THE DISFIGURED MUSE: SUPREME READERS
IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Michael B. Hobbs, B.A., M.A.
Denton, Texas
August, 1993
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In "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin tells us that "Every discourse presupposes a special conception of the listener, of his apperceptive background and the degree of his responsiveness." My study of Wallace Stevens's poetry examines Stevens's "conception of the listener"—in the form of his intratextual readers, their responsiveness, and the shapes that responsiveness takes—and attempts to formulate out of that examination Stevens's theory of reading embodied in his canon of poems.

Stevens depicts readers whose answering voices provide the responses in what I call antiphonies of evasion. Through their imaginative elusiveness, these supreme readers repair the damaged, disfigured terrains that they encounter in Stevens's poems. They "misread" their texts, a response which recalls Harold Bloom's theory of misprision: "Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem." Bloom carefully traces Stevens's intricate rewriting of his precursors, but Bloom's unwavering focus on Stevens's evasive readings of past poets prevents him from exploring
how Stevens's strategies of misprision affect his characterizations of his ideal readers.

The antiphonies of evasion between Stevens's poet and his supreme reader reach a moment of crisis in "The Auroras of Autumn." "Auroras" depicts the unceasing and strenuous struggle of the reader's and the poet's powerful imaginations, each wrestling elusively to liberate itself from liminal intercourse with the other. More and more, the disfiguring poet's and supreme reader's evasions veer away from each other instead of jointly evading, as in "Esthetique du Mal," conventional modes of figuration.

"An Ordinary Evening" attempts to restore an equilibrium (an evening) between supreme reader and disfiguring poet and achieves moments of precarious poise that suggest a new haven or refiguration of the city's disfigured terrain, one that provides a commonplace view of earth to replace the obsolete transcendent vision of heaven.

Stevens's intratextual readers are, of course, fictions. But their virtuosity exists as a potent virtuality, a hope for unsponsored humanity that makes up a part of Stevens's "mythology of modern death."
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That Wallace Stevens was born in a town named Reading must have amused the poet for whom the act of reading became a major concern in his poetry. As Stevens's letters and notebooks show, reading was an important activity from early in his life. In a July 1941 letter to Hi Simons, Stevens claimed that during his childhood "At home, our house was rather a curious place, with all of us in different parts of it, reading" (L 391). And in Souvenirs and Prophecies, Holly Stevens quotes her father as saying "We were all great readers, and the old man [Stevens's father] used to delight in retiring to the room called the library on a Sunday afternoon to read a five- or six-hundred page novel" (SP 8). Stevens's own omnivorous appetite for books continued throughout his life, but his obsession with reading goes far beyond the mere consumption of the written word. The reader and the act of reading become integral components in Stevens's process of creativity, as Robert DeMaria suggests:

[Stevens] speaks of the reader's response as an "answer" rather than as an only apparently animate echo. A high degree of activity on the part of the reader was one of Stevens's assumptions.
throughout his life as a writer. Sounding remarkably contemporary, in 1948, Stevens wrote, "Nowadays it is commonplace to speak of the role of the writer in the world of today. But why not think and speak of the role of the reader in the world of today . . . the role of the reader of my poetry, say." (246)

Stevens, of course, does speak repeatedly of "the role of the reader" throughout his poetry. Readers and reading comprise an important aspect of Stevens's aesthetic, an aspect which has, up to this point, seen a rather scant treatment in the criticism.

In "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin tells us that "Every discourse presupposes a special conception of the listener, of his apperceptive background and the degree of his responsiveness; it presupposes a specific distance" (346). My intention in this study is to examine Stevens's "conception of the listener"--in the form of his intratextual readers, their responsiveness, and the shapes that responsiveness takes--and to formulate out of that examination Stevens's theory of reading that is embodied in his canon of poems.

As B. J. Leggett points out in his important study Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory, "In the end, one of the poet's obligations . . . is to cultivate readers whose
gibberish matches his own, whose contemplative 'ignorance' before the work of art allows them to accept the irrationality of the aesthetic emotion" (96). Leggett is referring specifically to Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, but Stevens's attempt to create a readership for his poetry pervades all the major long poems and many of the short lyrics as well.

Whether Stevens thought it possible to fashion the readership he desired is impossible to say, but his major poems offer notes toward a supreme reader.⁵ In a letter to Hi Simons in January of 1940, Stevens attempts to explain poetry and the interpretation of poetry in a short parable:

[I]t is not the simplest thing in the world to explain a poem. I thought of it this way this morning: a poem is like a man walking on the bank of a river, whose shadow is reflected in the water. If you explain a poem, you are quite likely to do it either in terms of the man or in terms of the shadow, but you have to explain it in terms of the whole. When I said recently that a poem was what was on a page, it seems to me now that I was wrong because that is explaining in terms of the man. But the thing and its double always go together. (L 354)
Who is the reader, who the poet, and where is the text that is written and to be read in this profound little sketch? The shadow here is unusually elusive since it is reflected in the flow of the river and yet it responds to the motions of the man. In some sense, such a response is what Stevens demands of his imagined reader, but the reader's motion must be more than a mere mimicking of the poet's gestures. Stevens' supreme reader must ultimately shoulder the responsibility of supplying the poet, in a secular and scientific age, with the inspiration for his writing.

In August 1935, Stevens wrote a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, who had just recently published *Ideas of Order*, asking if Latimer would allow Knopf to publish a second edition of his book. In the letter, he assures Latimer that he will allow enough time for him to "dispose of [his] edition" before proceeding and then adds that "The reviews of the book will not be appearing at the earliest for possibly a month to come. Besides, selling poetry now-a-days must be very much like selling lemonade to a crowd of drunks" (L 284). This rather barbed comment suggests how Stevens felt about the potential audience for his poetry, and captures the exasperation that many early twentieth century American poets experienced regarding the reception of their work.
Yet opposite this apparent hostility stands Stevens's claim, in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," that the poet's function "is to make his imagination [the readers']." He goes on to say that the poet "fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (NA 29). Indeed, readers themselves provide the poet with a necessary element of his own project since they "receive his poetry" (NA 30). But these readers are, Stevens admits unabashedly, members of a rather exclusive group.

Stevens chose to view his audience as an elite corps, and he believed that all poets writing during his time addressed themselves to this corps: "There is not a poet whom we prize living today that does not address himself to an elite" (NA 29). He goes on to say that such an elite if it responds, not out of complaisance, but because the poet has quickened it, because he has educed from it that for which it was searching in itself and in the life around it and which it had not yet quite found, will thereafter do for the poet what he cannot do for himself, that is to say, receive his poetry. (NA 29-30, emphasis added)

Beyond these prose statements about the reader, Stevens characterizes, in a great many of his poems, readers whose
minds respond to the fire of the poet's imagination. But the characterized reception of his poetry suggests that, for Stevens, there were few if any right readers and far too many lemonade-spurning drunks. Stevens's characterized, right reader resides among a very high elite, and this study is at least in part an examination of how Stevens imagined his reception by such an elite readership would take place, and what shape that reception would come to hold.

My major focus is upon three of Stevens's long poems: "Esthetique du Mal," "The Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Stevens's magnum opus, Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, must wait for another study since it is beyond the scope of this discussion. I devote chapter two to a preliminary examination of intratextual readers in a number of Stevens's short poems, and then discuss the long poems in chapters three through ten. Finally I conclude with a chapter on selections from The Rock ("An Old Man Asleep," "Madame La Fleurie," "The World As Meditation," and "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"), poems in which Stevens's intratextual readers become perhaps more enigmatic than anywhere else in his oeuvre.

It is certainly not my intention here to prove a correlation between Stevens's imagined reader and his actual or real readers, whatever such terms might mean. But there
are interesting ramifications for contemporary critical theory in what Stevens has to say about the act of reading. Ultimately Stevens's reader is beyond the realm of possibility; like his supreme fiction, his imagined reader is someone always to make notes toward, "The impossible possible philosopher's man" (CP 250), someone unattainable, but this turns out to be good. As B. J. Leggett says, "Because the great poem of the earth, the supreme fiction, always lies ahead, proper work remains for the new poet to perform" (55). And I must add, as I think Stevens would, that proper work remains as well for the new reader.
Notes

1 Joan Richardson makes note of this in the first volume of her biography:

[T]he written form of Reading named not only Stevens's home but also the activity that in the most profound sense shaped him. It was natural that reading would play a leading role in the household of two ex-schoolteachers especially because they both had depended so much on independent reading to establish themselves in their professions. Books were like additional family members. (43)

2 See also Holly Stevens's *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, p. 4. I shall use the following abbreviations when citing Stevens's works: The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (CP), Letters of Wallace Stevens (L), The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (NA), Opus Posthumous (OP), Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens (SP).

3 Because of this assumed "high degree of activity" as well as the shape which that activity takes, M. M. Bakhtin's conception of poetic language fails to adequately encompass Stevens's work. Bakhtin claims that
The language of the poetic genre is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed. The concept of many worlds of language, all equal in their ability to conceptualize and to be expressive, is organically denied to poetic style.

Stevens's aesthetic in fact fits more with Bakhtin's notion of a heteroglot prose in which "Discourse lives . . . on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (284). For additional discussion of Bakhtin's applicability to Stevens's poetry see M. Keith Booker's fine article "'A War Between the Mind and Sky': Bakhtin and Poetry, Stevens and Politics." Indeed Booker points out that an extended discussion of Bakhtinian dialogism in Stevens "might yield many exciting results" and that one method of procedure would be to examine "the way in which Stevens quite frequently constructs allegories of reading within his poems" (82). This is in fact the procedure which I have adopted here, although, curiously enough, most of this study was written before I came across Booker's article.

4 RayLene Corgiat Tapia, in her dissertation "A Perfection of Thought: Wallace Stevens and His Reader," discusses the various ways in which Stevens attempts to
shape the reader he desires through his poetry, but her approach is substantially different from mine. First of all, she devotes only a very brief section of the dissertation to Stevens's characterized readers for the purpose of showing how these impact the actual reader. In addition, she focuses solely on *The Auroras of Autumn*. Since I devote my entire study to Stevens's intratextual readers, my conclusions about them move beyond the scope of Tapia’s ideas about characterized readers.

5 Bakhtin would, in all likelihood, consider Stevens's poetry closed and monological, though he does allow that there are exceptions to the general rule that poetry is monological in nature, exceptions which "are especially widespread in periods of shift in literary poetic languages" (FN 287). Certainly Stevens's time was such a period. Nevertheless, critics such as Gerald L. Bruns, Majorie Perloff, and Mark Halliday argue that Stevens continuously holds himself aloof from "the alien utterances beyond the boundaries of the self-sufficient world" as Perloff puts it (61). But it is really not my main intent here to argue whether Stevens's poetry is monological or dialogical. What is apparent to me, and what I hope to make generally apparent with this study, is that Stevens conceives of an exchange with his readership that is in some sense dialogical. He not only allows for but, in fact, relies
upon the extraordinarily powerful alterity of his imagined readers.

6 In November of 1945, Stevens wrote to Henry Church that

Every now and then one comes across some really powerful character in an out of the way place. I mean a really powerful character who writes, or paints, or walks up and down and thinks, like some overwhelming animal in a corner of the zoo. Personally, I feel terribly in need of encountering some such character. . . . What is terribly lacking from life today is the well developed individual, the master of life, or the man who by his mere appearance convinces you that a mastery of life is possible. (L 518)

7 In "Stevens's Psychology of Reading," B. J. Leggett has this to say about Stevens's parable of interpretation:

The man seems to represent the printed poem, what is on the page, but it is unclear whether the reflection represents the poem's meaning or content, the poet's intention, the reader's response, or something even more elusive. (54)

8 Stevens's theories of reading engage most especially with Bakhtinian theories of discourse and dialogism.
CHAPTER 2

NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME READER

There is still
The impossible possible philosophers' man,
The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

"Asides On the Oboe"

My discussion of Stevens's intratextual readers begins
with the shorter "reader poems," as Alan Perlis calls them
in "Wallace Stevens's Reader Poems and the Effacement of
Metaphor."¹ Perlis points out that "In a sizable number of
his poems, [Stevens] posits readers reading, and sometimes
reading the 'text of the world' that his own poems depict"
(67). Stevens's intratextual readers first appear in the
short lyrics of Harmonium, in such poems as "The Ordinary
Women" (CP 10-11) and "Of the Surface of Things" (CP 57).²
The women of "The Ordinary Women," who listen to serenaders
outside their palace windows, are said to "read of marriage-
bed. / Ti-lill-o! / And they read right long." Their
reading lifts them out of their spiritually impoverished
conditions--"Then from their poverty they rose"--even though
they return to catarrhs from "dry guitars" at the end of the
poem. For their serenaders, the ordinary women represent
earthly muses, diminished but still capable of inspiring
"Insinuations of desire, / Puissant speech, alike in each."

The exchange between the serenaders and the ordinary
women is mutually pleasing though hardly mutually
communicative. The serenaders' singing—-a mumbling of "zay-
zyzay and a-zay, a-zay"--is sleight-of-hand, trickery similar
to that of the moon whose light "fubbed the girandoles."
Their performance is seductive, meant to entice the women
down from their window-bays. But the women "lean" out from
the window-sills to read marriage-bed where the singers'
"insinuations of desire" press for lusty rendezvous. The
interaction is mutually elusive and for that very reason a
minor success:

And there they read of marriage-bed.
Ti-lill-o!
And they read right long.

The gaunt guitarists on the strings
Rumbled a-day and a-day, a-day.
The moonlight
Rose on the beachy floors.

How explicit the coiffures became,
The diamond point, the sapphire point,
The sequins
Of the civil fans! (CP 11)

This early example of ritual evasiveness between reader and
poet, rituals which I shall refer to as Stevens's
antiphonies of evasion, helps the ordinary women liberate
themselves from their impoverishment, but they do not
transcend their circumstances. Instead, at the end of the
poem they return to their catarrhs, to their mortal conditions of existence, just as the "gaunt guitarists" remain below crying "quittance / To the wickless halls."

In "The Ordinary Women," Stevens implies that right reading is a re-writing of the poem. The same pun (right/write) occurs in "Country Words" (CP 207) where the speaker "wants Belshazzar reading right / The luminous pages on his knee." The women readers of "The Ordinary Women" read right (evasively) and thus help rewrite (inspire) the poems of their serenaders. Evasive reading that rewrites a text recalls Bloom's concept of misprision in The Anxiety of Influence where he tells us that

Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem. A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety. Poets' misinterpretations or poems are more drastic than critics' misinterpretations or criticism, but this is only a difference in degree and not at all in kind. There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry. (95)

Bloom's concern centers on how the poet struggles with the past and its literary giants who weigh so heavily on the poet's own undertaking. The strong poets of the past must be evaded in order to clear space for the present poet's
imagination to recreate the canonical poems. Bloom traces Stevens's intense project of misprision in his important book *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, but his unwavering focus on Stevens's evasive readings of his precursors—"Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Emerson, and, most crucially, Whitman" (vii)—prevents him from exploring how Stevens's strategies of misprision affect the characterization of his ideal readers. Out of Stevens's intense project of evasion comes the fashioning of his intratextual readers, especially his always-yet-to-be supreme reader, who through his or her own evasiveness inspires the poet. Stevens's supreme reader is as strong as any strong poet, and the fashioning of this supremely imaginative reader, who evades just as the poet evades, provides a dwelling for the post-romantic imagination.

In Stevens's post-romantic world, where "The pillars are prostrate, the arches are haggard, / The hotel is boarded and bare" (CP 135) and where imaginative acts are threatened with extinction, Stevens's antiphonies of evasion refigure a potential dwelling for creative minds. This new place of the imagination anticipates Wolfgang Iser's notion of a "virtual dimension of the text":

The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we
might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination. (279)

Stevens often represents this textual limen in his poetry as a balcony or window or door or any margin of exchange that both separates and mediates between oppositions such as outside and inside. In "Ordinary Women" this limen is the window-bay out of which the palace women lean to hear their serenaders. "Of the Surface of Things" also establishes a balcony as its point of interaction:

> From my balcony, I survey the yellow air,
> Reading where I have written,
> "The spring is like a belle undressing." (CP 57)

The terrain of this poem's first two stanzas is stark and the speaker sounds disheartened—"the world is beyond my understanding"—but in the third stanza the tone shifts radically:

> The gold tree is blue
> The singer has pulled his cloak over his head.
> The moon is in the folds of the cloak. (CP 57)

Here, the balcony-singer's perspective no longer dominates; instead, the poem arranges itself around a new voice, that of an outside commentator whose reading is vital. The reader who emerges in the third stanza refashions the first two stanzas into a new dwelling place, a "virtual dimension"
where reader and poet interact to achieve a more gracefully held balance between imagination and "the world." The reader stands not on the balcony with the singer, but on the ground where he looks up to view the branches of the "gold tree" and the blue of the sky through the tree's transparency. The gold hue of the tree suggests that it is autumn, and the singer left standing on the balcony has evasively "pulled his cloak over his head" with the moon mysteriously weaving itself into the "folds of the cloak."

The singer's retreat into his cloak occasions the fashioning of the reflective moonlight's text. His evasion invites the firmly grounded reader's own elusive turn in the poem, a reading of "the moon . . . in the folds of the cloak." But does the reader's vitality here fully rescue the disheartened singer? The shift at the end of the poem to autumn and night and cold suggests an unillumined condition similar to the "wickless" palace halls found in "Ordinary Women." Seemingly, the two figures fail to interact; they appear to remain distinct and incapable of mutuality. Winter's impinging severity, the chill of real weather, forces the singer on the balcony to withdraw by performing a sleight-of-hand trick that makes him appear headless. His evasion leaves the reader below searching the folds of the cloak, as if for a missing meaning. Yet it is this very evasion that empowers the reader; an imaginative
strength arises out of the elusive communion. The singer, elevated but left in a rather lonely position, produces the flat phrase "The spring is like a belle undressing." Not until the perspective shifts away from the balcony and descends to the reader's more worldly realm, does the poem become a powerful commentary on the frailty of the singer's isolation. When we return to the beginning of the poem, we again walk among "three or four hills and a cloud," but now, along with the reader on the ground, we read the moon's mysterious weaving in the folds of the poet's cloak; as mutual masters of illusion, reader and poet press back against the real weather's pressure.

In Ideas of Order, the intratextual readers move distinctly toward supremacy, as suggested by the definite article in "The Reader" (CP 146-47); here is the reader. But does the reader in the poem really read, and if so, what is he reading? About the reader poems, Perlis claims that "the letters in the texts being read become effaced and the reader finds himself directly confronting nature" (67). He then goes on to say that

The reading itself proceeds in darkness but paradoxically gives way to illumination. For as the letters fade, nature superimposes itself, almost like a palimpsest, and speaks in an
alphabet that is ultimately clearer than any which makes words (67).

Such an ultimate clarity is, of course, illusory as Perlis points out, and Stevens carefully establishes "the debunking of all figures who attempt to read the world in a single-minded fashion" (70). This is all perfectly sound, but Perlis seems to miss the subtle shiftiness of Stevens's supreme readers. Instead of being taken in by "an alphabet that is ultimately clearer than any which makes words" and thus providing a negative example for the "exterior reader" (Perlis 71), Stevens's readers turn away from the oppressive clarity of "the pressure of reality."

In "The Reader," for instance, the speaker claims that he has been "reading as if in a book / Of sombre pages."

The two small words "as if" reflect the imaginative evasiveness of the reader. The words of this reader's text do not efface themselves but are instead effaced by the reader, and the reader is not left facing naked reality but on the contrary resides comically and affirmatively in his own recreated terrain:

No lamp was burning as I read,
A voice was mumbling, "Everything
Falls back to coldness,

Even the musky muscadines,
The melons, the vermilion pears
Of the leafless garden." (CP 147)
The mumbling, elusive voice here is that of the poet, and the mumbled text, if "sombre" to begin with, hardly remains so, becoming instead the reader's mixture of darkness and light-hearted comedy. "Musky muscadines" and melons and pears, the sounds and tastes and colors, the nourishment of the fruit, all of these are placed opposite the "coldness" to which everything must return. The reader pulls a long face, as if he were reading a sombre book, but like a grimacing clown, he manages to elude the grave fact that "Everything / Falls back to coldness."

Through his supreme readers, Stevens implies that the act of reading should be evasive. A text "Read in the ruins of a new society" should be read "Furtively, by candle" (CP 153). The lack of a lamp in "The Reader" suggests this secret and furtive premeditation instead of benighted witlessness. David Walker is right in saying that "The reader . . . must bring his or her own illumination to what is often a necessarily impoverished text" (52). However, he fails to recognize the power of Stevens's intratextual reader, a power derived from the reader's dusky elusiveness. The darkness that appears to reflect cold impoverishment is an absolute precondition to the survival of spirit and imagination, both in "The Reader" and elsewhere in Stevens. The supreme reader creates himself evasively out of darkened pages, out of the sterility of
"The sombre pages" that "bore no print." These contrast sharply with the reader's recreated winter garden full of muscadines and melons and pears, emblems of the mumbled voice as furtive as the "trace of burning stars / In the frosty heaven." This trace, this hint of the "diamond pivot bright" (CP 207), resides not on the dark pages that the reader reads, but in the antiphonal evasions of mumbling poet and supreme reader.

Supremacy for the Stevensian reader implies that he or she must evade both with and beyond the poet's evasion. Out of such an idea arises the question in "Gallant Chateau": "Is it bad to have come here / And to have found the bed empty?" (CP 161). In one sense, the poet is asking himself shruggingly about the apparent absence of his muse and is attempting to console himself by claiming that she might after all have been hostile, or that he might have found pitiless words substituted for her sacred presence. But more importantly, Stevens's supreme reader is asking "Is it bad to have come here / And to have found the bed empty?" The supreme reader comes to the poem and finding its limen vacant, treats this absence as the poet's evasion. Ultimately this becomes a source of empowerment for both poet and reader: "It is good. The bed is empty, / The curtains are stiff and prim and still." If we assume that the supreme reader asks the poem's opening question, the
traditional distinction between poet and reader begins to fade. The potential for imaginative exchange actually opens the vacant space of the poem which is here presented as the empty bed. Entertaining the possibility that vacancy may be a source of strength, the poet dispossesses the muse of her former place and tenders a subtle invitation to the reader to enter the poem's limen. From the beginning, then, poet and reader each confront a locus of antiphony, the mysterious limen that may provide for mutually evasive creativity.

However, a devastating solitude, opposed to such evasive creativity, lies just beneath the surface of "Gallant Chateau." Without the supreme reader's evasive accompaniment, the poet "might have found tragic hair, / Bitter eyes, hands hostile and cold." And without the poet's elusive strength, the supreme reader would be left with "a light on a book / Lighting a pitiless verse or two." Lack of "a light on a book" is good, since instead of "a few words tuned / And tuned and tuned and tuned," the supreme reader has unilluminated words, language drained of insistence upon a singularity of harmony and meaning. Interchange between supreme reader and poet is necessary in order to elude "the immense solitude / Of the wind upon the curtains," but it must be an evasive interchange. Such an antiphony between supreme reader and poet protects against a
breach in the imagination's bower, a breach that would allow Stevens's real weather to whistle in and overwhelm the inner realm.

