

THE MAP AND THE TERRITORY IN THE POETRY
OF WALLACE STEVENS

Erik Robb Thompson, B.A., M.A.

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APPROVED:

Scott K. Simpkins, Major Professor
James L. Baird, Committee Member
Marshall Needleman Armintor, Committee
Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of
English
Michael Monticino, Dean of the Robert B.
Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

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In this dissertation, Wallace Stevens' imagination-reality problem as depicted in his poetry is discussed in terms of an eco-critical map-territory divide. Stevens's metaphor of "the necessary angel" acts to mediate human necessity, the map, with natural necessity, the territory, in order to retain contact with changing cultural and environmental conditions. At stake in this mediation are individual freedom and the pertinence of the imagination to the experience of reality. In Chapter 2, the attempt at reconciliation of these two necessities will be described in terms of surrealism. Stevens's particular approach to surrealism emphasizes separating and delineating natural necessity from human necessity so that through the poem the reader can experience the miracle of their reconciliation. In Chapter 3, this delineation of the two necessities, map and territory, will be examined against Modernist "decreation," which is the stripping bare of human perception for the purpose of regaining glimpses of the first idea of the external world. And in Chapter 4, Stevens's approach to the problem of the map-territory divide will be considered against his alienation or internal exile: balancing nature and identity through mediating fictions results in a compromised approach to the marriage of mind and culture in a historically situated place.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Two Versions of the Same Place

According to Bateson scholar Peter Harries-Jones, the phrase coined by Stevens's contemporary and fellow Connecticutian Alfred Korzybski, "The map is not the territory" (*Science and Sanity* xvii) indicates that "words are neither outside objects nor are they inner feelings; instead all language can be considered as names for relations we construct between the objective and verbal world. All order, therefore, is constructed through some form of mapping process" (68).¹ In order to restore the link between perception and nature, poetry provides an essential and *necessary* fiction, which mediates and maps relations between subject and object. The fiction, as necessary, is both real and abstract. The concreteness or necessity of the words that convey the fiction belong to the territory, whereas knowledge of these words belongs to the map. The idea that fictiveness—not just the words that convey the fiction—creates connections to an externalized world corresponds to the map-territory distinction through the implication that a fiction is as false as any map is—for example, a map of "cat" contains no physical cat particles, nor does it contain a spiritually essential catness.² Stevens's "necessary angel" (this concept is

¹ The phrase "the map is not the territory" is more closely associated with Gregory Bateson who claims that Korzybski learned of it and much else in his writings from Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell. See Peter Harries-Jones examination of this idea in *A Recursive Vision: Ecological Understanding and Gregory Bateson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 62-7.

² Bateson's concept of the "difference that makes a difference" (*Mind and Nature* 76) is discussed below in this chapter. The map contains informational (non-physical) differences that account for how the cat is distinguished on some level of the territory as noted by the perceiver. These noted differences in turn are determined by different territorial levels of biases (genetic, physical, personal, cultural, and environmental) that the perceiver unwittingly depends upon in order to know the cat: epistemology is ontology. The map of the cat does contain some of the cat's informational content in so far as any object's existence is always in some way determined by perception. The map of the cat is both simile and metaphor for the actual cat: the map of the cat is *like* the real cat and it *is* the real cat because that is how it exists to the perceiver. For more on the epistemological ramifications of the map-territory distinction, see Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chandler Publishing, San Francisco: 1972) 454-71.

discussed below), as words in a poem on a page, is both concrete, and therefore a necessary part of the territory, and abstract, as part of the map that consists of knowledge of these words in a poem (*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* 96).³ Analogously, Stevens's "fiction" of the necessary angel is the experience of both the territory and the map or both metaphor and simile. For example, the metaphorical angel *is* the territory that emerges from the experience of someone suddenly noticing the blue sky for the first time and subsequently believing him or herself to be "at the center of a physical poetry, a geography" (*Necessary Angel* 68)⁴; the angel as simile is the knowledge that it is only "as if" one were at the "center of a physical poetry" because a moment later the light changed and the blue sky became prosaic again (*CP* 96). As is revealed in the discussions that follow, Stevens's "angel" is a human necessity and as such must be reconciled with natural necessity (external reality, the facts of birth and death) in order to remain in contact with a changing territory. At stake in this reconciliation are individual freedom and the pertinence of the imagination to the experience of reality.

In Chapter 2, the attempt at reconciliation is described in terms of surrealism. For example, André Breton concludes that the larger surrealist task is to love in a person,

the working out of natural necessity to the exact extent that in [that] person it was one with what was for me human necessity, *logical* necessity; the reconciliation of these two necessities has always seemed to me to be the only miracle within the reach of any human, the only chance of escaping now and then the meanness of the human condition. (*Mad Love* 119, Breton's emphasis)

Stevens's particular approach to surrealism emphasizes separating and delineating "natural necessity" from human necessity so that through the poem the reader can experience the

³ Hereafter, *CP*.

⁴ Hereafter, *NA*.

“miracle” of their reconciliation. In Chapter 3, this delineation of the two necessities, map and the territory, are examined against modernist decreation, which is stripping bare human perception for the purpose of regaining glimpses of the first idea of an alien external world. And in Chapter 4, Stevens’s approach to the problem of the map-territory divide is considered against his alienation or internal exile: balancing nature and identity through mediating fictions results in a compromised approach to “the marriage place” of mind and culture in a historically-situated place (*CP* 401).

This first chapter establishes and defines Stevens’s concept of the necessary angel in terms of the map-territory divide and Gregory Bateson’s ecology of mind. Some of the ecological implications of this definition are employed in readings of two Stevens poems that epitomize the imagination’s relationship to the cultural and physical territory. To begin, however, the general critical situation is reviewed briefly in order to distinguish those Stevens critics who focus on language only on one side from those who focus on ecology on another side. Also, three examples of eco-criticism are introduced as a preface to a Batesonian examination of Stevens’s way of approaching the mind-nature divide. Especially relevant is that of Gyorgyi Voros, who draws a parallel between Stevens’s worldview and that of today’s environmental philosophy known as deep ecology. Based on one of the sources of his deep ecology, Bateson’s ecology of mind, a link is made to Stevens’s necessary angel as the mediating fiction that through the faculty of the imagination (as opposed to fancy) restores a healthy balance between perception and external reality.

One prevalent alternative among Stevens critics is to regard his poetic career as a teleological narrative about his poems building victories over tooth and nail nature. Stevens’s

metaphor of the necessary angel allows for the emphasis to shift from the poet and his private victories to the poet's relationships, especially relationships with nature.

Stevens's "Web of Relations"

Stevens expresses singularity in language, which is a mode of consciousness that negotiates the self toward an understanding and experience of the ultimate chaos of the cosmos.⁵ Stevens's cosmos was not the cosmos of Wordsworth or Keats or even of Thoreau or Emerson. He turned from Emerson's transcendent mind in the material world to the immanent mind, or emergent structures of understanding in the material world. He looked for the thing (matter) in a new way of imagining it to "the common run of things" beyond civilized norms and cultural solipsism. As a consequence of reimagining the world, experience bears the imprint and authentication of a life lived on the actual earth. No longer, as with the romantics, would the thing become what it truly is by bearing the imprint and authentication of the culturally defined map of absolute reality.⁶

Knowing one's relationship to the world without appeal to earlier maps is similar to what Richard Rorty, following Harold Bloom and Nietzsche, calls "appreciation of [one's] contingency" (28). Rorty follows Harold Bloom when he emphasizes how centering oneself in contingency allows for "self-creation." This, as Bloom claims in *Wallace Stevens: Poems of our Climate*, is Stevens's project. Stevens's self-creation involves making the self real by imagining the world's reality. If Stevens wanted to discover himself in a world of contingency, he did so by discovering through his imagination that the world is real. He discovers that because the imagination is a part of the world, the world by extension is real. In his essay "Effects of

⁵ See Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* (London: Athlone, 1997) 282.

⁶ Richard Rorty discusses the difference between philosophy and poetry in terms of "final vocabularies." Philosophers seek the truth that is out in the world. Poets and the later philosophers who write like poets recognize that whatever is in the world, it is not language. Poets must utilize a novel variety of metaphors to differentiate themselves and their relations with the world from the relations of their forebears. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 73.

Analogy” Stevens writes, “There is always an analogy between the imagination and nature, and possibly poetry is the strange rhetoric of that parallel” (*Necessary Angel* 118),⁷ and “poetry is an analogue... composed of the particulars of reality” (*NA* 130).

Poetry’s analogy to the territory becomes more important when one considers that Stevens’s “supreme fiction” was not the final supreme fiction, but merely part of an ongoing activity that does not stop with a single poet’s creation.⁸ As to the final identity of the supreme fiction, Stevens writes, “I confess that I don’t want to limit myself as to my objective” (*Letters of Wallace Stevens* 485).⁹ Nevertheless, Stevens’s notion of the supreme fiction can be evinced throughout his poetry, as is seen in his claim that “the exquisite truth is to know that it [the exquisite truth] is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly” (*Opus Posthumous* 189).¹⁰ Roughly two critical camps emerge in response to Stevens’s tautological¹¹ definition of the supreme fiction as “an exquisite truth.” Both camps agree that Stevens creates fictions that are consequent upon contingent being. The difference between the critical viewpoints lies in their response to what Rorty terms “a web of relations” (43). Some like Bloom, Joseph Riddel, and Frank Lentriccia, see this web of human relations especially as it relates to victories over nature and its principal characteristic, death. Others, Gyorgyi Voros, Northrop Frye, Jonathon Bate,

⁷ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel; Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951) 176.

⁸ See Gregory Brazeal, “The Supreme Fiction: Fiction or Fact?” *Journal of Modern Literature* 31.1 (Fall 2007): 80-100, for a discussion of the identity of the Supreme Fiction. He makes a good case that Stevens did not intend his supreme fiction to be just a “will to believe,” as William Carlos Williams advocated. Brazeal sees Stevens moving toward settling on a third element beyond Humanism, which he disfavored as the replacement for religion and Christianity.

⁹ See Wallace Stevens and Holly Stevens Ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 890, xxxix. Hereafter, *L*.

¹⁰ See Wallace Stevens and Milton J. Bates, *Opus Posthumous*. (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1989) 334. Hereafter, *OP*.

¹¹ In Bateson’s systems theory, tautological arguments are not invalid or seen pejoratively since any argument is only valid within the system which gave rise to it. There is no appeal to the territory to validate any argument in the same way that the Pythagorean Theorem and all geometrical proofs depend on the system of “geometry” for their validation and not on any ideal forms that actually exist outside geometry (*Mind and Nature* 253).

John Vernon, and Albert Gelpi see this web as a coherence involving all of nature--nature as an ongoing process.

Three Eco-Critics

This second group, especially Bate, Voros, and Vernon references Stevens's map-territory divide as an ecological problem. According to this second group, Stevens sees knowledge of the belief in reified fiction as an "exquisite truth" available to someone who recognizes contingency and the impossibility of transcendence or appeal to larger more "authoritative" maps of reality as the modern condition. Also, in a different perspective from presumptive views of Rorty and the former camp, this "web of relations" includes the non-human. In one of his "Adagia," Stevens states that "life is an affair of people, but for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (*OP* 185). He also writes that one of the great discoveries any person can make is that he or she "live[s] in the center of a physical poetry" (*NA* 68). This discovery involves a reification of the abstract reality that, in part, makes the poet seem real by being part of this same map of reality to which the reified abstraction belongs. He imagines this reification of abstractions of reality, and does so while acknowledging that he imagines reality as such. He has no illusions of finding a truth out in the world that would act as Rosetta stone to uncovering the true identity of the objects of reality. He knows "that there is always an analogy between nature and the imagination." Eco-critics understand Stevens's poetry as involving a web of relations, which includes nature as co-constitutor of his poetry. Ultimately, they stress both the division between mind and territory and view Stevens's poetry as means to recover the territory.

In his book *The Garden and the Map: Schizophrenia in Twentieth Century Literature*,

John Vernon lays emphasis on the role of the imagination in creating an organic continuum in the mind-body-world divide. The imagination is organic because it is located in the body.

Vernon sees this problem exemplified and solved through the surrealist practice of setting up and stressing boundaries between static, discrete objects only to make more marvelous the ensuing irrational communication across those boundaries:

The jar in "Anecdote of the Jar" can "Make the slovenly wilderness /
Surround that hill." ... such an object as the jar couldn't possibly be an inert thing enclosed in its shape; it reaches out for the eyes of whoever is watching and with those eyes arranges the world around it—it infuses the world with itself and itself with the world by means of the point of view, the body, it is anchored in. (150)

Modernist poetry, as influenced by surrealism and its many precursors, paradoxically undermines dualism by reaffirming the independent existence of the world beyond preconceived ideas about the world. The modernist poem makes communication with this separate world possible. What Vernon refers to as the “condition of the map” is the modern cultural situation whereby the object can never be in communication with the body because such separation can never be logically bridged, given that map projections negate both time nor space (10). In map consciousness, objects such as a jar on a wooded hill are not experienced as such by the body but are located and oriented according to their position on a superimposed and preconceived map of that hill. The modernist poem makes communication with this separate world possible.

According to Vernon, this is a positive, organic form of being-in-the-world. A negative form is that which makes the jar and wilderness indissoluble in each other so that no effective communication takes place at all because, according to the logic of superimposed map consciousness, communication cannot take place between mind, body, and world.

Vernon's positing of a positive bodily orientation to the objects of the world has points of similarity with the totemism of tribal cultures, and the alternative, map-consciousness, has many qualities in common with the isolation and rigidity of modern schizophrenic living in a western culture. In garden consciousness, the opposite of map consciousness, Vernon sees much in common with the surrealists' relationship with objects and the world, whereby meaning is immanent in the body's experience in nature. Surrealists generally uphold separation between discrete objects as a good, since this separation creates the condition that necessarily precedes the creation of meaning that negates and disrupts conventional understanding of the world and the laws that govern one's relationship to it.

Similarly, another eco-critic, Jonathon Bate, stresses divisions and separation in Stevens. According to Bate, Stevens is always in the process of trying to take account of that moment when the separated world of books joins the outer world of nature. The moment when the basis for meaning-giving myths dissolves when the world's presence suddenly becomes available to the individual imagination.¹² According to Bate, however, the imagination's supreme fiction refers to a book's authority, not the body's mortality and its connection to reality. As such, Stevens's poetry represents various attempts to transcend "bookkeeping." Bate links this attempt to the actuarial science of Stevens's day job as surety-bondsman, as it tries to account for how change will occur in reality. In his poems, Stevens tries to bypass the limitations of theory to account for phenomena. His goal is to find a way through poetry to account for the experience of the thing itself. For example, Stevens's poem "World without Peculiarity" "begins with dissonance between human mortality and the biotic cycle, disconnection between the memory of dead parents and 'the red ripeness of round leaves.'" (Bate 116). Stevens tries to get at the thing

¹² This process of decreation in Stevens will be discussed in Chapter 2.

itself, “the red...round leaves” by evading the ideas about the leaves, which in this case are the book-bound metaphors. Dislocation prompts a troubled questioning, but then the poem moves to an acceptance. Stevens’s reasoning according to Bate is that

it is [...] enough that we are part of the earth and the earth is part of us: “it is the earth itself that is humanity” [from “World Without Peculiarity,” *CP* 454].

Sometimes there are moments when difference disappears and the earth seems not the meaningless place but a home where all things “become a single being, sure and true” [*CP* 454]. (116)

Stevens’s poem “Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” suggests in the line “intricate evasion of as” (*CP* 486) that the way to arrive at the naked truth of reality and the imagination lies in this process of evading and deconstructing book-based figurative language. Only by evading such language can Stevens give up ideas about the thing and realize the thing itself. This “evasion of as” is different from Rorty’s irony and personal, private metaphors that one would use to wrest control of one’s own narrative (which involves metaphors and such) from one’s forebears. It is the appearance of irony itself that Stevens tries to evade that is implicit in his phrase “a fiction believed to be true.” He tries to arrive at real experiences of places that are unavoidably abstracted by the imagination. Stevens says in one of his letters that his poems, especially the ones about Florida, refer to an actual experience in an actual place (*L* 289). In Bate’s view of Stevens, experiencing these places is a matter of catching the moments immediately following the destruction of the book-bound understanding of nature.

Gyorgyi Voros applies principles of deep ecology to this division between Stevens’s language and nature. Voros finds no basis for a critical standpoint that would either affirm romantic mastery of nature in Stevens or logocentric readings of Stevens’s poetry. Since all

objects in nature are characterized by non-anthropomorphic relationships to one another, Stevens writes that he rejects “art for art’s sake because it opposes the common run of things by simply existing alone and for its own sake, because the common run of things are all as parts of a system and exist not for themselves but because they are indispensable” (*L* 24). Stevens also rejects excessive faith in technology due to its potential to harm our relations with nature: such a faith encourages humans to see nature in its particulars and “blocks off the possibility of Nature revealing the unexpected—the wild. Technology also encourages people to see other people only in terms of a mirror of themselves. They are either useful or useless to that individual according to his or her needs” (85). According to Voros, in order to preserve the experience of the wild, Stevens reexamines subject-object relationships that negate the presence of the object in the relationship. Participation in the world includes bodily experiences as legitimate ways of knowing the world. Stevens questioned the separation between observer and observed, and believed that the knower is included in what is known in a “systemic or ecological approach to nature” (Voros 85). In deep ecology, one can no longer speak of the behavior of particles of matter that are independent of observation¹³. Associated with this new subject-object relationship is a “Redefinition of the self”: Surrender of ego-consciousness in favor of an enlarged sense of self, self as process, a verb, which includes the other in its self-identification. Stevens writes in his poem “Theory,” “I am what is around me” (*CP* 86).

Overall, Voros emphasizes Stevens’s stress on process over results. Stevens’s fictions in his poetry are constructed and disbanded, but usually indicate new beginnings. This process of creation and destruction of fictions corresponds to changes of the seasons, which is one of

¹³ See Lisa Malinowski Steinman, *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 219, for an account of Stevens’s exposure to the new science of quantum mechanics that made such a romantic belief possible.

Stevens's perennial themes. "Process is the basic condition of mortal life—the limitations of the body and existence in time are seen as giving rise to the very processes that bring being into its full and proper expression; these conditions are not seen [by Stevens and deep Ecologists] as tragic constraints but as expressions of earthly life" (Voros 84). Voros maintains that the central event in Stevens's life is the lasting imprint of his three-month wilderness expedition to British Columbia in 1901. On his deathbed, he recounts to Holly Stevens (his closest confidant later in life) that this was the most enjoyable event of his life (*Souvenirs and Prophecies* 117).

Bateson's Metaphorical Logic

Voros refers to Stevens's "view of 'reality' as comprised of the mind combined with the phenomenological world" (12). His endnote for this claim quotes Gregory Bateson's *Mind in Nature: A Necessary Unity*:

The immediate task of this book is to construct a picture of how the world is joined together in its mental aspects. How do ideas, information, steps of logical or pragmatic consistency, and the like fit together? How is logic, the classical procedure for making chains of ideas, related to an outside world of things and creatures, parts and wholes? Do ideas really occur in chains of ideas, or is this lineal structure imposed on them by scholars and philosophers? How is the world of logic, which eschews 'circular argument,' related to a world in which circular trains of causation are the rule rather than the exception? (21).

Whereas some of the early surrealists depended on logic-snubbing magical thinking and, in more serious moods, ideas of synchronicity to address the mind-body or the mind-object problem, Bateson depends on the legitimacy of the relationship between tautological or "circular arguments" and ideas in the world that "occur" in cycles in ecosystems to assert that mind and

external world are related. The mental processes are where to look to understand evolutionary processes and evolutionary processes are where to look to understand mental processes such as the phenomena of circular arguments. This is very roughly a claim of panpsychism¹⁴ based on Bateson's idea that "the mental function is immanent in the interaction of differentiated parts" (*Mind and Nature* 93-4).

Stevens's own explanation of his poem "On an Old Horn," from his 1938 book, *Parts of a World* makes a Batesonian connection between poetry and evolution. Stevens's explanation of the poem is remarkable for its pervasive awareness of the mental aspects of matter and evolution. The explanation is also noteworthy for being some of the more detailed comments he makes on the genesis of one of his poems:

...Here is what "On an Old Horn" means:

Man sees reflections of himself in nature. Suppose we start all over again; we start as birds, say, and see reflections of ourselves in man: perhaps we were men once, or we may even become men. This occasions a toot on the horn.

Incidentally, while we were changing from birds to men, some queer things are likely to happen. Bird babies become men babies with some unexpected transitional features. Just why I happened to think of the tail of a rat instead of a beak or feathers, I don't know. Perhaps, as a bird's tailfeathers vanish, they look a bit like the tail of a rat.

As the change progresses and as we begin to think the thoughts of men, there may be survivals of the thinking of our primitive state. This occasions another

¹⁴ According to William Seager and Sean Allen-Hermanson, "Panpsychism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008). ed. Edward N. Zalta. 6 June 2009. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/panpsychism/>>. , "Panpsychism is the doctrine that mind is a fundamental feature of the world which exists throughout the universe" (par 1).

toot of the horn. But the things of which birds sing are probably subject to change, like the things of which men think, so that, whether bird or man, one has, after all, only one's own horn on which to toot, one's own synthesis on which to rely; one's own fortitude of spirit is the only "fester [sic] Burg"; without that fortitude one lives in chaos... Suppose, now, we try the thing out, let the imagination create chaos by conceiving of it. The stars leave their places and move about aimlessly, like insects on a summer night. Now, a final toot on the horn. That is all that matters. The order of the spirit is the only music of the spheres: or, rather, the only music.

This is not just an explanation, I remember very well that this is the sort of thing that produced the poem [...] its strangeness is what gives it poetic value.

If you understand the body of the poem, of course you understand the title. Animals challenge with their voices; birds comfort themselves with their voices, rely on their voices as chief encourager, etc. It follows that a lion roaring in a desert and a boy whistling in the dark are alike, playing old horns: an old horn, perhaps the oldest horn. (*L* 403-04)

The oldest horn is not the oldest or the first music in the world. It is not reflective of Martin Luther's revolution, nor is it reflective of Karl Marx's (Both thinkers are referenced in the phrase "fester Burg," properly written as "eine feste Burg."¹⁵). The old horn in the singular is the

¹⁵ See *Lyrik und Lied. Digitale Dokumentation von lyrischen Kurztexten.*, 16 March 2009. <<http://www.lyrik-und-lied.de/ll.pl?kat=typ.show.song.shortcomm&ds=2050&start=0>>, for a history of the lyric "ein feste Burg ist unser Gott." Given its history, "feste Burg" was a loaded term at the time when Stevens used it. Martin Luther used it to signify faith and Christianity in a mutable world. In the late 19th century a left leaning workers' party in Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei) changed the phrase to "ein feste Burg ist unser Bund" (a mighty citadel is our union). In 1933 Bertholt Brecht used the phrase and melody of the original hymn from Luther to parody Hitler and the National Socialists. To Stevens, "feste Burg" is a possible source for the idea of the Rock as the foundation of all

spirit's instrument for responding to one's environment, and this is a part of our evolutionary heritage. The bird's "toot on the old horn" acknowledges unity between it and the man into which he metamorphosed in the long processes of evolution. In Bateson's terms, this passage indicates that the bird or man registers their awareness "of news of difference that makes a difference" with an aesthetic integration of his own environment (*Mind and Nature* 76).

Like Bateson, Stevens assigns spirit and consciousness to birds, lions and other life forms on earth. His mentioning of embryology ("a baby with a tail of a rat?" [CP 230]). in the poem "On an Old Horn," coupled with his statements above that the "spirit is the only music," and "the toot on the horn," indicate a belief that aesthetic ordering is an integral part of all creatures' mental life. Stevens makes and then unmakes a link to the music of the spheres as the ordering principle, or disordering principle, that all creatures have in common through shared evolutionary history.

This music is effective as an aesthetic ordering / disordering principle because its force of imagination has transformative power, or is like the "strange" evolutionary metamorphosis from one life form into another. According to Voros's explanation of "On an Old Horn," Stevens does not emphasize aesthetics as a key principle of evolution. It is telling of Stevens that he wrote the above passage in a letter to Hi Simons, one of his first academic critics, who compares Stevens to the Symbolist Mallarme. Stevens explicitly states that he does not agree with Simons' scholarship, but his explanation of the poem suggests that his views on aesthetics were as much in league with American transcendentalism's emphasis on the natural world as they were with Poe and the French Symbolists. In that passage, Stevens mocks and rejects the mysticism of the

poetic and spiritual and materialist values. It is a part of the territory and is not meant in either a Christian or a humanist sense.

music of the spheres as the mechanism for linking aesthetics to evolutionary heritage, but Stevens's faith is, nevertheless, that we are already a part of the natural world, and that, therefore, aesthetics without mysticism is a part of that world as well. His usage of the phrase "fester Burg" tokens this belief that aesthetics originate in nature as much as they do in the minds of poets and philosophers.

In the form of a falsely logical syllogism, the reasoning that Stevens uses in his explanation of "On an Old Horn" would be something like this:

Men sing
Birds sing
Men are birds.

According to Bateson, this type of syllogism is abductive reasoning, which is reasoning by the assumption that if two disparate categories of evolutionary phenomena are similar and analogous in one way then it can be reasoned that they are similar in other ways as well. Bateson explains abductive logic in terms of syllogisms and evolutionary history. Proper syllogisms are dependent on the development of language, so there were no syllogisms in the millions of years before there were people.¹⁶ There was only abductive reasoning in evolutionary processes. More generally, abduction is also another word for metaphor:

Organisms in nature managed to organize themselves in their embryology to have two eyes, one on either side of a nose... to organize themselves in their evolution... And it became evident that metaphor was not just pretty poetry, not either good or bad logic, but was in fact the logic upon which the biological world

¹⁶ Bateson explicitly rejects a Platonic logos at the top of Plotinus's "Great Chain of Being" since that invites dualistic thinking, an "epistemological error" in Western thought (*Mind and Nature* 21).

had been built, the main characteristic of the world of mental characteristics. (*A Sacred Unity* 241)

The metaphor, men are birds, in evolutionary terms means that they really are homologous and this is just not just “pretty poetry,” or art-for-art’s-sake aesthetics. Bateson’s abductive reasoning, or metaphor carrying the truth-bestowing capacity that formal logic gives, may provide a valid way to say that what Stevens affirms in his poetics is that language and communication, and, therefore, poetic metaphors are not human add-ons or decorations (“pretty poetry”) of the natural world, but are a part of what already occurs in the evolutionary process.

