In New York before his marriage he had made few friends. After his day's work he had usually returned alone to his apartment and read. On weekends he had taken walks of up to forty miles, noticing and later recording in his journal or in letters to his future wife the look of countryside and weather. The same way of life continued, more or less, after his marriage, except that he gradually walked less. His letters make little mention of sociability in Hartford. Except for his wife, his daughter, and three or four other persons, the relationships that meant most to him were with people he had never met, but with whom he had fallen into an exchange of letters. His pleasures had little to do with other people, a fact which sometimes caused slight compunctions of conscience. "I detest 'company' and do not fear any protest of selfishness in saying so." "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble." "Most people are a great nuisance."

It needed the heavy nights of drenching weather
To make him return to people, to find among them
Whatever it was that he found in their absence,
A pleasure, an indulgence, an infatuation.

Boredom, he said, is "practically unknown to me. Perhaps I have been bored at Church, or at the Theatre, or by a book, but

certainly, I have never been bored in any general sense." In fact, he put much time, thoughtful planning, and willpower into not being bored. He was determined that if life and the world could not be understood, they could at least be enjoyed. He read a great deal, though less as he grew older, when often he just sat around thinking. He thought himself a lover of nature, though actually he seems to have noticed mainly flowers and the weather. He had a large collection of records. He liked handsomely printed and bound books. A dealer in Paris supplied his requests for editions and bindings from that city and occasionally also forwarded cheeses. If you buy cheeses from France, you are living in France, Stevens said. He also said he enjoyed "nothing more than seeing new places," but he traveled little. He was frequently in Florida on trips that were partly business, but except for a couple of stops in Havana he never left the United States, and mostly he stayed in Hartford. He loved to "rush out of the office on Saturday morning, reach New York in time for lunch, have a really fastidious lunch and then spend a few hours looking for books," fancy fruits and cakes, and the like. This was his ordinary refreshment through change of place. After these outings in New York he also relished more vividly the order and coolness of his Hartford home.

But though he did not himself travel, he feasted on postcards from friends abroad. He had a correspondent in Ceylon and another in Cuba, and delighted in the glimpses their letters gave of ways of life in other, non-Hartfordian scenes. The correspondent in Ceylon and Harriet Monroe's sister in China were pressed into service to send little characteristic things—fans, carved Buddhas, a jade screen, unusual teas, black crystal lions—that stimulated his imagination. He could evoke novel impressions just as well from a letter from Cuba as from Cuba itself. If I understand him rightly, the letter was even more satisfying in some ways. Munich—to change the scene—is large, bustling, diverse, and sometimes disagreeable. Postcards from Munich are not. You can study postcards to the least details. You can depart from them in reverie. You may feel finally that you have exhausted all the stimulus they can give. Stevens enjoyed concentrating his mind. He liked to pursue his subject to the end, though he rarely did. He was aware of the complexity, the

many-sided and fluctuating character of things, and he felt a counter-need to fix them in contemplation and master them. Small bits or tokens of experience, isolated from the large, weltering mass, could be thoroughly explored and appreciated.

Paintings, for example. Stevens had strong visual and aesthetic responses. But his delight in paintings was probably also that each presented a manageably limited, fresh world. He could hang them up and contemplate them, or any detail in them, for as long as he liked. But again, as with his enjoyment of "new places," there was a fundamental vicariousness. He pored over catalogues and wrote anxious letters discussing possible buys, but he did not choose his paintings himself or see them before he had bought them. His Parisian book dealer and, later, the dealer's daughter were employed to purchase his paintings for him, exercising their own taste and judgment. When the paintings arrived, he found much refreshment living with and in them. Eventually he would tire a bit and feel the need of another painting.

He enjoyed sitting in his garden of a summer's day with cheese and chilled wine. He felt sensuous, wicked, and defiant when he ate an apple with a mound of mayonnaise as big as the apple, the mayonnaise having been purchased from someone in upper New York state who made sauces. He had woodapple jelly and Ceylonese tea for breakfast. "One likes to look at fruit as well as to eat it," and "When I go into a fruit store nowadays and find there nothing but the fruits du jour: apples, pears, oranges, I feel like throwing them at the Greek. I expect . . . sapodillas and South Shore bananas and pineapples a foot high with spines fit to stick in the helmet of a wild chieftain."