The final stanza serves not as a lament over the vacuity of the bed, but instead as an invitation into the bed, yet an invitation without any sense of seduction. On the contrary, the final line—"The curtains are stiff and prim and still"—suggests a certain propriety, an orderly proposal for legitimate coupling of imaginations. Still, there is a disturbing funereal quality tingeing the poem's final words, but this serves to remind us that the death of the muse is the birth of the post-romantic imagination. As Stevens proclaims in "Sunday Morning," "Death is the mother of beauty" (CP 68); the muse's sarcophagus provides the marriage bed of poet and supreme reader. If "Gallant Chateau" implies the death of the muse, the resulting void leaves poet and supreme reader "unponsored, free" to pursue a new communion of imaginations.17

"Phosphor Reading by his Own Light" (CP 267) continues to explore the vacancy found in "Gallant Chateau" and continues as well with its scrutiny of the reader who can inhabit such vacancy. The poem presents two types of readers: the realist reader, who is of normal stature, and Phosphor, one of several giant readers in Stevens's poetry. "Phosphor" begins with an assertion about reading—"It is
difficult to read"—and then we read Phosphor as he reads an
"empty" page, gazing into the text's void. D. L. MacDonald
suggests that "For Phosphor, [reading] is impossible; all he
can see is the reflection of his own green phosphorescence--
the glow of his own decay: his imaginative solitude is a
solipsistic death, and he has begun to rot" (23). For
MacDonald, the realist reader is equated with Stevens's
actual reader and the poem encourages us to view the realist
reader as a model for our own approach to reading Stevens.
We should come to the text with our minds empty, MacDonald
maintains, not knowing what we expect. But contrary to
this, I see the realist as a weak reader and Phosphor as a
supreme reader, a bringer of light to an otherwise opaque
text. What Phosphor expects is only the evasiveness of the
poet. He knows that there is no outer light to brighten the
dark. The surface of a poem is opaque--"The page is dark"--
and this surface complication resists the realist's efforts
to penetrate the poem's meaning. The realist reader
searches for a certain mimetic effect in the resisting
poem's surface and is disappointed, left with a "fusky
alphabet" on an eternally dark page, a page that refuses to
yield its meaning. 18

Only when the supreme reader realizes that the poet has
evacuated meaning out of the text can he or she, like
Phosphor, look through the dark alphabet and see "Down
deeply in the empty glass." Phosphor knows what to expect because he brings his own light, the light of his imagination, to the page. But the empty glass, the evacuated text, baffles the realist. The light of green night, "that elemental parent," tries to teach the realist the difference between reason and imagination, and in fact gives rise to the realist's limited understanding, but the illumination remains fusky, superficial, and facile. The realist, Narcissus-like, gazes at his own reflection and pines away because he thinks "that that is what [he] expect[s]." Unlike Phosphor, who knows his reflection and can look beneath it into the blank, mysterious limen of the text, the realist cannot see that he is gazing at his own insubstantial reflection. The realist gazes dumbly at his mimetic reflection while Phosphor--another of Stevens's supreme readers--experiences transparency and participates in a visionary antiphony, shaping one edge of the aesthetic exchange. With "his own light," Phosphor provides the illumination necessary for the antiphonal transparency that reveals the text's lamp shining invitingly from the empty depths of language.

Stevens's insistence upon erasure in "Phosphor" comprises what we might understand as an invocation asking the phosphorescent supreme reader to shed his imagination's powerful light on the empty abyss beneath the realist's
fusky alphabet. Phosphor delves beneath the "fusky alphabet" and beyond the elemental parent of night, and out of this encounter with vacancy, he awakens to the beauty of his unsponsored condition, the full freedom of the self as source. The supreme reader knows the poem erasing itself, and it is what he expects as he sees the "greenness of night" in the liminal breach of "a frame without a glass." "Phosphor" implies that to read is not to scan "a fusky alphabet" and come away at the end of the words with a provided meaning. There is no light for such activity, no "elemental parent . . . / Teaching a fusky alphabet."

Instead, reading is staring "Down deeply in the empty glass" of a poem's language and discovering that the reflection is absent, that there is a bottomless and abiding vacancy, and that each reading is an elevation of the reader's potential constantly falling back. Such brevity of elevation is the poet's (as well as the supreme reader's) necessary inspiration.

Stevens continues to strategically repose the reader in relation to the poet in "The Lack of Repose" (CP 303). "Andrew Jackson Something" is an interesting combination of supremacy (Andrew Jackson) and ineffability (Something); as "Something," he is elusive and this increases his power. The poem opens with a comment on Andrew-as-reader:

A young man seated at his table
Holds in his hand a book you have never written
Staring at the secretions of the words as
They reveal themselves. (CP 303)

Andrew reads intensely, but the words, as secretions, both
release and conceal (secretions) their meanings; they
simultaneously reveal and re-veil the sense of the text.
The poet puzzles to himself over the fact that Andrew is
reading his poem but is reading what he has "never written."
He spends much of "Repose" trying to account for this
paradox.

According to the poet, young Andrew is "well-disclosed"
and "one of the gang," not only known but easily knowable;
indeed, Andrew's commonplace status occasions the poet's
sarcasm about his name, Andrew Jackson Something. As one of
the gang, Andrew appears to misunderstand the poet's
"canting curliques"; he reads "a book [the poet has] never
written."19 "This book" (is it Andrew's book or the
poet's?) "Is a cloud in which a voice mumbles" as
mysteriously as the "gaunt guitarists" in "The Ordinary
Women." While Andrew seems naked, fully undisguised and
exposed, "this book" is evasive, opaque, complicated, even
heavenly in its cloud-covered mystique.

But halfway through "Repose," Andrew's apparent failure
begins to look like success. His ordinary reading becomes
extraordinary as his imagination begins to intertwine with
the poet's imagination. The poet tells us that "[the book]
is the grandfather [Andrew] liked." This is simultaneously
the poet's metaphor for his text's effect on its readers and Andrew's association of the book with something of himself, his appropriation of the book as his own. The poet suggests that the poem operates as an intense disclosure of origins, "Of a parent in the French sense," an origine or source from which we spring. Andrew understands the book as he understands his grandfather, "an understanding compounded by death," intensified by its association with mortality, no matter how naive that understanding.

The poet seems to imply that, as a young reader, Andrew is naive: "What a thing it is to believe that / One understands," especially when one is reading a poem concerned with "the intense disclosures" of one's origins. But the use of "one" entangles reader and poet and transmutes them into an antiphonal pairing of sophistication and naivete. The indeterminacy of the phrase "What a thing it is" suggests that the poet is groping after some sort of explanation for Andrew's extraordinary naivete, his ability to "see the sun again with an ignorant eye" (CP 380). "How," the poet seems to ask, "can this reader experience clarity in the midst of a complicated poem about our origins?" Andrew proves to be a supreme reader, and the poem's shift to "one" hints that Andrew's clarity comes by way of a communion of imaginations, a moment of "intense disclosure" during the antiphonal exchange between poet and
reader. The "momentary end / To the complication" is the accomplished goal of that communion, rising out of the complication of the poem, and "is good, is a good." Joseph Riddel's comment on this is definitive:

The good, 'a good' as Stevens would have it in "The Lack of Repose," is what man has instead of God (and tradition). It is the repose achieved in those instances when theory becomes act, as in the contemplative moment of "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (CP 358), where Stevens realizes in poetry what Santayana has described as the perfect communion of self and other: " . . . as in reading a book, the material book is forgotten, and the reader lives in rehearsing the author's thoughts without thinking of the author." (196)

As a supreme reader, Andrew achieves such a moment, as does the poet since part of this good is "not yet to have written a book." The writing of "a book" is in fact perpetually deferred; supreme reader and poet are simultaneously both grandfather and grandson, both progenitor and heir, source and receiver of inspiration. In effect, the supreme reader inspires the poet even as the inspired poet creates his reader.21
As supreme reader, Andrew becomes the book he reads just as "the reader became the book" in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (CP 358-59). The supreme reader is both aptly suited to the book and beyond this, is the book. The book, in fact, is nothing more than its imagined reader and for Stevens that reader must be ever-elusive. Thus, in "The House," the book all but disappears. Indeed it would successfully evade discovery, would escape the necessity of book and page and word, "Except that the reader lean[s] above the page." The reader's posture, his ability to lean, reposes (reshapes as well as repossesses) the book. "Leaned" suggests that the reader has become thin, gaunt, and ghostlike. But it also implies that he bends or tilts from a straight posture, veering much like the book veers. These evasive maneuvers, their failures and successes, make up the silent moments of meaning and the mind: "The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind."

In "The House Was Quiet," the reader "Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be / The scholar to whom his book is true." This will-to-supremacy takes the form of the reader's leaning over the page as both an evasion and an attempt to remain within a limit, within the boundary of the page beneath. As supreme reader, he desires to evade the powerful restraint of the book but simultaneously to remain within an arena of interaction. In a sense, he both evades
the text and restrains his will-to-evade, leaning *over* (dominating) and leaning *upon* (resting against) the page. His deviation both relies upon the book and appropriates his book. The success of the supreme reader lies in his ability both to transgress and not transgress. He must evade in order to pass through the rifts of the poem's necessary silence, that region where "The house was silent because it had to be," the paradoxical result of reading that is itself silent. In Peter Brazeau's *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, Richard Eberhart recalls that

Stevens would never have demeaned himself to want to go to a presidential inauguration and read a poem. Now that doesn't mean he was a snob. He had a much more private idea of what art was. Wallace would have thought the best thing would be the real intimacy of a reader in silence with his book. (Brazeau 150)

The poet's assertion that "The quiet" is an important aspect of meaning and of mind--"The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind"--suggests a silence that results from both poet's and supreme reader's endlessly deferring minds. When such minds come together at the mysterious thresholds of the poem, the result is "The access of perfection": an opening or passageway for antiphonal exchange, an inspired spell of intensity similar to "Key
West's" "blessed rage for order" (CP 130), and an addition as well as audition of perfection that poet and reader lend, one to the other. The resultant silence and serenity are the only meanings in an otherwise meaningless universe, "The truth in a calm world, / In which there is no other meaning."

Both "Andrew Jackson Something" and the reader in "The House Was Quiet" are supreme readers disguised in rather ordinary garb, but the large red man in "Large Red Man Reading" (CP 423-24) returns the supreme reader to a mythic scope such as that seen in "Phosphor." As MacDonald has pointed out, the large red man is also a read man (31), but surely this is no sign of infirmity as he suggests. According to MacDonald, the red man's readiness ultimately aligns him with the ghosts of the poem, who "lack . . . feeling, or experience: a content to be formed--a thumos, a living voice for the text" (30). As MacDonald says, the large red man revives, in his ghostly visitors, the ability to feel or imagine their world. He returns them to earth from the wasteland of heaven--"the wilderness of stars"--and re-establishes them on earth. But what MacDonald fails to note is that it is the large red man's supreme reading that dissolves the otherworldly realm and liberates its ghostly inhabitants.
The large red man is Stevens's imagined, future reader reading the "great blue tabulae" and evasively rewriting the poetry of heaven into the poetry of earth. The giant, earthly reader recreates the ghostly poets of the sky by evasively reposing their poetry in commonplace regions such as the kitchen or the tulip bed. His supremacy reanimates the heavenly poets' lean, elusive essences—"those thin, those spended hearts"—which, in turn, inspire the large red man to recite "the feeling for them, which [is] what they lack."

"Red Man" seems to insist that beauty resides in this world instead of in that "wilderness of the stars" from which the phantom poets descend. The ghosts fall happily down to earth, and in their descent they become the red man's readers as he becomes the chanting poet. On the other hand, their apprehension of the red man's recitation elevates him toward the stature of the sun and Apollo—he becomes a "large red man"—as he reads from the heavenly text. The ghostly poets drop from a wilderness of stars, but for the large red man, this realm is the great blue tabulae. In this antiphonal exchange each rescues the other from probable extinction. The descended readers save the red man from his earthly wilderness because his "literal characters" and "vatic lines" speak their "outlines" and "expressings." The red man's chanting creates an interior
repose "in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts," and so speaks "the feeling for them, which [is] what they had lacked." "They" refers not only to the ghostly poets-turned-readers but also to the red man chanting his "vatic lines"; each provides for each the "intense disclosure" that passes between evasively communing imaginations.

In "Things of August(V)" (CP 492), Stevens presents a version of the rabbi playing the part of "The thinker as reader." According to Robert DeMaria, the rabbi in Stevens's poetry exhibits traits similar to his readers of mythic stature:

When Stevens's reader is a mythical figure like Belshazzar, MacCullough, or some version of "Metropolitan Rabbi," his activity constitutes not only his own form of life but also the general form of human life; in these cases, reading creates a communal as well as a personal reality.

(263)

But Stevens seems less concerned with the creation of communal reality than with a potential communion of powerful imaginations. In "August" the rabbi's reading certainly lacks the evasive power necessary for the supreme reader's creative interaction with the elusive poet. Instead, the rabbi serves as a foil for the supreme "we" who take control
at the end of the canto. As a reader, the rabbi resembles the realist reader of "Phosphor" who "think[s] that that is what [he] expects." Facts tyrannize over his world, shaping a perspective of mere mimesis. The rabbi rules in "The state of circumstance" where the reader must read "what has been written." "Circumstance," the word that describes (or circumscribes) the Rabbi's realm, derives from the Latin circumstantia which means "a standing around." Such "standing around" or "surrounding" delineates the type of reading that interests the rabbi, and which he performs quite naturally. The rabbi reads by standing around or surrounding the text, as if it were the ark of the covenant, a sanctum sanctorum, and his custodial posture implies a desire both to enclose his text and to exclude others from its mysterious interior. He safeguards the holy canon, hiding it within himself: "He wears the words he reads to look upon / Within his being." For the rabbi, the text is a type of garment to cover the naked self, but "wears" works ironically against his sense of text as apparel. The rabbi, enclosing the text and enclosed by it, wears out its words, which thus can protect neither himself nor the text that they comprise. Even by clothing the self with "what has been written," he cannot protect either text or self. Both escape, wear away, evade discovery.
The rabbi's own reading contains no elusive veil. His evasions are self-evasions; they only disguise the self from itself. Thus he fails to recover the self disguised beneath "what has been written," beneath his apparent, ossified text. The rabbi's emblem of power as interpreter of an inner mysterium, his "crown . . . of crispest diamonds," alternately suggests a brittle and crumbling object that is old and no longer important and a sharp, clear, sparkling gem with a reflective surface that seems to have a center but is infinitely divisible. The "crown . . . of crispest diamonds" recalls the "diamond pivot bright," the image of the supreme reader whom the poet desires in "Country Words." But it also suggests the impenetrable surface of ossified tradition, an emblem of tyrannizing authority which forbids imaginative communion, permitting only an uninvolved gaze at its surface. The rabbi's garment, as well, represents his authority. While the garment is beautiful and rich, its overwhelming elegance and grace legislate against any reading more engaged than a mere looking on. Yet the garment, which is meant to clothe, protect, even disguise the rabbi, also exposes him. The "reddened garment falling to his feet" both covers the rabbi's feet and slides off of him, leaving him naked.

The rabbi cannot enclose the text within the sanctum sanctorum of rabbinical tradition. Language eludes such
constraint. The words supplied to the rabbi illuminate and inspire—God provides "A hand of light to turn the page"—but the hand of God always imperiously turns the page, just as the Rabbi's ringed finger, the finger bound about with God's covenant, points "to guide his eye / From line to line." Such a reciprocal covenant is ossified, shaped not by the light of evasive imaginations interacting antiphonally, but instead by the oppressive "hand of light" that turns the rabbi's pages.

As a contrast to the rabbi, the final stanza presents a version of the supreme reader. Loafing on a weekend devoted to lying on the grass and listening, the "we" reads and revitalizes the rabbi's ossified text: "we lie on the grass and listen / To that which has no speech." The posture here strongly recalls canto one of Whitman's Song of Myself: "I loaf and invite my soul / I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass." Whitman's "lean" suggests the essential evasiveness of the observer. The poet must veer in order to jar the reader, to "[unfix] the land and the sea" as Emerson says the poet must do. In "August," poet and supreme reader "lie on the grass and listen," a position that suggests a powerful evasion. Their lying on the grass differs vastly from the rabbi's posture. The rabbi tries to protect the holy of holies by excluding the unholy reader, but the lounging supreme reader and poet
strike a commonplace pose, that of leisurely observers
picnicking and listening to the sounds in a park on a Sunday
afternoon. Their lying also suggests an equivocation that
curves away from the text that "has been written."

The final stanza of the poem most powerfully
classifies supreme reader and poet who listen

To that which has no speech,
The voluble intentions of the symbols,
The ghostly celebrations of the picnic,
The secretions of insight. (CP 492)

Poet and supreme reader transform the rabbi's ossified words
into "voluble intentions," a lively and conversing mutuality
which twists and swerves, inviting antiphonal evasion. The
final stanza again echoes Whitman with its emphasis on
celebration and the importance of the commonplace experience
(such as a picnic), which here, as in Whitman, takes on a
measure of mystery. In "August," the exchange between
supreme reader and poet yields a visionary insight, one
which relies upon the reader's as well as the poet's
secretions. As in "The Lack of Repose," insight arises out
of such secretive evasions, both exposing itself and
continuously eluding exposure.

For Stevens then, the supreme reader is the evasive
reader who can elude the poet as the poet eludes him, and
this double evasion comprises the communion of imaginations
"pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36).25

In "One of the Inhabitants of the West" (CP 503-04), this
exchange is agonistic, as the poet encounters the reader as full rival. Language is most intense, most alert—"Our divinations . . . Alert us most"—when its "establishments / Of wind and light and cloud / Await an arrival, / A reader of the text." The reader's approach as an arrival stirs an epiphany that rivals the poet's "Mechanisms of angelic thought." The title of the poem hints at the mythic stature of this supreme reader, recalling Phosphor or the large red man. The star in the west, "evening's one star," arrives as supreme reader—"A reader without a body, / Who reads quietly"—and in his moment of most intense communion, he inspires the recreation of the poem out of the poet's (as well as his own) evasive maneuverings. Indeed, what he quietly reads becomes the poem, a text that represents his own evasions.

Before the appearance of the supreme reader, the poet's mood is one of static anticipation. The reader's advent jars the poet. Arriving unexpectedly in the poem, slipping silently in while "the establishments" continue to wait, he defamiliarizes the old establishments and presents his version of the "pastoral text." The poem turns toward what the supreme reader "reads quietly," elusively recreating "the establishments." After the colon, the remainder of the poem belongs to the "reader without a body," and his elusive engagement appears in the final stanzas of the poem, a long
quotation that disrupts the three-line pattern established in the poem's first half. The disembodied reader reads quietly, addressing himself to those "Horrid figures of Medusa," the writhing words (and ossified readers) of the modern poet's gorgon-like text. The medusa-like text evades by turning its readers to stone, a stark defamiliarization resulting from their too direct gaze at the snaking ambiguities of the poem's process. The realist reader's still, yearning stare into the coiling text petrifies him. Medusa-as-text must be simultaneously both evaded and not evaded; like Perseus, the supreme reader must both read and not read. In order to avoid becoming one of the "men of stone," he must read not a perfect reflection of Medusa in a perfect mirror, but a distortion so successful as to be other than that already imaged. Only then can he read Medusa's voluble, serpentine text, writhing dangerously before, but buried deep within, the mirror that does not reflect. He must read deep down, read in his shield that distorts; then in a deadly act of inscription, he must sever the head of the gorgon, eluding ossification.

But the supreme reader supersedes even Perseus, as he gazes upon the devastation of Medusa's presence. He transmutes the "horrid figures" of the text into "These accents," that "explicate / The sparkling fall of night / On Europe, to the last Alp, / And the sheeted Atlantic."
Through the elusive meditation of Stevens's elite readership, words achieve sublimity, rising above ossification in the sub-regions. The "archangel of evening," emblem of this elite readership, makes the approach of the modern poet possible. But the supreme reader's own elevation diminishes evasively. The bright blaze of the star becomes a minute drop of blood as he descends into the commonplace, and both poet and supreme reader waver before the ellipses. It is out of this hesitation that the full text of the poem re-issues. Stevens's elite readership descends from the one star's blaze into a drop of blood and silently into vacancy out of which arises, as spring arises out of autumn, the guilt (and gilt) of the recreated poem, "buried / Beneath the innocence / Of autumn days."
Notes

1 Perlis focuses on four poems: "The Reader," "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," and "Large Red Man Reading." D. L. MacDonald includes "God is Good. It Is a Beautiful Night," and Robert DeMaria, Jr., talks about "Country Words," "Things of August," and "One of the Inhabitants of the West."

2 To avoid an overwhelming number of awkward parenthetical citations within the text, I cite the page numbers of poems or sections of poems only after their first mention or after long quotations that have been set off from the text. I use the following abbreviations in citations: The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (CP), Letters of Wallace Stevens (L), The Necessary Angel (NA), Souvenirs and Prophecies (SP), Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (PC), On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens's Longer Poems (EW), and The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (CE).

3 The word suggests, as it does in "The Lack of Repose," an evasive movement, a tilting or tipping to one side in order to view what is desired.
Milton Bates refers to just this sort of empowering evasiveness in his discussion of "Earthly Anecdote," which opens both *Harmonium* and *The Collected Poems*:

One might regard the poem as an emblem of one's own engagement with this kind of poem: like the bucks, one's clattering, discursive mind swerves left or right whenever it approaches the firecat, thus duplicating the pattern of bafflement and evasion in the anecdote. The poem continues to produce its intended effect—an effect that is also its subject—as long as the firecat remains a source of perplexity. (152)

One might also refer to the interaction between Stevens's poet and reader as a type of *severed dialectic*. Joseph Kronick in "The Metamorphic Stevens" remarks that

Dialectic promises resolution and the totalizing poem, but in Stevens there are only fragments:

"'Words are not forms of a single word./In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts'" (CP 204). Unlike Eliot, Stevens welcomes this state of things, for it is precisely the absence of the "poem of the whole" (CP 442) that allows poetry to exist. . . . (5)
The Stevensian reader/poet dialectic is never resolved but is instead severed and thus always "endlessly elaborating" (CP 486).

5 At the end of "Large White Man Reading," Joseph Kronick points out that "In the parodic self-allusions of the poem, Stevens allegorizes the genetic pattern of literary history as a tale of readers and listeners rather than poets and precursors" (98). I argue that Stevens's poems embody a theory of reading figured through the interaction of supreme reader and poet.

6 T. J. Jackson Lears, in his interesting study No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920, points out that at the turn of the century "the process of evasion was half-conscious, a matter of instinctive self-deception rather than deliberate duplicity." He goes on to say that

Evasiveness underlay a central tenet of the modern world view: faith in individual autonomy. The official creed held not only that progress was inevitable but that the key to it was the disciplined, autonomous self, created in the bosom of the bourgeois family. From the dominant view, the autonomous self was a Promethean figure, conquering fate through sheer force of will. Faith in autonomous selfhood required a denial of
inner conflict and an insensitivity to actual social conditions; it epitomized the evasiveness of modern culture. (18)

Stevens's astonishing valorization of evasive interaction between poet and reader allows him to maintain at least the fiction of an autonomous self while at the same time engaging with an alterity and all of the conflicts, political or otherwise, that arise from such engagement.

7 Both the precariousness of such a dwelling and its antiphonal quality are suggested in a letter that Stevens wrote to Helen Simons on the occasion of her husband Hi Simons's death:

It is not likely that anyone will follow after Mr. Simons in his interest in my things, since his interest was due to some responsiveness between us of an exceptional sort. His notes are the materials out of which he had planned to make something. No one can finish what he had planned. It is not a question of an analysis of the work of a man with whom he felt himself to be in special sympathy but of something affirmative and constructive beyond that. (L 539, emphasis added)

The idea of moving beyond mere sympathy to a type of constructive affirmation suggests the positive quality of the reader/poet antiphonal evasion.
Limen (pl. limina) is a Latin word that means threshold, border, dwelling or doorway. I have appropriated the term to suggest the locales or moments of intense interaction between poet and reader in a poem. In Words Chosen Out of Desire, Helen Vendler makes the point that "We live out each [Stevens] poem as we live inside it. The poem-as-passage, not the poem-as-discourse, is Stevens's model, even when he appears most discursive" (57). See also Angus Fletcher's "Positive Negation": Threshold, Sequence, and Personification in Coleridge" for a thorough discussion of limina in poetry.