To say as Bateson said that evolution is creative is not a new idea. Stevens would have known of this idea through the works of many others, but especially Henri Bergson, whom he quotes several times in his essays.¹⁷ According to Tom Quirk, Stevens believed in the creative power and “linked this power to a vital force, biological in nature and primordial in origin” (Quirk 8).

Stevens’s Necessary Angel

To arrive at the idea of the primordial origin of a creative force, however, Stevens owes as much to exposure to Freud, surrealism, and other reading, as he does to having read Bergson. Like Bergson or the surrealists or even Bateson in a less logical-positivistic sense, Stevens seems ready to install an agency as the mediator that would make plausible the imaginative link between perception and nature. The agency or necessary angel (his necessary angel of the book of that title and of the poem discussed below, “Angel Surrounded by Paysans”) functions similarly to how an angel in Judeo-Christianity functions, except in Stevens’s agnosticism, this

¹⁷ According to at least one Stevens critic, Tom Quirk, Stevens references Bergson’s philosophy throughout the body of his poetry. In his essays, Stevens mentions or references Bergson’s *élan vital*, the creative agency driving evolution. (1-15).

agency is a fictional abstraction that does what the angels under divine authority were thought by some to do. Bergson (along with George Santayana) may have given Stevens the pragmatist's vocabulary to compare the aspirations of the poet with the aspirations of the Christian mystic while avoiding assuming metaphysical claims. The one thing that saves this agent from being purely fictional and, therefore, yet another example of a poetry cut off from the actual world, is that, as was discussed above in terms of Bateson, Stevens extends consciousness (in the form of music or poetic verse as part of our evolutionary history) to include the world itself. He does this without recourse to a particular systematic philosophy, theory or natural science; he merely suggests that it is possibly the case, and that a realistic possibility is enough to satisfy the imagination. On the other hand, he notes, a great poem satisfies both the reason and the imagination. He writes in his "Adagia" that "The Real is only the base. But it is the base" (*OP* 187). The rest is imagination, but the base must be real and something to which everyone might be able to accede. The mediating agency has a real potential to actually exist; its possibility can be said to be immanent in the relationship between the mind and the object. Stevens makes clear in his first two essays in *The Necessary Angel* and in many poems that only a "virile poet" or a "noble rider" can bring to light what is not readily available to the knowledge of others, namely the relationship between mind and object. This is made especially clear in his essay "The Figure of Youth as the Virile Poet":

[...]--few people realize that when they are looking at the world they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and their own feelings. [...] The experiences of thinking and feeling accumulate in the abnormal ranges of sensibility; so that, to use a bit of M. Focilon's personal language, while the normative poet is likely to be concerned with pretty much the same facts as those with which the genius, or

rather the youth as virile poet, is concerned, the genius, because of his abnormal range of his sensibility, not only accumulates experiences with greater rapidity, but accumulates experiences and qualities of experiences accessible only in the extreme ranges of sensibility. (NA 66).

As seen above, and in Stevens's letter about "On an Old Horn," Stevens stipulates that something has poetic value to the extent that its strangeness perceived in the virile poet's "abnormal range of perception" has been made plausible by the perception revealed through poetry.

In Stevens's various discussions of the virile poet, or strong poet in Bloom's terms, his task is to make the strange seem plausible and a part of normal everyday life: the greater the disconnect with typical reality that a fiction has, the more that is required of the virile poet to make the event seem plausible. Thus, the poem has integrative power and functions like a "toot on the horn"; one 'toots one's own horn' before the map-territory divide in order to assume territory for the imagination's map. More specifically, the poem functions like Stevens's "lion [that] roars at the enraging desert" in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," (CP 384) and like the "lion roaring at the desert" in the excerpted letter above. The poet's self-assertion in the form of a poem responds to the territory uncolonized¹⁸ by the imagination. In this case then of the fiction of a realistic agency or necessary angel, the poet has to draw on whatever he or she can to imbue the world with the plausibility of a greater than human agency, like Stevens's "Giant of the Weather" that shares qualities with both angels and humans. Stevens's task is to make this fictive agency appear plausible; moreover, he makes it seem possible that the mind is a part of the world and that the world is a part of the mind.

¹⁸ Colonization here refers to what is successfully mapped by the poet's imagination. The assumption is that all territory, political or not, is unknown before it is colonized by the imagination.

As discussed below, the supreme fiction can not be contrived in terms of philosopher Hans Vaihinger's "as if" religious ersatz.¹⁹ Stevens knew of the "as if" alternative to religion through reading *The Future of an Illusion*, in which Freud objects to the "as if" philosophy's impracticality. According to Stevens, however, a larger than life, quasi-mystical agency must be actually potentially possible so that it "allow[s] us to see the normal in the abnormal...the instinctive integrations which are the reason for living" (NA 155). That is, Vaihinger's advocacy for believing in religion only "as if" its cosmology could be upheld by contemporary science does not make a strong imaginative response to the territory.

To that end, Bateson's theories of panpsychism fill that need. When Stevens discusses the symbology of the angel of reality, or the giant of the weather, major man, the more than human hero, and the many other guises of the angel of reality that appear in his poetry and prose, he does so as if they were actually a plausible abstract principle that is immanent in the mind-body relationship. For example, as is discussed in Chapter 3 on decreation, Stevens over-emphasizes God's absence on earth in order to precipitate in the reader's imagination the need for God in relation to specific experiences of life on earth: the need for God will be immanent in the relationship to nature. In a similar way, tribal peoples living in close proximity to the earth develop animistic religions.

Ananke: Necessity or Inhuman Reality

Behind Stevens's necessary angel, nature as presence, in his poems is the idea of necessity or fate, a concept which, in part, stems from his reading in Freud. Milton Bates

¹⁹ Hans Vaihinger, whose philosophy Freud and his English translator mention in *The Future of an Illusion*, wrote *The philosophy of As If*, wherein he proposes fictions as replacement for religious beliefs and advances the idea that our maps of reality differ from the territory. Moreover, he argues against literal acceptance of an individual's maps of the world.

speculates that Stevens learned from Freud to use the ancient Greek word for necessity, Ananke, to refer to outer reality (35). Freud means that alone; his usage refers to the limitations that humans have in the face of nature as material reality. According to Voros, Stevens also knew about Emerson's similar usage of fate to mean both Ananke and limitation:

In "Fate," Emerson's truly "ecological" essay in the sense in which that term is used today, Emerson effects reconciliation with necessity, Fate and Ananke [Greek ur-deity of fate or necessity]. Recognizing that the laws of Nature are coterminous with what humans conceive as "fate" and, therefore, limitation ("Fate, or the laws of the world" [331]), Emerson writes, "The element running through entire nature, which we popularly call Fate, is known to us as limitation. Whatever limits us we call Fate" (338).[human nature's] limitation is not just the sum of physical laws that circumscribe the human but the human point of view, as well, that limits human perception of reality. (Voros 115).

The younger Emerson of "Nature" saw no such limitation to the power of the imagination in the face of reality. Stevens's fictional agency, like the older Emerson's imagination, would have gone no further than to reify only those moments when the world does seem to be in accord with human desires (NA 48). By contrast, the younger Emerson said every natural fact is a spiritual symbol. Stevens writes about "fortuitous" chance moments when "we look at the blue sky for the first time...and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there" (NA 68). This non-geography, the projections of artists and poets, is what Stevens says that Freud disparaged (NA 14-15) and what Stevens advances as poets fated (because that they are born with a propensity to their subject) "vocation" in reality (NA 48). This reality, different from

Freud's, depends more on chance encounters that the imagination has with the territory beyond the map. Only through poetry and religion does the poet have recourse to the life lived in a physical poetry beyond the rational mapping of causality. Stevens writes that the poet in his idiosyncratic preferences is "fated" to his subject: some prefer "a drizzle in Venice to a hard rain in Hartford" (NA 48). Stevens's "virile poet" has a skeletal idea of the fated subject brought forth through poetic craft. In the context of the essay about the limitations of rational philosophy and empirical science, and the relative importance of the imagination, the imagination's fortuitous successes reflect as much the possibility of fate or necessity acting on the imagination, the reader's and the poet's, as they do the fortuitous encounter between desire and fact.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud discusses his proposed "education in reality" in terms of scientific gains made against nature as if that meant remaining rationally dispassionate before a cruel woman who promises much but always intends our deaths. Stevens gains against nature exactly to the extent that poetry emerges to help poets and their individual readers to see nature in its total aspect, bringer of life and death. Stevens makes clear that the alternative is to replace the individual's free imagination with prescribed imaginative maps of civilization. In his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he describes robotic factory workers who think of labor only in terms of work, pay, and bare material product. He also warns people of the spiritual violence from without that must be countered with the imagination to restore the connection of the world. Without that restoration, the rational world of science and rational philosophy comes to mean only force and coercion: "This [the absence of a respect for the imagination] is accompanied by an absence of any authority except force. What has been called the disparagement of reason is an instance of the absence of authority" (NA 17). Stevens suggests that the exercise of the imagination is inevitable, and imagination is in use even when his fellow

citizens are the collective victims of propaganda. Stevens means advertising and politics and newspaper reading when he uses the word propaganda, but he also refers to the aforementioned materialist beliefs about reality among factory workers (NA 19). Altogether, without the “toot on the horn” that is the spiritual or intellectually integrative function of the imagination, these disparate things of the modern world are held together through explicit threats of force or the implicit “spiritual violence” of propaganda.

Stevens proposes in “Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” that imagination should be the unifying, enlivening factor that helps people live their lives in a state of personal freedom. People do this through a vigorous exercising of the imagination: “poetry is the scholar’s art” and the imagination is defined by Stevens as the “sum of our faculties” (61). If one aspect of what Stevens associates with Freud’s outer reality or necessity is the inevitably particular way that death befalls us, then the agency Stevens proposes in the form of an angel of reality is what allows a person to sidestep that fate to express our freedom.²⁰ Stevens’s “exquisite fictions” fall into this category, but what is being argued here is that these fictions were already immanent in nature. Stevens’s “possible poet” creates them by imbuing Ananke or necessity with the sense of freedom and choice when outer reality’s most obvious meaning is death and limitation.

Re-mythologizing Ananke

Stevens first uses the word Ananke in his 1934 poem, “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery”:

The sense of the serpent in you Ananke,

And your averted stride

²⁰ In Stevens’s approach to poetry against knowledge of death, Joseph Riddel sees a similarity with Paul Valéry’s need to “hypostasize poetry” in order to produce personal power over facts, especially facts like death (197). This critical view tends to reduce the active ongoing relationship Stevens appears to have had with a latently mythologized outer reality to a will to power.

Add nothing to the horror of the frost

That glistens on your face and hair. (*CP* 152)

Accounting for the experience of fate's "averted stride" characterizes the content of many of Stevens's poems, especially those that share surrealism's spontaneity and its rational understanding of the irrational twists and turns of the courses of events that are outside of conscious control. Ananke the Greek god of fate and necessity predates the later anthropomorphic Greek pantheon. Ananke is the earliest god of "Eco" (Bateson's word for the ecological gods [*Angels Fear* 142]) that appears as a serpent encircling the world in Greek mythology²¹, which is how Stevens depicts the serpent Ananke in "The Auroras of Autumn." According to Freud, "Anangke [sic]" or necessity generally lies outside the concept of culture and civilization:

The notion dawned on the most gifted people of antiquity that Moira or Anangke stood above the gods and that the gods themselves had their own destinies. The more autonomous nature became, the more the gods withdrew from it, the more earnestly were all expectations directed to the third purpose of the gods—the more did morality become their true domain. (*The Future of an Illusion* 18)

This is seen in *The Iliad* when gods such as Athena or Ares are active players in the Trojan War but are themselves beholden to the mysterious hand of fate. Freud mentions this extra-cultural background of Ananke in *The Future of an Illusion*, but in his usage, necessity becomes the limitations of reality encountered beyond infantile or religious consciousness. In Stevens's

²¹ According to James Hillman. *Re-Visioning Psychology*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 159, Ananke is the root word of the English word anxiety. Ananke, or in the Greek alphabet αναγκη, is translated as "distress" in Luke 21:23 of the King James Version of the Bible. See Biblos.com. 2004. 6 June 2009. <
<http://scripturetext.com/luke/21-23.htm>>

usage, Ananke, in partial response to Freud's usage, becomes fictional and as discussed above, potentially (after the poet's imagination transforms it) a living myth again. Stevens makes clear in several poems that the chaos of outer reality, like the personification of fate, necessity and limitation in the figure of Ananke, has to be imagined like everything else; therefore, necessity, as outer, inhuman reality that is imagined as such, is not something that lies outside the province of human civilization. However, as seen above in the discussion of "On an Old Horn," Stevens suggests that imagination (and by extension consciousness) itself is a part of outer reality, and is not only restricted to human language and psychology. Stevens's tautology is that the necessary angel is necessary because imagination is a part of necessity.

The Necessary Angel as Epistemological Link to Ananke

Stevens's device of the epistemological necessary angel as aesthetic approach to reality is necessary to the extent that people (especially moderns) perceive themselves as separated from nature. Poetry about poetry cannot, according to Stevens, be art for art's sake; its basis has to be found in the phenomenal world. The necessary angel, therefore, is always the discovered news of the real world that makes the link between perception and reality believable and empowering. Stevens explains the angel that appears in his poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" in a letter as

the angel of reality. This is only clear if the reader is of the idea that we live in a world of the imagination, in which reality and contact with it are the great blessings. For nine readers out of ten, the necessary angel will appear to be the angel of the imagination and for nine days out of ten that is true, although it is the tenth day that counts. (*L* 753)

In Bateson's terms, information of the real world is not the imagination's map of reality. The angel cannot be a private solipsistic symbol system as part of an "as if" philosophy (as stated

above, the philosophy to which Freud explicitly objects to as too impractical a replacement for religion) that treats fictions as if it they were religious dogma (*The Future of an Illusion* 26). The necessary angel effectively responds to outside reality exactly because it is “as it is, in an intricate evasion of *as [iff]*” (italics mine *CP* 486), or an intricate evasion of the falseness of metaphoric maps of experience. Its necessity has to be a response to a real-world stimulus if it is to be “the necessary angel of earth” in whose “sight [we] see the earth again” (*CP* 496). The angel of the earth also has to be composed of parts of the world. Its revelation would be the conjoining of poet and world in something beyond the personality of the poet. The revelation has to be composed of the poet’s body and particular unconscious mental aspects as well as the poet’s conscious reactions to those aspects. The necessary angel is simultaneously aesthetic and ecological.

Bateson’s Ecology of Mind and the Necessary Angel

The angel is the metaphorical link in a poem that makes aesthetic connections with the world. As a result, an ecology of mind and matter takes shape. With a non-logocentric view of Stevens’s poetry, this relationship in his poetry between two disparate categories, imagination and material reality, forms an ecology in which these two categories are an “interdependence,” which is itself a recurring term in Stevens’s poetics (*NA* 27). Ecology as it is used here stems from Bateson’s loose application of ecology as “the science of interrelations and interdependence between organisms and between organisms and their environments” (*Angels Fear* 207) to the concept of “mind” as mental system in which “individual body, society, and ecosystem interact and communicate with each other for the purpose of survival” (Gersdorf, Mayor 15). The emphasis in Bateson’s view of ecology is an exchange of information, whereas normally descriptions of ecology are limited to exchanges of energy (erroneously in Bateson’s view). In

terms of Stevens's poetry, the imagination helps the individual adapt to a changing territory or cultural landscape. For example, Stevens's factory workers mentioned above depend on the imagination to "help [them] live their lives" by "pressing back against the pressure of reality" with a pressure from within (*NA* 36). At the same time, Stevens presumes that the objects of the territory are wild, inassimilable, and other²². In Bateson's terms the "other" is necessary in order for communication to occur since all communication is "news of difference" that makes a difference at an interface between map and territory (where "territory" almost always simply refers to the map immediately preceding a current map) (*Mind and Nature* 76). "Information" can only be produced by two entities,

such that the difference between them can be immanent in their mutual relationship; and the whole affair must be such that news of their difference can be represented inside some information-processing entity, such as a brain, or, perhaps a computer. (76)

In Stevens's poetry the "other" is the territory that is separate from the imagination. As with Ananke's associations with death and, stemming from its non-anthropomorphic ontology, irrationality, if the object in reality does not stand out, it is no longer 'other' and does not count as "a difference that makes a difference." Stevens's form of othering involves stripping an object bare of whatever the knower has already (through cultural and personal expectations) projected onto the object so that there results a stark difference between the knower and object. In his poetry, Stevens expresses stripping bare the object and the resulting "poverty" as an almost positive thing: Stevens's grumpy Mrs. Alfred Uruguay "wipes away moonlight like mud"

²² The usage of the term "other" to refer to an individual from an outsider group such as women in the eyes of the patriarchy who usually has negative associations to overcome as part of their default identity from the perspective of the othering individual or group comes from Simone de Beauvoir, among others. Here, "othering" does not imply something negative.

(CP 248); the title of the poem “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” expresses an ecology based on difference that emerges as a result of othering; and the speaker of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” counsels his “ephebe” that “The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be” (381); and recurrently the othered object is expressed as a “poverty,” which is reality or some part of reality “naked of any illusion, in poverty” (258).

The news of impoverished outer reality calls for an act of imaginative “self preservation” (NA 21). The poem as an imaginative work of art is itself a device that negotiates new ecological relationship to reality, which, according to Bateson, if seen correctly is something other. To Stevens who seems to align reality with Ananke, reality is as threatening as poverty is to the individual. Understood together—the poem, poet and reader’s imagination, and the outside chaos of reality—form a fleeting integrative pattern that either does or does not nourish the imagination of the reader by connecting it to the outside world. The poem that adheres to reality connects by forming a bridge between two ways to understand reality, imagination’s and the reason’s.

Bateson’s definition of aesthetics as “The pattern that connects” refers to a pattern of logically unlike elements that are connected to one other not through the language of rationality on the one hand or through artistic pattern on the other, but through a perceived meta-pattern that encompasses both modes of communication (*Mind and Nature* 9). This meta-pattern can also be understood in terms of Stevens’s claim that a “great poem” (“great” as in order of magnitude) appeals to both the imagination and the reason, and he suggests that the same holds true for great works of philosophy and science (NA 60-61). Bateson, the evolutionary biologist and atheistic skeptic, confesses to a type of Platonism that consists in the process of achieving “appropriate synchrony or harmony” between “rigor”—conservative “thinking” like that in evolutionary

processes and in human education that preserves what “worked” in the past—and “imagination,” which he defines in this context as the creation of new forms that attempt new adaptation strategies (*Mind and Nature* 248). Bateson’s Platonism depends on hierarchies of logical types²³, such as class and member of a class. Bateson’s usage of logical types may appear to parallel the different levels of knowledge in Neoplatonism, wherein the person capable of receiving a lower level of knowledge, such as sensory information, is incapable of conceiving of what occurs at the higher level of knowledge, such as the imagination, but Bateson replaces any hierarchical “great chain of being” that owes its genesis to a logos at the top of the chain with his ideas of ecological difference where knowledge (located in the world or body) is immanent between mutually exclusive logical classes. For example, in Bateson’s epistemology, concepts of pattern (typology) and quantity (linear thinking) belong to separate “languages” but both participate and indirectly communicate at chronologically (as opposed to higher) distant points in the evolution of say, a particular mammalian vertebra.

At some point in changes that occur through time, adaptive or maladaptive adjustments occur in one cybernetic evolutionary process only to reappear when new information either confirms or disrupts (though positive or negative feedback) the previous balanced adjustment to the environment. Any communication that is indicated by these adjustments to have taken place occurs on a more abstract level because it registers the results of the communication as immaterial information from the interaction between discrete types that occurred earlier in the process. Through time, for example, the results of interactions between an organism’s specie and

²³ It can be credibly assumed that Stevens knew of the concept of logical type from Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, whose works inform Bateson’s theories of communication, cybernetics, anthropology, psychology, and biology. Stevens mentions Russell twice in *The Necessary Angel*, (10, 54) and in Lisa Steinman’s view, Stevens references Whitehead in his paper “A Collect of Philosophy” (159-61).

its environment are added to the information of that specie's collective genotype. According to Bateson's cybernetic theory, the guiding principle is not the truth of divine logos, but rather a feedback loop wherein a kind of "governor" (as in a steam engine) responds to the news within a mental system by means of self-reinforcing or self-correcting adjustments.²⁴ In Bateson's epistemology, the key difference between his Platonism and others is his inclusion of the dimension of time. No one, not a scientist or a poet or religious theologian can presume to stand apart and hover above the space-time continuum in order to understand what happens "below." Any mental system can only make adjustments "guided" by verities from within the system such as abduction (metaphorical logic) and hierarchical levels of logical type, which serve as keys to how the territory will be mapped. These verities are embedded through time-based recursive feedback loops that are themselves subject to the behavior of the system as a whole.

To summarize the above discussion in terms of Stevens's poetics, his ecology of the imagination and reality depends on news of difference between these two percepts. In Stevens's works, the difference between imagination and reality that results in a poem is often registered as the information of "poverty" of the imagination in winter, for example, or conversely as something "green and bloated" in the summer (*CP* 62). Moreover, Stevens's aesthetics depends on a credible link between mind and matter and is conceived of expressly without deliberate recourse to mysticism or metaphysics; it is a link that depends on the discovery of the territory in "times of inherent excellence" that makes possible the aesthetic relationship or "pattern that connects" in Bateson's terms (*CP* 386). Stevens describes the appearance of the imaginative inspiration in these times of excellence as something that suddenly "flies in the window" as if it the inspiration were an angel bearing news of reality or of the imagination (*L* 505). An

²⁴ For a discussion of Bateson's Cybernetic theory, see *Steps towards an Ecology of Mind*, 316, 405-31.

imaginative link cannot be predicted; it occurs “fortuitously” as a discovery that one would happen upon as in a flea market or as result of poetic improvisation. Life is enriched or impoverished by the presence of the necessary angel, for “misery is, / nothing to have at heart” (CP 192).

Thus, Stevens’s necessary angel opens up the possibility for an imaginative approach to Ananke in so far as Ananke stands for the territory. The necessity of the angel in providing this approach to the territory becomes clearer in terms of poetry if seen against an analysis of the distinctions Stevens makes between the literary faculties of the “imagination” and “fancy.” A rough parallel emerges between the angel and these two faculties of mind. John Dryden was one of the first to suggest fancy as a lesser form of the imagination: “The first happiness of the poet’s imagination, is properly invention, or finding of the thought; the second is fancy, or the variation, deriving, or moulding of that thought” (*The Works of John Dryden* 14). The inferior status of fancy does not hold true when one considers that a common example given of a work of fancy is Pope’s “Rape of the Lock” and of imagination is *Paradise Lost*. Instead of being superior and inferior according to some a priori scale of greatness, they each are records of responses in different genres to different sets of cultural conditions. Very generally, however, the work of fancy would be ornate, comic and conservative and a work of imagination makes a sufficient response to the shifting ground in the mythological landscape. Works of the imagination can induce the reader and the general public (by introducing new ways of looking at the world into the public discourse) to view cultural reality in fundamentally different ways. In explaining his poem “Angels Surrounded by Paysans” Stevens mentions the angels of imagination and reality. For the purposes of refining Stevens’s necessary angel, the angel of the imagination corresponds to fancy since it draws on and modifies extant works of the imagination. The angel of reality

corresponds to the faculty of the imagination since it is the voice that elucidates new realities. As Stevens indicates, new forms of the imagination appear at any time but especially during times of great social upheaval at “the end of one an era in the history of the imagination [...] It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality” (NA 22).

As is detailed below, Stevens aligns the faculty of the imagination with the capacity for adaptive evolutionary change—the ability or failure to adapt to the flux of change and time by creatively engendering new cultural images to negotiate this flux. Thus, the necessity of the necessary angel relates to changes in the cultural zeitgeist. In Stevens’s terms, it seem that fancy fails to do this, and thus a culture or people that relies on fancy as its chief negotiator with the territory may become self-destructive by reinforcing old, stale cultural images of itself that lack the ability to hear anything other than its own need to persist and reinforce itself. In Bateson’s cybernetic theory, this happens when the “governor” responds to the news within a system by self-reinforcing behaviors rather than self-correcting ones.

Stevens’s Imagination and Fancy

In his essay, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens’s “reality” is more than materialism; it includes the poet’s response to current events such as war and news about wars that constitutes “the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (NA 20). Stevens perceived the reality of his time (the world wars and the time between the wars) to be part of a “war-like whole,” whose chief characteristic for him was that it was “spiritually violent.” In the United States, he was not exposed first hand “to the physical violence that millions of others around the world were experiencing” (26-7).

Imagination on the other hand is the faculty of mind and spirit that responds to the pressure of this reality. According to his definition, the imagination is escapist, but not in the pejorative sense. Imagination is something that helps people to live by giving life and peculiarity to their reality. This peculiarity, according to Stevens, is nobility. He states that in his time period, nobility has to be elusive and difficult to see, for to fix it and to name it is to negate its ability to make the world seem alive and vital once again (34). He sees nobility as the “sum of our spiritual depth and height” (35). It’s important to note that spiritual height and depth is meant almost literally: the spiritual height refers to giants of the weather, and spiritual depths refer to Chaplinesque figures, or men and women of the people. The quality of nobility in poetry is both the greatest and most common thought about reality that we can contain within the imagination.

Nobility in the imagination is the dynamic, transformative relationship between reality and the imagination. This linking of reality with imagination helps explain how works of true imagination are never alienated from the social and material circumstances of the individual poet. Stevens’s poetry could not exist without the pressure of reality. Thus, Stevens states, “The possible poet will not find that it is a choice of imagination over reality or vice versa, and not a decision that divides them, but something subtler, he will find that here too, between these poles, the universal interdependence exists and hence his choice must be that the two are inseparable and equal” (NA 24).