He might be called a hedonist, but a hedonist on principle and with nothing gross in his pleasures. They were imaginative. When he contemplated his paintings, he entered and dwelt in the imagined France that he made out of the painter's France. His attention to *objets d'art* and to the sensations, impressions, and imaginative moods they set off in him shows a *fin de siècle* side to his sensibility. But it was not the fine carving of his jade screen or his wooden god that delighted him so much as it was the imaginative release they stimulated. Ceylonese tea for breakfast activated reverie and fantasy as well as digestion. Sipping

wine and nibbling cheese amid roses or chrysanthemums, he enjoyed the mental image or idea of himself engaged in such civilized pleasure, and when he ate a mound of mayonnaise with his apple, he saw himself in another, equally enjoyable light, as Wallace Stevens the plump relisher of the earth's fatness, amoral, reckless, and happy.

"THE THEORY OF POETRY IS THE THEORY OF LIFE"

"Felicidad," Stevens once said, is "after all . . . the great subject," and all his poems deal with it. The question, as I said, was how can we see and feel our situation as it really is and nevertheless be happy. That we must face up to "things as they are" was Stevens' first imperative. He almost never budged from it, in moments of difficult decision in his personal life he asked himself what "reality" dictated and took, however sadly, that path. But his allegiance to "reality" was a moral instinct, an expression of temperament. Like most of us, he had only vague and inconsistent notions of what he meant by "reality." Admiring critics have tried to make him precise and consistent, but they violate his own sense of his situation. He felt himself teased and preoccupied by quasi-philosophical questions—"a constant source of trouble to me"—that he could not resolve. Settling them for him, critics substitute abstractions for the human drama of his effort. His poems express rival premises and opposed emotional needs, going back and forth or hesitating between. Whether or not he deeply wanted to reconcile them I do not know. If he did, he was of too many minds and too honest to succeed.

From one point of view reality was the facts—winters, roses, machine guns, oceans, hunger, clouds, aging, death. In other words, things and conditions existed objectively, could be known, and had consequences. Did the sum total of the facts make, in most cases, for more pleasure than pain? For "felicidad"? Can human beings hope to find "the honey of common summer" enough? Stevens dearly wanted to say so. But obviously he could not forget all the "mal" of existence—the limitation, pain, moral evil, death. Life was not summer, reality not framed for our happiness:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

And if the facts are wintry, exigent, and hard to bear, what then? Do they necessarily depress our spirits and inhibit imagination? Or can they, on the contrary, summon our imagination ("from this the poem springs") to press back against them, altering them and so making an affluence amid our essential poverty? Perhaps they waken a heroic joy precisely because they are adverse. If we rejoice, should we rejoice in our moral strength to confront reality or in our creative power to change it?

But can imagination transform reality? Yes, says Stevens—or maybe. Or up to a point. We lack space to pursue his elaborate and changing analysis of the imagination's acts and powers, but some main heads may be noted. We focus on things, Stevens says, making them more vivid and present to us by the attention we give them. "Description is revelation." We relate different objects or sensations, spontaneously ordering whatever the world brings. We modify what we perceive by adding something, maybe creating a freshness thereby:

The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
The way the earliest single light of the evening sky, in spring,
Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself.

We project ourselves into things—"Her green mind made the world around her green"—and so dwell in a world to which we feel ourselves related. We make metaphors, thus contemplating facts in metaphorical versions. The facts persist amid such doings of the imagination. We have not closed our eyes to them. Neither, admittedly, have we literally transformed them. But we have changed our perception of them. Thus, maybe, we have made the facts vivid, meaningful, pleasureable despite their "mal."