"Of the Surface of Things" is an early example of what Helen Vendler describes as "the best of Stevens," the poise achieved when "the stoic is not too harshly repressing the elegiac, when desire is not entirely delusive, when the imaginative is not violently sacrificed to the logical, or vice versa" (165).

In discussing his "aesthetics of reception," Hans Robert Jauss makes the claim that

The distance between the immediate first perception of a work and its potential meanings, or, to put it differently, the opposition between the new work and the expectations of its first readers, can be so great that a long process of
reception is necessary in order to catch up with what first was unexpected and unusable. (30)

Stevens's theory of reading and his aesthetic of antiphonal evasion attempts to extend this "long process of reception" indefinitely since he desires to eradicate the idea of the poem's arrival at obsolescence and ossification. The reader's evasions, instead of making the poem "unusable," continually refresh the poem's unexpected and unfamiliar qualities.

11 As Barbara Fisher says, "One locates the contour of liminality in Stevens's tangential 'as ifs,' in labyrinthine embeddings of syntax and simile, in the veiled semiotics of obscurity, paradox, and riddle" (xxv).

12 In light of this, it is interesting to note Joseph Riddel's remark that "To follow the 'argument' of a Stevens poem always demands a kind of metaphorical detour . . . " ("Metaphoric Staging," 317).

13 In Words Chosen Out of Desire, Vendler has this to say about the special quality of impoverishment in Stevens's poetry:

Stevens's most authentic insights are those of a minimalist poet; his art is, he realizes, fully as laden with feelings as that of any other poet (and therefore not fleshless and skeletal); but the
feelings are often the powerful wintry feelings of apathy, reduction, nakedness, and doubt. (37)

14 Robert DeMaria asserts that "Paradoxically, and with an obvious analogy to Christian teaching, both Stevens's and Coleridge's readers lose themselves that they may find themselves more fully" (244). One might revise this to read "Stevens's readers evade the poet, that they may find themselves more fully." Note also M. M. Bakhtin's idea that "every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates" (The Dialogic Imagination, 260). Stevens's supreme reader offers this answer, whose influence his poet cannot escape, even before it is uttered.

15 David Walker, in The Transparent Lyric, claims that in some of Stevens's poetry "The act of reading the poem . . . becomes analogous to the act of writing it, and in turn to sharing in the process of imaginative transformation that for Stevens was the only credible source of order and value" (39).

16 Hans Robert Jauss, in "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," offers this characterization of a literary work:

A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which
reveals its timeless essence in a monologue. It is much more like an orchestration which strikes ever new chords among its readers and which frees the text from the substance of the words and makes it meaningful for the time. . . . (14)

17 The metaphor of communion may seem a rather odd one to use for Stevens since he devotes much poetic energy to overcoming a Judeo-Christian belief system. But as Rajeev Patke points out, while Stevens "rejects Christianity or expresses extreme skepticism about it" in his poetry, nevertheless many forms of thinking and feeling retain traces of a framework which persists in spite of the overt disavowals. It is as if, in building his new structures on the ruins of an older system, the plan and the outlines of the old survive in and under the new. (210)

Thus it seems valid to depict the interaction between Stevens's imagined reader and poet as a type of secular communion.

18 DeMaria points out that Stevens discarded "the classical analogy between art and a mirror," and goes on to suggest that this "rejection of the mirror is an important element in his overall elevation of the reader's activity and creativity" (245).
Though he restricts his observations to novelistic discourse, Bakhtin's discussion of stupidity (or incomprehension) as a dialogic category applies quite well to Andrew Jackson Something:

Stupidity . . . is a dialogic category, one that follows from the specific dialogism of novelistic discourse. For this reason stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always implicated in language, in the word: at its heart always lies a polemical failure to understand someone else's discourse, someone else's pathos-charged lie that has appropriated the world and aspires to conceptualize it, a polemical failure to understand generally accepted, canonized, inveterately false languages with their lofty labels for things and events: poetic language, scholarly and pedantic language, religious, political, judicial language and so forth. (403)

Bakhtin goes on to mention novelistic situations among which he includes exchange between the fool and the poet, just the sort of interaction which we see here between Andrew and the speaker of "The Lack of Repose." He makes the further point, which is important to "Repose" as well, that the fool is absolutely essential to the author, even if the author exhibits genuine scorn for the fool. The importance of the
fool's incomprehension lies in the fact that "his very incomprehending presence . . . makes strange the world of social conventionality" (404). In other words, the fool helps the poet to decreate and recreate conventions of discourse.

20 Though Bakhtin would claim that the following only applies to prose and not to poetry, his discussion concerning the give and take of language between speakers applies once again to the relationship between poet and reader in "The Lack of Repose":

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (294)
The fact that this description applies so nicely to "The Lack of Repose" should be sufficient in itself to answer Gerald Bruns's claim that

Much of Stevens's poetry is designed to keep [the] experience of otherness from happening: for Stevens, success in experience means hearing no one's voice but your own. One can then enter into a new world without any loss of self-possession.

(27-28)

My study shows, in fact, that quite the opposite is the case. Much of Stevens's poetry is devoted to showing the necessity of hearing the other's voice, as painful, frightening or confusing as that voice might be.

21 In "Metaphoric Staging," Riddel says this about Stevens's perpetual deferral of origination:

In Stevens's poetry it is precisely this question of the ontological status of the "book"--of images and their origin, the imagination--that sets off those open meditations, pronouncing in the same word the authority of a "total book" or "chief image" and the ultimate deferring of such resolutions. (315-16)

22 About the posture of leaning, Margaret Dickie says "In this pose, the reader, even in the dark, bends to his task in the attitude, if not of prayer, at least of the
needy and the faithful" (132). But Stevens's supreme reader leans far beyond this to include the pose of evasion that Stevens considered so essential.

23 DeMaria claims that there is a wide range of intratextual readers in Stevens's poetry, from "low-mimetic" to "mythic." But Stevens's supreme reader moves toward a merge with the poet: "Especially when his text comes from within or when what he reads expresses a reality for his listeners, Stevens's figure of the reader merges with his figure of the poet" (265).

24 Vendler makes the point that "Solitude, not society, is [Stevens's] subject as poet, whatever he may have felt as man, and he remains always a poet of 'the organic consolation, the complete / Society of the spirit when it is / Alone'" (EW 100). But Vendler seems to overstate the case in the direction of solipsism. There is an elite with which the poet communes, but it is more of a one-on-one interaction than DeMaria's communal reality.

25 This will-to-evade (which in actuality may be only the inevitability of mutual misunderstanding) depicted again and again in Stevensian interactions is similar to Bakhtin's idea about "the internal dialogic essence of language itself" which he characterizes as "the failure on the part of those speaking different languages to understand each other" (405). By different languages, Bakhtin means of
course the possible heteroglot stratifications inherent in any so-called common language such as English.
CHAPTER 3

THE OBSCURER SELVAGES: "ESTHETIQUE DU MAL, I-V"

"The first act of the Creator was not His revelation of Himself to something outside. Far from being a procession outward, or a 'going out,' of His hidden self, the first step was, rather, a withdrawal or retreat. God withdrew 'from Himself into Himself,' and by this act, abandoning a region within Himself to emptiness, He made room for the worlds to be."

Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah

As with Stevens's long poems generally, "Esthetique du Mal" often leaves its readers simply shrugging their shoulders in amazed wonder. Riddel, for example, says that "in 'Esthetique du Mal,' the abstract problem is central and unwavering, but the poet's variations on it are annoyingly diverse and private at times. The reader can avail himself of few reliable guideposts to the developing argument" (203). But then "reliable guideposts" are exactly what Stevens struggles to avoid, as Riddel himself suggests when he points out that "Esthetique" is centrally concerned with "the problem of belief in a world beyond belief" (202). Conventions, those "reliable guideposts" that lead us along the poetic path, are part of what is effaced from this "world beyond belief." One aspect of Stevens's difficulty lies in what I refer to as his aesthetic of disfiguration. To disfigure, in the Stevensian sense, is to deface or mar
the monuments of poetic tradition by parodying or distorting conventional modes of figuration. This figurative ravaging of tropes is meant to strip language of any orthodox adornment. Consequently, in such a scarred and impoverished terrain, supreme reader and poet struggle to refigure the new imagination's dwelling. This concept of disfiguration is similar to what Riddel and others (following Stevens) call decreation, but disfiguration has the advantage of referring to the figurative language of poetry as well as suggesting a type of painful desecration necessary to Stevens's process, without connoting a hopeless nihilism that seems antithetical to his project. The disfiguring poet must change the "guideposts," something which Stevens felt should not be annoying but instead liberating, at least for his envisioned supreme reader.

"Esthetique du Mal" is undeniably problematic. Riddel makes a stab at loosely schematizing its structure, whereas Bloom simply admits that "the sections are so various as to make us see again how subtly diverse Stevens's poetry was" (PC 226). Riddel gathers the cantos under a broad thematic umbrella that covers "the bankruptcy of traditional forms of belief; sentimentalism and self-pity as escapes from reality; the secularization of religion and its contemporary consequences; the inadequacy of reason as a mode of belief; the pressures of modern violence; the poverty of materialism..."
and utilitarianism" (CE 203). Bloom unites the various cantos under the flag of intellectual battle against T. S. Eliot and the modernist school. Another element that possibly draws the cantos together is the depicted interaction or antiphony between "Esthetique's" particular version of the supreme reader, which I call the reflective or meditative reader, and its disfiguring poet. Such interplay proves to be the recreative consolation against the mal of both artist and audience caught in Stevens's disfigured terrain or what Riddel calls "the world beyond belief."

In canto one of "Esthetique du Mal" (CP 313-14), an unnamed character—let us call him the Neapolitan stranger—sits in a cool cafe, listening to Mount Vesuvius rumble while he reads and writes. Notions of pain and "the end of life" preoccupy him, yet he derives a paradoxically unsettling comfort from the proximity of Italy's active volcano: "It was pleasant to be sitting there, / While the sulriest fulgurations, flickering, / Cast corners in the glass." As a tourist (or perhaps a soldier), the Neapolitan stranger feels removed from familiar surroundings, and so he is "writing letters home" while he lounges in the cafe. He is a stranger abroad, perhaps stationed in or visiting Italy for an extended time—"Vesuvius had groaned for a month." As a reader, he is also
a stranger abroad, touring "paragraphs / On the sublime."
Vesuvius, whose "sultriest fulgurations flickering" create reflections in the cafe window's glass, both enhances and disrupts the Neapolitan stranger's tour, whether of pleasure or duty. Vesuvius's rumblings disturb him, and he attempts to intensify his concentration on his reading and writing: "He tried to remember the phrases." But the volcano fashions a text that the touring reader cannot ignore, a text that is, in its figurations (a word lurking in fulgurations), passionate, intense, even ambiguous (as "flickering" implies).

Vesuvius's rumblings inspire a terror which the stranger can describe "because the sound / Was ancient." Convention, then, provides for his writing home about his volcano-aroused emotion. As Riddel says, "He can . . . understand Vesuvius's 'Sultriest fulgurations' because he has a language for it" (CE 205), but the Neapolitan stranger's efforts at description dissatisfy him. Listening to the mountain's "fulgurations," he suddenly experiences its bare physical presence, a stark thereeness, and he finds himself searching, struggling to "remember the phrases: pain / Audible at noon, pain torturing itself, / Pain killing pain on the very point of pain." As disfiguring poet, the Neapolitan stranger is no longer satisfied to describe his world in the received manner. He must try to remember the
phrases about suffering. As displaced stranger, he is left
with only a few fragments, words from the book he is
reading, words imagined to replace the groans of Vesuvius; he has only "stony rubbish" out of which to fashion a theory
of suffering. He is, like Tiresias at the end of the Waste
Land, left with a few fragments to shore against his ruins,
and out of these fragments arises the Neapolitan stranger's
meditation on suffering.

Halfway through canto one, the poem's tone plunges
steeply earthward--"It was almost time for lunch"--
descending somewhat comically from its high seriousness and
contemplation of spiritual suffering to the banality of
physical appetite. Ironically, this descent into the
commonplace awakens the first remembering of the phrases on
pain. The beginning of the stranger's refiguration--"Pain
is human"--emerges out of his fall from the elevated toward
the ordinary. The Neapolitan stranger seems isolated,
sitting alone in a cafe, "reading paragraphs / On the
sublime," but the commonplace of his waiting for lunch
provides an occasion for community:

Except for us, Vesuvius might consume
In solid fire the utmost earth and know
No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up
To die). This is a part of the sublime
From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,
The total past felt nothing when destroyed.

(CP 314, emphasis added)
The "we"—a communion of imaginations introduced in the latter part of the canto—replaces the solitary stranger, and the evocation of this communion

members

the sublime. Poet and reflective reader feel pain when viewing Nature's catastrophes, pain that Nature does not feel in return; however, communion strengthens their imaginations against the utter vacancy of reality, "a part of the sublime / From which [they] shrink." "Shrink" suggests that poet and reflective reader diminish in stature as they cower beneath unfeeling Vesuvius, but the word also hints that, in order to avoid complete self-abasement, they slyly lean or evade even as they respond. Such evasion is Stevens's disfigurative convention for taking into account the supreme strength of mutually engaged imaginations. Reader and poet elusively refashion the phrases about pain and thus create a new theory of suffering out of the fragments of the past, curiously animating an otherwise insensitive history: "except for us, The total past felt nothing." This communion of imaginations—a part of "the total past" as an evolving and evasive textual interaction—provides for the poet's as well as the reflective reader's future.

In canto two (CP 314-15), the Neapolitan stranger lies on his balcony at night, a favorite locale for Stevens's intratextual readers. Balconies, windows, mirrors, and such are important liminal positions, thresholds between
imagination and tradition's conventionally figured terrain. The Neapolitan stranger longs to experience Nature—the Romantic's terrain of the oversoul—and indeed strains to hear its chords, but the nightingale has drifted away: "Warblings became / Too dark, too far, too much the accents of / Afflicted sleep." Her warblings, as well as the whisperings of the heavenly muse, have diminished into a silence of despair, a mere product of "afflicted sleep." The warblings are now slight whisperings of impoverishment that "form themselves, in time, and communicate / The intelligence of his despair." The moment of visionary transparency when the oversoul manifests itself through Nature is now simply an empty form, time-worn, banal. The acacias, the warblings, the moon, and the night sky are all estranged shapes and sounds. A collective otherness that the Neapolitan stranger, lying on his balcony, wishes to confront, these elements evade his every effort: "The moon rose up as if it had escaped / His meditation. It evaded his mind." Nevertheless, a new type of strength, "a supremacy always above him," glimmers slightly forth from this very notion of evasion. The text of the moon rescues the Neapolitan's imagination--"that which rejects it saves it in the end"—because its powerful evasion serves as an invitation, a turning away that is also a gesture to follow. The moon's disfigured syllables "express / What meditation
never quite achieved," and thus open a limen where poet and reader refigure a "total past" to embody both self and other. Such a text of the past offers a vacancy ready to be filled, "a kind of elegy . . . found in space."

The Neapolitan stranger undergoes an epiphany of sorts when he comes to realize that the text he reads while lying on his balcony always evades his understanding: "The moon was always free from him, / As night was free from him."

Seeing this, he veers both with and away from the text, recreating its beauty by his own act of evasion, his own reading of the elegy "found in space." The moon and sky are "free" not only because they are separate "from him," but also because of his reading of their evasive text evasively.

The elegy itself, once spoken, once read, is "found in space," discovered in the very vacancy, the "Too dark, too far" that seems to surround it and cut it off from both creator and reader. A willed evasiveness on both sides creates the ceremony of antiphony, the mutually imaginative act during which "The shadow touched / Or merely seemed to touch him as he spoke / A kind of elegy." Is the speaking here the poet's reciting or the reader's reading? The distinction between the two blurs and merges into the common "elegy . . . found in space," a space provided by the invocation of the reflective reader.
The airy elegy itself swings back to a discussion of suffering and the intense self-awareness that suffering arouses. Despair and afflicted sleep inspire the accents and syllables of the elegy that accuses its own inspiration, as if its very source were blinding or hallucinatory:

It does not regard
This freedom, this supremacy, and in
Its own hallucination never sees
How that which rejects it saves it in the end.
(CP 315)

The elegy twists back upon itself in order to escape its origin and consequently frees itself from any delusion of fixity. It rejects itself in order to save itself (disfigures in order to refigure). As intense self-awareness, the elegy of pain blinds (and binds) the reader to the text just as it blinds the self to the other-than-self: "It is pain that is indifferent to the sky."

Suffering simultaneously produces a type of apathy towards all that is other-than-self and a type of inspiration that recognizes the freedom of alterity. Such blindness or hallucination is itself a type of evasion: I am blind to you, I create you, I free you, I am indifferent to you, I exist because of you, I reject you to save you just as you reject me to save me. The warblings of such a muse, manifest in the suffering of the Neapolitan stranger's mind, reveal themselves in an interior dialogue that both rejects and accepts at once, both disfigures and refigures the
reflective reader reading the poet who abandons in order to rescue both himself and his reader.

The Neapolitan stranger's source of inspiration is the absent muse, the supremacy of a distant intimate. I agree with Bloom that "Stevens is decisively a muse-poet, indeed much more an erotic poet (severely repressed) than an ironist" (PC 28). While discussing "Sunday Morning," Bloom continues to elaborate on this point:

What is the dreaming woman there for in Sunday Morning anyway? Like all muses she is invoked, as Eric Havelock says of Hesiod's muses, to be the voice of instruction and also the voice of pleasure. Her presence has the purposes of relieving anxiety, of assuaging grief, but above all else, of helping the poet to remember much that once he knew but has repressed. Or, as Vico intimated, she is there to help the poet divinate; she is an apotropaic sibyl whose function is to help Stevens survive, as poet and as man. (PC 28)

In canto three of "Esthetique" (CP 315-16) the poet fashions an evasive invocation to the "too dark, too far" muse: "here [and hear], O terra infidel." But how can we call "terra infidel" apotropaic, as Bloom would require of the Stevensian muse? After all, the first three lines of canto three create a sense of displacement and solitude, of lost
or deflected mutuality. The poem's firm stanzas hang "in hell / Or what hell was"; they no longer have a place or, what amounts to the same thing, a reader. Poetry hangs in a place that no longer exists, a realm without mysterious limina, where antiphonal exchange is not possible. But it is this necessarily harsh reality that forces the poet to a new invocation, a disguised and evading invitation: hear.

unorthodox, unfaithful world, world emerging from the fusion of heaven and hell, God and Satan, poet and reader, hear that you are absent and that out of that absence you can come again to be in a world whose health "might be enough."
The large rift between reader and poet as well as between poet and muse, or even worse, the apparent absence of a readership altogether, arises out of the collapsed traditions that formed the conventions of reader, muse, and poet. The ruin of these traditions is especially apparent in Stevens's mocking of Christianity and its "over-human God": "The fault lies with an overhuman God, / Who by sympathy has made himself a man." The "fault" or fracture and slippage between God and man, as well as between muse and poet, necessitates a modification in the relationship between man and man, as well as between reader and poet. The disfiguration of man's supreme audience—"[God] is not to be distinguished, when we cry"—must be balanced by a refiguration of the common, merely human reader (replacement
for God and muse) in order to repair the rift, the
disruption of mutuality. God, because he is "too, too
human," is no longer a super-hearer of our petitions.

God's inversion and humanization is the ultimate
evasion; as reader, he is the supreme evader. We author our
cries to an absent God, a God who deviates, who eludes
detection by becoming the same as those who search for him.
He pities and disappears, and his disappearance or elusive
rejection "saves [us] in the end." Pity, then, is God's
great evasion; as absolute, original source of inspiration,
he eludes by becoming identical, the supreme reader
supremely evading the poet's cry: "[God] has made himself a
man." This diminishment of the supreme reader, "our oldest
parent, peer / Of the populace of the heart, the reddest
[and most read] lord," into "a constant fellow of destiny, /
A too, too human God, self-pity's kin / And uncourageous
genesis" is a crisis for the poet: "If only [God] would not
pity us so much . . . the health of the world might be
enough."

The complicated dilapidation of heaven and hell into
"terra infidel" is itself perhaps a reparation however
harsh, a new "health of the world." This transmutation
brings us back to the "firm stanzas" disfigured at the
canto's beginning but refigured at its end: "It seems as if
the honey of common summer / Might be enough, as if the
golden combs / Were part of a sustenance itself enough."

Here is the extraordinary within the ordinary, golden honey within bland wax combs, precious "sustenance" within "common summer." Here also Stevens suggests the interactivity of creation in the cooperative functioning of the hive with its compartmental cells and the essence secreted into them. The secretions of reader and poet--both the essence of their thoughts and the innermost secrets of their feelings--go into the "firm stanzas" that "hang like hives in hell."

These become more than "satanic mimicry," a mere mirroring such as that of the realist reader in "Phosphor."

Paradoxically, such secretions both make pain bearable and give birth to pain. Allowed their mutual evasions of imagination, evasions that will perhaps make them "sure to find [their] way," reader and poet are each a source of pain as well as a source of consolation against suffering.

Working through the complication of the poem's disfigured surfaces--evasions, misdirections, ravelings--both reflective reader and poet find clarity "between [the] letters" (CP 313).

The reflective reader's antiphonal imagination arises out of the Neapolitan stranger's lonely suffering, as well as his turn away from that loneliness, his evasion of isolation. The sentimentalist of canto four (CP 316-17), who delights in nature's luxuriant variety as an emblem for
a transcendent realm, provides a contrast to the reflective reader's creative interaction with the disfiguring poet. The experience of transparence no longer resides in our interaction with nature as a manifestation of the sublime oversoul. Art and the mutually evasive interaction between artist, artifact, and audience now provide the arena for the experience of transparency: "B. sat down at the piano and made / A transparence in which we heard music, made music, / In which we heard transparent sounds" (66-68). In the interaction, the audience both hears and makes the music, is both source and endpoint of the artifact. B.'s making of music is the listener's making of music, a communion between poet and audience, each occasioning and inspiring the other's performance.