In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens, drawing from Coleridge, differentiates the imagination that is in tension with the violence of reality with fancy, a lesser faculty that merely mirrors an image of who the person or society knows itself to be. The contents of the images that fancy creates draws from objects that are “already fixed”: “it [the work of fancy] helps us to know ourselves...as we were” whereas the work of the imagination

attaches itself to contemporary reality and reveals through the poet how it perceives and thereby shapes its relationship with reality (11).²⁵ On the whole, Stevens's essay traces the historical devolution and looping regeneration of the quality of nobility in works of art: from Plato's "gorgeous nonsense" of horse-drawn charioteers to Verrocchio's noble rendering of a mercenary on horseback to the figure of Cervantes' Don Quixote to the epitome of the democratic principle in the statue of Andrew Jackson. Stevens finishes his list of examples of attempts at depictions of nobility with a description of a contemporary painting depicting three girls and a cigar-smoking man riding wooden horses on a merry-go-round. In contrast to the "work of fancy" that is the statue of Jackson, this painting, according to Stevens, does adhere to reality, and is "not without imagination and far from being without aesthetic theory" (NA 12). It appears that the "gorgeous nonsense" of Plato's charioteer has come full circle in Stevens's course of nobility because the painting of the last example ironically depicts a cycling merry-go-round that reflects how people actually live in twentieth century New York. The aesthetic theory is that nobility itself can never be fixed in a stock image of nobility like the statue of Andrew Jackson. It must change, and in the modern period it has changed by depicting the equilibrium between imagination and reality through a painting of "ribald and hilarious reality" (12).

In a letter to Hi Simons, Stevens uses the Twentieth century language of science to describe how the statues depicted in *Owl's Clover* are works of fancy: "What this poem is concerned with is adaptation to change. One assumes that change is the evolution of what ought to be. From that point of view, the statue is a manifestation of foppery" (L 366). In his stressing

²⁵ As an example of a work of American fancy, Stevens discusses the statue of General Andrew Jackson on horseback in Lafayette Square in Washington D.C. The poem, "The American Sublime" (written six years prior to the reading of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words") sardonically mentions General Jackson posing for a sculptor and a group of "mockers" (CP 130). Two other poems written during this time, "The Dance of the Macabre Mice" and "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," also feature public statuary, and "The Dance of the Macabre Mice" features a statue of "the founder of the state" on horseback.

chronological change and adaptation to changing reality, Stevens's renders fancy and imagination partially stripped of the metaphysical eternal present that is prominent in Coleridge's Platonism.²⁶ Moreover, Stevens couches the idealism of nobility in the language of science:

It is hard to think of a thing more out of time than nobility. [...] To look at it all makes us realize sharply that in our present, in the presence of our reality, the past looks false and is, therefore, dead and is, therefore, ugly; and we turn away from it as from something repulsive and particularly from the characteristic that it has a way of assuming: something that was noble in its day, grandeur that was, the rhetorical once. *But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same.* (NA 35-6, my italics).

It is telling of Stevens's somewhat critical views of Freud in an essay that also prominently references *The Future of an Illusion*, which also proposes a way to respond to reality, Stevens associates works of fancy with a society's "fixed" image of itself that is out of touch with contemporary reality. As Stevens states, "it [*The Future of an Illusion*] contains much that is inimical to the imagination" (NA 15). Stevens's fancy corresponds to what Freud says about the value of the works of creative artists, that they appeal to narcissistic desires in a civilization, and provide social cohesion by giving people some image of themselves in which to identify. Stevens, no doubt, responds to Freud in this essay by recalling Coleridge's and Shelley's definitions of the imagination that do not identify it as narcissistic but instead assign it

²⁶ In *Biographia Literaria*. (London. 1898. <http://google.com/books/>) 144, Coleridge's Platonism is clear in his definition of imagination: "The primary Coleridge writes "IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM...FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites."

a central role in an individual's "self preservation" against the pressures of society's "spiritual violence."

Two Poems, Two Approaches to Reality

Thus qualified, an understanding of fancy and imagination informs readings of how the figure of the necessary angel as mediating agency acts in Stevens's poems. Below is a discussion in these terms of two poems, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" and "Dance of the Macabre Mice"; both exemplify a deeper imaginative understanding of our relationship to reality. The necessary angel, in other words, demands new maps to correspond to news of crucial changes in reality.

As already noted above, Stevens's phrase "necessary angel" occurs first in his poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans." The necessary angel is an example of the life-changing type of imagination that has the power to ennoble the world and at the same time to make it seem real and alive. Stevens rejects as false any easy or obvious definition of nobility, but according to him the principal characteristic of the imagination is nobility. It responds and rejects the spiritual violence (fascist and especially communist propaganda, but more generally, also the propagandistic onslaught of the news and advertising media) from without by integrating one's experiences in life. According to Stevens, experiencing the calm of normality in a time of great pervasive violence is a revolutionary act. Seeing the world as real instead of through the lens of topical hysteria requires the effort to process conflicting pieces of information. "The poem must resist the intelligence / almost successfully" (*CP* 350).

The angel in this poem is one of the peasants in a painting from Pierre Tal-Coat. Stevens copied in his commonplace book a 1947 quote by an art critic about Tal-Coat that perhaps is the genesis of his poem:

We can wonder how he will emerge from this path, if he will invent a new realism, or if, on the contrary, he will heed the appeal of abstraction. It should be very surprising and entirely at odds with what is known of him. More likely we can expect, during the coming stages, *that synthesis* which everyone awaits and which no one has yet been able to realize... (*Wallace Stevens's Commonplace Book* 109, my italics).

The sense of hope for a syncretistic form of thought and art in this quote accords well with the hope for a new fiction that many of the poems in *The Auroras of Autumn* evince. The angel in the poem is “only half of a figure of a sort,” half-fleeting projection, and half illumination of reality “cleared of its stubborn and man-locked set”:

Angel Surrounded by Paysans

One of the countrymen:

There is

A welcome at the door to which no one comes?

The angel:

I am the angel of reality,

Seen for a moment standing at the door.

I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore

And live without a tepid aureole,

Or stars that follow me, not to attend

But, of my being and its knowing, part. [my italics]

I am one of you and being one of you

Is being and knowing what I am and know. [my italics]

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set
And in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone.

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said

By repetitions of half-meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition appareled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone? (CP 496)

The “tragic” self-knowing that constitutes the necessary angel of the earth is one that includes knowledge of death and life on earth and not just a “man-locked set.” The angel is a peasant’s experience whose history is attuned to and formed by particular landscapes and the vicissitudes of changes in the weather and life on the land.

This aspect of the peasant is a recurring figure in Stevens’s poetry, as a variation of Stevens’s often referred to “Hidalgo,” the country nobleman, whose culture and sensibilities are tied to the physical and social landscape of his ancestral lands and region. The countrymen unwittingly depend on this angel to make life bearable. In the process of establishing a new earthly focus for spiritual avatars, Stevens deposes the old heavenly angel: “I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore / And live without a tepid aureole.” But he restores the link between perception and the world by conflating self-knowledge with earthly experience. It is clear that the necessary angel of earth makes way for understanding that includes the earth. Yet it is a knowing that only Stevens’s giants and “Major Man” can grant, since this includes knowledge that occurs beyond narrow conscious intention. The suggestion here is that the earth itself contains in its makeup non-human mental activity, perhaps immanent in the form of the earliest god of Eco, Ananke.²⁷ The angel of reality’s self-knowing is the imaginative contact that connects the “countrymen” to their land, which they already indirectly know. This type of imagination that the angel of reality represents contains the epistemological assumption that knowledge of reality does not come from beyond the world or from the objects of the world, but from bodily and cultural relationships of the world.

²⁷ The necessary Angel is language or communication. The angel, as necessary, is both of the plane of immanence and transcendent to it (or abstracted from it). So the word is both real and abstract. The concreteness or the necessity of the word, then, would correspond to nature itself, whereas its abstraction should bring about the consciousness necessary for change. The word is both a metaphor and a simile (both the territory and the map). See the second footnote of this chapter.

Stevens's poem "Angels surrounded by Paysans" borders on being logical-positivistic like few other poems in his oeuvre (but there are as many suggestions that this angel is simultaneously an angel of death). A reader might conclude only after reading that poem and Stevens's essays that the poet is a proponent of Bergson's vitalism, and his poetry is part of an essential, meliorative way of knowing nature for the betterment of society. Stevens is more often not an advocate of social reform, but primarily an advocate of the spiritual pleasures of pure poetry who envisions both the positive and negative aspects of nature. In his essay, "The Figure of Youth as the Virile Poet," he rejects Aristotle's definitions of poetry in terms of the poet's moral duty. He affirms that there is no definition for poetry, only an ongoing "process" of the "discovery" of "a center of poetry" (NA 45). Rather than exploring notions of good or evil, his poet's relationship with the positive and negative aspects of the earth and mortality involves matters of health as value. (Elsewhere, Stevens writes, "Poetry is a health" [OP 200].) The countrymen in the above poem have a healthy relationship with their land, but since feudalism is not a part of the modern reality, it is no longer a viable relationship.

Many of the poems in *Ideas of Order* (1934) stress (in a comical way) the unhealthy aspect of the necessary angel as mediating agency within the world. For example, "The Dance of the Macabre Mice" appears to mock solipsistic cultural practices that fail to take a wider reality into account. Necessity demands that the imagination integrate into static images sensory information that is in constant flux. The question that this poem raises is to what extent that cultural image will be wedded to its real time and place in nature, or if it will be cultural information that merely nourishes a society with images of its own ideals.

Written during the Great Depression, "The Dance of the Macabre Mice" demonstrates a double bind, which lays bare the insanity of a solipsistic, isolationist social system. Stevens

appears to have in mind a humorous criticism of Marxist ideologues, which in his later poem “Esthetique Du Mal,” he describes as the view of “logical lunatics” or the “lunatic[s] of one idea” (*CP* 324-5). Stevens’s double bind is best understood through the distinction between the two types of imaginative activity, fancy and imagination. As stated above, Stevens’s fancy draws from fixed cultural associations that merely remind the individual of what type of society or group they want to belong to. Such an exercise of this more formulaic form of the imagination fails to make necessary adjustments to maintain a sense of healthy normality or equilibrium between imagination and reality in rapidly changing times. Failing that equilibrium, fancy does not nourish the people exactly because it sets up a double bind of self knowledge:

Dance of the Macabre Mice

In the land of turkeys in turkey weather
At the base of the statue, we go round and round.
What a beautiful history, beautiful surprise!
Monsieur is on horseback. This horse is covered with
mice.

This dance has no name. It is a hungry dance.
We dance it out to the tip of Monsieur’s sword,
Reading the lordly language of the inscription,
Which is like zithers and tambourines combined:

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

What a beautiful tableau tinted and towering,

The arm of bronze outstretched against all evil! (*CP* 123)

The first bind is found in the idea that in order for the society to retain the cherished image of itself and its history, it has to reject what happens in the world outside of its insular group. The second bind is that the logical response within the system in which that individual lives is the wrong response. The double bind depicted in “The Dance of the Macabre Mice” consists in the idea that, according to the logic of formulaic imagination or fancy, a society consuming only news of itself acts correctly when it acts according to past ideals of the noble and the good. This “beautiful” self-cannibalization is the looping (“round and round” like a carousel) dance of sentimental people who can only see themselves: “What a beautiful history, beautiful surprise!” They eschew imagination that would actually allow them to grasp anything beyond the nominally heroic gesture of their hero’s “arm of bronze outstretched against all evil!” They are unable to see the horror that is the dance of the macabre mice. The horror actually inheres in the prospect that the people whom the speaker in the poem represents believe that the dance of starvation is beautiful and normal and that their sentimental self-regard leaves them unwilling to follow through with their own line of questioning: “Whoever could have founded a state that was free / in the dead of winter, from mice?” They can only see that the statue of the historical “founder of the state” signifies heroism and nobility, but they do not see the actual evil outside of “the land of turkeys” because they are consumed with themselves as they take in only news of themselves. Stevens is lampooning shows of false nobility, false imagination and a false connection to reality. This type of art fails to nourish the people’s need for noble self-reliance and self-preservation that would allow people to meet the demands of the time that occur in the reality beyond their “beautiful history.”

Surrealism, Decreation, and Exile

Finally, a question that may arise, is given the above description of a work of fancy as ornate, comical, and conservative, to what extent is the “The Dance of the Macabre Mice,” a work that has those qualities, an example of a work of the imagination that adheres to reality? Does it in some way create the possibility for Andre Breton’s “miracle” of the reconciliation of human necessity with “natural necessity”? And would such reconciliation lead to a relationship with the territory that did more than perpetuate outdated images? It is not any more obvious about how it is a work of the imagination than is Stevens’s description of the painting (mentioned above) of the modern cigar- smoking “noble rider” atop a wooden horse at an amusement park. The answer about whether the poem is a work of the imagination or fancy may be found in the question for the next chapter which is, should this poem and others be understood from a surrealist standpoint? If that description of the modern noble rider and the imagery of the mice-covered statue do betray surrealist influences, and there is reason to believe that surrealism was a significant part of the social reality in 1930s New York, then clearly in light of the above Batesonian considerations of Stevens’s necessary angel, these elements, in general, may constitute a means toward ecological ends.

Furthermore, it appears that Stevens’s method of modernist decreation is a broadening of surrealist aims into an “earthy anecdote” as sacred domain. This involves dismantling older imaginings of the world in order to see the earth’s “poverty” with new eyes. The undoing of older forms of imagining the earth additionally results in a reality-imagination centered aesthetics based on flux and possibility. Some of the results of disrupting older forms of imagination becomes clearer along these lines as well. The individual—Stevens himself—feels like an exile in his own country. The positive way to look at this exile is to think of the idea of

home as immanent in one's relationship with the world; the negative aspect of this is that the map of home will always be abstract in the same way that a poem will always be just words. As Stevens writes, the poet's "own measure as a poet ... is the measure of his power to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination" (*NA* 21). In a historical sense, Stevens's "universal interdependence" of reality and imagination remains a linguistic construct that is cut off from the particulars of place in the territory.

CHAPTER 2

THE TERRITORY BEYOND THE MAP AS SURREAL DISCOVERY

*The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be discovered, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination.—Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous**

Stevens believed we live in a nominalistic universe made up of unrelated and inscrutable particulars, and that the only order possible in such a universe is that created by the poetic imagination. Theory is an attempt at a philosophic foundation for the hedonism and partly an extension of this hedonism...it is a kind of willed delusion—Yvor Winters, “Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist’s Progress”

The surrealist object is the meeting place between mind and matter, and it has a decidedly dreamlike aspect. Surrealist theory assumes that the old antinomies break down in a dream state. With Stevens’s objects of contingency, antinomies such as reality and imagination are suspended¹ in a rational, conscious state of mind in order to create the conditions for their serendipitous breakdown that allows the poet and reader to experience “the res itself” (CP 473). Stevens’s objects and techniques tend to reflect the moods and theories of surrealism, which

¹ The difference between the two will have been suspended as in the final image from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”: his “fluent mundo, / you will have stopped revolving except in crystal” (CP 407).

according to Stevens critic Glen MacLeod were prevalent in the public life of 1930s New York and Hartford (*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 232).

MacLeod gives an historical account of Stevens's ties to surrealism and places Stevens in league with the avant-garde visual art movements of early Twentieth century New York City. His neighbor was Hartford Wadsworth Athenaeum director Chick Austin, one of the most innovative art directors in America at the time. Macleod sees this museum as one of the more progressive in America during the 1930s. Stevens visited the Athenaeum often and was exposed to all strains of modernist painting, including those from the surrealist, dada and abstract school. MacLeod discusses Stevens's steady involvement the 1910s with the Walter Conrad Arensberg circle, which included surrealist artists Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and other members of the avant-garde. Stevens was no political revolutionary, but he did attempt to influence the spiritual, psychological and intellectual underpinnings of modernist thought and society.

In this chapter, Stevens's poetics is held up against Breton's surrealism in respect to major surrealist tenets such as the marvelous, convulsive beauty, erotic desire, the unconscious, the uncanny, automatism, and a philosophy of immanence. In each case, Stevens's more conscious, diurnal emphasis in his themes and structures predisposes him to see the other side of the polarity—unconscious, nocturnal—as a wilderness of otherness (as defined in Chapter One), sometimes in a positive, empowering sense and sometimes in the threatening sense of the word “wilderness.” Stevens's drawing on this radical otherness does suggest a certain surrealistic “revolt” of the spirit,² though without surrealism's more politically radical revolt and subversion of western cultural values. Stevens's writing tends to disrupt orderly thinking in order to reveal the immeasurable possibilities in a wild other, but he does not seek to radically disrupt the values

² See Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978) 45-6. The central thesis of this book is that all surrealist poetry and music, like The Blues and Jazz, signify a rebellion of the spirit.

of western civilization. Seen against surrealism, Stevens's poetry may allow a reader to see and experience the impetus for these values to be located in the wilderness of the other rather than in their orthodox forms.

"The Man with the Blue Guitar"

Janet McCann calls "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens's least transcendental and metaphysical poem (28). Surrealism was able to discard transcendent modes of poetry in part because the new psychological sciences seemed to confirm the existence of different versions of reality in the unconscious. In his first surrealist manifesto, Breton defines the surrealist method as "psychic automatism in its pure state, to express the actual functioning of thought, dictated by thoughts, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (25). Though he states that surrealist thought and art are always evolving, Breton's surrealism generally has these characteristics: the omnipotence of dreams, the disinterested play of thought and radical social goals (26).

According to MacLeod, while Stevens feared being thought of as a surrealist ("Stevens and Surrealism" 362), he did approve of what he saw as an art movement that is "extraordinarily alive and they make it possible for us to read poetry that seems filled with gaiety and youth, just when we are beginning to despair of gaiety and youth" (*OP* 232). But overall in his poetry, Stevens seems to want to subsume surrealism's narrower goals. To that end, MacLeod makes a case for Stevens's idea for the poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" coming from an article penned by Breton about Picasso—another who incorporates surrealist elements but has wider goals—in a surrealist magazine.³ Breton relates an anecdote of Picasso giving a toy guitar to a woman on the occasion of her giving birth. In an afterthought, Picasso pins a note with a poem to

³ See Glen MacLeod. "Stevens and Surrealism: The genesis of 'The Man with the Blue Guitar.'" *American Literature*. 59 (1987): 367.

this guitar. For Breton, (according to the article) this guitar is a symbol of Picasso's entire body of work. MacLeod theorizes that this article and Picasso's gesture of pinning the poem between the birth of a child and the symbol of a body of a great artist's work is the germ for Stevens's poem.

The poem would not disappoint much of what the surrealists called for in art. Breton could find in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" what he referred to as the "dream engendered objects [...] the objectification of the act of dreaming, its transformation into reality" (*Surrealism and Painting* 277):

A dream (to call it a dream) in which
I can believe, in the face of the object,

A dream no longer a dream, a thing,
Of things as they are. (*CP* 174)

Breton could condone the "disinterested play of thought"⁴ that is an essential part of the definition of surrealist automatism:

To nail his thought across the door,
Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,

To strike his living hi and ho

To tick it, tock it, turn it true (166).

Breton could also find a semblance of a revolutionary social project, as Stevens downplays hypocritical politicians:

⁴ See Andre Breton. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972; 1969) 26.

...behold

The approach of him whom none believes,

Whom all believe that all believe,

A pagan in a varnished car. (170)

And Stevens conflates this revolutionary rhetoric with hints of violence. Breton states in his second manifesto that the “simplest surrealist act consists in descending down to the street, pistol in hand and firing blindly as fast as you can pull the trigger” (125). Stevens wistfully describes his desires to be the heroic poet who can “drive the dagger in the heart” and to splay his brains upon a door, and “to bang [his living] from a savage blue” (CP 166). Although Stevens’s tone might betray a moral sense, which is counter to surrealism’s dictates, he does not hesitate to combine violent imagery with winsome rhymes and sound effects, which makes light of the violent imagery. Elsewhere in the poem, Stevens describes the whole of society as a “Hoard of destructions”⁵ (173). He states in the section where that phrase occurs, that all things as they are have been destroyed and asks if what he sees is “wine or blood.” In that context, he upends the idea of the Eucharist by associating sacred wine with social upheaval.

For Breton, violence told of the Id and its desires. For Stevens, however, violence concerns history and what is no longer viable. Picasso’s “Hoard of destructions” implies a radical social change that must be addressed with new art forms. Surrealism sought to contain the dangers of irrational-subconscious thought in society by bringing it to the attention of the conscious, rational mind. This is one of the hidden purposes of surrealist art (and possibly a

⁵ “Hoard of destructions” is in quotes in the poem. According to MacLeod, “as critics of Stevens have long been aware, this particular issue of *Cashiers d’Art* [an issue devoted entirely to surrealism] is the source of the quotation from Picasso that Stevens includes in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 63)

source of a basic contradiction in surrealist philosophy). If the art had overt practical aims, then the conscious mind would fail to take note of any subconscious material the art brought to light.

Stevens, on the other hand, does not rely solely on the subconscious for latent material to create poetry that responds to the “hoard of destructions.” In “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” Stevens writes, “Day is desire and night is sleep” (167). That day, when people work and do constructive activities, should be the time to exercise the Id suggests that Stevens’s goals are wider reaching than those found in Breton’s manifestoes. Stevens embraces contradiction by soberly playing at bringing the imagination into daylight. He will play deliberately, and not only by means of dream-like automatism, which uses a release of deliberate control to achieve its ends. For Stevens, the goal of the poem or art piece is not only to create a dreamlike object, as is the case with the surrealists, but (as stated above) to see a “dream...in which / I can believe, in face of the object, / A dream no longer a dream, a thing, / of things as they are, as the blue guitar.” (174). Breton’s surrealist object is the objectification of the dream, and its transformation into reality. Stevens’s dream is active, intentional imagination: “The cock / Will claw sleep” (182). Here again, in this harbinger of day’s clawing is the hint of violence that Stevens appears to transform into a reality principle instead of serving it up as a purely liberating manifestation of the Id. Oddly, he does this in order to bring the imagination into the waking world.

The Marvelous

This tendency to focus on daytime activities of the imagination can also be seen in how the surrealist concept of the marvelous as it intersects with Stevens’s works.

As seen above, Stevens develops his concept of the marvelous in “The Man With the Blue Guitar” along the lines of the reality principle, but one is left wondering if conscious control,

violence and the death it brings (as a manifestation of the reality principle) carries more weight in his poetics than the more erotic surrealist version of the “marvelous.”

In *The History of Surrealism*, Maurice Nadeau writes that

the marvelous...[is] a pure surrender to the laws of the unconscious...not to be confused, as the symbolists supposed, with the search for a deliberate, artificial, false mystery. The marvelous was endowed with an eternal youth, whereas symbolism had consigned to the death of oblivion the productions in which it made an extensive use of mystery. (201)

Stevens’s own usage of the word “marvelous” as “shorthand for surrealism” in 1930s New York and shorthand for the poetic imagination implies surrealist leanings, in spite of what his poetry shares with Symbolism—a sense of mystery and a focus on death—for he often returns to the phenomenal world and is clearly on the earthy side of the Symbolists’ purity beyond the horizon of decay (*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 58).⁶

Nevertheless, death, a recurrent fixation among Symbolists, supplies tension in Stevens’s poems. In “Sunday Morning,” for example, death is the “mother of beauty, mystical” (*CP* 69), yet death seen as one side of a polarity with life becomes a wild, inassimilable other as much as it is a “deliberate,” morose symbol that imbues the world with mysterious presence. Death in “Sunday Morning,” as the opposite of life’s presence, makes life seem more precious. In that poem, death functions similarly to Stevens’s trope of the “rock” in later poems such as “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and “Credences of Summer,” or the “nothingness” in the “The Snow

⁶ Joseph Riddel distinguishes Stevens’s Symbolism from various Symbolists this way: “Stevens metaphors of place, colored by earth as well as mind, against the symbolistic language which evokes essences and denies presences; Stevens’s resemblances between man and nature against Baudelaire’s ‘correspondences’ that in effect deny nature; Stevens’s dandyism which is a refuge from easy commitment against Baudelaire’s dandyism which is an escape into permanence” (187).

Man.” In those poems, the impending event of death presents the starkness of the object that may not be projected upon. But it also induces the need for passion and desire for the spring: “winter, spring, cold copulars embrace and forth the raptures of the particular come” (*CP* 392).

The Uncanny

Death and mystery combined through deliberate trope constitutes a Symbolist gesture, but those things combined haphazardly with what is familiar and common constitute the sense of “the uncanny” or the strange feeling of not being at home in a place that has all the signs of home.⁷ Surrealism creates the sense of the uncanny at times through juxtaposition of unlike elements. Comte Lautreamont’s “unsurpassed surrealist image” applied to his Englishman hero is an example of the coupling of unlike elements (Nadeau 25):

“He is as handsome...as the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.” Amazingly enough, that kind of imagination kindled in the house of love, brought back to poetry the long lost figure of woman as embodiment of magic powers, [...] always close in her sensibility and behavior to the two sacred worlds of childhood and madness. (25)

In addition to the juxtaposition of rational science, implied by the scientist’s work place, with irrational suggestion, the objects themselves do not usually occur together, especially in an erotic context. One feels the uncanny in this image of sexuality depicted in the most clinical way imaginable, as a violent assault on one’s expectations of romantic love.

⁷ Freud defines the uncanny as “that class of the frightening, which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (“The Uncanny” 220). Pertinent to Stevens’s poem “The Emperor of Ice Cream” and the many other poems that couple death with life and the erotic is Freud’s example of the womb being something both familiar and frightening, a sign of death.

In Stevens, these assaults happen frequently, especially in *Harmonium*. The “emperor of ice cream” and an ice-cream party complete with “concupiscent curds” and cigar-smoking men occur juxtaposed with the unsettling display of an impoverished dead woman⁸ whose face is covered and whose feet protrude. Someone places a factory-produced “Dominion Jar”⁹ of “Anecdote of the Jar” uncomfortably close to an approaching Tennessee wilderness. In “The Jack-Rabbit” a jack rabbit singing carols on an island in the Arkansas River unknowingly shares the scene with a newly sewn fluttering quilt, representing the rattling entrails of a hungry buzzard. In “The Doctor of Geneva” a man in a stove pipe hat, an epitome of bourgeois society, must contend with an “unburgherly apocalypse” in response to the Pacific Ocean’s “wild, the ruinous waste” (*CP* 24).

One experiences the uncanny in the unsettling juxtaposition of something that should be safe and commonplace with something that seems less commonplace—death, hunger, the wilderness. To produce the sense of the uncanny, the thought and imagery in these poems move from playful sense of middleclass sensibleness to a playful sense of grim, harsh reality that is sharply antagonistic to a sense of security.

Convulsive Beauty

The shorter poems in Stevens’s book *Ideas of Order* (1936) convey the voices of poets who are as derisive as they are playful, poets who do not believe in the effectiveness or aptness of their metaphors or in the authenticity of the products of the collective imagination. Poems such as “The Dance of the Macabre Mice,” “The Mechanical Optimist” section from “A Thought

⁸ Stevens may have had a dead prostitute in mind, given the first stanza’s imagery of an ice cream party’s “concupiscent curds”, “boys bringing flowers” and “wenches dawdling in such dress as they are used to wear”; and the second stanza’s “embroidered fantails” (*CP* 64).