But, on the other hand, do we actually know the facts at all? Certainly not if by "facts" we mean things as they objectively are. Our senses take in only those aspects to which they are attuned. What they collect they represent in accordance with their own inherent form and working. Sensation is a process of translation, selective and free, of an original that can never be known. Ste-

vens calls what the senses report "the eye's plain version," the "plain sense of things." Almost invariably in the process of perception we further modify "the eye's plain version" in accordance with our fears and hopes, our understanding and past experience—a banging door may be terrible to a shell-shocked hearer. This automatic and instinctive rendering of unknowable stimuli into sensations, and of sensations into charged perceptions, is not what we usually mean by imagination, but involves many of the same processes. In the least imaginative representation that is possible to us we have "the eye's plain version." At the opposite extreme we have fantasies. In either case the mind contemplates what it has itself produced. Have we, then, imagined the facts, the bitter and exigent circumstances we thought we confronted? Perhaps not entirely. What we imagine may be (as Santayana taught) our subjective version of what really is. And yet even the "absence of imagination" has "itself to be imagined"—the pond "without reflections," the "water like dirty glass, exposing silence." And since what Stevens wrote of the girl singing on the shore in Key West is true for all of us—

there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made

—why shouldn't we call this "world" reality? In this redefinition reality becomes

a thing seen by the mind,
Not that which is but that which is apprehended.

But though Stevens entertained this redefinition often enough, he was seldom willing to accept it. His fidelity was still to an objective reality, even if it was unknowable. We cannot cease striving to conceive it, and we come closest to the truth—at least we most guard ourselves against illusion—to the extent that we refuse to indulge our exuberant creativity. If we speak of reality in metaphors of emptiness, bareness, blankness, grayness, silence, and the like, such metaphors, though themselves illusory, will at least purge our minds of the notion that reality is accessible to us. Especially they will not suggest that reality has any relation to human emotions, moral instincts and meanings—no more than rock or empty air.

If we ask "How to Live? What to Do?" the answer can only

be—imagine! Proceeding toward reality, the imagination strips away imaginations: the angels are taken down and the backdrop of rosy dawn repainted to featureless gray. This is still an imagined backdrop, but hardly a wishful or self-indulgent one. Or starting from the featureless gray and working in the other direction, the imagination creates a humanized and delightful "mundo" where it is at home—our transformation of the world. In the one case we heroically strive for truth; in the other, facing nothingness, we heroically assert our own creativity. In both cases the imagination is roused, active, intensely engaged. And that is what matters. The world of the unimagining is dull and incoherent. More exactly, since any world is an imagined one, whoever does not exert imagination is invaded by the common imagination, and in our time, at least, the common imagination is remarkably unorganized, inert, unconscious, sordid, and clichéd. In contrast, the person of strenuous imagination lives in a world that is not real, of course, but is fresh, ordered, meaningful, and essentially happy. The difference imagining makes is between vivid life and living death. Poetry is imagining. Hence it is "the heroic effort to live expressed / As victory."

The imagination also creates total myths or "supreme fictions." Having lost the faith of his youth, Stevens was both bitter and nostalgic. He wanted to kick at the Archbishop of Canterbury, as he once put it, for propagating an illusion, and he mocked Christian faith aggressively. But he also wrote movingly about the dimensions and shock of the loss of faith:

How cold the vacancy
When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist
First sees reality.

In short, a total myth is necessary, but if it would be crude to dismiss such myths as mere illusions, it would be something worse to think them true. Stevens concluded, at times, that we must believe in a fiction while knowing that it is a fiction:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

The position is ironic, desperate, and maybe profound.
But our leap of faith could not nowadays land us amid the

saints and angels or the Olympian gods. A supreme fiction must be "credible." If only for this reason, supreme fictions must change from age to age, the no longer credible being discarded and the new created. A "second giant" must kill "the first—A recent imagining of reality."