B.'s notes, both many and one, individual and united, disclose the relationship between the artist and his communing audience:

```plaintext
did he play
All sorts of notes? Or did he play only one
In an ecstasy of its associates,
Variations in the tones of a single sound,
The last, or sounds so single they seemed one?
(CP 316)
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The tension between plurality and unity (a familiar one in American literature) resolves itself into an antiphonal ecstasy of exchange between the communing imaginations of artist and audience. Out of variations on "a single sound" arises "an ecstasy of its associates."
To clarify (or complicate) the idea, Stevens switches his focus from "B." to "the Spaniard of the rose." As artist, the Spaniard seems to "rescue" unity out of nature's wild variety. The rose looks suspiciously phallic---"itself / Hot-hooded and dark-blooded"---but transmutes into a text both made and existing in the artist's (and his communing audience's) "own especial eye," in the redness/readness of his rose. The phallic rose's rescue is an ongoing process, a readiness that progresses by virtue of the communion of imaginations, constantly crossing the boundary between audience and artist. The audience's imagining of the artist as rescuer of the fullness of the rose creates the artist's "nakedest passion." But the exchange of inspiration/origination is mutual. Stevens's artist impregnates his audience---"we conceive"---with his own originality while the audience simultaneously imagines its artist in his "nakedest passion." The sexuality of the imagery recalls the convention of the poet/muse relationship; yet here the muse is audience in the most extreme condition of communion. "Nakedest passion" suggests the most intimate communion of imaginations, not mere "philandering."

In contrast to the sentimentalist, the "genius of misfortune" does not merely revel in the riotous, seemingly infinite variety of nature; on the contrary, he is "that evil in the self, from which / In desperate hallow, rugged
gesture, fault / Falls out on everything." He is the always already absent source of language and imagination, and his evil, along with its necessary suffering, gives rise to the poet's (and reader's) gesture, his loud and desperate shout, his poem of invitation to the other to soothe his solipsistic solitude. The poet's (as well as reader's) "hallow" contains his hollow or void which needs filling, but also his holy interior, the sanctum sanctorum that poet and reader must always preserve through evasion that shapes "the rugged gesture" and the disfigured terrain of the poem. The poem of invitation—like Satan's temptation, an appeal to "that evil in the self"—lures both genius of mind and genius of body into "wrong and wrong," into the complicated chiasmus of the poem's disfiguration: "The mind, which is our being, wrong and wrong, / The genius of the body, which is our world, / Spent in the false engagements of the mind." The language of eroticism—"spent," "false engagements"—suggests a return to the muse/poet convention, but with a violent twist. The rift between mind and body, self and community, poet and reader arises out of evil's invitation into fault but also resolves itself back into that invitation/invocation, both exhausted and aroused, sterile and fertile. Out of the poet's bleak and barren isolation, out of his "desperate hallow," springs the arena for liminal
exchange, the ceremony of antiphonal evasion that is the new coupling between poet and reflective reader.

Certainly the idea of the fortunate fall is at work here. Riddel makes mention of this in his discussion of "Notes":

In Stevens's secularization of the Fall, the origin of consciousness was the birth of imagination; man grown conscious of himself wills to name the world, to possess it as it once possessed him. He wills the "I am" of poem one, and in willing it completes his fall into an alien world. The paradox is this: without self-consciousness there is no poetry, no need for the fiction which marries self with world. The fall (Adam's or Descartes', that is, our own) is fortunate. (CE 171)

If anything, the idea applies even more fittingly to "Esthetique du Mal." Thus in keeping with the notion that fortune flows from evil, the seemingly bleak tone of canto four gives rise to a highly affirmative canto of the poem in five (CP 317), one that rivals "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" for its note of blissful communion. The poet invites/invokes "all true sympathizers" to participate in a sublime bond among human beings and this new communion of selves provides a consolation that will revitalize the
will against lament. The true sympathizers are invited to come "softly," a word that suggests the advantage of a surreptitious stealth. The poet recommends that his reader creep up evasively in order to draw near "Without the inventions of sorrow." The reflective reader should abandon both contrived emotion and the genuine "sob / Beyond invention." Sorrow itself does not necessarily disappear, but its tearful manifestation is put aside, as if Stevens has in mind Wordsworth's "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

Beyond sobbs and overt, loud displays—in the soft approach that evades notice even as it draws close—lies the allowed intimacy of communion between imaginations, the antiphonies permitted within the mysterious limina of the poem:

Within what we permit,
Within the actual, the warm, the near,
So great a unity, that it is bliss,
Ties us to those we love. (CP 317)

The poem is the permitted frame that envelopes within its disfigurative complication of language the possibility of the poet's and reflective reader's mutual evasion. The bliss of their imaginations' antiphonies weaves a framed evasion that binds the reader/poet interplay. Our "great" unity coheres in the undulating shape of imaginative communion, which is itself "this familiar," the place that is both so near in the words on the page and yet
simultaneously so very far away. It is "For this familiar . . . we forego lament."

The "great . . . unity" of stanza one undergoes a number of appositive transmutations, all of which refer to the poem itself: "this familiar," "this brother," "these regalia," "these things disclosed" and "these nebulous brilliancies." The appositives masquerade as clarifications, but as the poet gestures for the reflective reader to follow and understand, he fades into the "ambiguous undulations" of the poem's surface and its complicated variations on his "appositive ritual" (CP 39). Such is the odd balance achieved between antiphony and evasion in a Stevens poem. The appositives frame the illusion of "so great a unity," but at the same time the frame itself seems to dissolve and dissipate, both arranging form for and allowing liberty to the imagination. Both poet and reflective reader catch fleeting glimpses of "This brother" in "the father's eye." Each sees the reflection of a similar self in the deep gaze into the other's eye, and each becomes the outward projection of the other's perception. The two thrive on words mumbled by "the mother's throat" (the elusive, originating dimension of the poem), but each also breathes language into the mother's originating throat; both poet and reflective reader insufflate the lungs of the poem. Brotherly companions of
"this intimate," they are not the poem as is but the poem always coming to be, a perpetuating communion of imaginations creating the "nebulous brilliancies" that glitter in the intimate yet distant embrace between poet and reflective reader.\(^\text{12}\)

As "the being's deepest darling," the reflective reader reads, paradoxically, with the "smallest look," one which contains "nebulous brilliancies" illuminating the poet's elusive turns.\(^\text{13}\) Indeed, because of the reflective reader's evasive brilliance, "we forego / Lament, willingly forfeit the ai-ai / Of parades in the obscurer selvages."\(^\text{14}\) This "smallest look" suggests, extraordinarily, both the brief, evasive glance of the reflective reader and his minute examination of "these regalia," an examination which in fact explodes into the "nebulous brilliancies" of antiphonal evasion. In the poem's revealed secretions, poet and reader experience their "obscurer selvages" not with ostentatious lamentation—"the ai-ai of parades"—but with the "smallest look," "softly." Stevens plays on "selvage" ("The edge of a piece of woven material finished in such a manner as to prevent the raveling out of the weft" \textit{OED}) to suggest both the crafted border of the poem and the self-edge (among other things, the boundary separating poet and reader).
Within these "obscurer selvages," dwells the "being's deepest darling," yet it is before that very dwelling that the poet's necessary evasion occurs:

Be near me, come closer, touch my hand, phrases
Compounded of dear relation, spoken twice,
Once by the lips, once by the services
Of central sense, these minutiae mean more
Than clouds, benevolences, distant heads.

(CP 317)

The intimate invocations—"Be near me, come closer"—dissipate into "phrases," but these "regalia" of the poem form the selvages (and self-edges) that frame the ceremonies of antiphony. The twice-spoken phrases pass between physical presence (the lips) and imaginary presence ("central sense") to form "the services" or ceremonies of exchange between the poet and his imagined audience, his reflective reader.

The poet invokes and at the same time comments upon invocation as a convention that must be evaded in order not to be restrictive and ossifying. The commentary on invocation becomes a shared evasion as well as a veiled invocation, an invitation to evade what is permitted and thus to create the possibility for the free play ofcommuning imaginations. In contrasting Stevens and Whitman, Byers neatly summarizes such communion:

Whitman's love is founded on the transcendent identity of all things. Stevens's is founded on interdependence and sharing, but these, like a
poem's mediations, are transactions between ourselves and others who remain irrevocably a reality not ourselves. I must love the world not because it is myself, but at least partly because it is not. (75)

The "transactions" between Stevens's poet and reflective reader fit easily into this schema. The "minutiae" of the poem--"these minutiae mean more / Than clouds, benevolences, distant heads"--reside in "the smallest look / Of the being's deepest darling," in the minute details of the shared phrases, the phrases "Compounded of dear relation."

Intimacy and familiarity overcome the obscurity of "clouds, benevolences, distant heads"; indeed, intimacy provides the necessary frame for the evasion of such poetic abstractions. Phrases of invocation are now part of a strategy of evasion. Recasting conventions of a romanticism that existed "Before we were wholly human and knew ourselves," the communing imagination veers away from the ornate and overpowering forms of outward reality--"in-bar / Exquisite in poverty against the suns / Of ex-bar"15--and seeks itself out in the antiphonal frames of shared evasion, "retaining attributes" of "the golden forms," appropriating what is necessary to refashion "the services / Of central sense," and maintaining the distant familiarity with the reflective reader. Again, Byers says this quite well: "The activity of the imagination
enacts the mind's love for the world, and 'the paradise of meaning' (CP, 320) is a paradise because it is the place where the two lovers meet" (76).

The framed evasion appropriates attributes of conventional exchange and grafts them onto new utterances as the final line of the canto makes apparent; "wholly human" suggests holy human and thus retains vestiges of the transcendent aspect of romanticism, which the poet wants to evade but also must somehow maintain. Knowledge of ourselves involves appropriation as well as evasion that somehow does not entirely elude the former conventions and traditions; the new ourselves, the selves of imaginary communion, arise out of the old myself, the super individual or Whitmanian self resident in "Song of Myself." In imaginary communion, poet and reflective reader speak with voices that rise out of the ornate "flower and fire of the festivals / Of the damasked memory of the golden forms" but that reside in an intentional starkness of detail against "distant heads," a created "poverty against the suns / Of ex-bar." Such a disfiguration fashions a place for the poet's and the reflective reader's mysteria of exchange, the coupling that is elusive as well as co-creative.
Notes

1 This idea of refiguration resembles Bakhtin's concept of "re-accentuation" which arises from the interaction between old and new "dialogizing backgrounds": "New images in literature are very often created through a re-accentuating of old images, by translating them from one accentual register to another (from the comic plane to the tragic, for instance, or the other way around)" (421). It is interesting to compare this idea to a brief mention of the "disorder of poetry" that Stevens makes in a May 1944 letter to Henry Church:

Yesterday I loafed in the garden after doing a certain amount of work there, and spent the time thinking about the disorder of poetry; that alone stirs one almost to the point of violence. True, everything seems to be in disorder now-a-days, but the disorder of poetry is its history. (L 467)

2 In a June, 1948 letter to Barbara Church, Stevens comments that "thinking about the nature of our relation to what one sees out of the window . . . without any effort to see to the bottom of things, may some day disclose a force capable of destroying nihilism" (L 602).

3 The term reflective is also meant to suggest the problematics of the supreme reader's mirroring effect. In
this passage from "Metaphoric Staging," Riddel captures much of what I mean to imply about reflection in Stevens's poetry:

Poetry is a certain narcissism, Stevens argues [in "Three Academic Pieces"], and narcissism is "an evidence of the operation of the principle that we expect to find pleasure in resemblances" (NA, 80). Resemblance, however, is never the full equating of the non-identical. Resemblance is a mark of equivalence that also signifies the unequivocal, the irreducible. (328)

4 The Greek word neapolis means new town and thus neapolitan suggests new citizen, an apt adjective for both reader and poet in "Esthetique du Mal." I find Riddel's description of the Neapolitan stranger--"He is modern man: uprooted, alienated, disabused of his faith, man seeking coherence in a world without spiritual coordinates" (CE 204)--more agreeable than Charles Berger's:

[Stevens's] ailing poet has developed a kind of counterstutter, one which blocks him from pronouncing any word other than the painful one. He can no longer substitute the saving if somber figurations of the sublime for the literal torment afflicting him. The book he either reads or composes tries to accommodate itself to the
destructive principle by assuming a pose of stoic
indifference toward both past and imminent
apocalypse. (8)

Riddel has also referred to the Neapolitan stranger or
"writer/reader" as

one of the expeditionary forces of modern poetry,
always in-between, homeless, the impoverished heir
of Wordsworth and Mallarme, sufferer of a "mal"
that he can understand only in the mediations of a
venerable "book." (Metaphoric Staging, 308)

5 Quite possibly Stevens had a soldier in mind for his
letter writer since "Esthetique du Mal" was written during
the height of American involvement in World War II, in 1944.
In fact, the poem was inspired by a letter about "the
relation between poetry and pain" written by a soldier and
sent to the Kenyon Review. See Richardson's discussion of
"Esthetique du Mal" (The Later Years, 230-33).

6 As image of the disfiguring poet's activity,
Vesuvius's eruption disfigures in order eventually to
refigure the landscape.

7 In discussing "Final Soliloquy of the Interior
Paramour," Barbara Fisher claims that
Stevens is deploying the plural we and ourselves,
along with the final together, in such a way as to
suggest a dual person, the grammatical dual that
occurs for example in classical Greek. The voice of the paramour is clearly speaking for both, but more than that, is speaking as both. The first person dual--I-and-you-together-as-one--found in Greek lyric poetry, certainly in Sappho, conveys an intimacy, a rapport, and a unity unavailable to the plural form. It both simplifies and subtilizes discourse, which is what seems to be happening in "Final Soliloquy," and offers a linguistic form for the experience we call communion. (93)

Fisher's remarks about the dual "we" are particularly appropriate to the notion of an exchange between depicted poet and supreme reader, and this usage certainly occurs often throughout Stevens's work.

8 Barbara Fisher offers an excellent comment on Stevens's parodistic style:

Parody offers a playful way to talk about things that are felt to be meaningful but are no longer taken seriously. It constitutes one sort of permissible discourse with institutions of the past. Stevens uses parody to establish a link with traditional sources--the "romantic tenements" of aesthetic form and poetic utterance, the confluence of poetry and religion in a sacred
text. But Stevens is also using parody to separate himself, to maintain distance from these same sources. (24)

See also Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" (364 and 409) for comment on parody in discourse.

Aside from the coy pun on "firm stanzas" that suggests stanzas written at the insurance firm by the insurance executive Wallace Stevens, "firm" calls to mind "form." "Firm stanzas" lean in the direction of ossification but are not fully ossified; they remain malleable, capable of further shaping. They "hang" as if poised precariously ready for some action to be performed on them, as if they have been brought to a certain point and then suspended "like hives in hell."

Bloom tells us that the Spaniard is a horticulturist named Pedro Dot, which suggests a contrast between the disarray of nature unarranged and the garden as ordered presentation.

Thomas Byers has commented on the idea that "Like Whitman, Stevens figures his primary subject as a lover. However, Stevens's beloved is not so fully assimilated to his 'I' voice as is Whitman's to his. Whitman insists on the identity of the lovers (I and soul). Stevens does not." Indeed, if Stevens insists on anything, it is that the lover
is unidentical and capable of maintaining a separate yet equally powerful identity.

12 Henry Church was one of Stevens's dearest friends and perhaps represented to him the image of his ideal reader as well. After his death, in a "Homage To Henry Church," Stevens says

As I saw him in New York, although he was withdrawn, he was eager to make friends and it was clear that his friendships were precious to him. This sort of duality: being withdrawn and at the same time being eager to make friends, was characteristic of him. Thus, in New York, he seemed to be essentially of Paris and, very likely, in Paris, he seemed to be essentially of New York. (L 570)

Stevens might well have been describing his own reserved yet deeply abiding need for companionship, a need for simultaneous intimacy and distance.

13 These "brilliancies" form the regalia of the poem, the emblems of its order, its finery shining forth from the page but also sparkling like a nebula, that vast, cloud-like blur of stars so far away that no individual sun is perceivable. A nebula's stars all cohere in a collective brightness yet derive from individual "brilliancies." A nebula is also "a small, cloudy opacity on the cornea"
(Webster), which suggests again the interplay between intimacy or nearness (a deformation on the eye) and distance (stars so far away they merge into a cloudlike formation of light). The exchange between illumination and blindness also reinforces the notion of visionary comprehension and necessary evasion. It is ultimately the muse herself—"the being's deepest darling"—who both evades and must be evaded.

14 Alison Rieke has pointed out the word play in "Esthetique" on both "ai-mi" (I-me) and "ai-ai" (I-I). Rieke implies that the word play disguises "the refrain of egoism running through the poem" (128). But because of the interaction with the supreme reader, the poet is willing to "forfeit" such egoism.

15 On "in-bar" and "ex-bar" Riddel says, Imperfections become the essence of being. They produce no "inventions of sorrow," but rather joyous affirmations. Thus the "in-bar" of our true self must replace the "ex-bar," those "golden forms" of the old gods into which ancient and primitive man projected his own ideal image. (CE 208)

16 Concerning the transcendent in Stevens, Bloom says, "beyond" in Stevens is where the self must go to find itself more truly and more strange, and we
can venture the formula "beyond" means "beyond the First Idea." There can be no idea of order in Stevens without reducing to a First Idea and then imagining beyond that idea to a new and heightened solitude of power and will. (98)

These arenas of "heightened solitude" comprise the mysterious limina of the poem where solitary poet and supreme reader interact.

As Bloom has pointed out, the sun (in this case "the suns / Of ex-bar") is often associated with Whitman: "For the sun, as in Like Decorations, turns out to be Walt the grassman, and as he says in the great, grassy section 6 of Song of Myself: 'All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses'" (PC 232.)
CHAPTER 4

A LUSTRED NOTHINGNESS: "ESTHETIQUE DU MAL, VI–X"

What things for dream there are when specter-like
Moving among tall haycocks lightly piled,
I enter alone upon the stubble field,
From which the laborers' voices late have died,
And in the antiphony of afterglow
And rising full moon, sit me down
Upon the full moon's side of the first haycock
And lose myself amid so many alike.

Frost, "Waiting"

Canto six of "Esthetique du Mal" (CP 318) turns heavenward not towards the "distant heads" and "suns of ex-bar," but instead towards "The sun, in clownish yellow, but not a clown." The sun, here, recalls Stevens's giant figures such as Phosphor or the large red man, but in clown costume the "brave man" (CP 138) displays an especially comic impoverishment. Still, he is only clownish (not quite a clown), as if retaining a certain nobility despite the disfiguration of his mythical stature. But he is undeniably clownish, if for no other reason than that he daily approaches perfection only to lapse into repeated failure. ¹

Ironically, in his failing, he represents both poet and reader, each constantly approaching an ideal interaction but always falling away, neither one achieving the absolute communion after which he strives. But failure itself ultimately empowers poet and reader, for it makes each, like
the sun, an elusive figure. The poet of disfiguration and
the reflective reader interact in the poverty out of which
each must forge, by evasion, the new. Though clownish,
Stevens's giant figure of the sun "desires / A further
consummation." As poet he longs for union with the muse,
but as reflective reader he craves to desire or unfather or
evade absolute authority. Bloom has spoken powerfully about
this struggle between the poet and his precursors. In The
Breaking of the Vessels, he discusses reading as being
not less aggressive than sexual desire, or than
social ambition, or professional drive. Disabuse
yourself of the lazy notion that any activity is
disinterested, and you arrive at the truth of
reading. We want to live, and we confuse life
with survival. We want to be kind, we think, and
we say that to be alone with a book is to confront
neither ourselves nor another. We lie. When you
read, you confront either yourself, or another,
and in either confrontation you seek power. Power
over yourself, or another, but power. (13)
Interestingly in Stevens, this depicted struggle for power
between poet and reflective reader--his characterized
desiring and evasion--leads to a "further consummation."
The disfiguring poet's pursuit of the reflective reader is a
desiring or deauthorizing of the text. Through his
unceasing evasiveness, the poet resigns responsibility for the text's meaning (as well as resigning and reassigning its meaning). The "further consummation" or antiphonal exchange with the reflective reader is achieved by the evasion of instead of the insistence upon authority.

As a disfiguring poet, Stevens attempts to transmute romanticism into something worldly, something hard or concrete, here instead of transcendent and otherworldly, as he suggests in "The Man With the Blue Guitar":

\begin{quote}
The earth, for us, is flat and bare. There are no shadows. Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,
Even in the chattering of your guitar. (CP 167)
\end{quote}

But at the same time, Stevens desires to refigure the realm of the imagination, and he attempts to achieve this through his communion of imaginations. This strategy of refiguration partly involves the rescuing of the muse—"the tenderest research" fusing heart and head, sentiment and logic, romanticism and realism—but this is only a portion of his "transmutation which, when seen, appears / To be askew." The transmutation seems awry, but the phrase also suggests that it "appears" or manifests itself in order to be "askew," that is, in order to evade what has gone before or to deauthorize and then resign conventions such as those associated with the muse.
The fable of canto six—a disfiguration of the legend of Prometheus—mythologizes the elusive relationship between poet and reflective reader. The rather ludicrous, clownish exchange between the sun and the big bird comically recalls Prometheus's torture by vultures, eternally devouring his liver. But camouflaged beneath this serio-comic revision of Aeschylus's tragedy lies a bizarrely disfigured account of the relationship between poet and reflective reader. Each "desires / A further consummation"—"The big bird's bony appetite / is as insatiable as the sun's"—and the craving of both is a desiring of the other's authority, a mutual deviation into elusive action. The big bird devours the "yellow bloom" of Prometheus's liver, but each manages to evade the other by the transmutation that is a consequence of this devouring. The horror of the bird's devouring is refined "In the landscape of / The sun," and this illumination refigures the terror of Prometheus's being ingested. But at the same time, "when corrected" the big bird's appetite "has its curious lapses, / Its glitters, its divinations of serene / Indulgence out of all celestial sight." Prometheus's descent into "clownish yellow," is matched by the big bird's ascension out of its own imperfection, and this dual and opposing motion suggests the mutual evasion necessary in the reader/poet relationship. Vendler makes the point that "The equilibrated and
restrained language keeps the appetites 'corrected,' and Stevens's central view—that interaction is, above all, interesting—prevails" (EW 215). But the antiphonal exchange depends for its highest success upon each component's elusiveness: "The bird / Rose from an imperfection of its own / To feed on the yellow bloom of the yellow fruit / Dropped down from turquoise leaves." The bird's desire to feed upon the turquoise leaves and the "yellow bloom" elevates and refines, and out of this refiguration comes the "curious lapses" that are described as "glitters" and "divinations of serene / Indulgence."

The reflective reader's imagination feeds upon the failed perfection of the poet, and such nourishment refines away the grossness of the poet's imperfection. The bird's "curious lapses" suggest the deliberate evasions that arise out of a willfulness to explore beyond the restrictive authority of an ossified text, and these lapses transmute into "glitters," flashes of illumination, beauty briefly glimpsed in the sun's light.

These "glitters" and "divinations" arise "out of all celestial sight" both as evasions of the sun's text (the reader is out of sight), and as originating from its far ranging vision. The authority of the sun—"[he] is the country wherever he is"—depends upon his ability both to elude and to be eluded. His country is that which is
simultaneously outside and yet also all encompassing, apart from but also an intimate part of the reflective reader. The evasion of his landscape (but also inclusion paradoxically in that landscape) inspires the bird's "glitters" and "divinations of serene / Indulgence": "The bird / In the brightest landscape downwardly revolves / Disdaining each astringent ripening." The bird represents the downward motion of the sun, but his descent sparks his "Disdaining" and "Evading." The bird, as refigured supreme reader, must evade "the point of redness"--the place where the beak enters the body of Prometheus and where Prometheus's pen enters the body of the reader--for in that evasion he liberates and awakens the communion of imaginations.

Not all resistance and evasion originates in the immensity and promised perfections of the sun's "rejected years" (Bloom's past and the progenitors' revisited texts). The bird is

not content
To repose in an hour or season or long era
Of the country colors crowding against it, since
The yellow grassman's mind is still immense,
Still promises perfections cast away.

Undoubtedly "The yellow grassman's mind" is a reference to Whitman, especially in its merging of the cosmic, natural, and human. But Stevens's communion of imaginations resides
both in the past and the future and intends to encompass the culture yet to be as well as the culture that was.

Canto seven (CP 318-19) shifts from the sun and daylight to darkness, sleep, and the shadows of night. According to Riddel, "This is the central meditation, picking up the affirmation of life in poem five and the paradox of poem six and combining them in a vision of suffering as a meaningful aesthetique experience" (CE 209). The canto dwells on the suffering of soldiers and death and is sepulchral in setting, calling up images of graves and war memorials or monuments. Stevens appropriates the harshest of realities, war and its victims, to demonstrate the affirmative strength of the imagination. Charles Berger has extensively discussed the relation between the imagination and war in Stevens in his *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. He points out that, for Stevens,

> War is the great antagonist of the imagination precisely because it can engage the imagination so seductively. But survival—for the poet and his civilization, the poet in his civilization—is the higher strain to which Stevens testifies throughout his later poetry. (xiii)

Canto seven begins with a powerful disfiguration, mingling beauty and suffering by evoking the rose and the
soldier's wound in juxtaposition: "How red the rose that is the soldier's wound." Both love (the rose) and war (soldiers' wounds) call to mind major poetic themes, and the pun on red/read reminds us that these themes have been read and reread over the centuries, and indeed have been read in blood. Surrounded by the violence of war, we still write and read poetry. In fact the very act of war leads to the poetry of war, no matter how harsh the former or how glamorized the latter: "the soldier's wound, / The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all / The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood," these lead us inevitably to "The soldier of time grown deathless in great size." And it is the very readiness of soldiers' wounds that creates the transcendent soldier.

No consolation is found on this "shadows' hill" for the "deeper death" of the individual, but the central figure that arises as artifact or monument out of the imagination lends consolation by fashioning a communion of the dead who "Form mystical convolutions in the sleep / Of time's red soldier." Riddel makes the point that the deathless soldier "solemnizes" the necessity of suffering and "Hence we share in his wound sacramentally, for it is ours; it binds humanity in a mutual suffering and a mutual joy" (CE 209). The central shadow is encircled by "The shadows of his fellows," almost as if shielded from the view of outsiders,
but the fact that he is a red/read soldier makes him a part of the mysterium that is himself-as-monument to "the wounds of all / The soldiers." Hidden and elusive among the dead that "ring him round," his central presence lends a "serene indulgence" and an elevated consolation to the "mountain in which no ease is ever found"; thus the setting becomes a "high night" where "summer breathes for them / Its fragrance."

For the fellow soldiers, death is "a heavy somnolence" in which "summer breathes for them." For the soldier of time, death--"a summer sleep"--becomes a sublime transcendence achieved through the communion of imaginations of which the fellow soldiers provide a part: "No part of him [the soldier of time] was ever part of death." The important pun on him/hymn suggests that the soldier of time transcends, through the communion of imaginations, the mortality of the individual. But the mortality of the individual soldier is a necessary part of that transcendent artifact, the monument or hymn to the dead soldier. The greatest consolation appears at the end of the canto, as the refigured muse, who both inspires and reads the monument or hymn of the soldier of time. She looks upon the memorial of suffering and, with the gesture of a "true sympathizer," both reads right and inscribes the monument with its own meaning, thus providing "a calm beneath that stroke."
Unlike the soldier of time, who has "grown deathless in great size," Satan is proclaimed dead in the first line of canto eight: "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination" (CP 319-320). The consequences of Satan's death are twofold for the imagination. Most simply, it means destruction or ruin for the imagination, but in addition "tragedy" suggests that Satan's death is a drama for which the imagination (the reflective reader) provides an audience. Thus, the reflective reader, with an affirmation born out of the intense suffering of tragedy, evades the "capital negation" that has "destroyed" Satan.

Canto eight elaborates upon a tension--found earlier in Stevens's "Phosphor Reading By His Own Light"--between the realist reader and the imaginative reader. When the realist denies Satan, he denies the imagination; Satan is intellectualized out of existence "and, with him, many blue phenomena," his accompanying manifestations of the imagination (later addressed as phantoms). The realist's denial--notice that he uses Satan's own means of rebellion--is effective because "negation [is] eccentric." Denial moves beyond the concentric boundary of understanding. The realist's eccentric act--the pronouncement that the giant imagination is not real and that no center exists around which manifestations of the imagination can form--decenters Satan's central imagination. This "capital" denial
 virtually abandons poet and reader to the cold vacancy of Satan's empty tenement: "Phantoms, what have you left? What underground? / What place in which to be is not enough / To be?"

Masquerading as merely rhetorical, the questions actually pose a significant problem and thus evasively tender an invitation/invocation. The poet surreptitiously dons the mask of Satan and interrogates his fellows of imagination, inviting them to search the future for what may reappear and to cull the past for what has been deserted but should be salvaged. The disguised poet re-tenants Satan as central imagination in the dwelling of the realist, but Satan, descended from the extraordinary to the ordinary, dissolves into the "shaken realist" who "First sees reality." He is the disfigured Satan, the "shaken" poet in search of a new and difficult muse and readership: "How cold the vacancy / When the phantoms are gone." His questions invite a readership made up of "poor phantoms" to read as evasive imaginations attempting to recreate a realm suitable for a new communion of imaginations, "the imagination's new beginning." A necessary impoverishment or disfiguration must precede this refiguration; thus, the poet says "You go, poor phantoms, without place / Like silver in the sheathing of the sight, / As the eye closes." The disguised imperative--"go, poor phantoms, without"--recommends
deprivation as a powerful response to the denial of a central imagination.

Stripping away all communion of imaginations, the disfiguring poet disperses his readership and confronts vacancy when left without reader or muse: "The mortal no / Has its emptiness and tragic expirations." Inspiration turns to expiration, readership to empty solitude, but the potential for refiguration exists in the emptiness. The "imagination's new beginning" resides in the "yes of the realist," which rises out of "a passion for yes": "under every no / Lay a passion for yes." Confronting utter emptiness, the poet as "shaken realist" suffers (note the play on "a passion") for affirmation; his instituting of emptiness in the dispersion of his readership allows space for the remaking of the communion of imaginations through antiphonal evasion, an embracing of elusion as the only true means of freedom left for mutual exchange in the realist's realm. Disguised in utter negation, this peculiar "passion for yes" is an affirmation "that had never been broken" (neither destroyed nor broached). Thus, elusive originality rises out of the abandoned tenements of the old. After such an expiration (a disfiguration of the muse's inspiration), the poet re-tenants the imagination in the reflective reader, who recreates the poet's inspiration, breathes back into him the words that are his own. The poet's dispersion
of his readership, in effect, blurs boundaries, causing overlaps in the dwellings of reader, poet, and muse, all separate and yet united in a communion that is the refiguration of imagination, and a new creation born of antiphonal evasion.

In canto nine (CP 320-21), the poet undertakes a disfiguration of the moon, finally leaving only a "lustred nothingness." He strips away the moon's "phosphored sleep" and "majolica dish heaped up with phosphored fruit" to prepare for a new, Panlike "primitive ecstasy"—"Panic in the face of the moon"—that reappears at the end of the canto. At the same time he instructs the "round effendi" on how to read the bare text of the moon. His transmutation reveals a lustred nothingness that no longer mirrors the characteristics that are actually a part of ourselves. Gone are the mysteriously glowing, sleep-walking moon and the good-hearted moon handing out, effendi-like, "phosphored fruit" to "anyone that comes." The new moon no longer reveals itself so easily. There is "nothing . . . left but comic ugliness / Or a lustred nothingness," which none may read, nor want to read.

However, the poet's sleight-of-phrase comedy curbs the defaced purity; his mask of despair slips off enough to reveal a clownish wordplay. For example, the poet's advice to the effendi—"Effendi, he / That has lost the folly of
the moon becomes / The prince of the proverbs of pure poverty"—appears to condemn those who misplace folly. But the speaker's proverb about proverbs also offers a lesson in evasiveness. "Lost" implies not so much misplaced as evaded, left behind, outstripped. Those who can outstrip or evade "the folly of the moon" gain elevated status in a realm of "pure poverty." In addition, the closeness of spelling between poverty and poetry indicates how delightfully (or dangerously) subversive even the simplest looking proverb may be. "Pure poverty" recurs to the notion of necessary impoverishment, full loss, a desiring in order to desire. The pure poetry of disfiguration resides in a necessary poverty—a "passion for yes"—that not only craves affirmation but also suffers for it. Since poverty is necessary, the poet's proverb instructs the reader about this condition and ultimately points toward the power of mutual evasion.

In discussing Stevens's relation to Charles Mauron in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, Leggett offers excellent insight about the poet's attempt to instruct the reader:

Although Stevens extends the motif of irrationality beyond Mauron's rather clear limits, a number of the most obscure passages in Notes are approachable once we recognize that they result from the poet's attempt both to capture and to
impart a quality of the aesthetic attitude the poem describes and simultaneously seeks to inculcate in the reader. That is, the poem resorts to nonsense in attempting to be faithful to its rendering of the aesthetic emotion, and it provides detailed instructions or notes for the reader's training in aesthetic seeing. (95)

Such reader-training (regardless of whether it has any value for actual acts of reading) occurs in "Esthetique du Mal" and all of Stevens's major poems. But perhaps instead of training, we should call such intratextual activity Stevens's re-envisioning of the reader whom he requires in order to write his poetry. The characterized poet's interaction with the effendi in canto nine is just such a re-envisioning.

According to the poet, "to lose sensibility" is "to be destitute," and he tries to explain to the effendi what such loss might entail. First of all, to lose suggests again not only to misplace, but also intentionally to evade sensibility in order "to see what one sees." As in "The Lack of Repose," "One" serves here as a generalizing word but also suggests a unity or communion of evasion, a newly imagined convention between disfiguring poet and reflective reader. A communion of imaginations sees beyond the horizon of the present moment,11 much like a giant Emersonian or
Whitmanian Self, but with the powerful difference that it has evaded "the folly of the moon," romanticism's ideas of correspondence and transcendence.

For Stevens, Romanticism's own evasions, its prodigal revelries in the visionary imagination, create both a prosperity for poetry and a poverty within its figured terrain. As Byers points out, though "Stevens longs to be another prophetic celebrant [like Whitman], he finds himself a skeptic, one who can believe at all only because he accepts the limitations and difficulties of doing so" (43). Thus Stevens's poet surreptitiously advises, "it is this to be destitute," offering a lesson to the effendi—the desired reader—on how to achieve poverty. The divestiture of inspiration—"This is the sky divested of its fountains"—occurs in this necessary destitution partly composed of the complicated evasions of poet and reader. Attempting to get at the sky as desired nothingness, the disfiguring poet and reflective reader strip the sky of its figural adornment through antiphonal evasion.

The disfiguring will-to-see the indifference of crickets and the nothingness of the moon motivates the communing imagination's urge to create anew, out of the "comic ugliness" of the divested sky:

```plaintext
Yet we require
Another chant, an incantation, as in
Another and later genesis, music
That buffets the shapes of its possible halcyon
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Against the haggardie . . . A loud, large water
Bubbles up in the night and drowns the crickets' sound.
It is a declaration, a primitive ecstasy,
Truth's favors sonorously exhibited. (CP 321)

Against the chant of "indifferent crickets" and the pressure
of "indifferent crises," poet and reflective reader require
(and re-choir) another chant, and each fashions the other's
incantation into "Another and later genesis," the
"Imagination's new beginning." Concerning the ending of
canto nine, Riddel says that "loss is transmuted into
affirmation, a yes in which each man is responsible for
making the music that once seemed to reside in the spheres"
(CE 211). The reflective reader provides a Pierian "loud,
large water" rising up from the earth (not as a fountain of
the sky), a water that "drowns the crickets' sound." He
inspires a "primitive ecstasy," Panlike in its frenzy and
intensity, but one that originates in the worldly, as a
communion of imaginations (not from the great god Pan who,
with the romantic's moon, has become a "comic ugliness").

Canto ten focuses on the muse and returns to the
homesick Neapolitan stranger of the first two cantos:13

He had studied the nostalgias. In these
He sought the most grossly maternal, the creature
Who most fecundly assuaged him, the softest
Woman with a vague moustache and not the mauve Maman. (CP 321)

In "the nostalgias," romanticism's long ago and far away,
the Neapolitan stranger seeks the disfigured muse, the "most
grossly maternal" woman. The mother/muse, who "most
fecundly assuage[s]," provides consolation in a world that makes the stranger (poet or reader) inconsolable. Her softness—an evasive silence—coupled with her undeniable physical presence—"the softest / Woman with a vague moustache"—produces such solace. She is gross (primal, earthy, original) instead of refined (civilized, heavenly, derivative), and, in her grossness, she provides the first and strongest audience for all poetic production. Riddel's portrait of Stevens's muse fits nicely the mother/muse here:
The conventional homage to the muse, once a devotional exercise, has become a tired gambit. Stevens like Robert Graves revives it, though unlike Graves, his goddess does not possess him. For Stevens's muse is no unearthly mother, no mystical patroness. Rather, she is very like the body of the world itself, on which the imagination dotes. Mocking an old tradition, Stevens refreshes it and thereby relocates poetry in man's daily adventures without conceding anything to the mythological archetype. (67)

Stevens's muse becomes the most desired home for the poet: "His anima liked its animal / And liked it unsubjugated, so that home / Was a return to birth." Home for the Neapolitan stranger's anima (the spirit of poet or reader) promises a "return to birth" as well as the comfort
of a berth in the physical body or the animal that contains the anima. The distinction between animal (container) and anima (contained) and the interrelationship of each to the other disfigures Romanticism's idea of the soul imprisoned in the body. Instead of imprisonment, the body becomes the spirit's residence and its comfort. The "grossly maternal" body overthrows the transcendent spirit's oppression of the purely physical origins of the self. The animal gives birth to the anima and provides its berth; neither exists without the other. Each is

again a being born

again in the savagest severity,
Desiring fiercely, the child of a mother fierce
In his body, fiercer in his mind, merciless
To accomplish the truth in his intelligence. (212-16)

"The imagination's new beginning" rises out of and takes its strength from "the savagest severity" of this disfigured terrain. As a "rage for order" that escapes the monotony of paradise, the communion of imaginations thrives on its intense, urgent deauthorization ("desiring fiercely") and its elusion of the authority of "one meaning alone." Both child and mother, poet and reflective reader, are merciless in their drive to "accomplish the truth."

Halfway through, canto ten shifts attention to "other mothers" and their relationship to the primal, "grossly maternal" mother:

It is true there were other mothers, singular
In form, lovers of heaven and earth, she-wolves
And forest tigresses and women mixed
With the sea. (CP 321)

Sophisticated versions of the primal mother, these figurally adorned muses are, like the primal mother, containers of and yet comprised mostly by their others, their poet/sons. The primal mother is the poet's starkest home, whereas later adornments of her are "homes / Like things submerged with their englutted sounds." The poet's disfigurations re-invoke the mother as primal audience, and she in turn re-inspires the poet's production; each is "fierce" in the other's body, mind, and intelligence. Their mutual merge (or submerge) of imaginations recreates the "englutted sounds, / That were never wholly still." And in this submerge, the antiphonal exchange transmutes the visionary experience into the poem itself, "never wholly still," constantly eluding through complication, escaping the full grasp of muse, reader, and poet. This primary evasiveness, the other always escaping--"reality, / The gross, the fecund"--provides the temper for the bond between imagination and reality as well as the consolation for suffering:

The softest woman
Because she is as she was, reality,
The gross, the fecund, proved him [and hymn] against the touch
Of impersonal pain. Reality explained.

(CP 321-22)
The disfigured muse as primal audience both tempers and describes the existence of the poet, and the pun on him/hymn suggests the conventional role of muse as inspiring source. In fact, as primal audience, she bears the intimate "touch" arising out of the distant, strange suffering—the "impersonal pain"—that poet and reflective reader experience during their communion of imaginations.

The final line of the canto suggests an untangling of the complications and a disengagement from suffering; clarification might arise out of the possible "innocence of living, if life / Itself was innocent." But the very word "itself" undermines the simplification hinted at, since the word is a compound of it and self that suggests a merging of self and other. It is this merge that "Disentangle[s] him from sleek ensolacings," but such Disentanglings are not so much unravelings of the interwoven self and other, as they are further entanglements that disfigure the facile consolations of romantic transcendence. Reality is harsh and confusing, yet proves the hymn of disfiguring poet and reflective reader, who each evade the entrapment of a too easy solace and complacency.
Notes

1 Vendler asserts that canto six is the most successful of what she believes are "Esthetique's" generally unsuccessful cantos:

If the flawed was painful to Stevens, it was also attractive, and the most original and confident passage in the poem is one where Stevens tells an indulgent parable of the yellow sun and its parasitic bird, both insatiable. The opening is both sympathetic and comic, as each sentence rises and then sprawls in collapse. (EW 213)

2 In March 1935, Stevens wrote a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer in which he has this to say about Romanticism:

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

3 Again there are echoes here of the fortunate fall. See Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (171).

4 In his essay "Two or Three Ideas," Stevens says that Since we have always shared all things with [the gods] and have always had a part of their strength and, certainly, all of their knowledge, we shared likewise [their] experience of annihilation. It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness. (OP 260)

5 In "Metaphoric Staging," Riddel points out that the negation of satan is a double negation, the negation of negation, a disruption of the dialectic of history, and thus a negation of the "underground," where "phantoms" (fallen images) reside until they are returned to their origin or are reerected as capital figures once again. (312)
My contention is that they are "reerected," or refigured, as readers.

6 The word is derived from the Latin *capitalis*, which means "of the head."

7 Stevens's frequent play upon the notion of impoverishment perhaps recalls Coleridge's discourse on the secondary imagination in the *Biographia Literaria*:

> It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (516)

8 Compare Roy Harvey Pearce's discussion of decreation in Stevens:

> Stevens's method . . . when decreation is involved, is quite simply the method of reduction--or negation--as a way of thinking about the world. But what is reduced/negated is not the world, reality (for that is by definition impossible), but rather the imagination itself. Such a reduction/negation is, however, only temporary, a way on to a further stage. ("Toward Decreation" 289)

9 About the pun on "passion," Riddle says
The "passion" for "yes" reveals the movement of writing as a death. The restoration of Satan in the "yes of the realist" is a "passion" of writing that fills in the old "vacancy" or absence and begins again the assassin's movement of a language of substitutions, displacements, or temporal movement. ("Metaphoric Staging" 312)

10 In canto nine, the word "Panic," which occurs twice, calls to mind not only extreme and irrational fear leading to impulsive and unreasonable behavior, but also the demigod Pan from which "panic" is derived.

11 Leggett elaborates on the importance of the future for the Stevensian poet:

Because the great poem of the earth, the supreme fiction, always lies ahead, proper work remains for the new poet to perform. The realization that "It Must Change"—that the imagination is always attaching itself to a new reality—posits an infinity of imaginative space for the poet. (55)

I would substitute for "new poet" Stevens's imagined supreme reader, who may or may not be a poet of the future. In any case, this incessantly deferred realization of meaning actually provides the poet of the present with his inspiration, the knowledge that his own poetry will be
always refreshed and made new by the evasiveness of the
supreme reader.

12 Near the end of his life, Stevens writes this about
Whitman in a February 1955 letter to Joseph Bennett: "It
seems to me . . . that Whitman is disintegrating as the
world, of which he made himself a part, disintegrates.
Crossing Brooklyn Ferry Exhibits this disintegration" (L
871).

13 I agree with Riddel's claim that the figure who
appears at the beginning of "Esthetique" and whom I have
been calling the Neapolitan stranger reappears in cantos 10
and 12 (CE 203).

14 Stevens often puns on Dis as Hades in words with the
dis prefix.
CHAPTER 5

THE DARK ITALICS: "ESTHETIQUE DU MAL, XI-XV"

But soft! Sink low!
Soft! let me just murmur,
And do you wait a moment you husky-nois'd sea,
For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me,
So faint, I must be still, be still to listen,
But not altogether still, for then she might not come immediately to me.
Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"

The harshness of "Esthetique's" disfigured terrain is fully embraced in canto eleven (CP 322-23). "Life is a bitter aspic" and as such is simultaneously nourishing and difficult to swallow. Life's suffering occurs as a commonplace that is comical in its horror:

At dawn,
The paratroopers fall and as they fall
They mow the lawn. A vessel sinks in waves
Of people, as big bell-billows from its bell
Bell-bellow in the village steeple. Violets,
Great tufts, spring up from buried houses
Of poor, dishonest people, for whom the steeple,
Long since, rang out farewell, farewell, farewell.
(CP 322)

War, disastrous accidents, even death pass by like mere domestic duties performed each day: the mowing of the lawn, the ringing of steeple bells, the cultivating of violets. The sing-songy rhymes, alliteration, and ludicrous imagery of canto eleven create darkly comic effects that suggest the "comic ugliness" and ordinariness of suffering: dawn and
lawn, people and steeple, the "big bell-billows . . . bell / Bell-bellow." Such lightness of language, while delightful in itself, contrasts horrifyingly with the associated ideas, but in a world "not / At the centre of a diamond," all suffer a necessary impoverishment, the only consolation depending on the poet's and reflective reader's tortuous skills as mutual imaginers: "Natives of poverty, children of malheur / The gaiety of language is our seigneur." An intricate, complicated, evasive game, language provides a dark pastime for the "children of malheur" sharing in, exchanging, creating and recreating life through antiphonally imaginative enterprises. The reader "of bitter appetite" hates the facile glamorization and elevation of war and disaster and death: "A well-made scene in which paratroopers / Select adieux" or "A ship that rolls on a confected ocean, / The weather pink, the wind in motion" or "A steeple that tip-tops the classic sun's / Arrangements; and the violets' exhumo." As Eleanor Cook points out, "Canto xi . . . is a poem of violent protest against popular nostalgia or a debased sublime, with some of Stevens's most angry word-play" (206). She goes on to show that [Stevens's] wild punning and black humor may have something to do with the blockage that is part of the sublime--a feeling of helplessness before the flood of pretty, saccharine phrases about death.
He selects four well-made scenes in which death is sweetened, then re-presents them as something he despises, in a mood of "bitter appetite." (Cook 207)

Yet words can console: "The tongue caresses these exacerbations." The language of antiphonal evasion—as opposed to evasion as idealization or glamorization—provides a solace.

But even language causes suffering. The very evasiveness of words passed between poet and reflective reader becomes threatening and oppressive. The poet refers to language as "our seigneur," a lord and master who, while he may provide shelter and comfort in a hostile world, may also tyrannize over the independence of both poet and reflective reader. Riddel makes this point in "Metaphoric Staging":

The self no longer governs language, but is governed by it. Language is no longer mediation but the law of the game. . . . The self is no longer at "the center of a diamond." The old mythology of moon/sun, of subject/object or inside/outside, no longer accounts for a language through which man, substituting for his "over-human god," regulates the world. (311)
Still, poet's and reflective reader's "exacerbations" derive meaning at least partly from the Epicurean qualities of the language: "They press it as epicure, distinguishing / Themselves from its essential savor, / Like hunger that feeds on its own hungriness." The uncanny circularity of hunger that feeds on itself perhaps best describes the dark side of the relationship between poet and reflective reader and the mysterious limina between the two. Hunger as food for hunger satisfies the appetite, but in the very act of satisfying creates and intensifies that appetite. Hunger thrives on itself, a viciously circular arrangement and one that ultimately produces the dark "grin" (hungriness) that stares menacingly out of the final word of this canto. Such a grin, produced by the Epicurean evasiveness of imagination and language, is indeed a bleak moment in "Esthetique du Mal," a low point that occurs within the seemingly affirmative declaration that "The gaiety of language is our seigneur."²

The Neapolitan stranger's meditation on solitude and its forms of knowing succeeds the low point of canto eleven:

He disposes the world in categories, thus:
The peopled and the unpeopled. In both, he is
Alone. But in the peopled world, there is,
Besides the people, his knowledge of them. In
The unpeopled, there is his knowledge of himself.
Which is more desperate in the moments when
The will demands that what he thinks be true?
(CP 323)
Read as a meditation on the relation between the disfiguring poet and his reader (and their mutually interactive imaginations), the canto exposes the agonistic involution of the two. The disfiguring poet suffers, whether in the peopled or the unpeopled world. In both, he is bereft of his desired audience, the reflective reader. Whether the poet knows "himself in them" (both himself and the hymn of self as it relates to and is antiphonally created by his audience) or whether he knows "they in him" (the audience as they are created by him and the hymn of self) each may tyrannize destructively over the imagination: "This knowledge / Of them and of himself destroys both worlds, / Except when he escapes from it." Evasion, most especially evasion of knowledge, presents an alternative to mutual destruction:

To be
Alone is not to know them or himself.
This creates a third world without knowledge, In which no one peers, in which the will makes no Demands. (CP 323)

This "third world" alternative--mutual evasion, evasion inspired by evasion--is seemingly satisfying. Solitude implies a new condition, one that liberates the self while fashioning a hymn of the self. And such solitude frees the self to reside simultaneously in a communion of imaginations and in an independence from constraining knowledge and the ossification of definitive understanding. In attempting to
explain the difficulty of Stevens's poetry, Leggett observes that

The chief source of the obscurity that characterizes [Stevens's] poetry throughout the forties is his desire to employ a language that is least susceptible to being fixed, a language that approaches the nonsemantic quality of the candid moment when the world is freed from conventional naming. If he cannot duplicate this moment in words, he can at least produce a poetry that resists as long as possible its inevitable exhaustion by the intellect into cliche and prose.