⁹ Glenn MacLeod shows that the probable source for the jar in “The Anecdote of the Jar” is the mass produced “Dominion Canning Jar” that was common in Tennessee at the time Stevens traveled there (*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 23).

Revolved,” or “The Pleasure of Merely Circulating” emphasize falsity to the extent that artifice becomes the starting and ending point of the subjects of these poems. In “The Dance of the Macabre Mice,” for example, the mice-covered statue of “the founder of the state” is immediately perceived as a superficial fake and a deliberate construction of artifice as opposed to a figure celebrating a nation’s collective identity (*CP* 123).

At the same time that “The Dance of the Macabre Mice” is notable for what it may have clipped, namely poetry that endorses patriotic listeners’ sensibilities, the deficiencies in the statue depicted in the poem point to a need in society for noble ideas and replacements for the old myths of self-identity that are no longer pertinent to modern societies. “What bread will we eat? “What wine will we drink?” asks the poet in another, adjacent poem about the statue of General Andrew Jackson (*CP* 130-31). The poems ask these questions, yet the speakers in the poems offer no answers.

Many of these poems from his books written during the 30s seem to offer uncertainty as an answer for the state-sanctioned art featured in the poems about statues in *Owl’s Clover* and *Ideas of Order*. As the above questions imply, this type of art will not sustain people spiritually. In “Man with the Blue Guitar,” from the book of that title published in 1937, Stevens rejects political mass movements that too forcefully trumpet answers into people’s ears:

And the beautiful trombones—behold
The approach of him whom none believes,
Whom all believe that all believe,
A pagan in a varnished car. (*CP* 170)

In the final section of the “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens points to a faith in process as the “bread of time to come, / Here is the actual stone” (*CP* 184). He has just

renounced the bread of “Time in its final block,” or spiritual sustenance that is not modern and process-based (*CP* 184). The modern person should “choose to play / The Imagined pine, the imagined jay” (*CP* 184), as a way to respond to events as they arise before the modern individual. Stevens writes to his editor Ronald Lane Latimer about this poem, “I do not have ideas that are permanently fixed. My idea of what I think a poet should be and do changes, and I hope, constantly grows” (*L* 289).

Accordingly, these poems of this period stop short of trying to satisfy the mind. Their salient characteristic is arbitrarily stopping short thought’s momentum as it seeks a permanent resting point. For example, in “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating” from *Ideas of Order*, poetic subjects arise only to be discontinued, and the poet flippantly forgets about the preceding line of thought:

.... And the clouds flew round with the clouds.
Is there any Secret in skulls,
The cattle skulls in woods?
.... Mrs. Anderson’s Swedish baby
Might well have been German or Spanish... (*CP* 150)

The poem juxtaposes satanic druids and rococo angels and merry-go-rounds and then abruptly ends: it all “Has rather a classical sound” (*CP* 150). The poem’s short, trimeter lines and light verse do not indicate anything classical. Rather they indicate a lack of fixity coupled with an abrupt ending to the exercise in the discovery of reality.

This poem and others’ odd juxtapositions, their tonal abruptness against an emphasis on flow and circulation, in many ways recalls Breton’s idea of “convulsive beauty,” which according to Mary Ann Caws, the Breton scholar and translator of Breton’s *Amour Fou*, is

linked to the conventions of hysterical neurotic patients and to the meeting of opposites. As cubism can be thought to be the picturing of an object many times from many angles of repose, and futurism to be the picturing of it in action, surrealism combines the two tendencies. (124)

In his prose works, *Nadja* and *Mad Love*, Andre Breton writes that “Convulsive Beauty” of legitimate art (and life) “will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be” (*Mad Love* 19). By clipping poetic structures and thwarting expectations of modern, agnostic readers, Stevens does not strive to be as “fixed-explosive” as in Breton’s mind-stopping imagery: “Life framed between the hedges of blue tit-mouses of aragonite and the treasure bridge of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef” (13), or “a speeding locomotive which had been abandoned for years to the delirium of a virgin forest” (10). Breton happens upon links between human madness in the form of “convulsive” patients in the World War I psychological wards and with found objects, such as the photograph of a speeding locomotive out of place deep in a South American jungle. No political or social revolutionary, Stevens always stays within bounds of the sanity of his culture and environment. Hence, his poem, “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating,” draws the freedom and verve from outlandish specimens of the imagination (“Secrets in Skulls”) and presents these specimens in a separate stanza but in contrast to the succeeding stanzas, depicting normal or typical settings for Stevens: “gardens,” “Swedish babies,” “going round and round” on a typical carousel (*CP* 150). In his paper “Imagination as Value” (1948) Stevens discusses the dialectic that imagination, “the irrepressible revolutionist” has with reason that he, like the surrealists, associates with the normal though spiritually violent middle class culture (*NA* 152).

In “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating,” the abnormal instance of imaginative life appears improperly embedded between the oddly conceived “classical sounds[s]” of normal life. In Breton’s examples of convulsive beauty, it is the normal life “framed between” the abnormal instances of organic life, “blue tit-mouses of aragonite and the treasure bridge of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef.” Stevens emphasizes “perceive[ing] the normal within the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos” and Breton and others emphasizes the abnormal within the normal, or as Stevens says of Kafka, “deliberate exploits of the abnormal” (NA 153).

Stevens and the Surrealists use similar methods but have different political and social goals. Convulsive beauty appeals to Breton for the way that it opposes “bourgeois reason” (*Mad Love* xv) and “everything that attempts to found formal beauty on a willed work of voluntary perfection” (*Mad Love* 11). In this anti-rational stance of this major tenet of the surrealist art movement, the surrealist artwork is subversive. His challenging of middle class sexual mores is seen more readily in Breton’s emphasis on the “veiled-erotic” aspect of convulsive beauty. He states in *Mad Love* that natural wonders or works of great art do not impress him unless they “straight off arouse a physical sensation in me, like the feeling of a feathery wind brushing across my temples to produce a real shiver. I could never avoid establishing some relation between this sensation and that of erotic pleasure...” (8).

In Stevens’s poems, there is little to suggest that he veils a significant eroticism. His more sensual poetry in *Harmonium* contains “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” which in mocking himself and love poets over forty, asks “Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?” (CP 13). “Peter Quince at the Klavier” shows the church “elders” watching the bathing Susanna (the biblical figure) and feeling “the basses of their beings throb” (CP 90). These lines betray, along with humorous mockery and puns, some disgust with sexuality, but his invocation of female muses in

several key poems (“To the One of Fictive Music,” “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”) suggests that Stevens feels that poetry does owe its inception at some level to romantic attachments. (His wife Elsie was one, and according to a recent study, more significantly, his first love from his Harvard days, Sybil Gage.¹⁰) His ambivalent attitude toward the erotic in poetry may be why Stevens considers poetry to have “gaudiness” (*L* 261) at its core, and why he refers to it as “gorgeous nonsense” (*NA* 4). After *Harmonium*, Stevens’s readers rarely encounter the erotic element in overt sensual forms. In Stevens’s formally structured “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” the poem’s sense of the erotic becomes “the marriage place” (*CP* 401) or “cold copulars [that] embrace / and forth the particulars of rapture come” (392).

Other Poems from *Ideas of Order* such as “Farewell to Florida,” “Gallant Chateau,” and “Restatement of Romance” hold no hope for the speakers’ romantic fulfillment. As Harold Bloom claims, “Farewell to Florida” transparently and ironically veils Stevens’s love for Florida as the speaker in the poem protests too much in his renunciation of his former lover, Florida (109). And the speaker in “Ideas of Order at Key West” is twice removed from the female singer of that poem, once because she is just part of a scene that he observes, and twice because she is the subject of a discourse he is having with his art critic friend Ramon Fernandez about the relationship between art and order.

Surrealists, however, also have ambivalent attitudes about the erotic element. In Breton’s repeated reference to Comte Lautreamont’s above-mentioned line, “beautiful as the encounter of a sewing machine with an umbrella on a dissection table,” the reader finds violent sexual

¹⁰ See William T. Ford, “Seeking the Sibyl of *Harmonium*: Wallace Stevens and Sybil Gage,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 38.1 (2008) 3.

imagery, but more often, the opposite modes of humor, love, and freedom prevail in surrealist sexual imagery.¹¹

Convulsive Beauty's third aspect, that it should be "magic-circumstantial," occurs less prominently in Stevens. His poems depict medical doctors, clergyman, scholars and philosophers more often than witch doctors with found objects as their charms and talismans. Nor do his poems seriously suggest miraculously synchronistic encounters with mysterious women of the kind that Breton writes about in *Nadja* and *Mad Love*. However, many of Stevens's poems reference monsters, fairy tale-giants, fantastical dream creatures, legends, and myth. Stevens's "Fabliau of Florida" features "sultry moon monsters...dissolving" (CP 23). "The Dance of the Macabre Mice" is "magic circumstantial" given its fairytale like title and its opening line: "In the land of turkeys in turkey weather / at the base of the statue, we go round and round" (123). Many of his poems represent fable-like characters such as grackles playing the part of nightingales in "Autumn Refrain," crows speaking of aesthetic orders in "Man on the Dump" and "Variations on a Summer Day," lobster claws strumming guitars in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," oxen (The ox makes up one half of the surrealist's minotaur, a stock character in surrealism and the title of a surrealist magazine.) appear in three poems, and the "inexplicable sister of the minotaur" is identified as a muse figure in Stevens's essay, "The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet" (NA 67). References to the occult or outré abound: the hooded figures around the cow's skull from "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" and the spirits evoked by the speaker in "Notes from a Volcano" are two examples. As for instances of surrealist magical-thinking in his poems, there is his tentative acceptance of meaningful chance occurrences, or synchronicity, but as with the erotic element, the magical thinking is highly abstracted and theoretical. He merely

¹¹ See the chapter "Love and Laughter: Surrealism Reappraised," in *The History of Surrealism* (Nadeau 11-34).

writes in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” that it is better not to willfully “impose” but to “discover” one’s good:

...Not balances
That we achieve but balances that happen,
As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.
Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which
We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist. (*CP* 386)

That chance and desire coincide does not mean that he adheres to a doctrine of correspondences between the elements of subjective desires and objective materiality. In Stevens, this magic is as much a matter of a fortunate “ignorance” that a person with a strong imagination is able to equate with rational thinking. At the same time, such magic always has in Stevens more coldly mysterious “origins, in ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” that cannot be expressed denotatively (*CP* 130).

The magical circumstances of Stevens’s poetry, overall, seem less important than another goal in surrealism, the disruption of orderly perception. Stevens tends to invoke the conjoining of a simultaneously primitive (the druid like characters beating on cow skulls in “The pleasures of Merely Circulating”) and civilized (“Mrs. Anderson’s” baby carriage of the same poem) in the imagination. The “bread” and “wine” that the modern reader craves is socially acceptable spiritual nourishment in the psychologically subversive poetry of Stevens.

To disrupt orderliness, Stevens tends to favor instinctive drives for violence and death over the erotic in his poems. In “Man with a Blue Guitar” and “Poetry is a Destructive Force,” Stevens depicts the imagination as a violent, destructive force. He often aligns the imagination with animals and animal force: “the lion roars at the enraging desert” (*CP* 384), or in “Poetry is a Destructive Force” the lion in a man’s heart is the “Poetry [that] can kill a man.” But his poems (outside of a few poems in *Harmonium*) do not make direct references to animalistic sexual instincts.

Stevens and Freud

Whereas this preference for brute animal force over sex can be attributed to an interest in tapping into the irrational uncivilized mind, a process Stevens describes in his essay “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936) as “excavations of the eye” (itself a stock surrealist image as seen in Bunuel and Dali’s film *Un Chien Andalou*) and excavations of the ear and the corresponding images the mind creates, this interest in the irrational should not be mistaken for his agreement with Freud’s emphasis on sexual theories of the unconscious.¹² As mentioned in Chapter One, Stevens clearly states in his first major essay, “The Noble Writer and the Sound of Words” (1942) that in Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*, “there is much in that essay inimical to poetry...” (*NA* 15). While the surrealists made cavalier use of Freud’s therapeutic method of free association and established their own Bureau of surrealist Research for quasi-psychological research, Stevens considered their automatism that they derived from Freud “provincial,” “rigid” and “limited” (*OP* 232).

¹² J. Hillis Miller in *Poets of Reality; Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1965) 217, refers to Stevens’s “improvisational” style, wherein thought starts and stop without regard for any meaningful center; typically, his poems attempt only variations on a theme, but end abruptly without adequate conclusions.

Stevens opposed making art based on Freudian precepts and theories, in part, because like Pound, Moore, Williams, Eliot, and other poets of his generation, he owed more to philosophical understandings of the unconscious, such as that advanced by Nietzsche, Bergson, and William James, than he did to the faddish new science of psychoanalysis. As his comments from his friend Henry Church attests, Stevens distanced himself from the surrealists' methods in part because they were popular and faddish (*OP* 224). Moreover, as stated in the previous chapter, he did not like the way that Freud in his book about the imagination relegates the exercise of the imagination to a form of escapism (*NA* 14). Stevens was serious about dignifying the imagination as a faculty of the mind equal and linked to reason and even hoped that the future would bring a new science that honored the imagination as the principle mental faculty that encompassed all others. To that end, he suggested to his friend Henry Church the idea of instituting a poetry chair at Princeton for just this sort of impartial science of poetry and the imagination (*L* 377).

The surrealists, contrary to popular understanding, also never blindly followed Freud. According to Celia Rabinovitch in *Surrealism and the Sacred*, the surrealists' methods and ideas came from a great variety of sources, and were as deeply indebted in the development of automatism to the painter Chirico's ideas concerning mystery and intuition in regards to the plainest most unadorned objects, as they were to Freud's dressed-up scientific approach (147). The surrealists had their own Bureau of Surrealistic Research, but they were as interested in playing games as they were in doing serious research. They sought to combine games with science just as Stevens tried to combine the "gorgeous nonsense" of the imagination with scientific rationalism. The difference lies in how they viewed the social norm. Stevens's defiance of it figured in resistance to social forces beyond the modern individual's control,

regardless to what social class they belonged, while the French surrealists rebelled against the reality that maintained social stability and hoped to cater to workers and people of day-to-day street life in Paris. The less socially committed surrealists of New York City—Duchamp, Paul Klee, Miro, Man Ray, and later Dali—were increasingly more dedicated to play or radical chic than were their French and European counterparts (*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 24).

Automatism and Spontaneity

Stevens considered the official surrealists' methods "too rigid" but recognized that their youthful verve, and their devotion to surprise and spontaneity made a permanent contribution to the theory of poetry (*OP* 232). Following their contribution, Stevens also created poetry in an "improvisational" way. Stevens indicates the spontaneity of his poetic method in a letter to his young Cuban friend and publisher Jose Rodriguez Feo: "I almost always dislike anything that I do that doesn't fly in the window" (*L* 505).¹³ His commitment to spontaneity and surprise becomes more evident if one contrasts Stevens's methods with other prominent poets of his time. Poets such as Pound, Eliot and H.D. did exhaustive historical and literary research prior to producing even a short poem. The same is true with Marianne Moore, who drew from her exhaustive studies in botany, zoology, and to lesser extent anthropology and current events to deliberately compose a particular poem. Even William Carlos Williams in *Paterson* incorporated well-researched prose historical accounts which he juxtaposed with verse composed over a period of decades. Stevens worked quickly, often composing poems on his walks to work and dictating them to a secretary once he arrived at his office at Hartford Indemnity. Even his most

¹³ Frank Lentricchia, Winters, and Marjorie Perloff base much of their view of Stevens as western Decadent on Stevens's demonstrated need for novelty, which they view as escapist distraction. See Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 305. and Marjorie Perloff, Ed. Albert Gelpi, (Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge UP, 1985) 41-64.

important long poem, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” was composed in a matter of weeks instead of the years it took his peers to compose their respective long poems (Lensing 146).

On the surface, a crucial difference between Stevens’s method of generating poetry and the surrealists’ method is that Stevens’s method does not reject what he critically referred to as “the least fastidiousness in the pursuit of the irrational” (*OP* 231). He allowed for both chance occurrences and deliberate play of the will to operate in his poetry. According to Lensing, the results of his spontaneity and fluidity in the genesis of a poem “are not surreal,” for although his poems are often “based in the phenomenal world,” his poetry is more dedicated to the nuances and variations that depend on the “mind’s caprice” (144). The subject of a Stevens’s poem can be simply the conscious, meditative play of his intellect around a particular subject, phenomenal or conceptual. In a surrealist poem or act, the processes of the unconscious work independently of conscious deliberation.

This way of creating poetry that involves a combination of acts of the will and spontaneous leaps of discovery or epiphany is demonstrated in Stevens’s “Forces, the Will & the Weather.” This poem explores a perceived distinction between the conscious active will of the subject and the passivity of a subject in reference to “ideas” of the object:

The dog had to walk. He had to be taken.

The girl had to hold back and lean back to hold him,

At the time of the dogwoods, handfuls thrown up

To spread colors. There was not an idea

This side of Moscow. There were anti-ideas

And counter-ideas. There was nothing one had.

There were
No horses to ride and no one to ride them
In the woods of the dogwoods,

No large white horses. But there was the fluffy dog.
There were sheets high up on older trees,
Seeming to be liquid as leaves made of cloud,
Shells under water. These were nougats. (*CP* 229)

There is only a relation and no clear distinction between the forces of the will and the weather, but the perceived difference is what constitutes the notion of the will as a separate object for contemplation:

It had to be right: nougats. It was a shift
Of realities, in which it could be wrong.
The weather was like a waiter with a tray.
One had come early to a crisp café. (*CP* 229)

Stevens's speaker concludes that free will is more assertion of the mind that acts in concert with its perceived oneness with the modern stand-in for providence (or fate), the caprices of the weather and the forces beyond one's control.¹⁴ That the speaker concerns him or herself, then, with trifles such as "nougats," "fluffy dogs," and frivolous walks in the springtime in a world of war-like revolutionary ideas transforms those seeming trifles to acts of purposeful will in a similar way that an omnipotent God is transformed to capricious springtime weather. That

¹⁴ In a letter to Henry Church, Stevens states that the proper subject for poetry is "the idea of God" as opposed to God himself, even in a time when "one of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God...[but] poetry will create a substitute for it" (*L* 378).

suggested belief in itself, however, is just one more “nougat” or one more aspect of the weather and its effect on perception. To use a well-known example from Frost, a walker thinks that taking one way on a road that forks makes all the difference, but really it is just a perception that taking that way makes the difference. In Stevens’s poem, this demotion of freewill diminishes the importance of great acts of the will of communist revolutionaries in “Moscow.” The “nougats” of the spreading colors of springtime weather are as much a part of the revolutionaries’ ideas as they rush to war on horseback as they are of the girl’s in a comical poem about how that girl tries to control a white fluffy dog (which looks like a cloud). For all of the speaker’s minimizing of the importance of freewill and providence, however, there is a mysterious transformation arising out of the play of chance in the poem. This can be seen as the poem’s poet (aware of violent revolutions in Moscow) concludes, “The weather is like a waiter with a tray.” The difference that makes a difference is that in a Stevens’s poem coming early to a “crisp café”—the café is a metaphor for the weather—to write a poem about nougats becomes as adequate a response to the contemporaneous as becoming heroic and riding a big white horse through the dogwoods on the way to a history-making revolutionary battle. There is a difference between the responses and once one knows that each is as authentic a response to the weather, then one really has perspective on the differences between the forces of the will and the forces of the weather: the zeitgeist is as much a matter of springtime weather as it is news events of Bolsheviks proving to themselves their freewill and imperviousness to outmoded concepts of providence by fighting in history-changing wars. Newspaper readers do not need to overreact to topical hysteria of such events in order to prove to themselves that they are in touch with the

weather or zeitgeist. Maintaining normality¹⁵ by drinking tea at a café during a time of war and revolution is as adequate an act of the will as contributing to the war effort by fighting in the war.

In this poem, Stevens begins with a random phenomenal impulse, the perception of dogwood blossoms, and then lets his intellect play around that particular impulse. The result is a poem about poetry or a poem about the play of the discrete faculty of the imagination around a subject. He is consciously thinking about the imagination and in doing so uses his imagination in such a way that spontaneous acts of the imagination seem to merge into his more personal, conscious and deliberate observations about thinking about the weather. In explanatory notes he made about different sections of “The Man with a Blue Guitar,” Stevens suggests that there is no real difference between the act of the imagination and the reality (weather) that gave rise to it:

Here is a fundamental principle about the imagination: It does not create except as it transforms. There is nothing that exists exclusively by reason of the imagination, or that does not exist in some form in reality. Thus, reality = the imagination, and the imagination = reality. Imagination gives, but gives in relation. (*L* 364)

Thus, given the “relation” in “Forces, the Will and the Weather” the dogwood blossom comically transforms into a girl’s dog, and the dog transforms into a hero’s horse, and all this together becomes “the weather was like a waiter with a tray.” Stevens states in his essay “Imagination as Value” that the mind, like the weather, is in constant flux and in search for personal value that allows one to live in an otherwise deficient (for lack of an imaginary counterpart) world (152).

¹⁵ In letter to Hi Simons: “I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal, the central...For instance, a photograph of a lot of fat men, and women in the woods, drinking beer and singing Hi-li, Hi-lo convinces me that there is a normal that ought to try to achieve” (*L* 352). This desire to achieve the normal manifested itself in Stevens’s love of 17th century Dutch painting—Vermeer, Rembrandt—paintings in which the good life was depicted in a human sense while topical political and religious themes were avoided. (*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 46).

Of course, overall, this poem is a comical attempt to use theory to go beyond limited experience to reconcile oneself with the wider world.

Mysticism and Anti-Romanticism

The force of the will in constant flux is similar to the constantly changing weather and zeitgeist. Stevens tends to uphold separation between the world and the mind in order to check the tendency among poets and imaginative people to let wish-fulfillment be the rudder of perception of objects. However, this is not to say that the mind is not a part of nature, but recognition of the sudden and uncanny convergences between the two depend on their initial separation. If any convergence does occur, it occurs unpredictably and is as much a matter for the reader as it is for the poet. Breton, on the other hand, emphasizes a more radical, mystical form of a “philosophy of immanence” in his understanding of how the imagination interacts with the object:

Everything I love, everything I think and feel, predisposes me towards a particular philosophy of immanence according to which surreality would be embodied in reality itself and would be neither superior nor exterior to it. And reciprocally, too, because the container would also be the contents. What I envisage is almost a communicating vessel between the container and the contained. Which means, of course, that I reject categorically all initiatives in the field of painting, as in that of literature that would inevitably lead to the narrow isolation of thought from life, or alternatively the strict domination of life by thought. What one hides is worth neither more nor less than what one finds. (*Surrealism and Painting* 46)

Stevens tends to distance himself from mystical rhetoric, such as that found in the phrase “communicating vessel between the container and the contained.” He states in an essay that he

does “not for a moment mean to indulge in mystical rhetoric, since for [his] part, [he] has no patience for that sort of thing,” although in almost every one of his prose essays on poetry he compares the poet to the religious mystic (*OP* 231). As is made clear in Chapter 3, Stevens draws from the auspices of mystical rhetoric in order to create his poetic substitute for “the idea of god” during a time period when the trend seemed to be “a movement away from [...] god” (*L* 378).

Stevens is more comfortable using what Paul Valery called the language of a “cool scientist... in the service of a subtle dreamer” to describe the essence of poetry and to describe his poet’s relationship to the object (*The Art of Poetry* 315). To the limited extent that his poems were “automatic,” allowing for spontaneity, and that he also did not know in advance how his poem would end, Stevens seemed to believe that thought and their material referents would “fortuitously” commingle as a result of the poet surrendering conscious control of what he or she wanted the end product to be. This substitution of chance for hints of mysticism parallels his ambivalence toward romanticism, which he reveals in the preface he wrote for William Carlos Williams’ *Collected Poems*. Stevens praises Williams by calling him an “anti-poetic” romantic (4). Glen MacLeod notes that Williams took offence to that label, and Stevens was nonplussed that he did so (*The Harmonium Years* 90-91). Mostly, in his essays and his own poems, Stevens disparages romanticism. For example, in his essay, “Imagination as Value” he states that,

Then, too, before going on, we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic. We feel, without being particularly intelligent about it, that the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed. At the same time, we feel, and with the sharpest possible intelligence, that it is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic. The imagination is one of the

great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is to imagination what sentimentality is to feeling. ...The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction. The achievement of the romantic, on the contrary, lies in minor wish-fulfillments and it is incapable of abstraction. In any case [...] one wants to elicit the sense of the imagination as something vital. In that case one must deal with it as metaphysics.
(NA 139)

Stevens aligns the romantic with a self-deluding belief in the ego's transcendence and aligns the power of the imagination with something more authentic. Breton betrays his own distaste for the literature of romantic idealism (interpreted by Stevens as "minor wish-fulfillments") by eliminating the prominent role of the poetic ego or literary talent in discoveries of the surrealist object.

Stevens's alternative to the romantic involves a philosophy of immanence. He did not agree with Williams' "no ideas but in things" (*Paterson* 6);¹⁶ however, he seems to have harbored hopes of being able to go beyond "the ideas of things" and come upon "the res itself" (*CP* 473), which was for him as much a transpersonal ultimate reality as it was ultimate knowledge of material reality. Conversely, In *Paterson*, "Book I" Williams makes repeated

¹⁶ In his poem "The Creations of Sound," Stevens distinguishes between poems emanating from "the ceiling" and "the walls" that the poet "X" passively receives and the "venerable complication" of sounds that the readers of poetry create out of the poems created by a construct of a poet— "intelligent / beyond intelligence, an artificial man / At a distance, a secondary expositor, / a being of sound... / From him we collect" (*CP* 310-11). See Gillian White "'We do Not Say Ourselves Like that in Poems': The Poetics of Contingency in Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop." (Diss. Princeton U. 2005) 86-90, for speculation that poet "X" in this poem is Williams and that this poem criticizes Williams' motto "No ideas but in things" (86-90).

analogies between marital divorce and the divorce of language from the land in and around the Paterson, New Jersey:

...The flower spreads its colored petals
wide in the sun
But the tongue of the bee
misses them
They sink back into the loam
crying out
[...] Marriage come to have a shuddering
implication
[...] the language
is divorced from their minds,
the language . . . the language! (*Paterson* 11-12)

The job of Williams' poet is to effect the marriage between language and local place where that language is heard. Williams brings about this marriage by planting the seed of language in the soil of the place where the poet lives: "Nothing can grow unless it [the intelligence] taps into the soil" ("Projective Verse and The Practice" 196). Hearing "No ideas but in things" entails bringing the poet's intelligence to bear on his or her relationship to particular things. For Stevens, the element of artifice or the unreal takes a more prominent position vis-à-vis the poet's relationship to things, but things are tied to particular locales only minimally in Stevens. This "thing" is not the particular of the material world per se, but it is the "fundamental poetry older than the ancient world" (like Ananke's necessity) of material reality that is more generalized and abstract than Williams' particular real thing (*NA* 145). Stevens's "res itself" is not eked out by a

particular poet like Williams' poet, who attempts to liberate American language by creating an American poem wedded to a particular American place. Stevens deemphasizes both the role of the poet as medium to the authentic identity of the object and the role of the object in imparting news of itself. As explained in Chapter One, an intermediary, something not the poet and not the object, but created out of the lived relationship between the two brings the two suspended elements together in a new meta-pattern.