These ideas had been developed and brilliantly explored long before Stevens adopted them. They were central to the great literature of the Romantic age—Coleridge, Emerson, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth—and they had been partially restated in more modern forms by philosophers such as Bergson and Santayana. The more pessimistic aspects of them in Stevens had, naturally, the more modern sources; the paradox of believing in a fiction, for example, was presumably suggested by reading Nietzsche. That the ideas were generally typical of a less "recent imagining of reality" does not limit their significance. And Stevens' attempt to resurrect the Romantic imagination as a live option, a possible *magister vitae*, has much human interest also, the age lending it so little credibility. But since interpreters of Stevens sometimes give the opposite impression, it may be useful to say plainly that Stevens was not a powerful contributor in the realm of ideas, as he himself well understood. His prose pieces collected in *The Necessary Angel* are helpful if we are interested in Stevens, but as *Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, as the subtitle puts it, they are vague and muddled.

Poets differ from the rest of us, Stevens says, because their imaginations are stronger and more active. Through their writings, however, readers also are lifted into the concentrated and radiant atmosphere of the poetic imagination. The great Romantics before Stevens, having also identified poetry with the imagination, had equally rested their justification of poetry on an analysis of this "glorious faculty"—thus Wordsworth—"its acts / And its possessions." But the enormous difference was that the earlier Romantics held, though with many doubts, that the imagination could embody knowledge, whether of immediate, particular things or of ultimate truth. A hundred years later Stevens could seldom credit this. The purpose or end was imagining, the activity itself, not whatever might be imagined. Imagining is happiness, and happiness justifies itself. Having composed a poem, or read one, we can only go on to another. So long as we are imagining, life is heightened, and the only

thing to do is to keep on heightening life from moment to moment until it ends.

THE MYTH OF A SUFFICING NATURALISM

In contrast to Blake or Yeats, Stevens made no attempt to create a supreme fiction himself. His "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" pretend merely to suggest some necessary characteristics of any supreme fiction. Yet from the start to the end of his career, his poems speculate in desperate hope that "the health of the world might be enough," that "the honey of common summer / Might be enough." In such passages he thinks of reality as things as we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell them; our imaginative response is merely a focusing of attention through which the "visible" is "announced" but not otherwise changed. "We observe," says Stevens, "and observing is completing and we are content."

Stevens hopes with Nietzsche, in other words, that if we surrender our illusion of a Father in heaven—of a supernatural ground and purpose to our existence—and turn to this world as all we have, maybe this world will take on a fullness, richness, and vividness so intense as to suffice. The earth will be

a jostling festival
Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent,
Expanding in the gold's maternal warmth.

We will be merely and wholly physical and natural beings, for whom

Day is desire and night is sleep.
There are no shadows anywhere.

And so we will be free to rejoice in "this present ground." This "thesis" is "scrivened in delight"; its "reverberating psalm" or "right chorale" must take the place of the no longer credible hymns of the Church. "What more is there to love than I have loved?" Stevens asks. If the answer is, "nothing," the glory once bestowed on heaven returns to earth:

And if there be nothing more, O bright, O bright,
The chick, the chidder-barn and grassy chives.

The myth of a sufficing naturalism may make life possible. Certainly to desire to be anything else except a "race / Completely physical in a physical world" would be to desire the incredible, the impossible. It would be a desire "too difficult to tell from despair."

THE MAJOR POETRY OF THE FINAL PHASE

In his confident and astonishingly productive last phase, beginning in the early 1940s and ending with his death in 1955, Stevens' style differed widely from that of *Harmonium*. The doctrines of the Imagists, which had modified many of the poems in *Harmonium*, were now violated wholesale. Instead of using no word "that did not contribute to the presentation," as Pound had urged in his 1913 statement in *Poetry*, Stevens was voluble and diffuse. He now seldom followed the Imagist principle of composition in "sequence of the musical phrase," but wrote in meters, especially iambic pentameter. He did not take the Poundian advice to "Go in fear of abstractions"; he abounded in them. The high spirits of *Harmonium*, the ironic wit and corruscations of sound were still present but generally much toned down. As he put it in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,"

The color is almost the color of comedy,
Not quite. It comes to the point and at the point,
It fails. The strength at the center is serious.

In fact, much of his later poetry was without pose of any kind, unless straightforward reflective utterance was itself a pose.