(134)

As Leggett suggests, the relationship between poet and reader is agonistic. Accordingly, Stevens articulates a reader who "is content to remain in an indeterminate condition, prolonging the moment of contemplation, resisting the intellectual urge to exhaust each figure or connection" (Leggett 111). But Stevens's reflective reader does not stare in voyeuristically, as if an intellectual outsider; instead, he envisions integrally and intimately, as a participating recreator who evades and actively re-imagines the disfigured hymn of the self. Such is the communion between disfigured selves, the antiphonal exchange between imaginations desired so intensely by the lone poet.
However, a disturbing emptiness echoes through the last
stanza and manifests itself harshly in the canto's final
lines:

[The will] accepts whatever is as true,
Including pain, which, otherwise, is false.
In the third world, then, there is no pain. Yes, but
What lover has one in such rocks, what woman,
However known, at the centre of the heart?

(CP 323)

The will's malleability begins to sound like resignation.
The ghost of Alexander Pope seems to linger here claiming
that "Whatever is, is right!" But the apparently facile
optimism finally buckles under the burden of the final,
bleak rhetorical question. The canto leaves us in a barren,
sterile waste, wandering through the amazing poverty of
Stevens's "third world." Here is the one place left for the
"imagination's new awakening," but that awakening discovers
the self to be isolated, without a lover, without inspiring
muse. Still, the final lines are neither entirely
rhetorical nor entirely bleak; they recall, in part, the
disfiguring poet's quest, in the midst of his
impoverishment, for the evasive reflective reader, who can
celebrate the ceremonies of antiphony even amid the
diminished landscape of the poet's disfigured terrain. The
final question thus tenders a disfigured invocation/
invitation to "what woman, / However known, at the centre of
the heart."
As Riddel has suggested, "Esthetic du Mal" is "an intellectual lyric, which analyzes the historical failures of imagination to account for the essence of the human—imperfection" (CE 202). Canto thirteen begins as a particularly ironic examination of such a failure:

> It may be that one life is a punishment
> For another, as the son's life for the father's.
> But that concerns the secondary characters.
> It is a fragmentary tragedy
> Within the universal whole. (CP 323-24)

Mortality or "destiny unperplexed" overwhelms conventional meditations on moral order; they become merely a mulling over broken forms that seem darkly comic now. Fractured, elusive, and puzzling to its audience, tragedy has transformed into irony, and the clown has supplanted the hero. While "the universal whole" seems to imply an order, it is one no longer concerned with morality. Indeed, the homonymic play on whole/hole implies that absence has become the new order. The universe is an empty chamber from which all value has been evacuated. The sterility of the old order is perfectly apparent: "The son / And the father alike and equally are spent" (278-79). The old relationships are dead or at least diminished to the point of insignificance now. Once again poet and reader find themselves staring at the stark necessity of disfigured impoverishment. They stand at the center of desolation, yet an undercurrent of
impending renewal presses urgently and evasively back against the threat of their psychic ruin.

The Emersonian romance of individuality, coupled with "unalterable" (note the pun on un/altar/able) animality, has contributed toward impoverishing the old communion between father and son as well as between poet and reader:

The son
And the father alike and equally are spent,
Each one, by the necessity of being
Himself, the unalterable necessity
Of being this unalterable animal. (CP 324)

To be human is to be unsanctifiably animal and as such completely unsubjected to any moral laws originating in a universal order. There is instead only Stevens's necessary evacuation of all value and his disfiguration of the imagination's terrain.

At this utter nadir of existence, resignation becomes a seductive alternative to any active struggle against universal vacancy. Moral order has collapsed into a "fragmentary tragedy," and the "force of nature in action" has substituted itself as "the major / Tragedy." But this new drama requires a new audience, a reflective reader, to understand the terrifying simplicity of "destiny unperplexed, / The happiest enemy." Instead of resigning out of despair, the reflective reader transmutes communion through powerfully active meditation:

And it may be
That in his Mediterranean cloister a man,
Reclining, eased of desire, establishes
The visible, a zone of blue and orange
Versicolorings, establishes a time
To watch the fire-feinting sea and calls it good.

This cloistered meditator seems resigned and complacent in
the face of "destiny unperplexed," but his apparent
resignation before his "happiest enemy" disguises a strength
that resigns or reassigns creatively as he compares evil to
evil and identifies as "The ultimate good" his "time / To
watch the fire-feinting sea."

The meditator's cloister is an apt emblem for his
powerful imagination, a sanctum sanctorum of evasive
resignings in the midst of apparent resignation. The
meditator is "Reclining, eased of desire" much like Andrew
Jackson Something leaning over his book in "The Lack of
Repose." Leaning back, taking his ease, he evades, desires,
and refigures "the major / Tragedy," fashioning "The
visible, a zone of blue and orange / Versicolorings." His
action functions as antiphonal vision--the liminal exchange
between himself-as-audience and "the assassin's scene"--out
of which arises "a reality / Of the longest meditation."
The reflective reader's meditation is both a product of
antiphonal exchange and its instigation. Ultimately it
becomes the climactic "assassin's scene" when "The assassin
discloses himself." This phrase echoes strongly back
through "Sunday Morning" and "Death is the mother of
beauty." Out of antiphonal exchange, death reveals (and
reveils) itself as "the force that destroys us."
Consequently, poet and reflective reader learn that
mortality reveals the new hymn of the self; it becomes the
inspiration that apposes word with world (and poet with reader) through the communing acts of evasive imaginations.
"Within / This maximum" mortality becomes "an adventure to be endured / With the politest helplessness."

When the poet sighs "Ay-mi," resignation sounds all but final in canto thirteen. Yet the interjection also suggests a shout of the most primordial type, a refiguration of the original moment of language, rising out of the inspiration of mortality. "Ay-mi!" (I-me!) bursts forth in a surge of self-creation and reveals the evasive ecstasy swelling up from the mysterious intuition of nature's power and from the coupling of poet and reflective reader as one in that power: "One feels its action moving in the blood." The shout precipitates an intensity of communion—the "ring of men" who "chant in orgy" participating in visionary antiphony—that occurs, during the "imagination's new awakening," between disfiguring poet and reflective reader.

Little has been said about canto fourteen (CP 324-25) even though it is one of the most important moments of "Esthetique du Mal." Bloom only mentions in passing that "Stevens's polemic is too political and so too narrow" (PC 235). He misses entirely the subtle instruction that the
canto offers Victor Serge, who should, according to the
disfiguring poet, cultivate the reflective reader's
aesthetic of evasion as a way to resist the logical lunacy
of violence in a war-torn and politically unstable world.
The poet quotes a passage from Victor Serge's "The
Revolution at Dead-End" that reveals how Serge reads
Konstantinov during an encounter: "'I followed his argument
/ With the blank uneasiness which one might feel / In the
presence of a logical lunatic.'" The poet's commentary on
this passage is both an evasion of logical lunacy
(Konstantinov's as well as Serge's) and a lesson to Serge on
how one should read. Essentially, the poet recreates Serge
into his desired reflective reader.

The passage quoted from Serge's book attempts to
pressure its readers into a political confrontation; the
reader must grapple with the necessity of a political frame
of reference. But the poet subtly and subversively evades
this insistence, and thus exemplifies how his longed-for-
reader should react to such a text. The disfiguring poet's
first stratagem for evading the demand that the reader heed
the apparent dangers of the world's Konstantinovs at the
expense of all else—in other words, that politics take
precedence over aesthetics—is to include Victor Serge among
those whom Serge himself has labeled "logical lunatic(s)."
The poet asserts that "Revolution / Is the affair of logical
lunatics."10 His point is that not only do logical lunatics conduct revolutions, they also provide commentary on those revolutions, as well as conduct counter-revolutions. Since Victor Serge has made it his business to write about revolution, he has in effect become one with the logical lunatics. For these, art or imagination, or aestheticism in general, must take its place behind the "reality" of political action in the world. Through the artistry of political violence or manipulation, the logical lunatics lend their "politics of emotion" an "intellectual structure," the deadliest of disguises, to create a political structure that looks logical, but is founded upon lunacy.

Thus the poet's second stratagem is to point out that while politics relies upon aesthetics, it is an aesthetics of violence, oppression, and manipulation, instead of an aesthetics of imaginative communion and interaction. In order to please and to persuade its readers, revolution must appear naturally to fit "an intellectual structure." But the poet suggests that an aesthetics of politics oppresses, while one of imaginative communion (meditation) liberates. As Riddel puts it, "The poetic lunatic is a revolutionist who overthrows the 'logical lunatic'" ("Metaphoric Staging" 314). The poet's own reading builds upon a resistance to or a revolt from the pressures of the logical lunatics; he
attempts to liberate the imagination from their oppressive texts, their causes that create "a logic not to be distinguished / From lunacy." Such texts are indeed powerful, if for no other reason than because of their ability to merge logic and lunacy, to make reason complicated and illusory. The only reader who can resist such power is one who is equally evasive, equally illogical in pursuit of a confusion that eludes detection. Victor Serge is not such a reader. He is somehow awestruck by the presence of Konstantinov, and thus he cannot resist the pull toward the logical lunacy of political aesthetics. Serge's imagination gives way before lunatic reason; he does not "meet" Konstantinov, cannot equal or overpower him. Confronting the revolutionary, he is left blank, speechless, and uneasy.

Serge's mediocre reading of Konstantinov provides the occasion for the poet's refiguration of the reader. His transmutation of Serge occurs in the latter two-thirds of the canto after an elliptical pause: "... One wants to be able to walk / By the lake at Geneva and consider logic." The rereading of Konstantinov and the refiguring of Serge into a reflective reader occur at Geneva, a neutral territory or arena of liminal exchange where negotiation can occur between rivals. But what seems most important to the poet here is a place and time to "consider logic," to
meditate calmly and as "one," as in a communion of imaginations.

Meditation--"a promenade amid the grandeurs of the mind"--most successfully evades Konstantinov and resigns his power to "the worlds of logic in their great tombs." The poet's refiguration of Victor Serge's response into a meditative walk among the graves and tombs of the logicians overwhelms Konstantinov, whose own limitations become all too apparent against both the mysterium of mortality and "a world of ideas." The graves and tombs of the great logicians represent the sanctum sanctorum which their own logic can never enter but which they themselves cannot avoid. The very fact that the promenade takes place among tombs suggests that the antiphonal coupling of disfiguring and evasive imaginations comes much closer to understanding mortality than do the Konstantinovs with their lunacy of "one idea." As reflective reader of Konstantinov, the re-imagined Serge strolls contemplatively along the lake shore, not so much complacent as calm and intensely aware, alert, interiorized, imagining "clouds like lights among great tombs."

As a consequence of his meditative stroll, the refigured Victor Serge acquires "a blank uneasiness": "A promenade amid the grandeurs of the mind, / By a lake, with clouds like lights among great tombs, / Gives one a blank
uneasiness." The result of the promenade seems to be the same as that of Serge's meeting with Konstantinov described at the canto's beginning. But the subtle differences are significant. It is not the actual meeting with Konstantinov that forces "blank uneasiness" upon Serge, but rather the meditative walk that gives it, as if to strengthen Serge against the inevitable approach of a Konstantinov. The meditative imagination gives the refigured Victor Serge the power to meet the Konstantinovs of the world, to elude them, and by that very evasion to overcome them, in fact to relegate them to where they will eventually end anyway, with the other dead "martyrs of logic." With such strength, "one might meet Konstantinov," might powerfully and evasively encounter as well as counter him, not with the vulnerability of Victor Serge who receives the wound of "blank uneasiness" but with the endurance ("an adventure to be endured") of an imagination fired in the crucible of Stevens's necessary impoverishment, the "blank uneasiness" of the evasive imagination.

Against the elusive imagination of such a recreated reader as the poet's Victor Serge, Konstantinov begins to look diminutive and narrow:

He would not be aware of the lake.
He would be the lunatic of one idea
In a world of ideas, who would have all the people
Live, work, suffer and die in that idea
In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the clouds,
Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire. His extreme of logic would be illogical. (CP 325)

The supreme weakness is to be unaware of change and process, especially in a world of suffering and death. And where the evasive imagination is powerful, Konstantinov's ossified strength is immensely diminished. The poet's imagined clouds are an apt emblem for the endlessly altering evasions of the reflective reader, heavenly opacities that reflectively illuminate while they create the possibility of antiphonal coupling. These clouds reflect the "white fire" that lights "the martyrs of logic" Pentecost-like, and in their own astounded conditions of mysterious interaction they themselves become, in their descent, the poet's reflective readers, inspiring by their flaws, and whom his own flawed evasions re-inspire and re-elevate.

The opening of "Esthetique's" final canto (CP 325-26) -- "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair" -- echoes Thoreau's discussion of why he went to Walden: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, . . . I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary." Thoreau goes to the woods to evade the impoverishment and despair of living life that "was not life." For both Stevens and Thoreau, resignation is an unevasive capitulation to the
despair that the mass of men experience in their lives. But Stevens excludes from his disfigured terrain the transcendence that Thoreau discovers during his sojourn at Walden. The feeling "that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair" (in other words, desire that can neither be distinguished from despair nor articulated because of despair) and the consequential impoverishment of poet and reflective reader must be confronted. For poet and reflective reader, the new adventure is to conceive of "a race / Completely physical in a physical world."

Since the metaphysicals are not "completely physical," since they are separated so entirely from the world out there, the physical world's advent has an overpowering effect on them: "The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals / Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat, / The rotund emotions, paradise unknown." But their overawed condition need not mean complete abasement. The gleaming of the corn both eludes detection and allures the metaphysicals on to discover its mystery. "Sprawling in majors of the August heat" suggests not only a condition of paralysis but an ecstatic state as well. This disguised inspiration arouses "The rotund emotions, paradise unknown" that can empower poet and reflective reader. The commonplace site of a field of green corn contains the wholly unsuspected paradise; the ordinary is extraordinary.
Such is "the thesis scrivened in delight / The reverberating psalm, the right chorale." Disfiguring poet and reflective reader conceive of themselves as merely physical beings living in a physical world and thus each inscribes a delight, but one that bears both a sense of elation and a sense of suffering, as if delight were lacerated by the harshness of the scrivening blade. Their act of writing comprises a reverberating psalm that echoes antiphonally between their communing imaginations as the "right chorale."

The disfiguring poet concedes that there is an immense antipathy between the physical world and the metaphysical selves that inhabit that world, but out of his disfiguration of that antipathy arises a communion of imaginations. Poetry—"speech" that has "found the ear"—arises both out of and in spite of "the evil sound": "Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound." The internal rhyme between found and sound suggests the intimate relationship between the chaos of "evil sound" and the order of the poet-reader struggle to found itself against and within that sound.

Disfiguring poet and reflective reader sense that where self and other collide (and merge), there is found the "dark italics" that speech "could not propound." The odd, mysterious coupling of poet and reflective reader within the secret, elusive, unilluminated limina that are the "dark italics"—something which is both integral to and set off
from the remainder of the text—is the antiphonal communion of imaginations that cannot be propounded. What is seen, heard, and felt can not have been imagined by a single, powerful, solipsistic imagination. No Hoon can have fashioned "so many selves," such a multiplicity of other imaginations fashioning speech from a multiplicity of chaotic worlds:

who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.14 (CP 326)

The poet and his readership are an organized chaos (a swarm of selves, which recalls the hive image of canto three) moving from a disfigured terrain to a new and wholly refigured realm. They bear a mystery with them—"the dark italics"—that inheres in their communion of imaginations.
Notes

1 The bizarre image of paratroopers mowing the lawn evidently comes from a dream told to Stevens by Henry Church's wife: "Mrs. Church sometimes related her dreams to Mr. Stevens (L 516-17), and in this case it appears that Morpheus had brought her images of paratroopers who, as they fell, mowed the lawn" (Richardson, Wallace Stevens: The Later Years 233).

2 James Longenbach makes the point that "the gaiety of language is indeed what Stevens seeks throughout 'Esthetique du Mal,' but in canto nine the gaiety is offered at the expense of suffering, and its art is not a cure for suffering but is complicit in the disease" (241).

3 Numerous remarks in his letters demonstrate Stevens's problematic relationship with his contemporary readers. In a letter to R. L. Latimer in August 1935 Stevens sardonically remarks that "selling poetry now-a-days must be very much like selling lemonade to a crowd of drunks" (L 284). In January 1943, he wrote to Louise Bechtel that The reviews of Parts of a World have not been very helpful. [Hi] Simons wrote an exceedingly intelligent notice, trying to put the thing together. What a poet needs above everything else
is acceptance. If he is not accepted, he is wasting time, so far as his readers are concerned, although not so far as he himself is concerned. I cannot imagine any of the reviews, except possibly the one by Simons, doing much in the way of helping one to be accepted. By being accepted, I mean the sort of thing that is meant when you ask for a book by so-and-so. That this element is lacking in my own case is demonstrated by the fact that no one seems to enjoy the poems. (L 433)

Finally, in a letter to HI Simons in January 1943, he rather lamentingly reveals the value of a sympathetic reader:

Possibly one never has more than a very few readers who pick up the feelings that one puts into one's poems. In my case, I think you are one of those two or three. It seems to me to be unquestionably true that, for a long time, the reviewers underestimate one; then, when one is accepted, they overestimate one. This is inevitable; people can't stop to put one man under the microscope. (L 436)

4 Stevens was certainly acquainted with Pope, possibly from early in his life since his father presented his mother with a copy of The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope for
Christmas in 1871 before they were married (Richardson 39; see also p. 48).

5 If absence is not itself an order, it is what arouses the "rage to order," as Riddel seems to suggest:

What modern man had was not imaginative forms of explanation, but imagination; not the old mythologies, but the human power that created them and gave them life. Whatever had passed, there remained the human and its commitment to order, to aesthetic. Thus "Esthetique du Mal. . . . " (CE 202)

6 Cloister is from the Latin **claustrum** which in ecclesiastical Latin meant the place in the monastery shut away from the laity, a type of holy of holies.

7 Bloom writes that "Stevens's most ambitious aesthetic may be the reduction to a First Idea, but his more human aesthetic was the reimagination of the First Idea" (PC 233). But reduction (disfiguration) and reimagination (refiguration) seem too distinct here, as if one might occur without the other. There is a closely interwoven relationship between the two impulses that Bloom seems to overlook.

8 The passage is quoted in Stevens's commonplace book, *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects* (79). Longenbach offers this on Serge and Stevens:
Serge, a member of the Left Opposition to the
Leninist regime, describes in his memoir a meeting
with Konstantinov, who was suffering from paranoid
delusions. Serge's conclusion is not that
"Revolution / Is the affair of logical lunatics"
but that there was an accidental yet profound
truth in Konstantinov's ravings: "in what he said
there was the germ of a basic idea, and it was not
the idea of a madman: 'We did not fight the
revolution for this.'" Stevens twists Serge's
point into a condemnation of political labyrinths
in general. . . . (242)

9 Lisa Steinman discusses a similar act of reader
creation by the poet/narrator of "Country Words":
In effect, the narrator's desire and resultant
activity create the figure desired, so that the
final image of Belshazzar reading and alive is no
longer that of a pillar 'of a putrid people' (CP
207), but of a poetic process that might save
societies from putrefying. (166)

10 Stevens feels, according to Rajeev Patke, that the
revolutionary
does not make proper allowances for the emotive
origins of his desire. In comparison, it is the
poetic imagination which is the truly
'irrepressible revolutionist' (NA 152), and Konstantinov is merely a type of the contemporary conspirator, as empty headed as he is starving. (182)

11 Note also that the setting is on the lake shore, a liminal position between water and land. Patke remarks that "lakes are apt locales for meditation, and Konstantinov's obliviousness of the lake he walks by is a result of the poverty of his imaginative response to the 'mal' of life" (183).

12 In her excellent *Made in American: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets*, Lisa Steinman has a great deal to offer on process and its importance to modernist poets in general. In discussing "Owl's Clover," another of Stevens's works that seems more than usually political in content, Steinman points out that No one static figure can adequately represent poetic process: the activity by which man might recreate his image of himself and his world can only be continual if the images proposed are dismantled in order to allow for new images. In fact, the dismantling of his figures is what distinguishes Stevens's central imagination from the ideology he opposes in "Owl's Clover."

Insofar as his central imagination cannot be
portrayed in a static figure, the figures proposed allow Stevens to make his grand claims for art and imagination because they are qualified and replaced. (153)

13 For a discussion of Thoreau's influence on Stevens see Errol M. McGuire's "'A Mythology Reflects Its Region': Stevens and Thoreau." McGuire mentions echoes of Thoreau in "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," "The Man with the Blue Guitar (XXXIII)," and "Credences of Summer."

14 Berger's comment on the final canto of "Esthetique" is helpful:

Instead of opposing force with force, Stevens seems to adopt an attitude of divide and conquer—divide the self, that is, in order to avoid being conquered by the violence from without. His vision of proliferating selves . . . and worlds amounts to a denial of our extinction; we cannot be eradicated if traces of us are present in everything we see and hear and feel. (32)
Thus the theory of description matters most. 
It is the theory of the word for those 

For whom the word is the making of the world, 
The buzzing world and lisping firmament. 

It is a world of words to the end of it, 
In which nothing solid is its solid self. 
"Description Without Place"

The antiphonies of evasion between Stevens's poet and his supreme reader reach a moment of crisis in "The Auroras of Autumn." In chapters six and seven, I discuss how "Auroras" depicts the unceasing and strenuous struggle of the reader's and the poet's powerful imaginations, each wrestling elusively to liberate itself from liminal intercourse with the other.¹ More and more, the disfiguring poet's and supreme reader's evasions become a veering away from each other instead of a joint evasion of conventional modes of figuration. Thus I have chosen to call "Aurora's" version of the supreme reader the refractive reader as opposed to "Esthetique's" reflective reader. Bakhtin's figurative discussion of dialogism as a type of refraction helps shed light on my idea of the refractive reader:

If we imagine the intention of . . . a word, that is, its directionality toward the object, in the
form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself (as would be the case in the play of an image-as-trope, in poetic speech taken in the narrow sense, in an "autotelic word"), but rather as its spectral dispersion in an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle. (277)

At the same time that the refractive reader distorts and bends the poem's ray-words, his antiphonal evasiveness "makes the facets of the image sparkle" for the disfiguring poet. The supreme reader depicted in "Esthetique" certainly exhibits some of the refractive reader's unsponsored evasiveness, but in "Auroras" this tendency is carried to an extreme (one which continues, but with special qualifications, in "An Ordinary Evening In New Haven").