Immanence

In "Imagination as Value," Stevens discusses the faculties of the imagination and reason's ability to make reality seem immanently real. He states that earlier poets were "orators of the imagination" who were able to make heaven and hell seem real to the "masses of men" (NA 142). His contemporary poets try to make their experiences in life seem real: "The world is lost to [the poet] because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (142). It is lost to the contemporary poet because poetry is no longer the chief means by which modern people gain a sense of the world. Stevens sees that in his time politics and international relations tend to dominate imaginative life, and it falls to "a grubby faith like communism" to do the work that the poet once did in making come alive "the paradise" of worldly things (NA 143). Stevens consistently disparages communism and its claim to be the voice of a new culture of materialism and of the workers' paradise, yet he does not disparage an emphasis on materialism and the "spiritual prize" that claims to be representative of that particular paradise of the modern era. Moreover, there is no "essential conflict" between "Marxism and the sentiment of the marvelous" (L 291), Stevens writes in response to his editor Ronald Lane Latimer's question about surrealism's relationship to Marxism:

The conflict is temporary. The only possible order of life is one in which all order is incessantly changing. Marxism may or may not destroy the existing sentiment of the marvelous; if it does, it will create another. It was a very common fear that Socialism would dirty the world; it is an equally common fear that Communism will do the same thing. I think that this is all nonsense. Of course, that would be the immediate effect, as any upheaval results in disorder. (*L* 291-92)

In such a time the world may be lost to the poet but the imagination is not. Here, the implication is that the imagination may belong to an order of the earth altogether older and more durable than anything human culture can produce.

If such a spiritual prize were the “great poem of the earth” and a non-Marxist materialism, then what kind of poetic work could we expect of Stevens in regards to his surrealist tendencies? What Stevens referred to as the yet-to-be-written “great poem of the earth” could be his answer to the materialism of Marxism, and in the meantime, Stevens’s poetry that refreshed the “first idea” (the oldest poetry) is the means to experience earthly life as an end in itself and not a way to escape the same. This poetry turns the civilized, alienated mindset toward the “first idea,” which according to his “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” is the “myth before the myth began” (*CP* 383). Stevens’s treatment of the first idea expresses the primitive, inhuman earth as the unbreachable but worthy goal for contemporary persons who would necessarily remain as they are, the inheritor of Cartesian dualism:

The first idea was not our own. Adam

In Eden was the father of Descartes

...There was a muddy centre before we breathed. (383)

Unlike in surrealism proper that in one step simply (and politely) destroys the pre-existing social norms as a gesture of anarchic liberation, Stevens desires to help alienated modern persons by placing them in a life-refreshing proximity to a material experience of the primal chaos of being or a modernist intimation of innocence on earth.

Valuing objects as imbued with experiential knowledge as opposed to universal knowledge becomes the marker of Stevens's broader, less dreamy surrealism. In section II of "It Must be Abstract" from "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens "throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep," (382) suggesting a denial of the surrealist emphasis on dreams. Then in section III, Stevens's avers his own daytime brand of surrealism:

The poem refreshes life so we share,
For a moment, the first idea...It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning
And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end. We move between these
points
And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,
An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
The poem, through candor, brings back a power
Again
That gives a candid kind to everything.
We say: At night an Arabian in my room

with his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
 Inscribes a primitive astronomy
 [...] Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls
 By day the wood-dove used to chant his hoobla
 Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation. (382-83)

This section casts the elements of Stevens's surrealism in miniature: a hybrid automatism of conscious daytime reasoning and arriving at knowledge through something beyond conscious control ("unconscious will," "Of what we feel from what we think," and "by day"); a surrealist emphasis on youth and life ("refreshes life," "immaculate beginning") together with the Jules-Laforgue-like "celestial ennui of apartments" (381); the marvelous (hoobla-hoobla); the magic-circumstantial of convulsive beauty ("an elixir," "astronomy"), and the uncanny ("nonsense pierces us with strange relation"). And this section emphasizes primitive instincts as opposed to the more narrow erotic appetites as paths to liberation: the "wood dove [Venus's bird] used to chant" but now the speaker in this section looks for the less acculturated and effete and more vital, primitive instincts suggested by "beating in the heart as if blood newly came / The poem through candor, brings back a power again..." The rest of "Notes" negotiates the poetic principles that will show how the civilized, powerless "ephebe" (the student or idealized audience of the speaker in "Notes") from his "attic window" (384) will, with his essentially impotent piano, tame the primitiveness of the first idea and let it "refresh life" in the surrealist fashion in section III of "It must be Abstract."

Wilderness as Other

The value of the primitive stems from its otherness, which in Stevens suggests an innocence of fleshly existence. Arriving at this innocence depends on a temporarily experienced

“ignorance” of his exile from the earth rather than on romantic consummation, or wish-fulfillment (222). In “Notes,” he states that the poem and the imagination have their source in the fact “that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves” (383). Furthermore, “we” arrive at the approximation of the first idea through apprehension of “the hum of thoughts evaded by the mind” (388). Through a return to “ignorance” as a kind of innocence, the ignorant person goes beyond believing prosaically *as if* they were living at one with nature and to an ideal state, the metaphor that one *is* wedded with nature. Stevens expresses this idea most clearly in *Parts of a World’s* “The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man”:

It may be that the ignorant man, alone,
Has any chance to mate his life with life
That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze. (222)

Similarly, in *Harmonium’s* “Peter Quince at the Klavier” the church “elders” spy through the lens of Peter Quince’s piano music the figure Susanna in her Byzantine garden and are able to put her wild innocence to use as poetic principle that will temporarily satisfy them, or make them temporarily ignorant of their post-lapsarian predicament:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—
The fitful tracing of a portal
But in the flesh it is immortal.

T he body dies, the body’s beauty lives. (92)

The “tracing of a portal” allows the poem’s narrator to believe in Peter Quince’s fiction that the body and the world have value and presence in and of themselves and do not depend on the mind to imbue them with these things.

This othering of what is to be valued helps explain tendencies in many poems, especially those after *Harmonium*, to introduce ideas of death, violence, and exile. Stevens appears to do this both to “refresh life” and to position defiance of the civilized mind as an affirmative act of the mind. The point of affirming defiance seems to be that if a value were a known value and were not defiant of, say, “The Doctor of Geneva” of the poem of that name, then this value would not be a culminating “time of innocence” (418). A reader somehow perceives in a positive light the deathly, inhospitable sense of an object as remote and wild other by embracing its threats of death and obliteration of the acculturated mind:

The Doctor of Geneva stamped the sand
That lay impounding the Pacific swell,
Patted his stove-pipe hat and tugged his shawl. (24)

And he approaches the wilderness of the Pacific Ocean as a latter-day romantic lake poet (“Lacustrine man” [24]) who because he is over-certain of old applications of romantic poetic ideas of nature and the wilderness, he “felt no awe before the visible, voluble dulugings” of the “wild...ruinous waste” before him (24). That tidy worldview changes before the otherness of a wilderness no stodgy Swiss doctor is equipped to apprehend. His civilized mind can hold steady only “Until the steeples of his city clanked and sprang / In an unburgherly apocalypse” (24). The Swiss precision of clocks comes undone in response to a random world that is oblivious to the mechanical and logical principles that inform the conceiving and manufacturing of clocks. Stevens tends to alienate nature from the civilized person in his poems and maybe his readers who identify with the doctor from Geneva, possibly, in order to disrupt orderly perception, which in turn may trigger a renewed sense of value in the world.

As a civilized man with access to generations of inherited memes, the doctor of Geneva experiences this Pacific “ruinous waste” at worst as foreboding and threatening, and at best as “notations of the wild” (24). Because the doctor is able to intellectualize this experience, and thereby tame or contain this void, he is initially able to see the wild as a source of knowledge instead of as foreboding and threatening. But in the narrator’s mockery of this doctor of Geneva’s logical positivism, it is because this alien other is foreboding and threatening that the narrator and his or her reader can value the wilderness’ threat to old world civilization as something marvelous and meaningful in itself.

Reverse Catharsis

In Chapter 3, Stevens refers to this stripping of all subjective value in modern culture as “decreation.” In his essay “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” he defines decreation as “making pass from the created to the uncreated, but destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation” (NA 174-175). Stevens’s nothingness, however, as the word’s usage in Stevens connotes, is an affirmative value since nothingness is something in relation to the mind just as mind is something in relation to objects. Stevens’s snow man, for example, is able to see the mind in relation to the winter scene as the “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (CP 9). As a dispassionate “Snow Man” without the Doctor of Geneva’s logical positivist drive for directing knowledge toward rational anthropomorphic ends, the speaker in “The Snow Man” is able to become part of the winter landscape and value the experience of its bleakness as a good. Poetry as knowledge of nothingness in Stevens is experiential knowledge in relation to the objects as opposed to the purely disembodied knowledge of some philosophers and theologians.

Arriving at this experiential knowledge involves a modern form of catharsis: the poet begins in the realm of the disconnected, incorporeal world of metaphysics, or to use one of Stevens's words, the hierophantic, and then is released into the materiality of the world in the way that a spectator of Greek tragedy would be purified of his faults before being released and reconnected with the cosmos beyond normal civic life. In Stevens's modernist catharsis, artistic decreation helps to cleanse the modern person of their preconceived notions about the world and metaphysics in order to return to a new understanding of the world, which is the "central poem [becoming] the world, / And the world the central poem" (*CP* 441). The "central" in Stevens refers to normal civic existence of a modern person.¹⁷

Normal civic life, of course, runs counter to what French surrealists advocate, and for this comparison to surrealism to not become too farfetched, the usage of catharsis here requires a more philosophical (as opposed to the mock-serious pronouncements of Breton's manifestoes) definition of surrealism. The philosopher Robert Solomon supplies a broader more existentialist (like that described in Camus'¹⁸"Myth of Sisyphus") definition of surrealism that better describes Stevens's emphasis on experiential knowledge. This definition derives from surrealism as philosophical noun as opposed to historical art movement. A broadening of the definition is warranted by the statement that Stevens makes about surrealism: "It has had the effect that it makes previous movements irrelevant...It will be absorbed" (*OP* 232). As Macleod makes clear in his historical study of Stevens's various dialogs with contemporary art movements, a broadening of the definition of surrealism is also warranted by Stevens's own growing interest in art influenced by Existentialism, which was itself influenced by surrealism. Stevens absorbed

¹⁷ See footnote #15 for a reference to the importance Stevens placed on being "normal" in tumultuous times.

¹⁸ Stevens mentions Camus by name in his poem, "The Novel." Also, according to Glen MacLeod, Stevens's commitment to establishing "a relation with contemporary ideas" included establishing a relationship to Camus' philosophy and existentialism in general (*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 99).

surrealism like Jackson Pollack absorbed it, along the lines of Solomon's broader, looser definition. According to Solomon, surrealism is defined

as the more than real. It is the idea that a person's world is more than reality, and that the values that he or she projects onto his or her world are not simply inside of him or her. It is not a merely subjective state of mind. These values are out there in one's experience of the world as one lives it. The object's importance is the determining factor for the value one places on an object. Surreality is reality from an [experiential] point of view. (67-8)

This definition is consonant with Breton's 1952 definition of surrealism as a philosophy of immanence, excepting Breton's mysticism of communicating magnetic vessels. An individual obtains knowledge in both Breton and Solomon by experiencing and valuing the object. How an individual experiences the material object determines how value emerges. The container contains value from a particular point of view and cannot be had by appealing to an outside authority to the object—in both Solomon's and Breton's surrealism. The object has to remain other.

In sections VI-VII of "It Must be Abstract" from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens expresses an experiential philosophy of immanence. The material world is the source of ideas and conversely the particular material object obtains identity through the ideas of a perceiver who finds him or herself between the material and the disembodied public conception of the ideal:

It must be visible or invisible,

Invisible or visible or both:

A seeing and unseeing in the eye.

The weather and the Giant of the weather,

Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:

An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought (*CP* 385)

Thought is given essence by the presence of the material body (“an abstraction blooded”), and the material body of man or woman is given identity by the presence of thought. If the word is analogous to thought and its referent is analogous to the material objects, then the “eye” in the section above becomes perception that is both the “visible or the invisible,” which is to say the referent or the word or both: “a seeing and unseeing in the eye.” The abstract word and its material referent become interchangeable. The identity of the world is interchangeable with the materialism of the world. Thought is not superior, inferior or identical with material referents. Both are in play as possibilities because of motivated tension between the polarities of thought and material categories. Harold Bloom compares the “seeing and unseeing in the eye” to Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” and writes that “weather is prime material for poetry, but the material for poetry and poetry are the same thing, and for Stevens the prime material is the weather” (186). Bloom also says of this seeing and unseeing of the eye something that accords well with both Solomon’s and Breton’s ideas of immanence: “In believing in the weather, Stevens grants it a reality consisting of the visible and the invisible, and for the first time this canto admits of an agent of perception. Yet the seeing is in the eye rather than by it” (188).

But unlike with Bloom and Rorty, the motive for metaphor from a surrealist point of view stems from an essential desire to believe that the world beyond the mind actually exists. In a different zeitgeist, it was the myth that existed prior to the person and “blooded him with essence” prior to his physical existence. From a surrealist perspective, it is the material and the ideas experienced within the material that ensoul inert matter. The poet and his or her reader do *not* merely create the linguistic world that according to Richard Rorty and Harold Bloom will

give the human being the only victory over death and brute nature that he or she, a creation by a linguistic world, will ever have. Rather, the modern person creates the real possibility that the linguistic world and the material world co-inhabit one another, just not in ways that are easily identifiable. Because the relationship between the two is difficult to pinpoint, some poets give up on the notion of the physical, and just pay attention to the infinite regress of the world known only through words (For example, see Borges' story "The Library at Babel" for a dramatization of the infinite regress.). But the problem with this reliance on words as the lens through which one knows the world arises when one considers the motive for metaphor. Bloom's and ultimately Rorty's motive for metaphor depends on a psychodynamic that involves narrative strategies to overcome or disregard others' narrative strategies. Solomon's surrealism supplies a less narrowly defined motive for metaphor: passion derived from the perceived experience of the real is responsible for individuals actually wanting to believe that they are essential parts of experiences of the material world that really is there.

If the passion for Stevens's "motive for metaphor" is to be aligned with a one-to-one correspondence with a pre-existing mythological system, then his poetry's reason for being is then simply a replacement for the pre-existing mythology. The alternative way is to align passion with the experience of the material world, from which the individual subject is exiled through language (maps of reality). Thus, Stevens has a passion to see a linguistically mediated mundane object or experience as "marvelous" surreality. The object is marvelous solely for the fact that it is believed to exist beyond the mind yet *is* the mind—both metaphor and simile. Stevens's many poems with depictions of still-life objects may attest to the possibility that the sole bare object

minus fantastic trappings is itself surreality for him.¹⁹

Stevens's poems seem to change reality because the "poem is the act of the mind in finding what will suffice" for the owner of that mind as it is located in and notices aspects of reality (*CP* 239). For the healthy imagination, as opposed to the solipsistic kind, as the need for new definitions of what is normal changes in concert with the ever-changing weather or zeitgeist, so too does the poem and its interpretations.

Stevens's Earth

Above, the discussion of Stevens's relationship to surrealism concludes with a move toward Robert Solomon's broader definition of surrealism as opposed to historical surrealism. As Glen MacLeod shows, Stevens was influenced by pre-surrealist ideas first through his involvement with experimentalist magazines such as *Trend*, *Poetry*, and *Others*, and with the Arensberg circle, and then later through surrealism's pervasive presence in 1930s New York and Stevens's own Hartford. Later, when he is actually accused by his friend Henry Church and magazine critics of being labeled a surrealist,²⁰ he moves to higher ground and begins, as do Eliot, Pound, Mina Loy and others influenced by a similar cultural milieu, to formulate a theory that goes beyond that of surrealism. In the next chapter, personal surrealities are shown to have the potential to be the basis for shared surealities. Perhaps the best way to describe this shared surreality is by saying it is one in which reality itself actually exists apart from the mind of the subject.

This is where issues of deep ecology come into play when considering Stevens against theories of surrealism. Stevens was a materialist, and he had quasi-religious aims for writing

¹⁹ See for example, John Vernon's Surrealist readings of "The Glass of Water" and "Anecdote of the Jar" (150, 158).

²⁰ See MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 212.

poetry, but he gives little indication that he seriously thought he was tapping into the perennial symbols and myths of humanity. The relationship with the earth was the source for meaning. But since he was agnostic, skeptical, and distrustful of romanticism, Stevens approaches his relationship to earth as a source of meaning with any intellectual means at his disposal. These include science, philosophy, and a new understanding of modern life. A modern person, according to Stevens, has to contend with the increasingly forceful pressure of the contemporaneous. The contemporaneous tends to marginalize myth and religion, given that contemporary life (as opposed to tradition) demands as much (in terms of adapting to change) as it does from people. The modern poet writing poetry that was in contact with the pressure of reality would write materialist-romantic poetry that had something of the modern modes of understanding the world informing its sensibilities. Stevens states in a letter that one of his goals in poetry is to establish “relation to contemporary ideas” (*L* 340). These include surrealism and other art movements of his time, but they also include a new way to apprehend nature.

CHAPTER 3

DECREATION: STEVENS'S THEATRE OF POSSIBILITY

*There is inherent in the words the revelation of reality a suggestion that there is a reality of or within or beneath the surface of reality. There are many such realities through which poets constantly pass to and fro, without noticing the imaginary lines that divide one from the othe.—Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous**

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve is one of the great human experiences. It is not that they were overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. Since we have always shared all things with them and have always...we share likewise this experience of annihilation.—Wallace Stevens, "Two or Three Ideas"

Not Surrealism, "Sub-realism"—Atomic Particles, etc.

It is argued below that the credibility of the discovery of the territory through fiction depends on whether the objects of contingency can plausibly be said to exist beyond the mind. Stevens's necessary angel as non-human ordering device aids in the creation of the link between mind and territory. The poet does not impose the link; he or she only discovers links that can credibly be said to already exist. To that end, usage of the necessary angel functions as a semi-transparent trick that both betrays and reveals the existence of the territory beyond the map. His appeals to rational science work the same way as self-imposed tricks: they create a sense of possibility that induces the conditions for the suspension of disbelief that mind and nature are

one. Stevens's sleight of hand is not exclusively an appeal to theories of subconscious drives and the magic of surrealism but as Stevens terms it, it is an appeal to "subrealism" (Lensing 168), an appeal to anything that can plausibly be said to occur below the level of normal perception where mind and world can be said to meet.

Stevens's method for arriving at a primordial sense of oneness with the world involves a type of deconstructive or what he more narrowly defines as modernist "decreative" activity that leads to a restoration of the primordial link between mind and nature. Stevens states in his essay about modernist aesthetics, "The Relations of Painting and Poetry," that "modern reality is a reality of decreation in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief but the precious portents of our own powers" (NA 175). These "portents of powers" to know ourselves and the world are those that aesthetically (as opposed to ideologically) and inadvertently connect a person's many ways of knowing what is beyond him or her in the world. Drawing from Simone Weil's theological use of decreation, Stevens distinguishes decreation from destruction when he writes that decreation does not indicate an arrival at nothingness in the way that the word destruction does (NA 174). Weil had used the term decreation to mean that modern people become co-creators with god when humans sacrifice themselves as creators: "We participate in the creation [god's creation] of the world by decreasing ourselves" (*Gravity and Grace* 33). Stevens removes God from his use of the term and stresses the human and earthly ways of knowing and unknowing the world. This tendency to remove God and mysticism from their traditional doctrines is the pattern throughout the essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" in which Stevens references mystical sayings from theologians and philosophers like Simone Weil and painters like Paul Klee and Cezanne and then proceeds to distance himself from the mysticism in their pronouncements. For example he says, "This sounds a bit like

sacerdotal jargon” after quoting something mystical by Klee (*NA* 174). This is Stevens’s general tendency in his poetry too: draw from the auspices of religion, metaphysics, mysticism, and the mystery of death, but at the same mitigate or blatantly negate their supernaturalism and suggestions of a source of doctrinal authority outside the world. What is left is a fictive reality in the world itself. Earlier in the essay, “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” Stevens states what modern poets and painters have in common: the tendency to want to search for “the supreme truth . . . in reality or through reality or even a search for some supremely acceptable fiction” (173). Elsewhere, Stevens states that “the major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God,” but even though “the import of poetry is the import of the spirit” his “intention is *not* to foster a cult” (*L* 378). A “supremely acceptable fiction” would bestow what religion used to bestow to reality but would during a time when “the modern imagination [is moving] away from the idea of God” draw its credibility from science and philosophy. For his part, these fictions that help him understand reality are not “sacerdotal,” but, nevertheless, advance an aesthetic that represents a way of knowing that includes human conscious perception and some form of perception that is perceived as other to himself. This way of knowing reality is embodied symbolically in fictive agencies such as his “giant of the weather,” “major man,” or through his Emersonian trope, a “seeing and unseeing in the eye.” These symbols emerge after decreation has occurred; this is especially evident in the eyeball trope, a “seeing and unseeing in the eye” from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.”

If his decreative aesthetics allows for reconnections with the reality of the earth in a quasi-religious sacred sense, that is never his overt purpose. These sacred reconnections merely arise spontaneously, and depend as much on the unconscious “not me” beyond Stevens the poet. Moreover, recoveries of knowledge of the earth involve Stevens’s idea of a “necessary angel of

reality,” one name for the expediency of creating a fictive agency of the earth, whose intentions are never clear because they never follow a prescribed human agenda. Even if this angel is to be interpreted as an avatar of the wilderness, this viewpoint does not align with an ethos that is analogue to the tenets of deep ecology, because at the heart of that movement is an intentional love of nature and respect for the organisms and ecosystems with which people share the earth. Judging from his non-committal responses to reviewers’ questions about his influences, Stevens would not make such an earnest declaration of allegiance. Stevens does appear to admit the valuing of the non-human and wilderness in his poetry but in a way that is incidental to his overall goal of writing good poetry. Stevens’s focus is the earth because that was all there was left after severing ties with religious and metaphysical ways of linking perception with the world. As explained below, decreative aesthetics make room for an immanent knowledge of the body and the world. Art governed by this principle provides the framework for removing credibility gaps present in traditional, religious links between perception and world, and such art thereby creates the conditions whereby the link is restored in such a way that does not prescribe for but allows “objects to be released into their own essence” (Voros 19).

To accomplish this restoration of the link, Stevens applies the feelings associated with absolutes, such as God or death, to the fictions derived from experiences of living in a world of chance and contingencies. After such a transvaluation, open possibilities for interpretations of reality through fiction become the apparent permanent condition. Stevens does not seek the imprint of absolute reality in objects; rather he tries to see the objects become what they already seem to be, which is being in a state of flux. This seeming as a final state can also be the fulfillment of the noblest conception of the imagination in a poem, something Stevens also termed an “exquisite appositeness” (NA 118).

Stevens decreates for the modern individual who is aware of his or her contingency or lack of plausible support from traditional mythologies and what Richard Rorty calls their “final vocabularies.” Fictions created for contingent beings alive during the first half of the twentieth century, however, do not last as myths to live by, nor do they presuppose a lasting cultural reality, which fictions typically have as a foundation. Stevens writes, “The real is only the base. But it is the base” (*OP* 187). The fictions in Stevens’s poems, then, create a provisional theatre for the play of possibility in the world. This sense of possibility and freedom does not derive its power by connecting to “the base.” If this fiction has any force at all, it derives from the experience of the imagination attaining the sense of reality, or conversely, of reality attaining a sense of the freedom of the imagination. Fiction coupled with a sense of reality becomes the ground for a necessary relationship between mind and reality.

This relationship holds open the possibility that the imagination itself is evidence that aesthetics in conjunction with the worldly can take the place of god as “the birth of a non-human order of truth” (Critchley 290). Stevens’s relationship to the new physics is key to an understanding of a non-human order of truth. In the time of Einstein, Heisenberg, and quantum theory, this was not orderly Newtonian physics of Emerson’s time.¹

While the surrealists were happy to have a new scientific worldview on their hands that freed them from old ways of thinking, Stevens saw it as part of an inescapable modern reality with which poetry had to maintain contact if it truly wanted reality at its base.

¹ See Robert D. Richardson. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. California UP, Berkeley: 1995. Emerson apparently based his ideas of transcendentalism on the notion that “each man, by finding out what he feels, discovers the laws of the universe” (95). Emerson had read an interpretation of Newton that would have led him to just this stable concordance between scientific law and imagination. For Stevens, the concordance would have been less stable because the laws were less continuous and clearly defined.

This science, for example, confirmed contingency as a part of everyday reality. As Lisa Steinman in her *Made in America: Science Technology and American Modernist Poets* has documented, Stevens takes license from this normalized view of contingency to view awareness of one's actions and deeds as the only way to keep pace with this new understanding of reality. In one of his "Adagia" Stevens writes, "The world is a force, not a presence"; he also writes, poetry is an "act, experience and mode of motion" (*OP* 198). An emphasis on movement, motion, and action is in keeping with the optimistic view of the modernist spirit as held by the Italian Futurists, but the emphasis in Stevens is more on the idea of possibility as an endpoint, not as way to technological utopia, as with the Futurists.² Play, humor, and the freedom from thinking in terms of final forms are the basis of this new approach to reality. This is not an arbitrarily imposed modernism, if seen from the perspective of the new physics, or even the new psychology-- modernist poetry and art owe more to the chaotic play of instincts in nature than they do to static principles of the laws of the universe and their application in morality and philosophy.