To read the poems of his last phase is to enter a coherent world, continually changing yet always characteristic. That there is a central topic or preoccupation helps create this sense of coherence, but mainly it depends, I think, on the imagery. Stevens never organized his vocabulary of images as Yeats did in *A Vision*. Probably he never exploited the association, cross-reference, and incremental return of images as consciously as Eliot did in the *Four Quartets*. But he thought in images; the same or similar images tend to recur from poem to poem; to each poem they bring implications already gathered in other poems; and thus they enhance imaginative resonance or connotation. Fully to ex-

plore this vocabulary of images would take another book, the more so since each image is richly evocative and changing in its suggestions. The sun and summer are generally associated with natural and physical reality; they may be fierce, fecund, tropical, and Stevens' many images of the Deep South and Florida are part of this large cluster of associations. From the point of view of winter, summer is an illusion, and as autumn blows "the silence of summer away," the true reality emerges:

It is a coming on and a coming forth.
The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge,
Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks.

The glass of the air becomes an element—
It was something imagined that has been washed away.
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

Since "summer" and "winter" were interdependent opposites, the imaginative "circuit" or going round from one to the other, including and experiencing both points of view, would have seemed truer and more satisfying to Stevens than any choice between them. But had he been forced to choose, my opinion is that he believed more deeply in the reality of winter and probably loved it more.

While the imagination of daylight holds fast to "the plain sense of things," moonlight transforms, weaving the gorgeous gowns of illusion by which we cover our nakedness, make an affluence amidst our poverty. For the imagination of moonlight reality is made of words and thus is endlessly transformable:

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self.

Metaphor is moonlight, and the imagination of moonlight especially suggests unreality. Hence Stevens' many gestures against the moon: "It is fatal in the moon and empty there." In such moods he also rejects the transformations of metaphor as evasions. They are a "beau language" that fobs off "The precisions of fate." The imagination that seeks "Nothing beyond reality" needs a language

untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object.

Among his habitual images, to be fat means, among other things, that you fill the space of the world, leaving no room for anything that is not you. More exactly, you are projecting yourself into the world, which thus reflects you, and you feel at home in it. Stevens usually presents this "fatness" with irony because it is manic. Those who feel the vast indifference of the cosmos are thin, pressed into little space by the alien world they dwell in. Straight lines and figures suggest rational thinking. Statues, especially bronze ones, suggest points of view that cannot change. They become "rubbish in the end."

Major symbolic images may come from the realm of fairytale and romance: "A giant, on the horizon, glistening"; "The pensive giant prone in violet space." Stevens does not retell the ancient myths, and, with very few exceptions, his poems are not based on them. But he saw or imagined things as they exist for the myth-making imagination: the sun is a "brave man," the night a "noble figure . . . Moving among the sleepers . . . the archaic queen."

If his imagery is one main source of Stevens' power, the other, complementing this concrete, imaginative tendency, lies in the active play of his intellect. His paradoxical generalizations surprise: "It is an illusion that we were ever alive." Phrases demand analysis. By definition a hypothesis is not fixed and solid. A "crystal hypothesis," however, must be clear, solid, and radiant, hardly a hypothesis at all. Such wit is omnipresent. Already in *Harmonium* Stevens' poems had a quasi-philosophical dimension. One poem asks whether a plum survives "its poems." Does it persist in "its own form," or does it exist only in and as the "poems" or images we entertain of it, each shaped and colored by the obliquities of a momentary and personal contact? Whether or not his utterances have any value as philosophy, the quasi-philosophical aspect of his poetry undeniably impresses readers with feelings of its seriousness and dignity.

In the latter part of his career Stevens became a major poet in the meditative mode. In the religiously meditative verse of the seventeenth century, in much of the so-called descriptive-meditative writing of the eighteenth century, and in such later examples as Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and portions of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, meditative poetry enacts a strenuous effort of thinking leading toward realization. The main formal prin-

ciple of such poems is the rendering or imitation of the natural movement of the mind "in the act," as Stevens put it, "of finding / What will suffice." In Stevens as in Wordsworth or Coleridge the motion of the mind in meditation is presented as a continual transition or "manifold continuation," an "endlessly elaborating" and "deluging onwardness."