"Aurora's" refractive reader has something in common with the Bloomian notion of the Uberleser, which Bloom presents as the scandal of Academia in The Breaking of the
Vessels. What is so powerfully disturbing about Bloom's Uberleser is that it suggests an unrestrainable creativity inherent in every act of interpretation:

no reader, however professional, or humble, or pious, or disinterested, or "objective," or modest, or amiable, can describe her or his relationship to a prior text without taking up a stance no less tropological than that occupied by the text itself. (30)

Bloom goes on to quote a lengthy passage from "The Oversoul" in which Emerson asserts that "The great poet makes us feel our own wealth, and then we think less of his compositions. His greatest communication to our mind is to teach us to despise all he has done" (396). "Despise" is the operative word here for Bloom since it evokes the important feeling of anxiety so central to his aesthetic. But despite is not necessarily the residue remaining after the reader/poet contention depicted in "The Auroras of Autumn." The refractive reader does not come to despise the poem, but instead helps to refigure it in its own self-defeat as James Longenbach calls the achievement of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

I think we could best appreciate the power of Stevens's finest work by thinking of its point as the self-defeat of poetry. In saying so, I do not
mean to diminish in any way that poetry's power,
its verbal delights, its fabulous confections, and
its visionary ecstasies. . . . (265)

For Longenbach, this self-defeat indicates the poem's
realization of the extraordinary within the ordinary or "the
wonder of the common world" (264). But beyond this
realization of the ordinary through the poem's self-defeat
(or disfiguration, as I have been calling it), a
refiguration takes place which liberates the contending
imaginations of both poet and refractive reader.2

From the beginning of canto one (CP 411-12),
"Auroras's" every limen "wrigglets" out of both refractive
reader's and disfiguring poet's hold and continues its
elusive undulation throughout. Every volution not only
creates a gap for the refractive reader and disfiguring poet
to struggle over but also fashions a discussion of those
gaps or mysterious limina that open between poet and reader.
Every vague indefinite pronoun--"This is where the serpent
lives"--is an invitation to create meaning, to evade along
with the poem, to "wriggle[ ] out of the egg."3 Flicking
his uncanny, silent, beckoning tongue, the serpent
personifies the poem's mysterious limina.4 He is "bodiless"
and absent--"His head is air"--and yet mysteriously "there"
for both poet and reader: "Beneath his tip at night / Eyes
open and fix on us in every sky."
These limina admit an almost terrifying, side-winding evasiveness into lines or even single words (such as "tip") which branch into myriad paths of labyrinthine meaning that refuse the refractive reader any sure sense of direction. Instead they enforce a relationship of mutual evasion, one in which the refractive reader must counter the disfiguring poet's evasion with his own elusory movements of imagination. The serpent's tip—the end or point of its head, the tongue flicking from its mouth, or perhaps the rattle on its tail—is also its swift tilt or sway that leaves the refractive reader looking at empty air instead of a readable text. The sway is also a tip (as in hint or trace) that lies camouflaged in the suggestiveness of language, inviting the refractive reader to follow.

The assertion about "this" in stanza one—"This is where the serpent lives"—becomes a question (both rhetorical and actual) about "this" in stanza two: "Or is this another wriggling out of the egg, / Another image at the end of the cave, / Another bodiless for the body's slough?" The question not only invites but insists that the reader join in the pursuit of "this," participating in a disfigurative exploration of absence that investigates poetry as well as its locus. "Auroras" is then partly the refractive reader's and disfiguring poet's mutual search for the poem. Both question the common ground where they
supposedly come together, and in the poem's repetitions challenge each other to prove that ground. Reader's and poet's transgressions across the mysterious limina of the poem prove to be radical and jarring collisions. As "Another image" or "Another bodiless," the poem is simultaneously a representation of what has gone before (a convention of exchange) and another or an alterity reawakening out of the refractive reader's and poet's contending imaginations. New estrangements and complications arise that twist and turn, undulate evasively to escape entrapment or encasement as in an egg or at "the end of the cave." Refractive reader and disfiguring poet pursue these labyrinthine slitherings to what seems a dead-end, and still each eludes the other as "another bodiless for the body's slough."

On the one hand, the rhetorical stance of "Auroras's" second stanza implies that the disfigurative poem may be merely a repeat of what has gone before. The poet's effort --his latest, autumnal aurora--is simply "another bodiless for the body's slough." The poem is another meager attempt to console the hopelessness and dejection of poet and reader in their utter subjugation to the flesh cast off at death.

On the other hand, the "not-quite-rhetorical" side of the question challenges the refractive reader to participate in the creation of the poem. As one side of the
antiphonally imaginative we, the refractive reader provides a place for the bodiless, evasive or not, and the very possibility of such a place suggests an always already there, impossible to evade. In a trimmed, Whitmanian fashion, the poet leads the refractive reader upon a slight knoll and "hooking [him] round the waist" points out "These fields, these hills, these tinted distances, / And the pines above and along and beside the sea." But the Whitmanian panorama is disfigured; the transcendent essence of the terrain is vacant. Poet and reader now behold Nature as "tinted distances," that which they cannot transparently experience since it is far away and distorted by the shades and dyes of the disfiguring mind and its own evasive maneuvering. If poetry is still an intersection point between mind and body, a place where poet and reader can rest, console themselves, meditate, then some substitute must be found for the absence of the universal being and the transcendent realm. In "Auroras" there is no longer such a realm, but merely "where the serpent lives."

As serpent, the poem's mysterious limina act out "form gulping after formlessness." As Vendler says, "This changeable serpent lives in present participles, gulping, wriggling, flashing, and emerging," but "the true genius of the poem" (EW 250) is not so much the participial undulations of the poem's limina as the depicted crossings
of those limina. Carnivorous and violent, form hungrily and aggressively pursues the formlessness of the refractive reader's and disfiguring poet's unrestrained conditions, their pure freedom in formless evasion. Paradoxically once form engulfs the two, each gulps, terror-stricken at narrowly avoiding the chaos of formlessness, but also frightened by the consequences of its absence. This doubling delineates the dilemma Stevens's poetry confronts. Poet and refractive reader need simultaneously to flee from and aggressively pursue formlessness. Such an aesthetic, which involves both a veering away and an intense chasing down, demands the trickiest disfigurements. As a disfigurative poem, "Auroras" is "Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances." Twisting, turning, undulant, the poem glitters as if reflecting the sunlight, as the refractive reader catches fleeting glimpses, hints, and suggestions of it. And yet it is a swift motion towards the reader, a speedy pursuit that threatens to overpower him, if unwary, in its attempt to embody the real along with the imaginary. "Skin flashing" suggests the slight twist that allows both a tip away from the physical and an embodiment of it, the exchange of an "e" for an "a" making fleshing into flashing. These sleights-of-phrase create "the serpent body flashing without the skin," the poem shedding its own imaginative layers to reveal and reweave the hidden presence of the "dark
italics," there for a split second and then gone. Such sleights rely on the antiphonal interaction of contending imaginations to lend them their full power, their fleshed and flashing impact.

The disfigurative poem is, then, a locus of "wished-for disappearances" not quite fully achieved. The antiphonal evasions of refractive reader and disfiguring poet both pursue and elude formlessness, and within the poem's serpentine shedding of skin after skin, each refigures a "new birth of the imagination":

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. (CP 411)

The "master of the maze" applies as appropriately to refractive reader as to disfiguring poet, each poised—note the pun on poise/poison in "This is his poison"—before the other's imagination. The poem is the distillate—"his poison"—that results from the fact that both reader's and poet's "pole / In the midmost midnight" is always already "another nest" of the "master of the maze." But the process of creation keeps refractive reader and poet in pursuit, a pursuit that is also an attempt to evade the other always in possession: "This is his poison: that we should disbelieve / Even that." The repeated thats represent the agonistic
circularity within which reader and poet turn, Disbelieving, maintaining an infernal faithfulness as they gaze infernally on "His meditations in the ferns." Each exchanges places with the other in a convolving dance of creativity, a dance which is both a poison and a poise, a futility as well as a balancing in the beauty of the poem.

Reader and poet alike awake while watching respectively poet and reader as meditating serpent: "His meditations in the ferns, / When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun, / Made us no less as sure." The poem's slight (as well as its sleight) motion, its minute change of n to re, makes "sun" into "sure," and suggests that certainty arises out of the physical manifestation of sunlight. But by its own sleight-of-phrase, it turns upon itself, evading its own expression of certainty and its own faith in the real by suggesting that we know less as sure, or that we have no knowledge of certainty. We may also know the certitude of (or be poisoned by the knowledge of) "less," a suffix that echoes ironically back through the first canto in words like bodiless, formlessness, and relentless. In any case, the serpent does become the emblem of the text where the contention of imaginations occurs: "We saw in his head, / Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal, / The moving grass, the Indian in his glade." The final lines are Edenic and pastoral, suggestive of the conventions of romanticism.
and a Rousseau-like innocence, but these are conventions and
an innocence to which the next three cantos bid farewell.

With a good-bye wave of the hand, cantos two, three,
and four dismiss "the pines above and along and beside the
sea" (those "ancestral places that never were" as Rajeev
Patke puts it), and then settle into a sort of melancholy
meditation upon the remaining vacancy and what might be
recreated to fill that vacancy (Patke 196). As Bloom points
out, "'Farewell to an idea' is a dirge of Wordsworthian
dimensions, a lament here not for an absent gleam but for
the driving away of tropes and colors by the glare of the
auroras" (PC 261). Indeed, after his leave-taking, even the
poet seems to depart, dissolving through the elliptical gap
and abandoning the refractive reader in an empty cabin or
wandering along a barren beach. As in "Gallant Chateau" or
"The House was Quiet," the reader approaches as a stranger,
exploring the poem's terrain to see what remains. In canto
two (CP 412-13), both cabin and beach suggest the poem's
mysterious limina. The cabin and its walls provide the
margin between inside and outside, nature and civilization;
the beach is that shifting margin between land and sea where
poise is difficult. The vacancy here is the white of a
denuded terrain, similar to "the nothing that is" of "The
Snowman":

A cabin stands,
Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
As by a custom or according to
An ancestral theme or as a consequence
Of an infinite course. (CP 412)

The emphasis on whiteness (white is repeated seven times in twenty-four lines) calls to mind Melville's "The Whiteness of the Whale" in which Ishmael says of white that "its indefiniteness . . . shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milkyway" (Moby-Dick 169). In his divagation on whiteness, Ishmael relies on shared opinions and accepted conventions to demonstrate the terror that whiteness inspires in people. For both Melville and Stevens, the horror of whiteness as an emblem of universal vacancy is "An ancestral theme" or "a consequence / Of an infinite course," a habitual way of thinking that is communally understandable. The vacancy of the cabin and beach is white based on conventions or communally imaginable ideas. But canto two has begun by bidding "Farewell to an idea," and so must attempt a re-exploring or reminding of ideas about vacancy and "solitude."

Not only are the cabin walls and the beach white, but "The flowers against the wall / Are white, a little dried, a kind of mark / Reminding, trying to remind, of a white / That was different." The flowers are an inscription—"a kind of mark"—related to past conventions that are "trying to remind" but are failing. Such failure creates despair,
in poet as well as reader, about complete isolation in a universal void. Thus the inability or insufficiency of "ancestral themes" necessitates a rewriting of or reminding about those themes. But on the one hand, to remind, for the disfiguring poet, is merely to recall some golden age now forever gone; on the other hand, to remind (that is, to disfigure a process of thought and then refigure that process into something new) is to recreate out of as well as beyond earlier convention, to refresh a process so that antiphonal evasion becomes a possibility. The motivation for originality, then, resides in this impulse to refresh and make possible imaginatively exchange, not in an inherent, absolute value of priority such as that at the center of Bloom's theory of influence.9

To remind is to recreate "something else," an alterity that is the "dark italics" or mysterious limina that dive down deeper than the poet's utterly desperate "white of an aging afternoon." This reminding provokes "Auroras's" contention of imaginations out of which arises the convention of antiphonal evasion. Whether opaque (the snowman) or transparent (the man of crystal, the "diamond pivot bright"), the contention between refractive reader and disfiguring poet is multi-faceted and large, enkindled "from horizon to horizon." The giant stature of the encounter reverberates, as Bloom has amply documented, with Whitman's
and Emerson's versions of the American giant self, as well as with Stevens's giants—the large red man, Phosphor, Satan, the sun.

The disfiguring poet's attempts to create new conventions for the imagination prefigure a struggle, but for the moment the beach and cabin remain vacant: "The wind is blowing the sand across the floor." The wind blowing freely through the cabin reveals a dilapidated shelter, now no more than an unsealable shell, with the distinction between outer and inner realms all but effaced. Indeed, the terrain grows whiter as the canto progresses, as if the perspective were the snowman's, but then begins to dim:

Here, being visible is being white,
Is being of the solid of white, the accomplishment
Of an extremist in an exercise . . .

The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach.
The long lines of it grow longer, emptier,
A darkness gathers though it does not fall

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall.
(CP 412)

The latter lines of the quotation constitute a turn away from Ishmael's fear of whiteness; they are a reminding of that fear into an antiphonally evasive exploration of "the colorless all-color" of language. "Here" is highly self-referential and makes the entire passage a commentary (and a playful commentary at that) on poetry. As in "Phosphor," mimetic reflection in "Auroras" is not possible. White's easy visibility—opacity, ossification, the anti-secretive—
threatens the black, printed letters, words, and phrases on the page. Invisibility—disguise and evasion—shelters the "dark italics" of the words, and the refractive reader and disfiguring poet can transgress the poem's limina only by delving down deep into these bottomless crevasses of language. "The solid of white" is "the accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise," which suggests that closure or the finished product is a petrified poem for petrified poets and readers.

As "The long lines of [the poem] grow longer, emptier," the gathering darkness suggests the antiphonal evasions of contending imaginations encountering each other within the mysterious limina of the poem. Thus instead of an ossified finality of achievement, an elusive and momentary poise occurs between darkness and whiteness, at which point the refractive reader appears: "The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand." His walking is an antiphonal perambulation of power, a turning blankly that is both elusive and a being eluded. He is blank and uninscribed as he veers, but he also "turns blankly" as if baffled, lost, jarred by the estranging "frigid brilliances" that have captured his attention. He achieves his disfigurative poise at that important liminal position of exchange on the beach, where footing is precarious but also allows easy shifting of directions. The supreme reader reading "the
north," he is inspired by and inspires in his "turn" the reminders of the poem constantly "enlarging" and "enkindling" as "The color of ice and fire and solitude."

As a contrast to the disfiguring poet and refractive reader, canto three (CP 413-14) characterizes the interaction between the romantic poet and reader, brooding together upon "The purpose of the poem":

The mother's face,
The purpose of the poem, fills the room.
They are together, here, and it is warm,

With none of the prescience of oncoming dreams,
It is evening. (CP 413)

The two romantics gaze into and indeed through the "mother's face" to the primal origin of beauty in the transcendent experience, especially as that experience is embodied in the interaction between inspired poet and inspiring muse. Such meditative activity creates the illusion of a presence that dispels the emptiness of the room as well as the difficulties of the poem--the "here"--with its gap-ridden language.

The romantic poet and his reader find complete consolation in the presence (no matter how illusory) of the mother figure: "It is the mother they possess, / Who gives transparence to their present peace." Such consolation and placidity comes out of a prior, reader/poet transparency of interaction. Each experiences a comfort in the visionary interaction that offers reassurance about the transcendent
beauty of the universe, which is incarnate in the mother's face, or felt in the touch of inspiration derived from the supernatural breath of the muse. But these are also the tropes being dismissed by the disfiguring poet's departing gesture as he disappears through the elliptical gap just after his farewell, leaving the romantic poet and reader to run headlong into the violent knocking of the wind at the end of the canto. They complacently invoke the mother as primal muse, and their experience of transparency, as they gaze face to face at her, rocks them into an almost childlike condition of reliance and weakness. Their reading and writing relies upon the sharing of established romantic tropes, instead of refигuring those tropes through a mutually evasive contention of imaginations. Left completely vulnerable, they do not even possess "the prescience of oncoming dreams," a failure of awareness that even the strong romantics would lament.

Ignorant of the deadliness of the other-than-self, the romantic poet and reader essentially lack evasive techniques in a violent and threatening world. The consolation (and consequent complacency) resulting from their transparent mystical vision of the mother/muse leaves both reader and poet "with none of the prescience" necessary for the survival of the imagination in a disfigured terrain. Reлиance upon the tropes of the romantic imagination--the
figurations of transparency and transcendence—fails, whereas "Auroras's" antiphonally evasive contention of imaginations constitutes an unending reminding of those tropes in order to survive.12 "Auroras" valorizes an antiphonal contention between disfiguring poet and refractive reader which is a function not of transparency but of evasion. Reliant upon the "mother's face," romantic poet and reader reside in a tradition that is "still-starred," central, bright, and mystically illuminating, yet terribly, even tyrannically, ossified. Indeed, possession is the most important consideration for the romantic poet and reader—"It is the mother they possess"—but "Auroras's" disfiguration eventually reveals the mother's ephemeral nature. Her transparency transmutes into something ghostly and phantasmagorical: "And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed. / She gives transparence. But she has grown old. / The necklace is a carving [and craving] not a kiss. / The soft hands are a motion not a touch." With her transparency diminished, disfiguring poet and refractive reader see through the mother's former strength to her gaunt and withered figure.

The mother/muse "has grown old" and "the house is of the mind and they and time, / Together, all together." Though there is consolation in this romantic communion, it is a comfort unaware of the reality rolling in: "Boreal
night / Will look like frost as it approaches them." In the midst of this fatal cold, the inhabitants of the crumbling house merely say "good-night, good-night." The romantic poet and reader are self-deluded instead of elusive, fooled by their own blind consolation. Their weak reading of Boreal night as a "good-night" demonstrates a lack of antiphonal evasion that is necessary to create a durable "shelter of the mind." Instead, their "windows will be lighted, not the rooms," suggesting a profound darkness within and thus a complete lack of mutual inspiration for an imaginative evasion of "A wind" that "will spread its windy grandeurs round / And knock like a rifle-butt against the door." Such a wind—and the disfiguring poem that takes that wind into account—is threatening and devastatingly confusing to the poet and reader reliant upon unchanged and unchanging romantic tropes. Without the "new birth of the imagination" in antiphonies of evasion, "The wind will command them with invincible sound."

The disfiguring poet qualifies his gestures of dismissal with an ambiguously pitched pronouncement in canto four: "The cancellings, / The negations are never final" (CP 414). The line moves in opposite directions simultaneously, suggesting both melancholy exhaustion at the unending attempts to strip away old tropes, and elation at the irrepressible affirmation behind all negation such as
"Esthetique du Mal" celebrates: "under every no / Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken" (CP 320). But what is most important here is not exhaustion and elation, but instead the idea of endless effort. Since cancellings and negations "are never final," evasion is an ongoing project that does not end with the poet's words on the page. The refractive reader continues the gestures of dismissal that perpetually refresh the poem.13

As a trope of evasion, the father of canto four is "of bleak regard," harsh and hopeless and possessing an intensity of apprehension essential to the refractive reader. Blending chameleon-like into the landscape (is it the surrounding space or the father that is "of bleak regard" and "strong"?), he resides in the necessary impoverishment of Stevens's disfigured terrain. He is "strong in the bushes of his eyes" as if his strength depends upon his ability to disguise himself in the underbrush of his eyes (and his ayes).

The power of the father's camouflage partly derives from his skill in sleight-of-phrase: "He says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell."14 His seemingly arbitrary pronouncements of farewell are supremely evasive, but note also that they are antiphonal: to an uttered no or yes he responds with no or yes. The antiphonies, as clipped and orthodox as they seem
to be, suggest liminal transgressions, especially when the "no to no and yes to yes" eventually transmute into elaborate and elusive repetitions of the ritual exchange: "He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly / Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames" (80-81). The lines masquerade as a comic appraisal of the father's abilities, but beneath the buffoonery hides the transmutation of the simple yes/no antiphonies of stanza two; "He says no to no and yes to yes" becomes "He leaps from heaven to heaven." These simultaneously silly and powerful acrobatics look forward to a further elusive response that is just as silly and just as powerful: "He assumes the great speeds of space and flutters them / From cloud to cloudless, cloudless to keen clear / In flights of eye and ear." But these most elaborate of his antiphonies are qualified by the fact that "now he sits in quiet and green-a-day." Reposing in his "green-a-day" paradise regained, the father's complacency resembles that of the romantic poet and romantic reader in canto three, who enjoy delusions of comfort as the violence of the "naked wind" beats its rifle-butt rhythms on the door.

But the father moves (and as reader reads) from "cloud to cloudless, cloudless to keen clear / In flights of eye and ear," and his evasive response to "keen clear" may be cloudless, and to cloudless cloud. His most powerful
evasion—his "yes / To no"—occurs when he appears to become transparent but in fact answers cloudless with cloud, the poet's clarity with his shadowy complication. Such is the father's "highest eye" and his highest aye or "yes to no" as well. Out of the refractive reader's apparent complacency comes a discernment (a perceiving in all directions simultaneously) that belongs to "the deep ear" when "At evening, things . . . attend it until it hears / The supernatural preludes of its own." This type of refractive vision is the supreme moment of evasion, the reader's awakening in and awakening of the poet's imaginary escape. As refractive reader, the father's powerful evasions become the source of inspiration for the poet, and he gives birth to the poet much as Wordsworth's child is father of the man. The "angelic eye" of the refractive reader "defines / Its actors approaching, in company, in their masks," but then recamouflages that definition with his own refiguration. Thus the poet, one of the masked company, invokes this "angelic eye" at the end of the canto:

Master 0 Master seated by the fire
And yet in space and motionless and yet
Of motion the ever-brightening origin,

Profound, and yet the king and yet the crown,
Look at this present throne. What company,
In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?

"This present throne" reverberates ironically against "Auroras's" impoverished terrain, and the reverberation
demands the most severe of evasions if the imagination is to survive. A new company of contending imaginations must consider this stark terrain as a part of poetry, as well as a part of its creative process. The company's contending imaginations compete not only amongst themselves but also against the rifle-butt cadences of the wind; they "choir it with the naked wind." Poet and refractive reader must finally sing the itness of their disfigured terrain, and this can be accomplished, if at all, by the supreme effort of mutually elusive exchange.
Notes

1 In "Wallace Stevens and the Inverted Dramatic Monologue," Margaret Dickie discusses the idea of an "intersubjective voice" created by what she calls Stevens's inverted dramatic monologues. Such intersubjectivity is highly elusive as she points out:

As [Stevens's] dramatic encounters suggest, language is an exchange that destabilizes subjectivity. It is an exchange not between discrete entities but between changing, reforming, and moving speakers who are changed by it. (32)

2 Longenbach feels that Stevens's greatest achievement came with "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and that everything after retreats from the ordinary or political world into the world of pure poetry or aestheticism, at least until some of the final poems published in The Rock or in Opus Posthumous. This is perhaps partly explainable by the fact that the characterized readers seem less engaged with the political or the ordinary and become more like interior paramours. But the tension in the exchange between poet and reader is no less volatile for that.

3 On Stevens's use of indefinites, Dickie says these open-ended terms summarize what has never been detailed and leave the poet free to create
categories, to change the space he occupies, to revise his own thinking, and not to represent a preexisting world, to match his thoughts to an origin outside themselves. Stevens's use of the nonspecific "it" is reminiscent of Dickinson in such poems as "It was not Death" . . . where "it" remains mysterious and significant and capable of endlessly proliferating rather than of precisely distinguishing. (158)

4 For Bloom, death is "the ultimate meaning of the serpent of the Auroras . . . because the serpent is the emblem of the necessity of change and the final form of change is one's own death" (PC 256). But for Stevens, there is no "final form of change" as long as one's poetry is kept vital, and part of that vitality lies in the refractive reader's evasive contention within the disfigurative terrain of the poem. Leggett comes close to this type of endlessly elaborating contention when he says that

The difficulty in Stevens's cyclical conception of creativity is that the vitality of any specific work of art is short-lived, doomed from the moment of its birth. The optimistic note is that the world of change transcends any attempt to fix it in particular works, so that the cycles need never end. There is no point at which readers have
sufficient poetry or at which poets are content with the poems of the past. (128)

See also Patke, who claims that the serpent is both "the change of metaphor, sloughing off past embodiments in its appetite for change and for the 'first idea'" as well as "another version, in Stevens's evolving symbology, for the possession of a first idea which will betoken candour and ease" (194).