In light of a popular understanding of early twentieth century theories of physics, Stevens's repeated use of words like "possible" at pivotal moments in his poetry suggests more than hope for a coming supreme fiction. As shown below, possibility and a state of flux is the goal if a perceptual link to reality is the motive for metaphor. Stevens, however, was no positivist like the Italian Futurists who saw a coming utopia (a type of supreme fiction) that would be a result of technological advances derived from the new scientific discoveries.³ Nor is it clear that Stevens viewed the spirit of modernity as constant change and motion in an entirely positive light. Stevens appears to have viewed modernity in terms of a sense of abandonment by God and

² See Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) 27.

³ See Berman for a full discussion of the Italian Futurists (24-26).

tradition. Accepting this abandonment as a part of reality, Stevens explores modernity for ways in which poetry could theorize contingency so that it provides the basis for the birth of a “new non-human order of truth.”

In *Harmonium*, Stevens does not formally theorize the sense of the possible as world order, though that does not mean that he was not writing according to that theory. In this period (1914-1923), he is interested in “pure poetry,” poetic effects which he did not try to make amenable to science or anything else. In poems like “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” Stevens is more interested in watching the tragedy of play. There is no order, only arbitrary gestures; therefore, a state of play is the only reality available to us. A funeral wake for a lower class woman in “The Emperor of Ice Cream” doubles as an ice cream social. The supreme ruler is ice-cream, something transitory and signifying desire (“concupiscent curds”) and levity. But its levity is simultaneously tragic, for Stevens does not see modernity as redeemable as a force of social good. He sees it simply as something that will upset the social balance. Generally, in his early poetry, Stevens does not *try* to find a credible authority to replace God. Nevertheless, even in “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” Stevens hints at redemption through a sardonic tone that ambiguously mocks an absence of moral authority.

“The Idea of Order at Key West”

Stevens’s poetry written in the 30s and 40s reflects a perception of an absence of order in his modern American society. His poem written in 1932, “The Idea of Order at Key West” stands as one his fullest artistic expressions as to how people are to respond to this lack of external authority. The idea in that poem may be to make provisionally held supreme fictions the points of contact that the imagination has with experience of nature. Poets carefully concoct their ideas of order out of careful observations of both the scenery of nature and the lack of connection

that people feel with nature. Contemplating poetry in order to understand our modern relationship to nature and the cosmos supplies the order that religion once did.

More than just offering ideas of order, Stevens suggests what the nature of this order is through the question-imperative posed to the narrator's companion "Ramon Fernandez" (who as a Spanish language art theorist is reminiscent of George Santayana, Stevens's mentor and poetic dialog partner from his Harvard days):

Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilted in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (*CP* 130)

The poetic "maker" is able to order "words of the sea" because the words are already there in the sea. That is, the chaos of the sea inherently contains possibilities for new fictive orders, and Stevens knows that if reality was chaos and reality was the goal upon which to attach the imagination, then contingency in itself must be elevated as a source for meaning and order.

In other poems in *Ideas of Order* (1935), Stevens's position on supreme fictions returns to a more tragicomic attitude. Many of the poems in *Ideas of Order* mock middle class conventions that prevent people from basing their fictions on realities other than those centered on themselves and their social communities.

"Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit"

Stevens intensifies his examination of supreme fictions and their relationship to contingency in *Transport to Summer* (1947). In this book's poems, imagination is to be located in the world of contingency, but Stevens seem to find more complex, less whimsical and less heroic reasons for doing so. He no longer reveals the force of the imagination in its bare form as he did thirty years earlier in *Harmonium*. Now in *Transport to Summer*, Stevens didactically locates this fiction in terms of relationships to the earth as a basis for ideas of order. Many of the poems in this book can be said to arrive at the conclusion that poetry must be a force to move people back from the world of metaphysics and ideas beyond the world to the temporal world of nature and reality. In "Esthetique du Mal," he has the "after death" spirits yearn to return to be "completely physical in a physical world" (CP 325). In "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit," it is God (or the idea of God) who returns to the earth.

In "Less and Less Human," letting God to be the closed, silent familiarity of the everyday world inverts the old assumption of humanity's alienation from heaven. Instead of being alienated from God, man is now alienated from everyday reality. Similarly to how humanity's biblical fall resulted in a greater distance between man and God (also for the possibility of salvation), by making earth divinity's place, humanity is also made distant from their familiar surroundings. Altogether, the poem sounds like a sermon with its harsh talk of our alienation, and its biblical imperious phrasing: "It is the human that is the alien," "Let him [God] hang out...", "Let him not hear us," "He must not hear us," "He must dwell quietly," and "He must be incapable..." (327). Stevens makes it clear that postulating God's presence on earth is not his idea, and Stevens does not seem to want to comfort readers in this way. Rather, this is a sermon hypothetically casting the human from earth just so the ungrateful human will have incentive to want to see the earth as a place that would be worth returning to. In addition to being a poem

about effecting humanity's alienation, this is also a poem that tries to achieve an ironic marriage between the human and his familiar place, a marriage that is similar to humanity's earlier marriages with the gods.

To make the earth the "marriage place" in "Less and Less Human O Savage Spirit," Stevens separates the categories of earth and God, even as he reluctantly brings to earth a remote God "who does not hear us when we speak" (328). The speaker in the poem insists that people not to assume God's presence but that they overtly project a construct of God onto the world: "If there must be a God in the house...let him be one..." In addition, he insists that there be no easy correspondence between the human and his or her world: "It is the human that is the alien." Finally, he postulates God as earthly only in hypothetical terms: "let there" and "if there must be." The construct remains hypothetical so that people will not be tempted to even try to communicate with it as if it were not a fiction. With these two categories (earth and God) clearly estranged from one another, Stevens achieves a polarity with tension between the poles. In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the narrator explains the dynamics of polarity as the perceived state in which

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

On the real. This is the origin of change. (my italics, 392)

The motivation for the union between marriage partners is the same as the motivation for the union between the reality of earth and the imagination. With Eros as the model, distance between opposites is the prerequisite for the tension in the motivation for union. Thus, the human in such

a world that Stevens posits in this poem tries to imagine the familiar god as something alien to who he or she is in order to preserve a polarity and possibility for meaningful union. The God that is postulated would be a thing of the earth whose nature is to resist the pathetic fallacy:

If there must be a God in the house, let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness,

A vermillioned nothingness, any stick of the mass
Of which we are too distantly a part. (328)

He would be a random omnipresence (any stick of the mass) “that” would be indistinguishable from any other thing of reality (red tends to be the symbol of reality in Stevens)⁴ whose essence we are *apart* from and “distantly” a part of in the sense that we, in spite our imaginations, stem from the earth. However, since the “God in the house” is invoked by the alienated human imagination, thereby, making God an alien on earth, God’s alienation is humanity’s alienation and is thereby familiar to us. Paradoxically, the distant God in this poem becomes familiar by participating in a plausible polarity, that between reality and the imagination. The point of the polarity, however, is not paradox, tension, or irony as an end in itself; it is to transfer how one imagines God and the metaphysical to how one thinks about modern earth-bound reality. This is the theory-laden stuff of Stevens’s *Transport to Summer*.

“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”

⁴ Other examples include the “Large Red Man Reading” who beckons the blue spirits of outer space to return to the earth to “step barefoot into reality” (*CP* 423), and the “old sailor” from “Disillusionment at Ten O’Clock” who, “Drunk and asleep in his boots, / catches tigers / in red weather” (66).

One of the book's most discussed poems "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" depicts the theory of a fiction about supreme-being as temporary fiction created especially for contingent beings. Section VII of "It Must Give Pleasure" marks probably the most emphatic moment of this poem and exemplifies well the relationship between fiction, contingency and reality. Here in this section, the reader may begin to understand the poem's speaker as not only the intense but impersonal lyricist and poetic thinker; the reader also can see the poet as personal, emotional agent who craves a particular kind of fiction:

...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. It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first a beast disgorged, unlike
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of the absolute—Angel,
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound. (*CP* 404)

Stevens here anticipates the discovery of a “form not imposed like a myth from the past, but the form that is the consequence of contingent being” (Kartiganer 22). This form will be discovered “out of nothing” in a “possible, possible, possible...possible...time.” If the narrator “finds the real...stripped of every fiction,” it will have nothing to do with any final vocabularies, or even absolutes beyond that of the “fiction of the absolute.” The real will be something that is plausible but improbable, but its “proper sound” will occur under the auspices of the associations with the old God and the angels in “luminous” poetry of its form.

Harold Bloom lays the importance of this poem on Stevens’s discovery of his own power to command the elements in his imagination at the expense of established knowledge (167).⁵ Stevens does explicitly speak this kind of message through one of the poem’s flippantly donned masks, “Canon Aspirin,” but the mask through which it is conveyed only serves to make the poem’s real authorial voice all the more prominent as it comes into being: following his testament of faith in the discovery of the possibility of absolute fiction of the real, Stevens begins to use “I” consistently throughout the remainder of the poem.⁶

Bloom and many recent critics, however, consider the epilogue to “Notes,” in which

⁵ Bloom in *Poems of our Climate* states that Stevens concludes, "I am to believe in a fiction of the self, in a trope of myself" (212).

⁶ Helen Vendler in *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens's Longer Poems*, sees the poem as advancing toward an academic definition of the identity of I "by closer and closer approximations, with each slight shift marking a further advance in precision" (175). For Marjorie Perloff in her "Revolving in Crystal," the "ephebe" to whom the poem is addressed, the soldier in the poem's epilogue and the narrator are all Stevens addressing himself (21). Stevens does not hide the fact that the reader partakes in the poet's strong vision only to the extent that the poet changes a reader's sense of reality. The Noble Rider himself creates poetry only as an expression of his personality as it integrates mind and reality. In this case, however, the appearance of the soldier in the poem is evidence that Stevens has not only realized the existence of reality and his own relationship to it, but also that soldiers from the world of current events can begin to people this discovery of reality.

Stevens broadens the scope of the poem and seems to be concerned with the wartime reader of his poetry, to be either irrelevant to the poem's message of a poet's "election" or an error of didactic sentimentality that Stevens commits as an apology for poetry.⁷ An alternative explanation for the presence of the poem's epilogue is that it is the transparent propaganda for which Stevens has earned the right to express after 630 lines of hair-splitting about exactly what kind of reimagining of the "first idea" that a modern poet in good faith to him or herself and to their intellectual milieu may permit him or herself to pronounce. The poem's epilogue also picks up the biblical language of spiritual bread, wine, and sustenance that has been a mainstay in his poetry since "Sunday Morning." These supreme fictions may (if they accept the "faithful speech" Stevens proposes) help American soldiers who are about to die in the service of others' political ideologies regain their identities and narratives in both personal and transcendent terms.

To be sure, Stevens's ideal poet would always put his own originality first, but Stevens's poetry by dint of its focus on impersonal shared reality involves the public as well. As George Lensing makes clear in his historical examination of Stevens's publishing history, Stevens often only initiated writing and then publishing a poem after prodding from editors like Harriet Monroe or friends like Henry Church, to whom "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is dedicated (131).

If the reading public did matter to him (This needs to be said to respond to Stevens's reputation for ignoring public concerns in his poems and for having advocated "pure poetry" in *Harmonium*.), one can surmise that Stevens's discovery of the fiction of the absolute reality

⁷ Jonathan Ausubel takes a more complex view of the narrator's relationship with the soldier of his epilogue in his article "This Hot, Dependent Orator": Shifting Narrative Stance and the Collision of Speaker and Reader in 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.'" For him, soldier, ephebe and reader all partake of the supreme fiction. The movement is not so much toward equality of position as it is to communality of position and disposition; the poet, his fat girl, and the reader alike discover "The fiction that results from feeling" (*CP* 406). For him, the epilogue is not a matter of "faithful speech" but more a matter of the difficulty of speaking that speech in a single voice (372-73).

would refer to something beyond mere discovery of himself. For example, this something beyond is what he offers the soldier at war in the poem's epilogue; Stevens extends the "bread of faithful speech" as communion wafer. Not just an abstract formulation of the substance of the "real," the "bread" here signifies an attempt to address the long-standing impasse between mind and matter in western culture. This discovery of a fiction of absolute reality marks one of the ways that Stevens points to as to how one can have one's conscious faculties (the mind) and the world (matter) too. Thus, the supreme fiction presents the possibility that individuals can escape pure materiality or pure idea and become actors on a stage of freewill, capable of moving about as if they were free, and not held ransom by death or literally understood mechanistic reality or religion—categories which are fixed by the violent ideas of the times. Stevens's supreme fiction offers the possibility of freedom of the imagination to "the adventurer in humanity [who] has not [yet] conceived of ... a completely physical ... world" (CP 325).

"The Auroras of Autumn"

After *Transport to Summer's* complex aligning of freedom with both the imagination and reality, in his next book *The Auroras of Autumn* (1949) Stevens begins in a less theoretical voice to create simpler, though sometimes darker fictions. Beyond proclaiming something like "Life is a bitter aspic" as he does in *Transport's* "Esthetique du Mal" (322), in his poem "The Auroras of Autumn," he accepts and embodies the "bitter aspic" to say something life-affirmative. In "Auroras" the narrator of that poem patches together a character with an appropriate message for his congregation. The "scholar of one candle" or the "rabbi" concludes that it is better to make

fictions that encourage people in hard times: this is the fiction of “an unhappy people in a happy world” (420).⁸

Stevens’s rabbi may be able to freely offers this bromide to his congregation in good conscience because this rabbi takes sanction for doing do from his experience of living in a world of contingency where anything, as is seen in the display of the northern lights, in nature and the imagination is permissible. According to Eleanor Cook’s research on Stevens’s sources for the “The Auroras of Autumn,” scientific research into the northern lights was published widely during Stevens’s lifetime, and the language of contemporary (to Stevens) scientists—“arcs, bands, curtains, veils, drapery, rays, clouds” (238) infuse the descriptions of the auroras in Stevens’s poem. If granting license to discover fictions using the language of rational science was all Stevens had to say through poetry, then “The Auroras of Autumn” would not have been necessary since he had already expressed this idea in other poems throughout his career. However, “The Auroras of Autumn” goes further in its theory about who can express supreme fictions than does “The Idea of Order at Key West,” where contemplation of the creative works of the “single artificer of the world in which she sang” replaces God as the author of supreme fictions (*CP* 128). In the later poem, the walker on the beach contemplates nature itself as an arbitrary artificer of the world. The lyrical poet who narrates in that poem speaks for him or herself and not through any other figure’s work of art (as was the case in “The Idea of Order at Key West”). In section VII, this poet appears for the first time in the poem and asks in his or her own voice,

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned

⁸ According to Joan Richardson’s biography of Stevens, Stevens’s northern lights represent to him the natural counterpoint to the atomic blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (265) It is difficult not to see the poem against the backdrop of the postwar sense of despair pervasive in much of the world in 1949. Stevens critic Eleanor Cook remarks that “a sense of [nuclear] apocalypse informs the sequence of thoughts in the poem” (239).

As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops
To imagine winter?...(*CP* 417)

Different from the earlier question from “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Why does the imagination have the power to order the world in a believable way? the question suggested here is, is there an independent world-imagination in nature that imagines the seasons into the future not according to immutable laws of God but spontaneously (as in the case of a modernist-romantic poet’s imagination)? In the earlier poem, the poet finds the raw materials of the imagination in the world as the “ever hooded” “words of the sea” (*CP* 130). More intensely, in the aurora borealis (visible to Stevens in Hartford), the world-imagination that sits “enthroned” becomes mythologized as the ancient Greeks’ earliest god, “Ananke,” fate or necessity. Stevens had mentioned Ananke directly once before in “Like Decorations.” In that poem, Ananke’s course is likewise unpredictable:

The sense of the serpent in you Ananke
And your averted stride
Add nothing to the horror of the frost
That glistens on your face and hair. (*CP* 152)

In “The Auroras of Autumn,” the serpent Ananke suggests the equivocal image of two serpents. One serpent signals the undisclosed day of a person’s death, as in the way that every living thing on earth is a harbinger of mortality:

Is this another wriggling out of the egg,
Another image at the end of the cave,
Another bodiless for the body’s slough?

This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
These fields, these hills, these tinted distances,
And the pines above and along and beside the sea. (*CP* 411)

The second serpent is the figure from the myth of Ananke, the one that encircles the world, and like in the myth suggests that something exists beyond the human individual that will persist beyond the individual's death:

These lights may finally attain a pole
In the midmost midnight and find the serpent there,
In another nest, the master of the maze
Of body and air and forms and images,
Relentlessly in possession of happiness.

That is his poison: that we should disbelieve
Even that.... (*CP* 411)

The recognition that something exists beyond the fate of a lone individual creates the opening to a larger network of responsibility. Thus, in this poem the romantic poet, the scholar of one candle, becomes a “rabbi” speaking hope to a congregation. That hope is predicated on the probability that value exists beyond the mental world of the individual poet, and his or her family and culture. The most obvious reason that Stevens picks the Greek ur-god Ananke to embody necessity is to emphasize as Freud does that it is not a product of human culture, but that it stems from the non-human earthly order that predates human religions and the cultures built up around those religions. Hence, on a scrap of paper, Stevens writes “Human society as the result of human nature” (Lensing 167), and in an essay he writes, “the imagination tries to penetrate to

basic images, basic emotions, and to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world” (NA 145). Societies and their religions, then, react to the necessity of death. As an agnostic, Stevens may want to reunite a congregation or readership with moments of knowledge of outer reality that give rise to order in civilization: people are unhappy as a society because outer-reality indicates that they die, but they can take solace in the idea that outer-reality is itself composed through something resembling the imagination’s capacity for artifice.

The speaker can freely concoct a fiction, “unhappy people in a happy world,” because, according to the poem, he or she has sanction to do so in a contingent world that, like the northern lights, is as much “theatre floating through the clouds” as it is individual imagination (CP 416).

Stevens’s supreme fictions probably do not reflect an advance on chaos, as maintains David La Guardia and others, who see all of Stevens’s poems as steps toward his late (within a few weeks of his death) conversion to Roman Catholicism. Rather than this poem being about Stevens’s move to religion to order chaos, “The Auroras of Autumn” may contain another example of Stevens’s supreme fictions taking their sanction from the visible phenomena of chaos in the world. According to William Burney, a critic who sees Stevens as a romantic Existentialist, for Stevens “the only order worth looking for is the order of chaos itself” (177). The state of possibility for innocence that informs the Panglossian “unhappy people in a happy world” comprises a fiction that restores the link between perception and territory. The map of the territory (or the imagined territory) in this poem’s instance mirrors the indeterminacy of shape and form that is seen in the aurora borealis: just as the auroral lights described in the poem leap from white to black and from presence to extinction of presence, so too are the movements of the imagination never static and always carry within them as essential characteristic the possibility

of new links to the physical world. In Stevens's poem this link may take the form of the reification of possibility in the form of the auroral lights:

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.
So then, these lights are not a spell of light,
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.
An innocence of the earth and no false sign... (*CP* 418)

The narrator's conclusion of "a happy world" depends on the ability of the perceiver to experience necessity and mortality as part of an "innocence of the earth." Credible perceptions of innocence create links to displays of pure contingency as sources for life and not to a conclusion about the territory's moral status.

The Possible

The word "possible" occurs at pivotal moments in Stevens's poetry and prose. The "possible poet" and his possible poem is the subject of Stevens's essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," and below is a partial list of that word's occurrences in Stevens's published literary work (*NA* 27). His particular usage of that word suggests an apparentness of finality of any fiction about the marriage between mind and material. His usage of the word "possible" also indicates that change is the only permanence:

- The impossible **possible** philosophers' man... ("Asides on an Oboe"31)
- It is **possible** that to seem—it is to be, ("Description without a Place" 339):
Of the **possible**: seemings that are to be,
Seemings that it is **possible** may be. (342)

Book of a concept only **possible** (345)

- Trace the gold about the whitened sky
Without evasion by a single metaphor.
Look at it in its essential barrenness
And say this, this is the centre that I seek.
Fix it in an eternal foliage
And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
Of change still **possible**. Exile desire
for what is not. This is the barrenness
Of the fertile thing that can attain no more. (“Credences of Summer” 373)
- ...the visible announced... This in sight and memory,
Must take its place, as what is **possible**
Replaces what is not... This complex of emotions falls apart.
 (“Credences of Summer” 373)
- It is **possible, possible, possible**. It must
Be **possible**. It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come,
Seeming... (“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” 404)
- The **possible** nest in the invisible tree,
It may be, may be. It is **possible**. (“Saint John and the Back-Ache” 437)

- Searches a **possible** for its possibleness. (“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” 481)
- ...As in / another and later genesis, Music / That buffets the shapes of its **possible** halcyon (“Esthétique du Mal” 321)
- Fire is the symbol: the celestial **possible**. (“To an Old Philosopher in Rome” 508)

In the above examples, the state of dynamic possibility signifies the innocence of seeing objects simply in the way they seem. In “Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens “searches [for] a possible for its possibleness,” a possible presence of the innocence of objects that is found in the apparentness of their finality. He states in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” and in “A Collect of Philosophy”⁹ that the objects that seem permanent and final are actually, according to philosophers and modern physicists that he names, comprised more of the infinity of empty space and of particles of matter that, like the northern lights, are in constant motion (NA 25). The street, house, and ordinary objects of prosaic reality in “Ordinary Evening in New Haven” make up the local world that Stevens knew, and he implies in this poem that more exotic sights seen while traveling abroad are nothing significant without the ability to imagine and thereby compose a simple object as other—discretely real and independent of the projections of his mind. As seen above in the above discussion of “Auroras of Autumn” this object must be an object that allows for the possibility of concordance with the mind’s sense of the first idea, or perception of the world’s innocence. Only the first idea could have a sense of the possible

⁹ In “A Collect of Philosophy,” Stevens refers to a letter from Jean Wahl in which Wahl states: “I am just now reading the *Méditations cartésiennes* by Husserl. Very dry. But he affirms that there is an enormous (*ungeheueres*) a priori in our minds, an inexhaustible infinity of a priori. He speaks of the approach of the unapproachable” (OP 275). Stevens goes on to say, “This enormous a priori is potentially as poetic a concept as the idea of the infinity of the world” (OP 275).

because only it in primal innocence, argued backwards from knowledge of death, does language seemingly refer to the objects that it purports to refer. Accordingly, language in a state of positive possibility harmonizes (in unexpected ways) with the reality of the objects of the world: “The sun must bear no name, . . . but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be” (381). What is more important for escaping old ideas of the sun (“Phoebus is dead,” “heaven has expelled us and our images” [381]) is attaining the mind of ignorance¹⁰ that allows one to believe that one gets at the particulars of reality in an innocent and vital way:

It may be that an ignorant man, alone,
Has any possibility to mate his life with life
That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze (222).

Similarly, in “Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens conceives the mind and the object in simultaneously dualistic (“his life” or mind and the “life” of nature) and monistic (fluidity fixed in art) terms. This claim can be extrapolated from the last lines of the poem’s last section:

These are the edgings and inchings of final form,
The swarming activities of the formulae
Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at,

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,

A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,

¹⁰ Janet McCann writes that Stevens was “somewhat envious of the participation mystique” – the Modernist view of so-called ‘primitive’ experience not being divided from nature—but was “closed to him because of what he thinks of as his alienating sophistication” (35).

A woman writing a note and tearing it up.

It is not the premise that reality

Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses

A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (488)

“Final form” is never arrived at in a solid form; rather, as with the mind’s formulae apposed with the qualities of the violet light in the evening, only processes of search and discovery occur. Nature, mind, and desire become formless without the goal of *discovering* final form, for it is “not the premise that reality is a solid,” which is to say that final form is not fixed and permanent. Earlier in the poem he states that reality is a “permanence composed of impermanence” (472). His usage of the word “solid” recalls the language of chemistry and science, especially in conjunction with his many other references to science. Stevens also employs language from physics: “It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade.” As in the last line from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”, “you [the world] will have stopped revolving except in crystal¹¹” (407), the poet frames provisional poetic reality in terms of permanence seen against change—the combination in one image of stasis and dynamic becoming. These lines casually make use of the notion from quantum theory that light is simultaneously particle and force or wave. A romantic poet attempting to bring science into his understanding of “a solid” could be expected to want to align the subjective mind with a new understanding of light. Stevens’s inversion or transvaluation of this alignment is to remove the

¹¹ Crystal is transparent and solid simultaneously; thus, since transparency is associated with light, air and the weather where change occurs most visibly, crystal is an image of a world of constant change seemingly made into final form. According to Michael Benamou’s study of Stevens’s Symbolism, Stevens’s crystal in “It Must Give Pleasure” is an alchemical symbol for the conciliation of opposites (Benamou 131)

subjective mind's source from above--sunlight, the father, the sky god, the political forces acting upon the people, or any a-priori (necessary) pronouncements—and place it in the dark inert (non-transcendent, contingent) truth that inheres in a commitment to the earth's relative darkness as a good and as a source of knowledge relative to former metaphysical sources of knowledge. If the old romantics spoke of the absolutes that could be intuited by overthrowing strictures on perception, Stevens the romantic-modernist has knowledge of matter not through recourse to metaphysics but through plausible analogies, some derived from readings in popular science.

Stevens the modernist does not rebel so much as reveal a need for objects to seem like fixed and final forms in the perceiver's mind. Dark, unenlightened earthly matter perceived in a state of contingency is the source of his freedom to accept seeming as final, just as it is the source of "the first idea" mentioned in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Living within a darkness of earth indicates an absence of any final philosophy that composes the scene. In Stevens's last poems, he wavers between the idea of home in such an earth and acceptance of permanent exile. His poem "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" suggests that, at least for philosophers, the marriage between mind and material particularity is possible, and that, therefore, a temporary escape from internal exile is possible.

Bowing to Expediency or Fate in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"

In letters dating from 1949, Stevens remarks that he has been meditating on a quote from his old friend from his time at Harvard, George Santayana: "I have always bowed, however, sadly, to expediency or fate" (*L* 637). This quote from Santayana appears in two of Stevens's letters (*L* 635, 637). The interesting thing for this discussion is the interchangeability of fate and expediency. Fate is something determined from above by providence, but in modern times when the "above" is no longer authoritative, bowing to fate can be equated with bowing to expediency

or to something that makes apparent practical sense to do. Santayana's usage of expediency as interchangeable with fate recalls the pragmatist aspects of his philosophy as he takes an empirical approach to nature's indeterminacy: "A landscape to be seen has to be composed; and to be loved has to be moralized" (*Sense of Beauty* 133). Imbuing down-to-earth compositions with a divine aura is a motif in Stevens's poetry. That is the case in the above-discussed "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit," and it is also the case in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome."