At one extreme Stevens' meditations may be dense with images, rapid and surprising in transitions, and continuously witty, thus providing a distinct node of interest at every moment. This stanza in "Esthétique du Mal," for example:

Life is a bitter aspic. We are not
At the center of a diamond. At dawn,
The paratroopers fall and as they fall
They mow the lawn. A vessel sinks in waves
Of people, as big bell-billows from its bell
Bell-bellow in the village steeple. Violets,
Great tufts, spring up from buried houses
Of poor, dishonest people, for whom the steeple,
Long since, rang out farewell, farewell, farewell.

The allusion in "aspic" to Cleopatra's death, the swift contrast of jellylike aspic with the similarly transparent but invulnerable diamond, the unexpected transition to paratroopers, the odd comparison of the trailing parachutes to the grass-catchers of lawnmowers, the quick presentation of another image of death in the sinking vessel, the shock (emphasized by the line break) of "waves / Of people," the movement by rapid association from the ship's bell to the steeple bell, and from waves of drowning people to the more traditionally elegiac scene of a village so old that in it violets spring where houses once stood, the rude checking and violation of elegiac sentiment as Stevens (typically) keeps in mind that the dead were dishonest, like all of us, and the final repetition of "farewell," insisting with a bell-like sound and an indefinable feeling of sorrowful yet almost angrily mocking dismissal that the dead do not rise again—in short, the phrasing continually arrests attention and routs the giant of ennui.

At an opposite extreme of his style, however, Stevens holds attention no less effectively despite a texture in which no word or phrase can attract special notice. In such cases the effect depends on tensions generated by the movement of thought and feeling, that is, by the syntax. A well-known passage in "Notes

toward a Supreme Fiction" builds by suspended constructions and by repetitions expressing urgency:

But to impose is not
 To discover. To discover an order as of
 A season, to discover summer and know it,
 To discover winter and know it well, to find,
 Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
 Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
 It is possible, possible, possible. It must
 Be possible . . .

Because these passages represent opposite stylistic poles, they are not quite typical of Stevens. Usually his writing combines elements of both styles in a texture and movement to which everything we have noticed contributes—his vocabulary of images, surprising juxtapositions, humorous fantasies, wit, generalizing diction, play of ideas, "philosophical" largeness, and strong, varying flow of syntax. "The Plain Sense of Things" may be quoted as an example:

After the leaves have fallen, we return
 To a plain sense of things. It is as if
 We had come to an end of the imagination,
 Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
 For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.
 The great structure has become a minor house.
 No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
 The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.
 A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
 In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

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 the lilies, all this
 Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
 Required, as a necessity requires.

Few readers would call this a "great" poem, for it lacks the magic of phrase, the intensity and drama of emotion, the depth of connotation and profundity of symbolism that are now associated with this adjective. But if it is not "great" it is good in the extreme. It presents a sustained, lucid, equable, tough, ongoing, tenaciously working activity of mind, touched with imagination and pleasurably surprising at every point.

In all Stevens' meditation there is no finality. I quoted a moment of climax—"It is possible, possible, possible"—in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," but, typically, the climax was not the end. The line continued—"It must / Be possible"—and the slight variation sadly qualified and began to withdraw from the triumphant assertion. And so it goes in Stevens. Whatever is affirmed is at once questioned. Eventually the unrelenting flow of thought and feeling may lead to an opposite affirmation, which also becomes, in turn, a starting point for further meditation. His sentences can be long and shapeless, and, as Helen Vendler has pointed out, we almost irresistibly forget how often the accumulating clauses stand under some introductory sign ("One might," "If," "It must be") that makes them hypothetical, contingent, or merely hopeful. That there can be no "last deduction" or "grand pronunciamento" Stevens understood very well. It was implied in what he meant by meditation, of which the formal essence was ongoingness. It was intrinsic to the restless, questioning, and skeptical habit of his mind. And he wished that meditation should be "never ending" because it was pleasurable.