In that poem from 1952 about Santayana's retirement to an Italian convent, things of the earth become imbued with thoughts of heaven:

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distance of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end—

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

How easily the blown banners change to wings...
Things dark on the horizons of perception,
Become accompaniments of fortune, but

Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
Of the unknown. The newsboy's mutterings
Becomes another murmuring; the smell
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled...
The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns... (CP 508)

“The newsboy’s mutterings” of ephemeral worldly happenings are no longer important, and the medicine that must be taken to sustain life becomes like the “fragrantness” of Catholic incense that hints of heaven’s permanent forms. The image of “the two parallels [that] become one” references the optical illusion of seeing the two rails of a railroad track merge in the distance. The horizontal orientation suggested in the poem by the words, “parallels” “horizons,” and “reach” stress the earthliness of the “threshold, Rome and the more merciful Rome/ Beyond.” Emerson’s circles, horizons, and transparent eyeballs echo in this horizontal directionality. In this poem, the “kind of total grandeur at the end” is “chosen by an inquisitor of structures for himself” (510-11). Universals are not discovered in the manner described in Emerson’s famous transcendentalist motto: “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (16). Here, “the total grandeur of a total edifice” derives from the lifelong formulations of aesthetic arrangements:

He stops upon this threshold,

As if the design of all his words takes form

And frame from thinking and is realized. (511)

His ideas precede a concocted sense of grace, which does not arrive freely from the unconscious or from metaphysical sources. It does not matter whether God exists or not for this total grandeur to exist in the mind of the philosopher. After a lifetime of study, Stevens's Santayana sees the ideas from theology, philosophy, history and aesthetics in items such as "a bed, a chair ... the book and candle in ... [his] ambered room" (510). He is "unwilling that mercy should be a mystery" coming from beyond. The human value of mercy arises from things in his immediate vicinity. This final grandeur is, in other words, not grace or even earned as a reward, rather it is a matter of expediency: at the vantage point of his natural threshold, death is real; the things of his everyday world seen in contact with the unknown beyond death. The possibility is enough that he has, in Santayana's words, accomplished the "marriage of imagination with reality which is the goal of contemplation" (*Sense of Beauty* 136).

The Santayana outside this poem advocates a type of decreation to accomplish this marriage when he states in *Sense of Beauty* that scientists, philosophers and historians must learn first to separate their imaginative projections from an everyday landscape and to witness how formless and infinitely varied the landscape is without them; he proposes that the scientist and philosopher view him or herself as a poet whose discovered forms are as much a product of mind as matter. They are always just part of the world and never "the final philosophy" (140).

Mostly in Stevens's poetry, the marriage of the imagination and reality tends to fall apart, leaving the imaginative person yearning for the reality of the world once again. For individuals seeking their place within a world of contingency, the objects in their midst are composed of imagination or are in exile from it.

CHAPTER 4

INTERNAL EXILE: THE ABSENCE OF THE PARTICULAR

After joining the firm Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company in 1916, Stevens traveled to south Florida each winter through 1940, initially solely on business and later more for the congenial climate and association with close friends. Generally, this act of traveling south for pleasure suggests a schism in Stevens's personality. In the south he is gregarious. In Hartford, at times, he is a hermit. He states on more than one occasion that he found the southerners easier to befriend than New Englanders (Brazeau 99). His increased sociability in Florida stems to some extent from increased alcohol consumption while away from his wife Elsie who disapproved of his drinking—Stevens was careful never to mention drinking bouts in letters to her. Despite some of the raucous times he experienced with friends and the locals in Florida, his poems on the subject of Florida suggest that he has a more subdued and more ambivalent attitude to Florida than his and others' anecdotal accounts of his experiences in Florida may suggest. On the one hand, Florida was a home for the senses but not for the spirit and the intellect. On one of his returns to the north, he writes that he had little appetite for serious literature (Brazeau 100). Associating southern climes with leisure and pleasure represents a tendency that a northerner on vacation in the south could be expected to have. Stevens's job, normal social life, and his literary discipline all lay to the north. His Florida poems, however, reflect someone who enacts leaving the land of lotus eaters, as if going on vacation and having to go back to reality had more significant meaning.

Before World War I, associating the sensual south with artistic and moral freedom typifies a stance taken by northern writers such as Wyndham Lewis, Thomas Mann, and Oscar

Wilde. Especially for Stevens, his mentor George Santayana, a man born in Spain but who had lived many years in ascetic Boston, perpetuated associations between the north and its barren Protestantism (*Secretaries of the Moon* 21). In the south, one would find an uninhibited reign of the senses, and the unconscious would express itself more easily. This was true of the normally reserved Stevens who became a voluble raconteur in Key West, where he was known for telling jokes and stories among friends. Stevens goes to the south for pleasure, but aims to return to the north where he can continue his career as a writer and contribute to a permanent literature. Even before he met his influential friend Judge Arthur Powell and other friends in the south, Stevens had written of Florida (in “Nomad Exquisite,” for example) and the sensual south as counterpoint to the cold, ascetic north. Later, as he became more established at Hartford Indemnity, he would spend a few weeks in Key Largo and other places in Florida visiting with friends in literary and business circles. He rarely mixed the two and was never eager to let it be known that he was a poet. The trips to the south, then, may have been a way to provide something that he lacked, companionship, adventure, and a more sensual climate. He would always be going back and forth, both literally as a traveling surety bondsman for Hartford Indemnity, and figuratively as a modernist poet who sought home in a world that he actually experienced and not the world that he intellectualized.

On a less practical level, however, a spiritual homelessness for the poet Stevens may stem from his recognition that he was not a regional poet even though he may have felt that the ideal poet should have a regional orientation: “the man in Georgia waking among pines / Should be pine-spokesman” (*CP* 38). The man in Georgia in this line from “The Comedian at the Letter C” probably refers to a real person from Georgia, Judge Arthur Powell, the man to whom Stevens owes the line, “The hen-cock crows at midnight and lays no egg” (Brazeau 101). Stevens’s

immigrant to Judge Powell's region, Crispin, from the poem "Comedian at the Letter C" fails at acclimating himself to his southern plantation after emigrating there from Europe. Moreover, Stevens felt that this poem, the longest and most ambitious in *Harmonium*, was a failure and was somewhat reluctant to include it in his *Collected Poems* of 1954 (L 330).

For Stevens, the man from Dutch Pennsylvania, his original spiritual home was closely tied to his Presbyterian church from which he later distanced himself. He tells his wife Elsie in a 1907 letter that "it is a particular desire of mine to have you join church (L 96). He approves of her church going while he no longer turns to it as a source of truth. After he moves to New York City and later to Hartford, he replaces the hills and rivers of his boyhood in semi-rural Pennsylvania with cosmopolitan city life and workaday office life. According to George Lensing's readings of Stevens's early letters and journal entries, Stevens starts living a split life already while at Harvard by bifurcating the imagination into "the priest in me" and the poet honoring the "beauty and might" of nature (57). These make up part of the same identity, but Stevens's spends much of his poetic career trying to reconcile them.

It appears that he finds nature's "beauty and might" in its most vibrant form in Florida.¹ In "Nomad Exquisite," an early poem about Florida, the "vines [are] angering for life" and the sun and "the eye of the young alligator" make a communion in a time prior to when the narrator of that poem joins the communion, and then only as a tourist would, in a secondary fashion (CP 95). In the crowded cities of the north on the other hand, in the absence of a strong religious faith that would seemed to have originated in the lay of the land, the people only had each other, only humanistic culture without a prehistoric-seeming landscape. In letters, essays and poems Stevens

¹ Lentriccia in *Modernist Quartet* discusses the complications of Stevens's "male literary inheritance" (12) and of how the male body is "no longer continuous with nature- the self is particular, alone, and unrelated and unresolved in cosmic design and purpose" (13) Thus, psychologically, Stevens reasons for wanting to go south to find nature may have stemmed from a desire to escape a code of masculinity in the north.

writes of the claustrophobia of city life, the “ennui of apartments” (*CP* 381), the general lack of privacy and space for spiritual contemplation (*NA* 18). In his early poem, “Ploughing on Sunday,” Stevens mocks the idea that the ex-Puritan who breaks the Sabbath by ploughing on Sunday requires his own version of a southern Uncle “Remus” to acculturate him to the land. Stevens critic Joseph Riddel asks whether this Remus is a myth-making American Uncle Remus or a city-founding Remus, twin to Romulus (70). The “barren Protestantism” of the north does not seem as if it would welcome southern raconteurs, and if Remus is to found a new city in northern America, the question arises as to what religion if any he would bring. In a letter, Stevens notes, “Humanism would be the natural substitute [for religion], but the more I see of humanism the less I like it” (*L* 348). More likely, Stevens’s had in mind as the substitute “the great poem of the earth” that would take him beyond humanism, the assumed replacement for religion. By proposing that Stevens’s “earthy anecdote” replaces both Christianity and humanism by combining associations from both the north and the south in a great poem, Stevens neglects the particulars of place and time, which, it appears, must be included if one wants to found a city and overcome homelessness in any real sense.

Exile

The critical consensus on Stevens’s north-south dichotomy has Stevens following Santayana’s typology for the tension between regional characters.² According to this view, the feminine south nurtured the imagination, and the ascetic north counteracted it to provide balance (*Secretaries of the Moon* 21). Gyorgyi Voros sees the significance of Stevens’s ambivalence to the south and the north as part of the necessity of avoiding the pathetic fallacy (176). These accounts fail to mention the pathos of exile that Stevens might have felt as a “nomad exquisite,”

² For an overview of criticism on Stevens’s north-south dichotomy, see Melita Schaum, *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools*. (Tuscaloosa. Alabama UP: 1980).

a travelling surety bondsman. When Voros claims that Stevens tries to construct a home in his stanzas to experience life in the world as opposed to blueprints of objects (the mother rather than matter [45]), he suggests that this home is an emergent property dependent on recognition of an essential wildness in both the unconscious and in reality. Voros does not indicate that Stevens would search for such a home in particular places such as Reading, Pennsylvania or Key Largo, Florida. In Voros' view, Stevens's ideal home always lay elsewhere, but generally, in the direction of British Columbia that Stevens visited as young man prior to his becoming a lawyer (20). In this chapter, it is shown that even as Stevens idealizes "the marriage place" (*CP* 40) as the particular place where the mind is at home, he fails at finding such a home and has to accept exile as a kind of home: "Every exile knows his place and that place is the imagination."³

Characters and motifs in his poems that typify Stevens's spiritual and temporal exile—internal exile—include that of the hidalgo, the "floribund ascetic" (*CP* 241), and restatements of romanticism. All mark a trend in Stevens toward abstraction as a home that assumes exile as both an endpoint and as something that cannot, he comes to find, in the usual way—by returning to one's place of birth—be overcome.

The Hidalgo and the Plantation

Stevens tries to overcome spiritual and internal dislocatedness through the fiction of the Spanish "hidalgo." This term refers to the landed Spanish nobility and their peasants who have acquired "tenure in the land"⁴ through generations of habits and customs cultivated in tandem with the particulars of a homeland's climate and landscape. Several of Stevens's poems examine

³ See Alberto Milián. "Defining Time and History: Ricardo Pau-Llosa." (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003). This quote is from Ricardo Pau-Llosa, Cuban exile, important poet, art critic and scholar of exile. He lists Wallace Stevens as his main influence and wrote his master's thesis on him.

⁴ I borrow this phrase from Scott Momaday who uses it in *House Made of Dawn*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 58, to distinguish newcomers to northern New Mexico from the animals and people who had lived there for millennia.

the possibility of a new world hidalgo as a way of overcoming exile. For example, the poem, “In a Clear Season of Grapes,” posits an abstract but successful colonization of the new world’s land and weather:

When I think of our lands I think of the house
And the table that holds the platter of pears,
Vermillion smeared over green, arranged to show. (*CP* 110)

Here, the conjoining of home and land in artifice almost satisfies the narrator. A few lines later, the poem moves from still-life painting to the real house and lands:

But this gross blue under rolling bronzes
Belittles those carefully chosen daubs.
Flashier fruits! A flip for the sun and moon,

If they mean no more than that. But they do.
And mountains and the sea do. And our lands.
And the welter of frost and the fox cries do.

Much more than that. Autumnal passages
Are overhung by the shadows of the rocks
And the nostrils blow out salt around each man. (110)

Aside from Stevens’s use of death as his *deus ex machina* to conjoin parallel lines of nature and mind (like the railroad tracks in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome”), the poem suggests the figure of the hidalgo who has become accustomed to ancestral land after many generations of fox hunts and grape harvests. Grapes do not grow in New England, nor were wine grapes cultivated

extensively in the southern colonies; this is merely an idea that comes from an American beholding a European still-life painting (“smeared” “daubs”) of “vermilioned pears” on a table. Americans can postulate the idea of a colonized home in a new world because somewhere their forbears have done the same. As a modern urban dweller, however, Stevens does not live the agrarian feudal lifestyle of his presumed forbears in Holland and Germany (or the feudalism associated with the Latin American haciendas and southern plantations of the new world aristocracy). The season of grapes indicates that cardinal point on the wine grower’s calendar when the grapes are ripe. For Stevens’s narrator, the season of grapes marks a private symbol for the time when poetry can be harvested—the time when mind and matter seem to cohere. This coherence, however, depends on an abstract scene that lays far beyond the *genii loci* of New England (further “than beyond the genius of the sea” in “Ideas of Order at Key West” [128]).

The poem immediately following “In a Clear Season of Grapes,” “Two at Norfolk,” shows how new world *hidalgos* might take form through tragic American folk tales and folk songs. If, as George Lensing claims, Stevens groups like poems with alternating aspects of a single theme in his books, then “Two at Norfolk” could be an attempt to bring the ideas discovered in the previous generic poem to a more geographically local point of focus (143). Norfolk, Virginia lies between the extremes of cold New England and tropical Key West. The African Americans slaves of this American colony are mentioned: “Mow the grass in the cemetery, darkies, / Study the symbols and Requiescats...” (*CP* 111). A Scandinavian northern immigrant has a daughter named Carlotta who seems foreign to him since she was born in a foreign place, and the German immigrant of the poem has a son named Jamanda. The son and daughter of immigrants meet and die young tragically in the new world, and out of their tragic fall, folk songs of the new world are created: “The dark shadows of the funeral magnolias / are

full of the songs of Jamanda and Carlotta” (111). The two families from different parts of northern Europe merge to create a new identity.

Stevens’s second published literary work, a one-act play titled “Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise,” contrasts tragic death and love in a new world colony with Chinese sensibilities. In the play, aristocratic Chinese travelers to America foretell of a doomed love affair that ends with a hanging in the untamed forests of the new world. In this play and many poems throughout his poetic career, Stevens brings together disparate ethnic and cultural elements: in the play overly civilized, effete Chinese Mandarins are juxtaposed with the children of European immigrants. For Stevens, the poet born and raised in a relatively culturally homogenous Reading, Pennsylvania, this coming together of different peoples and ethnicities (as he would have seen in New York) is probably a strange proposition, which he tries to process through an abstract rendition of tragedy.

In “Two at Norfolk” the artifice of tragic songs precede the creation of a colony. Before the tragic art arises, the land is not colonized in a psychological sense. The land and people remain slightly foreign to one another; the Scandinavian’s daughter Carlotta remains foreign to her father prior to her death and ensuing songs. Tragedy forms part of the process whereby the figure of the *hidalgo* habituates himself to the land. As stated above, Stevens depicts this process as a failure in “The Comedian as the Letter C.” The colonist in this story attempts to write the epic poem of the new world, but due to the immensity of the task gives up. He, like the ancestors of the colonists of the aforementioned “Two at Norfolk,” attempts to found a colony in a middle region between two climactic zones of the new world, the hierophantic climate of the Yucatan with its volcano gods, and the severe asceticism of the “green palmettos of crepuscular ice” of the arctic north (*CP* 34). But unlike those colonists, the song that he sings will be firmly planted

in a realist's experience of place and not in the aura of artistic tragedy: "his soil is man's intelligence" (36). But as quixotic, comic figure, or as a figure characteristic of the overreaching in the St. Crispin day speech from *Henry the Fifth*, Crispin finds hope in failure: "the plum survives its poems," (41) which is to say that reality is something still to be discovered after the imagination's luster has faded. The American modern who comes after the colonist will always have new discoveries and new changes to discover. Crispin's modernist progeny (His four daughters begin their less conventional colonization projects where his plantation and epic poem end.) will discover that in acceptance of change there is a sense of permanence that the hidalgos of old Europe enjoyed.

His progeny's freedom from tradition and plantation may lead to regret because while they have a wider reality in the whole of North America to discover, it is a generalized, abstracted plum and not a particular plum that they cultivate themselves in the Carolinas. In other poems written during the same period, Stevens even caricatures the modern way of settling the land as a sort of con-job. Stevens's poem "Anecdote of the Jar" suggests the absurdity in believing in a noble fiction about a noble jar ("Tall and of a port in air") that takes "dominion everywhere" like the jar on a wooded hill in Tennessee (76). The particular product of modern people, the factory-produced Dominion Jar, does not really tame the "slovenly wilderness" even if it is intentionally placed there; the anecdote or fiction of its taming presence retroactively contributes to the false perception that the wilderness was "slovenly" before someone littered the place. The speaker announces that he or she placed a jar on the hill, then claims that it ennobled a wilderness that presumably was deficient before he or she placed the jar there, but in a real sense, looking at the "grey and bare" jar for what it really is, it is the jar and its placement that are deficient as a work of art, notwithstanding the qualities the speaker appends to it. This poem, like

“Ploughing on Sunday” in which the overzealous ploughboy claims he will plough all of North America (20), suggests that the colony is too vast and the modern urban progeny of agrarian colonists have really lost their bearings. As with their mass-produced jars, modern people produce instant works of art (“placed a jar in Tennessee” like Duchamp’s readymades placed in an art exhibit) that create provisional fictional ties to the land. The sing-song bombast of the poem’s cadence mimics that of a carnival barker⁵, and one can only remain a comedian at the letter C (C for see, or perception) for as long as the show lasts: “it took dominion everywhere. / The jar was gray and bare.” Founding a colony by placing a jar on a hill underscores at worst the futility and at best the dada⁶ humor involved in the modern artist’s role in carrying on the process of colonizing the new world. Flippant modern art can create moments of order and disorder, but does not actually make the land feel like home. Accordingly, the line “it did not give of bird or bush / like nothing else in Tennessee,” is the cry of a carnival barker like P. T. Barnum who cons his way into making his national colony feel like home.

In several poems of *Ideas of Order*, Stevens writes similar poems critical of America’s art and statues that create such spurious connections to the actual land. Two of his poems in this book ask despairingly with “what bread” and “what wine” the American people should spiritually nourish themselves if they lack the myth created by the art that would effectively transubstantiate the natural products of the land. In the *Harmonium* poem depicting a naturalistic food chain, “Frogs eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs eat Snakes. Men eat Hogs,” Stevens ridicules an American people, who have a purely literal or purely material understanding of their own humanity and its ties to the land.

⁵ See Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) 259.

⁶ See Glen G. MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 253.

The Urban Hidalgo

Possibly as an act of self-criticism for his own false connections to Florida, Stevens leads off *Ideas of Order* with the poem “Farewell to Florida.” He leaves Florida as if he leaves a romantic lover whose siren song threatens to engulf him in pure bodily sensuality, “her oceanic night / calling for music, for whisperings from the reefs”(117). This recalls the medieval death-love motif that figures prominently in Thomas Mann’s “Death in Venice” and Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” the poem whose oceanic lullaby consists in the soothing words, “Death, death, death”(205). In Stevens’s poem, “the whispering from the reefs” had seduced him with the sweet lure of death music. As in other poems, such as “On an Old Horn,” the false music of the spheres cannot be supplanted by false music of earth’s shores in order to create connections to a beloved place. Stevens must invalidate romantic themes (rather than succumbing to dissolution and the Schopenhauerian abyss as the only source of wisdom and beauty) if he wants to actually contend with social reality of the north. Stevens counter-intuitively sees freedom in the rejection of vacation on Florida’s beaches and in acceptance of “My North leafless ... in a wintry slime / Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds” (118). By framing his new source of freedom with patently unpleasant imagery, Stevens underscores the spiritual sacrifices that this new freedom within cities (as opposed to southern plantations) will entail for the modern anti-romantic. The modernist freedom will be created through grappling with the forces of modernity rather than through promises of vacations in southern paradises.

Stevens’s most anthologized poem about Florida from *Ideas of Order*, “The Idea of Order at Key West” portrays this new difficult relationship with a particular place in the tropics. This poem is more realistic than “Sunday Morning’s” more formal and global “expression of

paganism,” which is how Stevens explained the meaning of “Sunday Morning” (*L* 250). In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” paganism is not the subject of the poem, but rather a new theory-centered modernist version of a romantic approach to nature in which the subject does not intuit the essence of nature. The modern romantic walking with a companion discuss and contemplate a poet’s song as she “order[s] words of the sea” and “of ourselves and of our origins / in ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” by transubstantiating nature’s material chaos into more abstract “ghostlier demarcations” (130). The poem following this one, “the American Sublime,” asks the aforementioned question, “What wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?” (131). Stevens appears to have the Christian Eucharist in mind in his writing and grouping of these poems. In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the modern artist will bear the burden in originating myths, but Stevens, at least, will not regard them as final. Emerson, on the other hand, writes, “The religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative men” (430). Contrary to Emerson’s example from “The American Scholar,” human nature in Stevens does not partake of nature in the sense that divine nature is “the seal” and nature “the print” (48). Stevens’s theorist, possibly like the workers in the factories of the north, will “rage to order” nature’s raw material into cultural significance. Stevens seems aware of the discrepancy between discovery of myth in nature and construction of myth in the “maker’s” role as the “single artificer of the world / in which she sang” (*CP* 129). He indicates that she is alone in her artistic production, but he as a mediator/theorist at one remove from the singer, her song, and the sea brings all three components together at a later level of abstraction.⁷ As a poem that is the result of contemplation of poetry and nature, “The Idea of Order at Key West” resembles romantic poetry that has both nature and the imagination as its object (both apperceived at once)

⁷ See Chapter 1, 30-31 for a discussion of abstraction as a logical type occurring at a later abstract point in a cybernetic circuit.

of interest. The raw material for poetry in this poem stems not only from nature's "words of the sea" but also the raging imagination's (which is essentially romantic) raw material. In this way, the imagination lies "beyond the genius of the sea" and the sea beyond the genius of the imagination, but in Stevens's modernist poem they are brought together as discrete components on a more abstract plane.

Stevens's modern progeny of Crispin must habituate themselves to the colonized lands of America through an abstract intellectual approach not only to the land but also to their own artistic passions for the land. The new relationship with the land will differ from Emerson's injunction for Americans to be self-reliant ascetics in their relationship to America's uncolonized nature because Stevens replaces emphasis in the powers of the soul with trust in a trial and error poetic process of discovering credible relationships with nature.

As with viewing a Cubist painting by early Duchamp or Braque (one of Stevens's favorite painters), a reader pieces together for him or herself an understanding of one's relationship to American nature in general and the Key West of this poem in particular. Other poems in *Ideas of Order* also seem to ask the reader to make sense of a nature that is separate from culture. For example, the narrator of "Restatement of Romance" undoes the romanticist's relationship to nature and, based on this resulting separation of nature and mind into discrete parts, forms a new basis for romantic relationships. Now, separation and alienation from one another may be the basis of relationships. Separation from nature becomes a positive thing when seen against the vanishing point of death where "two parallels become one" (508). Ideas and thoughts of death unite the self with nature:

The night knows nothing of the chants of night.

It is what it is as I am what I am:

And in perceiving this I best perceive myself

And you... (146)

Death, however, is not romanticized here as a source of beckoning music. Through the inexorable limit that death poses, it is something against which the constructive capacities of the intellect can struggle in order to form new cultural relationships and habits with the modern landscape. In this way, the center of activity is not beyond the world but in the world, and in Stevens, the American world.

In *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order* Stevens tends to mention quintessential American characters such as General Jackson, who Stevens has posing for a statue (which to this day stands before the U.S. Capitol)⁸, and Uncle Remus is directly mentioned in at least two poems from *Harmonium*, “Ploughing on Sunday” and “Some Friends from Pascagoula,” and indirectly elsewhere.

These poems referencing southern folk lore and myth indirectly feature the *hidalgo* as an ideal but unreachable form of the relationship modern Americans can have with their land. After the failure of his long poem of *Owl's Clover*⁹ in its labored attempt to establish a modernist national poem that might create a new form of the *hidalgo*, he writes the more fully realized poems in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. In the title poem of that book, the aristocratic *hidalgo* or the Comedian at the Letter C has been replaced by a Spanish immigrant to one of the northern industrial centers instead of to tropical Florida. Out of the “sounds that are false,” the speaker in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” will “evolve a man” out of this immigrant whose essence is that

⁸ “General Jackson” occurs directly in “The American Sublime” where he poses for a sculptor (*CP* 130). “Andrew Jackson Something” occurs in “The Lack of Repose” (*CP* 303). See <<http://www.preservationnation.org/travel-and-sites/sites/southern-region/decatour-house/andrew-jackson-statue.html>> for information on Jackson’s statue in the center of Lafayette Square in Washington D.C.

⁹ For more on the failure of “Owl’s Clover” see *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 253.

of a puppet (“fantoche”) “like something on the stage, puffed out,” but he is a puppet whose stage is a polluted city:

...heavy cables, slung
Through Oxidia, banal suburb,
One half of its installments paid.
Dew-dapper clapper-traps, blazing
From crusty stacks above machines.
Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,
Oxidia is the soot of fire,
Oxidia is Olympia. (*CP* 181-82)

The speaker of this poem still has the *hidalgo*, a Spanish character of the imagination, in mind, but he is an immigrant put in an environment foreign to him. His real world and its particularities recede. “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the hero, *hidalgo*, or “man number one” (166) is replaced by guitar-playing everyman serenading the entire world in order to create his or her own identity in a chaotic, mythless world. In the exercise of the imagination, the modern *hidalgo* can recreate ties to the world by playing with the meanings and identities of everyday objects. In doing so, they create a temporary break with the definitions and meanings of the past and begin to see the world from eye-level rather than through the eyes of an elevated central authority. The poem following this one, “The Men that Are Falling,” was inspired by news of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.¹⁰ That poem laments that the *hidalgo* must die for the political and

¹⁰ Alan Filreis makes a convincing case that Stevens has been grossly misread and skewered as a conservative poet whose poems are solely autotelic objects d’art that have nothing to do with current events in Stevens’s time. This poem, “The Men that are Falling,” for instance won a prize given by the leftist *Nation* magazine for best poem about

ideological causes that are imposed on them by “demagogues and pay-men!” (188). The common-person hidalgos of this poem die in the war because they “loved earth, not heaven, enough to die” (188). This poem and the other two poems in the book with the “The Man with the Blue Guitar” explore the hidalgo as modern man in the abstract. It is also here that Stevens begins to construct the device of the “giant of the weather” as positive persona that enlarges the modernist hidalgo into a humanist spirit of the earth, an ideal that is larger than the mortal individual, yet is not supposed to be a divine incarnation. The constructed fiction of the hidalgo is also a discovered (though provisional) pattern that connects individual with the world in a general way.

The hidalgo mentioned in the third poem in *The Man with a Blue Guitar*, “A Thought Revolved,” represents the yearned for poetic figure of a culture and a poet in that culture who needs such a figure as the hidalgo to lead them out of exile, but this leader personifies just one phase of thought, not a permanent hero.

Hidalgo as Mental Process

“A Thought Revolved” has four sections, each corresponding to possible approaches to exile; its first section “The Mechanical Optimist” begins with a portrait of a dying diabetic woman in an American tenement who forms her “floweriest barge” out of the Christmas poem, “The Night before Christmas” and “lesser dithyrambs” she hears on a radio program. Her approaching death acts as the catalyst for her to focus her mind on exactly what kind of earthly ideal she will have as her solace in her dying days.

The ampersand in the title of the section of “A Thought Revolved” second section in “A Thought Revolved,” “Mystic Garden & Middling Beast” resembles the sign of a dry goods store

the Spanish Civil war. See Filreis. *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties & Literary Radicalism*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 31.

or a lawyer's firm on the city street to which the poem's poet would have accustomed himself. He forms an ideal that transcends the quotidian of his environment which is composed of "cigar stores, / Ryan's lunch, Hatters, insurance and medicines" (CP 185). As a middle class man in an middle class environment, he focuses on the idea of a hero of the classical type from epics such as Dante's *Inferno* ("these are his infernal walls"), Virgil's *Aeneid* ("and Speech of Virgil dropped"), or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but middling man's heroic songs are

Happy rather than holy but happy-high,
Day hymns instead of the struggle of the idea of constellated rhymes,
Hymns of the struggle of the idea of god
And the idea of man, the mystic garden and
The middling beast, the garden paradise
And he that created the garden and peopled it. (185)

In this modern "era of the idea of man" the "he" of the last line is not God, but the poet "striding among the cigar stores." He constructs a happy paradise for conducting commerce in a "happy-high" manner tinged with the "struggle" of the idea of "god," heroically in the course of daily life.

The third poem in "A Thought Revolved," "Romanesque Affabulation," considers the construction of the ideal heroic person by someone more cosmopolitan. Here the ideal will be imagined by "he that at midnight touches the guitar, / the solitude, the barrier, the Pole in Paris, celui qui chante et pleure." And unlike the "middling beast" of the previous section, he constructs his ideal for the suffering soldiers,

....whose heaven is in themselves,
Or else whose hell, foamed with their blood

And the long echo of their dying cry,
A fate intoned, a death before they die,
The race that sings and weeps and knows not why. (186).

The poet seeks the ideal of the “earthly leader” for these dying men so that they will know why they sing and weep.

The poem’s last section, “The Leader,” identifies the “earthly leader” of the previous poem as

...the moralist Hidalgo
Whose whore is Morning Star
Dressed in metal, silk and stone,
Syringa, cicada, his flea. (186)

In his ambivalent identification of the earth with the unapproachable wantonness of the well-dressed “Morning Star,” the Hidalgo’s approach to the land is similar to Stevens’s ambivalent attitude to Spanish Florida, which is also framed as lascivious, dangerous, and best kept at a distance. This leader has become a severe ascetic scholar whose “knowledge drops” “poison” “upon his heart” (186). His extraterrestrial idealism in stars does not suggest Platonism; the star represents earthly sensuality. Sixteen years earlier, Stevens’s had written a poem “Homunculus et la Belle Etoile” about a similar star that charms “drunkards, poets, widows” and philosophers alike:

How pleasant an existence it is
That this emerald [the star seen above Biscayne, Florida] charms philosophers,
Until they become thoughtlessly willing...[become sensualists]
It might well be that their mistress
Is no gaunt fugitive phantom.

She might, after all be a wanton,
Abundantly beautiful, eager,
Fecund
From whose being in starlight, on sea coast,
The innermost good of their seeking
Might come in the simplest of speech.
It is a good light, then, for those
That know the ultimate Plato... (*CP* 26-27)

In the last section of “The Thought Revolved,” the ultimate Plato is similarly acknowledged as a counterpoint to the “whore morning star.” In the earlier poem, Stevens derides metaphysics and systematic philosophy. In the later poem, Stevens’s modernist hidalgo knows that thoughts revolve, and that the star of earth’s sensuality contained and subdued through noble fictions (she is dressed like the priestess muse in *Harmonium’s* “To the One of Fictive Music”) becomes something understandable, a single exotic *Syringa* flower and a “flea.” This modernist hidalgo does not have his plantation: he and his abstractions cut off from the earth are always the “flaw in the solar morn” (187).

Such heart-felt affirmations of the “moralist hidalgo’s” spiritual poverty contrasts with the ideals from the poem’s earlier sections: the floweriest barge floating like Santa Claus’s sleigh among the Alps, the solipsistic middle class in their happy earthly Eden, and the romantic heroism of the third section. The moralist hidalgo of the fourth section is a human figure who incorporates negativity into himself as an essential element of his total being. Thus, the poem leaves the reader with the image of the hidalgo as an ascetic nourished on hardship before his ideal of the sunlit world:

He sat among beggars wet with dew,
Heard the dogs howl at barren bone,
Sat alone, his great toe like a horn,

The central flaw in the solar morn. (187)

His “whore morning star” does not seem to represent the Platonic ideal, but rather the recognition that nature’s ideal is the sensual abyss that leads to dissolution at the same time that it is the source of wisdom and beauty. And in the above lines, his separation from and partial rejection of that abyss appears to be the source of his spiritual poverty that nevertheless gives rise to the noble desire for the earth (the world of the solar morn) as his real home.

The poem “A Thought Revolved” does not appear to show how an ideal evolves; Stevens sees gaudiness as a revolving, central part of what poetry is. The dying woman’s Christmas carols in the snow-capped Alps are as poetic as the poetry of the ascetic half of the hidalgo, who reads from “severe a book.../ until his nose grew thin and taut / and knowledge dropped from his heart.” The poetry of the dying woman and her sugary death and corresponding sugary ideal revolves to become the ascetic life and the ascetic ideal of knowledge of stark dry reality. The woman as epicure and the hidalgo as ascetic both have death as a central aspect of their worldliness. The epicure says live well because death comes, and the ascetic says live nobly because death comes.

A question that arises may be, how does the narrator of this poem become reconciled to the particular place and the idea of home with such a revolving personal approach to the world? If poetry does not provide the narrator the authority to claim Manhattan, Connecticut or Spain as home, then she can only draw upon her own observations of her own human tendencies, epicurean and ascetic. She can see how her thoughts revolve in her own mind and in good faith

believe that these categories are broad enough to be relevant to human nature in general. Thus, a thought revolves, first one becomes epicure and then one becomes an ascetic: she does not settle on one or the other; rather she accepts a process of both/and.

Combinations of unlike elements such as the “lesser dithyrambs” and the “severe ... book” in a single thought or concept characterizes one of Stevens’s contributions to poetry. Like a symbolist poet, he allows the reader to experience rather than deduce correspondences in a poem, and like a high modernist poet, he allows the reader to experience the way the mind works in constructing reality in a poem. Stevens’s poetry offers the reader a view of how he or she imagines ideals (which are embedded in one’s interpretations) and worldviews. As in “Ideas of Order at Key West,” Stevens allows us to watch ourselves think and form thoughts. He accomplishes this by presenting thoughts as part of a never-ending process.

Hidalgo as Composite Figure

Janet McCann (among others¹¹) has concludes that *Parts of a World* (1942) celebrates action and movement in the mind as the only permanence, just as Stevens’s 1923 book *Harmonium* celebrated style as substance (61). Thus, in “A Thought Revolved,” from *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, Stevens depicts how the mind alternates between the epicurean mode and the ascetic mode. In *Parts of a World*, Stevens features several poems that combine the two in a single figure, “The Floribund Ascetic” or the freely blossoming ascetic (241). Poems such as “The Well Dressed man with a Beard” expresses how “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never,” (CP 247) even as the poem overall shows that thinking really comes to nothing until one can consider the act of thinking as something. The most well known lines from *Parts of a World*, “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (239) indicate that thinking is an

¹¹ See A. W. Litz. (*Wallace Stevens’s Defense of Poetry: La Poesie Pure, the New Romantic, and the Pressure of Reality*. Pittsburgh PA: Pittsburgh UP, 1977) 111-132.

object encapsulating an observable action, and as such is best expressed as a poem, which is, then, the discovery of carefully chosen language conscious of itself as language. The poem thereby becomes action and action understood as such becomes substance, analogous to a bracketed conception (in a phenomenological sense) of constantly changing natural processes such as the wind and the weather. The “floribund ascetic” evokes the new world figure of a possible poet, who, like the old world hidalgo, can conceive of the mind in league with the world; the figure’s poems resemble both natural objects, floribunda, and unnatural objects cut-off from change—such as those that the “Well-dressed man a Beard” attempts when he tries to stop his heart and mind from desiring.

Several years after Stevens writes the line, “An anti-master man, Floribund ascetic” (241), Stevens responds to his Irish friend Thomas McGreevy’s questions about Charles Baudelaire’s influences:

Very likely what I am thinking of is that the ascetic is negative and the humanistic affirmative, and that they face in two different ways, which would bring them together ultimately at the other side of the world, face to face. Gandhi, alack, has always bored me. ...Gandhi, however, is without all this Baudelaire. He is as yet a creature of the Associated Press. To be consistent I should ignore Buddha and Jesus and try to preserve the dazzling purity of this contemporary figure and to understand that although he lacks mythological perspective and rhetorical perspective, he lives a truly living life in the minds and hearts of millions of people whose principle fault is that they are so far away. Yet that is an extremely serious fault for me, and I could argue the point if the vessel was not about to sail or the plane to fly. I am, after all, more moved by the first sounds of the birds on

my street than by the death of a thousand penguins of Antarctica. (L 632, my italics)

Beyond confirming that Stevens thinks of the ascetic and the epicure as one figure, this excerpt shows that Stevens's principle concern was the local intersect of bird sounds in his immediate vicinity. Any compromise figure that retains both the worldly and the world-renouncer would not suffice him if the figure remained divorced from particular sounds—the sounds of local birds—heard in his present time. In the above letter, he expresses a desire for the particular local place and not just the concept of earth as home. As the above discussions of Stevens's poems have intimated, a sense of exile always accompanies life on earth, even in hearing bird songs on one's own street—mainly because the particular thing, place, or woman¹² is always unreachable by the mind since as concept-creating faculty, the reality of a particular will always evade it. Stevens demonstrates in his poetry the conviction that the poet can achieve the illusion of overcoming the divide between language and object, or even the illusion of arriving at some compromise that allows for observance of the freedom of the mind in directly experiencing the earth, illusions realized in “Credences of Summer” and in the latter sections of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.”¹³

However, many of Stevens's earlier cold poems (“The Snow Man,” “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Bird”) already convey a bleak regard at the prospect of attaining an illusory sense of the particular while retaining any trace of individuality. To accomplish this union of a subjective mind with an objective particle, Stevens's Snow Man would need to retain a particular

¹² He lived somewhat estranged from his own wife who did not appreciate his poetry or a good part of his sensual, social, or intellectual life. It is emblematic of their relationship that her profile is the model for the Liberty Dime and that Stevens said “Money is a kind of Poetry” (OP 191). See Richardson, Joan. *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years 1879-1923*. (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986) 84.

¹³ See Joseph Riddell for a full discussion of a shift from faith in the power of the mind to a loss of such faith (64-5).

part of himself while still becoming part of the winter scene before him. Stevens does posit the possibility for that type of union in the Snow Man's closing lines, "nothing that is not there and *the nothing* that is." But such somethingness does not really satisfy the demands of the social person that Stevens halfway aimed to be, because the implication that nothingness is a substance makes sense only to a snow-man-like person that has withdrawn from the company of others.

Other poems give only the Floribund side of the dichotomy, as if Stevens were trying to remedy what the Snow Man lacks in terms of romantic mastery of the world. Poems such as "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," and "What to do. How to Live." offer the romantic prospect of a man who thinks because he becomes one with his subjective self, he is one with the whole world:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (65)

The second time Stevens returns to this overt romantic oneness with the world, in the poem "What to do, How to Live" he undermines it with an ironic title that mocks the romantic epiphanies that follow:

Coldly the wind fell upon them
In many majesties of sound:
They that had left the flame-freaked sun
To seek a sun of fuller fire. (CP 125)

He mocks a Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind" or a Wordsworth on the lea in "The World is too Much With Us" because contrary to the title that makes the instructions on how to live sound easy and routine, no one can live as heroically and intensely as those two poets seem to advise the common person to do. "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" promises a union with the earth, and the

poem in “How to live. What to do.” almost gives one reason again in the anti-romantic modernist era to adopt the romantic theory of union with nature, but one has to contend with nagging doubts.

The cold poems and the warm, hopeful poems taken together underscore Stevens’s doubts of ever achieving that union in a modern era. Close to the time he wrote “How to Live. What to do.” he writes the lines prescribing how the romantic can return in the modern era,

Mon Dieu, hear the poet’s prayer.

The romantic should be here.

The romantic should be there.

The romantic should be everywhere.

But the romantic must never remain... (*CP* 120)

The romantic must only be experienced long enough to experience “the slight transcendence to the dirty sail” (*CP* 121). The dirty sail in this poem, “Sailing after Lunch,” however, is a sign of the materialist, anti-romantic modern era, when the possibilities for romantic poetry are at a low point in the cycles of history. Ironically, Stevens would have concurred with Yvor Winters’ opinion that Stevens never regains the affirmative poetic stance that he presented in “Sunday Morning” (246-49).

Hidalgo’s City Built in Snow

After “Sunday Morning,” Stevens’s poetic is often based on loss and regret. Anything affirmative comes out of the sense of failure of ever having created a poetry that captures the particular. “Sunday Morning” ends in elegy:

And, in the isolation of the sky,

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make

Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (*CP* 70)

The poem begins with the languor of a post-Christian American woman in her peignoir enjoying tea, oranges and meditation on a Sunday morning. Later poems begin with elegy. In the first stanza of Stevens's longest poem in *Ideas of Order* "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," Stevens rejects "Walt Whitman" and his "Union of the weakest" who "develop strength / Not wisdom." Stevens asks,

...Can all men, together, avenge
One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?
But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow. (*CP* 158)

Stevens does not appear to want to be the national poet, writing the great unifying national poem. His only affirmations come in the form of deceptions, or surrealist poetic experiments that reveal ways in which the word and material particle meet. The fact that he wanted to set up a chair for the study of poetry at Princeton in order to arrive at concrete knowledge of the "import of the spirit" indicates that he believed that this meeting could be achieved:

What is intended [in creating a poetry chair] is to study the theory of poetry in relation to what poetry has been and to what it ought to be. Its literature is a part of it and only a part of it. For this purpose, poetry means not the language of poetry but the thing itself, wherever it may be found. It does mean verse anymore than philosophy means prose. ... It is the aspects of the world and of men and women that have been added to them by poetry. These aspects are difficult to recognize

and to measure. ..The knowledge of poetry is a part of philosophy and a part of science; the import of poetry is the import of the spirit.¹⁴(*L* 377-78)

This memorandum suggests that he considered poetry, like science and philosophy, an experimental process that would lead to greater knowledge.

To that end, the notes of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” are not complete. His emphasis on process marks an American modernist’s shift from the grand heroic paeans to Lincoln to the poem for the Chaplinesque¹⁵ heroes (like the “Bantams in Pine Woods”), who have to find a reason to fight and possibly die for a purpose that they may not understand.

Accordingly, Stevens never tries too much to sustain an argument in a long poem. This is especially true of the books and poems he wrote after *Harmonium*, which he originally wanted to title *The Whole of Harmonium*. He breaks his great poem of the earth into smaller parts of the great poem. His longer poems comprise smaller poems linked together under common themes such as parts of a world, ideas of order, notes toward a supreme fiction, or auroras of autumn, songs on a blue guitar, decorations at an African-American cemetery. But unlike the fifty-two poems comprising Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” Stevens’s poems do not correspond to a whole in any obvious way. He sees his task as a poet to keep the romantic alive in the U.S. during the modern era. When asked why he did not go to Paris to live like many other American poets and novelists (also internal exiles), he replied, “My job is not now with those poets from Paris. It is to keep the fire-place burning” (*Secretaries of the Moon* 20). Stevens does not accept, as his later critics Joseph Riddel and Paul Bové maintain, a referentially centerless poetry with language as an end or a beginning; he really wanted the great poem that corresponds with the earth in such a

¹⁴ Here in this letter Stevens groups together spirit and science. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of how the spirit and science relate to one another.

¹⁵ In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” the speaker counsels the “ephebe” that he should “confect” his “major man” out of “the man / In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons” (*CP* 389).

way that it leads to cultural unity as great poems of past eras might have.¹⁶ But he realizes that he cannot will this to happen and that his project begins with acknowledgement of the spiritual poverty of the time that he lives: “The wise man avenges by building his city in snow” (158).

Modernist Myth

The provisional fictions forwarded through the thirty-one poems of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” act as contingency particles, free-floating within his poem. Stevens’s postulated ideal reader (the lowercase “ephebe”), however, can make a random world cohere in the private theatre of his or her imagination. By the end of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” this ideal reader also knows that “This complex falls apart” (377). Stevens forwards an argument, contradicts it and begins again. The poem trails off into the future.

Valedictory tones always coexist with intimations of new beginnings across Stevens’s poetic career. In “Our Stars Come from Ireland” and particularly the section from that poem “The Westwardness of Everything,” written six years before his death in 1955, Stevens acknowledges exile and failure of having established a home and a poetry to go with that home, but there is also the suggestion of a continuing process that is itself an end. Like Thoreau in his essay “Walking” and Whitman in his prose book *Democratic Vistas*, Stevens has not found the particular home on the eastern seaboard where he lives. Moreover, he cannot make a continuum between the sensual south and the severe north a replacement for the founding of an actual home: “It is the earth itself that is humanity... / He is the inhuman son and she, / She is the fateful mother, whom he does not know” (454). Stevens’s “Westwardness of Everything,” unlike in Thoreau or Whitman, is

¹⁶ See Paul A Bové. *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1980). According to Bové, Stevens tests telos-oriented quest metaphors in various myths and metaphors. Stevens knows from the outset of his career as a poet that there is no metaphysical or physical center and, consequently, knows that all is fiction. Conversely, Riddel concludes that Stevens does not know this at the outset; only later in his poetic career is he able to disown the myth of presence (269-78).

not the promise of an actual pure breed of unaffected, genuine American, in, say, Alaska or Fargo, but the promise that just as every day begins in the east and ends in the west, so too is the process of discovering transparencies between the mind and matter a never-ending process: the process of finding a home in nature is the goal and is the home. In “Westwardness of Everything” the fictions of a new home that come to America from the old world are reduced to particles like “beautiful and abandoned refugees” (455). The fictions of home traveling westward from Ireland are

Themselves an issue as at an end, as if
There was an end at which in a final change,
When the whole habit of the mind was changed,
The ocean breathed out morning in one breath. (455)

The hidalgo’s fictions of particular homes become a universalizing “one breath” in the Americas, modernity’s true home.

The Exile’s Home

The problem with particulars in Stevens’s map-territory divide is that knowledge of the historically situated territory must be more than subatomic particles and exigencies of being. After Stevens discovers that the place exists and then decreates that experience, it appears that he has to confront the problem of how to reinsert human life with history into that place. His poems in *The Rock* suggest that he does not opt for a rudderless humanism as a basis for the “marriage place” between human and land. In light of his 1955 conversion to Catholicism, it can credibly be assumed that his last necessary angel of the earth was God.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“On The Road Home”

They said, “You have a blue guitar.

You do not play things as they are.”

The man replied, “Things as they are

Are changed upon the blue guitar.”

--Wallace Stevens, “The Man With the Blue Guitar”

It was when I said,

“There is no such thing as truth,”

That the grapes seemed fatter.

The fox ran out of the hole.

--Wallace Stevens, “On the Road Home”

Much of Stevens’s poetry is not about a metaphorical return to the garden but about laying bare the perceptual apparatus that would enable readers of his poetry to construct the world out of the shards of the broken bits of old perceptions of the same garden. Poetry about poetry is poetry about perception of the world. What is at stake is the world itself, for the discovery of perception is simultaneously the discovery of the world. There is little unusual about the claim that poetry’s role is cleansing the lenses of perception to make the world fresh again. There is, however, something uncanny in the claim that we do not even know that the world exists. While philosophical discussions on this problem might center on Bishop Berkeley’s

thought on this question, Stevens's modernist poetic experiments demonstrate on the page the idea that our constructions of the world may not be one and the same with the actual world.

Stevens's discovery of the actual outside as surreal object means many things for the role of poetry in a reader's spiritual and intellectual life. First, it means that the world is discoverable through poetry. There is something worth knowing right before our eyes, and, remarkably, after orderly perception has been upset, these objects seem to exist independently of perception, *as if* on their own. Second, it means then that if the object exists in human terms and in human perception, that the world as other might become mythological again. Necessity in such a world would not be Freud's outer reality as described by science. Natural necessity harmonizes with human necessity, which is the accomplishment of Breton's surrealist "miracle": "the reconciliation of these two necessities [natural necessity and human necessity, or *logical* necessity] has always seemed to me to be the only miracle within the reach of any human, the only chance of escaping now and then the meanness of the human condition" (*Mad Love* 119). In terms of Stevens's poetry, this miracle occurs when pragmatic expediency (human necessity) merges with the supernatural fate of, for example, an ancient Greek tragedy such as *Oedipus Rex*. In such times when the two are reconciled, we live in a theatre of possibility in which human understanding of reality informs the identity of the fiction's dramatic personae. They act freely within the bounds of a fiction that corresponds to the changing understanding of the laws of reality.

Finally, the discovery of an actual world in a world of contingency may suggest moral lessons not unlike those associated with contemporary deep ecology. An ecologically-minded reader might assume that Stevens's brand of romanticism brings to the fore such ideas as the rights of the inhabitants of the natural world. For Stevens's part, the moral lesson seems not

to be that divine or personal retribution may visit down for the hubris of a character who disregards reality. Rather, for Stevens, the penalty for being out of touch with the territory is being out of touch. A solipsism born out of an unexamined connection between culture and territory results in a spiritual poverty of the kind some readers may associate with the “lost generation.” Such spiritual poverty or solipsism occurs in the case of the followers of what Stevens terms a “lunatic of one idea”(CP 325)—a fanatic who adheres too closely and literally to a theory such as Marxism or any philosophy, political, economic, or scientific, still adhered to when its permutations have passed it by. Stevens’s mockeries of such followers in “The Dance of the Macabre Mice” and his humorous portrayal of the speaker in “Anecdote of the Jar” do not amount to a finger-wagging warning. Rather, these people and their cultural solipsism are a source for Stevens’s black humor. Reality, ecologically and spiritually understood, will be the arbiter of punishment and rewards. Put in the terms of Gregory Bateson’s ecological homily, if a species of caterpillar eats all of its leaves, it eats itself in the process and the result is that species of caterpillar does not survive.¹ To use one of Bateson’s literary examples, the answer to the riddle of the sphinx, the definition of humanity, is something that must continually be redefined and acted upon in order to maintain an imaginative connection to the earth and outer reality.

However that definition may be redefined, Stevens suggests that tragic exile is an ineluctable aspect of the definition. If the elements of Stevens’s poetry support the ideas of tragedy in ecological terms—Hubris (a culture’s neglect of the problem of the map-territory divide), Nemesis (the consequences of metaphorical blindness) and Ananke (the understanding

¹ See Peter Harries-Jones, *A Recursive Vision: Ecological Understanding and Gregory Bateson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 78.

of the rules of that territory and not just the culture's rules)²—then tragic loss of one's home in the territory, too, is inevitable. A reader may have glimpses of the territory secondarily in the abstract experience of Stevens's "first idea," but tragic loss and exile will be a central and inevitable part of the modernist theatre experience that Stevens proposes through poetic fiction. Poetry reflects reality as defined by art, philosophies, and science, but for Stevens, poetry on a subjective level reflects the tragic predicament of being an internal exile, the experience of geographic exile in the land of one's birth. Sometimes, for Stevens, exile is fraught with the exhilarating adventures open to a "Nomad Exquisite" and a "mountain-minded Hoon" (65), but other times exile simply means accepting homelessness and the struggles of trying to construct a home in a spiritual void.

In the New World, a place that seems to resist psychological colonization—that process whereby internal exile is overcome—to attempt a solution is to construct a home in the imagination, on an abstract plane beyond the bodily experience of "the marriage place." Stevens's later poetry of *The Rock* implies that constructing a home in language entails advancing ideas of God as a proxy way to understand the experience of being in the world.

Below, Stevens demonstrates the idea of God in the abstract in his syllogism for the equation of God with the imagination. He indicates that his proof for the idea of God linking the imagination to the thing is an expedient device to connect the imagination with reality:

Proposita:

1. God and the imagination are one.
2. The thing imagined is the imaginer.

² This anatomy of tragedy comes from Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 224.

The second equals the thing imagined and the imaginer are one. Hence, I suppose,
the imaginer is God. (*OP* 202)

In his 1954 poem “The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” the same proposition for the proof of God is rendered abstract by making the language loop back on itself so that it signals to a reader that the idea of God is language and mind, not territory:

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.

We say God and the Imagination are one...

How high that highest candle lights the dark,

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,

We make a dwelling in the evening air,

In which being there together is enough. (*CP* 524)

With such a necessary angel of the earth, Stevens’s “marriage place” becomes possible even in a state of internal exile.

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