5 Vendler describes the evasive effect of canto one as if it were a sort of simultaneously pleasing and frightening roller coaster ride: "The motion of the canto is a nervous ascent and descent and reascent and redescent, a vertiginous uncertainty expressed in antiphonal rhetoric" (EW 247).

6 See Bloom, The Poems of Our Climate, p. 147.

7 Concerning passage across a limen, Angus Fletcher says though the threshold is temporally nonexistent, a phantom-place, the passage across this no-man's-land seems to be more intense, experientially, than life either inside or outside the temple, inside or outside the labyrinth. The threshold unmakes the dialectic of inside and outside, replacing it by an unmediating passage between.
8 "Stevens's aim was to keep the cycle of imagination, which moves to construct, reject, and reconstruct orders, in motion in his language" (Steinman 141).

9 Leggett has mounted the strongest foray against Bloom's astonishing appropriation of the Stevens canon for the superstructure of his theory. Leggett tries to salvage a pre-Bloomian Stevens in order to show that Stevens's notion of literary history is antithetical to Bloom's:

In Stevens's version [of literary history] the possible poet instructs himself in his precursors; their huge imaginations induce neither envy nor despair, however, because their reality is remote and their men and women the living dead. The poet will not fear that they have filled all imaginative space, because the progression of mental states is incessantly creating new imaginative space. (54)

One implication of Leggett's counter to Bloom is the idea that Stevens does not wrestle so much with his past progenitors as with his future progeny, the reader-yet-to-be who will, in effect, give birth to him. The reader is the child who will father the man-as-poet.

10 Bloom misses the powerful doubling effect that "turns blankly" has when he says that "To turn blankly is to trope vainly or write poetry without purpose, in a state of
'This is,' where the wind and the auroras dominate and the wind and the auroras themselves are allied as 'gusts of great enkindlings'" (PC 264). In my schema, the wind and the auroras provide the disfigurative arena for the poet's and refractive reader's evasive refiguration.

In the theoretical coda to The Poems of Our Climate, Bloom speaks at length about tropes and their function:

The contemporary French rhetorician Gerard Genette says that a trope is nothing but a reader's awareness of a trope, an awareness that comes into existence only when the reader either recognizes or half recognizes that a text is problematic or ambiguous in its evasions of, or schematic deviations from, proper meaning. I would say rather that a trope is a reader's awareness of a poet's willed error and results only from a reader's will to be lied to, or to be repersuaded of persuasions already implicitly formulated that are crucial for the survival of the reader's own internal discourse, the hum of thoughts evaded in the reader's own mind. (PC 394)

But Stevens goes far beyond both Genette's and Bloom's notions in the conceptualization of his imaginary refractive reader. Stevens's readers exhibit not a "will to be lied
to" but instead a will to lie both along with and simultaneously beyond the poet's own fiction making.

12 Leggett comes as close as any Stevens critic to describing the idea of antiphonal evasion:

The scholar, the man of imagination "separately dwelling," must . . . feel everything for himself if he is to discover the personalia uniquely his. To phrase this in terms of Stevens's version of the history of the imagination, we may say that if succeeding generations of poets feed only on the past, ignoring the principle of flux that is the life of the imagination, they produce only diminished versions of the geography of the dead and bring about the death of poetry. (58)

But in Stevens's characterized interactions, not only the poets of the future but the readers as well must respond to "the principle of flux" so essential to the poem's vitality.

13 Stevens was wary of readers who wanted to establish, once and for all, the meaning of a poem. As Leggett suggests,

At the point where readers believe they have mastered the poem intellectually, whether or not they are in some unequivocal terms correct, the poem, Stevens believed, ceases to hold interest for them. A misreading (in Stevens's terms)--that
is, an intellectual explication that attempts to clarify the details of the poem in terms of the reader's system or doctrine—is more destructive of the poem's power than a "right" reading of the sort Stevens recommends. This would be a reading that accepts the poem on its own terms and that is intent on the "obvious whole," rather than on details "not quite perceived" (CP 350), allowing the poem to retain a candor that must elude the mind's propensity for explication and paraphrase. (140)

Indeed, a right or refractive reader would, by his own evasive maneuvering, help the disfiguring poet to subvert any "system or doctrine" by the endless elaboration accomplished through their interaction.

14 The baffled reaction of critics such as Berger to the father of canto four provide ample evidence of his elusive character:

He seems, indeed, massively irrelevant. His function as judge or statuesque oracle is described in odd terms: "he says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell." These are opaque lines, and the only sense I can make of them is that the father's voice, unlike his rigid countenance, is
internalized in much the same manner as the voice of the superego, a voice synonymous with conscience. (51)

As I show, the father is anything but "statuesque" and "rigid." On the contrary "He measures the velocities of change" by participating in the active antiphonies that fashion the interaction between poet and reader in "Auroras." Patke, as well, sees the father as an emblem of strength: "The father is a deliberately active and energetic figure, almost Blakean." He goes on to say that the father's response of yes to no suggests an attempt at "imposing his own will over nature" (202).
"Perhaps there is an evasion, a shirking of responsibility, in becoming certain too quickly. . . . Since the body is dogmatic, a generator of belief, society might well be benefited by the corrective of a disintegrating art, which converts each simplicity into a complexity, which ruins the possibility of ready hierarchies."

Kenneth Burke, Counter-Statement

Canto five of "Auroras" (CP 415-16) moves beyond the poem's gestures of dismissal and brings mother and father together in a clangy, jangling festival celebrating the process of creativity. Harold Bloom has pointedly remarked that Stevens's use of "festival" is almost always negative:

Something of an uncanny, rather negative quasi-religious flavoring is felt each time Stevens uses "festival" in a poem. . . . [The word] attains its Stevensian nadir in the Auroras, V, when the poet whips up his spirits until he can proclaim, "We stand in the tumult of a festival," but then reacts bitterly with rhetorical questions: "What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?" (PC 246-47)

However, Bloom too easily dismisses the genuineness of the festive tone here. A close examination of the canto reveals
an important interaction between audience and performers, one worthy of celebration. The participants look neatly arranged at the start—mother and audience (reader) set beside father and performers (poet)—but as the canto progresses, the various revelers merge into a wild orgy of gaiety, music, dancing, and laughter. A skeptical voice—one that sounds very much like a parodic version of Wordsworth's melancholy speaker in the "Intimations" ode—emerges at the end, but his rhetorical questionings are countered (perhaps by himself) in the final two lines and this counter-rhetoric continues into canto six.

From the first stanza, canto five generates a sense of secular communion initiated by a father and mother who seem large, like the primal progenitors of cantos three and four. The arranged celebration, a metaphor for the process of life as creative change, is tumultuous and raucous, and perhaps fatuous as well as vacant in the end. Still, the festival metaphor suggests that the essence of life is creative, and of course such a notion must consider the relationship between audience and performer (reader and poet). The performers commissioned by the father are "tellers of tales," musicians, and dancing "negresses," and the father himself transmutes into a disfigured Prospero magically conducting everything with his sleight-of-hand gestures. The audience for this grand event is the mother, humanity,
and the children. Everything looks simple, neat, well-arranged, but once the gala begins, groups swirl, agitate, and merge in a wild tumult of the father's "unherded herds," a chaos that becomes disturbing for the skeptical questioner at the end.

The boisterous interactivity of the fete begins with the father's fetching of "negresses to dance, / Among the children." The simile comparing them to "curious ripenesses / Of pattern in the dance's ripening" indicates the exotic, sensual quality of their performance. Their powerful, primal motions inspire the innocent, as yet undiminished imaginations of the children, who "laugh and jangle a tinny time." As "curious ripenesses" comprising "the dances ripening," the negresses display the power of figuration in Stevens's poetry of disfiguration. The dancers are the elusive movement toward a finish that is ever deferred, just as their simile displays its disfigural ripeness in the midst of the poem's ripening. The figuration opens an exotic portal, one of the poem's mysterious limina, set off from the rest of the work and gleaming with the possibility of a larger ordering or completion. "Curious" as they gyrate, the negresses both inspire curiosity and seek curiously for the next step in the dance, just as a disfiguring simile twists toward what it does not know,
compelling the reader's imaginative communion, filling the surrounding text with a curiosity-inspired significance.

As this suggests, the dance itself develops out of an interaction between dancer and audience, and the children help create the routine with their laughter and disharmonious, ingenuous janglings of unevasive innocence. The musicians, on the other hand, "make insidious tones / Clawing the sing-song of their instruments" during the negresses' dancing. Accompanying the dancers with their music, they are, obviously, a part of the performance. But they also view the dance. They too are an audience—albeit more jaded and lecherous than the children—and are involved in creating the dance. The relationship here between "Auroras's" version of the "gaunt guitarists" and the negresses goes far beyond that found in "The Ordinary Women" between the serenaders and the palace women. The musicians and the negresses experience a mutuality of inspiration in "Auroras." The musicians' reading of the negresses arouses their imaginations during their playing, and the negresses in their dancing hear the music and pivot toward an interactive rage for order, their own intense motions in communion with the musicians' strumming music. As both performer and audience, each clearly inspires the other.

For the musicians and the dancers, the performance involves a reading of the other as well as a recreating of
the other's act in "insidious tones" and "curious ripenesses." "Insidious" slyly, even lasciviously, counters the ingenuous reactions of the children's spontaneous and straightforward laughter, and the undertones of eroticism consummate the creative communion between the musicians and dancers, an interaction that arouses the musicians to "strike the instinctive poem."³

The father's performance complicates the interaction between poet and refractive reader. His own sleight-of-hand in the fourth stanza suggests that he, like an archetypal Prospero (or a primal Ed Sullivan), has created the entire show out of thin air: "The father fetches pageants out of air, / Scenes of the theatre, vistas and blocks of woods / And curtains like a naïve pretense of sleep." "Among" these pageants, "the musicians strike the instinctive poem." They both form a part of the pageants and provide an audience for them, watching as "The father fetches his unherded herds, / Of barbarous tongue, slavered and panting halves / Of breath, obedient to his trumpet's touch." Stevens's disfigured Prospero performs as a supreme magician among the musicians, and his "trumpet's touch" (the erotic implications of this should be obvious) awakens the "unherded herds," as well as the unheard heards. "Unherded herds" juxtaposes powerfully the chaotic and the ordered, and this chaos/order contredanse overlays the unheard/heard
relationship between audience and performer, between refractive reader and disfiguring poet. To experience the poem as both unheard and heard, the refractive reader must understand carefully, even intensely, the poem and then unearth its meaning. In other words, Stevens's refractive reader must intentionally turn away from the heard poem. As a disfiguring ritual of antiphonal evasion, such intentionality precedes the poet's composition of the poem and demonstrates the refractive reader's will to evade and thus to refigure what has been disfigured. In effect, Stevens's imagined supreme reader reads the poem before its composition, with a primordial, instinctive virtuosity that is primitive and sophisticated at once: a "barbarous tongue, slavered and panting halves / Of breath, obedient to his trumpet's touch."4 Primitive, primal, strange, exotic, even threatening, the supreme reader's part in the antiphonal contredanse is both estranging and harmonic. Such imagined readers are the "slavered and panting halves," the haves or possessors of alterity's breath, the others that, as supreme readers experiencing the poem's "dark italics," offer inspiration to the poet struggling near the margins of communion.5

Against this contredanse of evasion bristles the realist reader, who appears at the end of the canto, a reader similar to the one in "Phosphor" who struggles with
the surface reflections of the text instead of diving down into its mysterious limina, the vacant depths of language. He skeptically challenges the gaiety and celebration of the festival. To the disfiguring poet's claim that "We stand in the tumult of a festival" he comically, perhaps ingenuously, shrugs and, shouting to be heard above the uproar, rhetorically asks:

What festival? This loud, disordered mooch? These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests? These musicians dubbing at a tragedy,

A-dub, a-dub, which is made up of this: That there are no lines to speak? (CP 415-16)

The realist reader denies any potential for gaiety or cause for celebration amid the surge of disfiguring chaos and surface complication of a poem such as "Auroras." To this challenge the poet replies that "There is no play. / Or, the persons act one merely by being here." The self-referential "here" returns us to the poem's metaphor of life as a creative process, and the final lines again evoke the ritual of antiphonal evasion, a ritual that frees the imagination to create, even if at the bottom of such creativity lurks the terror of chaotic disorder and the threat of a "barbarous tongue, slavered and panting." 

Canto six (CP 416-17) continues the attempt to answer the skeptical realist reader. The play that is acted out "merely by being here" is performed in "a theatre floating through the clouds, / Itself a cloud." Canto six, then,
still addresses the notion of performer and audience and how the two interrelate, how their roles blend together just as the theatre blends into landscape, clouds, mountains, rock. Ephemeral and airy, the theatre constantly transforms, endlessly inviting an observing imagination to make what it will of its amorphous stages. The image suggests the child's game of trying to name figures in the clouds, forms that forever shift and elude definition. But the canto's shifts from cloud to rock to mountain, from an airy insubstantiality to solidity (though disguised by a veiling mist) and finally to a seemingly solid mountain that is "running like water, wave on wave, / Through waves of light," these shifts reveal the dissolving, elusory, and illusory undulations of the relationship between what is out there and what is in here. As "cloud transformed / To cloud transformed again, idly," the arena for audience and performer interaction is itself an endless repetition and transmutation, perhaps futile, of their surroundings and how they perceive them.

As transmuting cloud, the theater--"itself in change"--suggests a performed text that the observing audience reshapes at its leisure. And like the cloud/theater, the poem acts as liminal arena where self and other-than-self merge as it/self. As "the lavishings of itself," the poem, showering repetitions and transformations prodigally, adorns
the merge between self and alterity. These become "fire's delight," the inspired imagination's pleasure, especially as yellow transmutes to opal, an iridescence fashioned out of refracted light reflected back to its source. This interesting figure characterizes the supreme reader as an alterity that reflects back a refracted light transformed by the reader's own evasive imagination and, thus transformed, made inspiring to the poet's imaginative fire in turn. Such light becomes "delight" after the antiphonal transmutation, just as "misted rock" becomes "opal elements."

The light of "itself" is "splashed wide-wise," breathtaking and shocking, an abrupt unnamable correspondence, that leaves both reader and poet shaken. "Wide-wise" hints at this sudden correspondence between it (or other) and self, the spatiality of "wide" fused with the psychic self's "wise." Such correspondence occurs within the theatre of the poem where reader and poet exchange antiphonal evasions, the "half-thought of forms" through which the theatre itself "drifts idly," "filled with flying birds, / Wild wedges, as of a volcano's smoke, palm-eyed / And vanishing, a web in a corridor / Or massive portico." "Flying birds" recalls "Sunday Morning's" self-referential "ambiguous undulations." But these auroral birds flare more exotically into "wild wedges" of Stevens's letters and words winging after a "wide-wise" spontaneity while the refractive reader reflects
back the read glow of the text’s active volcano: "Wild wedges, as of a volcano’s smoke." "Palm-eyed and vanishing," as evasive as the sleight-of-hand man palming a coin or card, both poet and reader fill the theatre and each bears away a palm of victory.

But the poem, for all of its intricacies, interwoven and even acting as snare or trap, attaches frailly to communing imaginations within a place much larger than itself, "a corridor or massive portico." As "a capitol" that is either "emerging or has just / Collapsed" the poem emerges or collapses in the same wave-like undulations that transmute everything throughout. Such frenzied "alchemicana" portends an unraveling, a clarification and epiphanic moment; poet and refractive reader have been brought together at the capitol, the gathering place for interaction and decision, but "The denouement has to be postponed . . . " The ellipses trail into blank space while the supreme reader waits for the anticipated antiphony; then he opens the door on the poet’s most powerfully disfigured terrain:

He opens the door of his house

On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is. And he is afraid.

(CP 416–17)

The clarification crumbles away, and both poet and refractive reader are left trembling at the edge of chaos.
Harold Bloom has called this passage "the most strenuous single moment in all [Stevens's] poetry, a true test for Stevens and for his reader" (PC 270). He goes on to say that having prepared himself for this great battle of the mind against the sky, [the scholar] opens the door of his house, his entire consciousness, to find that the whole sky is on fire, as the auroras triumphantly quell his challenge and reduce him to fear. (PC 271)

The theatre/poem, soothing and comfortable for all its metamorphoses, gives way to vast auroras "flaring on the frame" of both reader and poet. The theatre dissolves as soon as the door is opened "On flames." The "single man" (note the pun on single) seems enfeebled, alone, isolated in a vast and unfamiliar space full of voids and flame, cold fire of "Arctic effulgence."

Just before this vast disfiguration, three "segmenta" are recorded for the reader:

This is nothing until in a single man contained,
Nothing until this named thing nameless is
And is destroyed. (CP 416)

These sleights-of-phrase set forth ideas for how poet and reader, self and other, might achieve a moment of visionary transparency and mutual understanding fully realized: the single man must contain the other; other as named thing must
be nameless; and other as named thing must be destroyed.
The profound hopelessness of such an enterprise is rather apparent when the single man, "The scholar of one candle," steps beyond his singularity and perceives the surrounding alterity by opening a door and standing upon the threshold, the liminal arena of exchange with other. What he beholds devastates him, and his hope for containment, for complete knowledge of himself and the hymn of the self, diminishes to the point that "he feels afraid."

Unlike Emerson's self as transparent eyeball experiencing the congenial power of the oversoul, the "scholar of one candle" senses the nothingness of the vast other and its naturalistic indifference to his own being. The experience provokes in him his own sense of insignificance, but the scholar is not without resource; his "one candle" allows him to move in a dim light, to approach softly and surreptitiously this "flaring" on the threshold of his being.9

Canto seven (CP 417-18) attempts a revaluation of the imagination after the utter diminution experienced by the "single man." The canto begins with a suppositional questioning of what shape a supreme imagination might take:

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops
To imagine winter? (CP 417)
Disembodied, giant, absolute, such a monarchical creativity would be as cruel, savage, and stern as it would be good, kind, and benevolent. This supreme imagination is both a response to and an outgrowth of the auroras, and as a deadly and tyrannizing force, it participates in the auroras' immense disfiguration in order to achieve its supreme evasion. Such a Whitman-sized imagination must embody opposite characteristics; grim and benevolent, just and unjust, Stevens's creator cum destroyer sits amid its dark opposite to further enhance its sublime brightness. It is "the white creator of black, jetted / By extinguishings," both darkened by its own creative acts because they are simultaneously destructive, and shot upward or elevated by the sublimity of its creation. The apocalyptic scale of its creativity extinguishes planets, earth, sight, even its own vision if necessary. It thrives in snow, a cold white sterility and emptiness, as well as in the distant sky, majestic and aloof, a "crown and diamond cabala."

A blinding whiteness surrounded by an utter void of nothingness, the cabala is a supreme imagination that protects itself from "a violence without" by a mutual degree of creative hostility capable of sublime disfiguration, an imagining of winter "in the midst of summer."

In the latter half of the canto, this "diamond cabala" performs an intense disfiguration:
It leaps through us, through all our heavens
leaps,
Extinguishing our planets, one by one,
Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where

We knew each other and of each other thought,
A shivering residue, chilled and foregone,
Except for that crown and mystical cabala.

(CP 417)

Chaotic and violent, the cabala annihilates "us," our
planets, and our means of interaction, but ironically "It
leaps through us" as if dependent on our presence for its
destructive conduction. This powerful cabala sounds
uncannily similar to Emerson's universal being in his famous
transparent eyeball passage: "the current of the universal
being circulates through me. I am nothing. I see all. I
become part and particle of God." But Emerson's circulates
becomes leaps in Stevens, hinting at Stevens's shift from
Emerson's transcendent and benevolent oversoul to a
destructive and either malevolent or indifferent
extinguishing force, a super imagination that must have its
way no matter what the cost. This supreme imagination is as
appetitive as sexuality or hunger. Elusive and startling,
it no longer flows smoothly but leaps jarringly and
abruptly. Ironically the "through us" suggests that the
cabala has a point of vulnerability since the "diamond
cabala," the all powerful imagination, can leap only by
virtue of our presence.
This supreme imagination's power leaves only a
"shivering residue," a leftover that is itself shivering
into minute parts of what it was, as well as a cold and
frightened ash of the former "us." Yet again the
disfiguration of "we" hints at another potential power that
may challenge the cabala since the very ash produced may
contain an intensely refined by-product of the
extinguishing, something "chilled and foregone," left for
dead but perhaps overlooked by the very force that has
chilled it. Ironically, the mysterious cabala falls upon
the blade of its own negative sublimity. The supreme
imagination dares not leap into its own dark, its jetted
surroundings; it dares not but it must: "it dare not leap by
chance in its own dark. / It must change from destiny to
slight caprice." To avoid its own destruction, the supreme
imagination must shift from its own authoritative
pronouncements (which can be and are answered only ritually
and in a predetermined fashion), to sleight-of-phrase
improvisation, interactivity, and antiphonal evasion as
possible exchange.

The final stanza, through its own chaotic syntax,
becomes the invocation/invitation into antiphonal evasion.
The diamond cabala itself shivers into the poem as myriad
mystical limina for antiphonal exchange:

its jetted tragedy, its stele
And shape and mournful making move to find
What must unmake it and, at last, what can, 
Say, a flippant communication under the moon."
(CP 417-418)

The fixed engraving or stone monument must move, and it is that movement that invites antiphonal communion, "a flippant communication under the moon." Disfiguring poet and refractive reader unmake the mysterious cabala by participation in the commonplace exchange that is talkative and even accidental.12

The childlike flippancy and ingenuousness that ends canto seven is both denied and affirmed at the beginning of canto eight (CP 418-19): "There may be always a time of innocence. / There is never a place." Innocence is a place more of the mind than of the world. It resides in the mind's conception of the past or future, but is never a part of the tangible here and now. The idea of innocence inhabits the imagination's terrain of hope or nostalgia, but the real is always of experience, always calamitous, always a force pressing against the imagination's looking backward or forward. Yet even if nostalgia and hope come to be denied, innocence still resides in "pure principle": "For the oldest and coldest philosopher, / There is or may be a time of innocence / As pure principle."

However, drained of both nostalgia and hope, the idea of innocence becomes simply a condition of vacancy or an evacuation of meaning: "Its nature is its end, / That it should be, and yet not be, a thing / That pinches the pity
of the pitiful man." As Berger says of innocence in "Esthetique du Mal," it "becomes a desperate way of explaining nature's indifference to our total death" (23). Without nostalgia or hope—ideas that necessary disfiguration has "shivered" into a mere residue—innocence is an evacuation of meaning and, as such, is a pure, albeit empty, principle; it leaves behind a text that substitutes for what is no longer, and never has been, there. Innocence becomes, finally, the definition of there which is simply not here. It is that which always evades, the thing that is always already absent, but which always hints invitingly at its own presence elsewhere. The paradox that innocence both is and is not, that it is both "beautiful and true" and "beautiful but untrue" "pinches the pity of the pitiful man." This "pitiful man"—another version of the realist reader—disregards the aesthetic splendor of innocence, instead despairing over the impossibility of fixing the text of innocence. He needs the book to be true both night and day and feels pinched by its ineffable quality.

The contrast to this "pitiful man" lies in the "true sympathizers" of "Esthetique du Mal," those supremely evasive responders who reappear here at the end of canto eight. They reside ingenuously (or perhaps disguised as ingenuous) in the ephemeral idea of innocence, the idea that "[Innocence] is like a thing of ether that exists / Almost
as predicate." Innocence is a liminal region of exchange in the poem, a "virtual dimension" that "exists," or at least almost exists, in the evasive turn of the poem's "almost as predicate," as it dissolves back into the airiness of pure ether. Innocence eludes both poet and refractive reader, fading quietly into the ever fainter echoes of "it exists, / It exists, it is visible, it is, it is."

These echoes suggest an emptiness and a return to the vacancy of the philosopher's "pure principle," but they also hint at an antiphonal answering that is not simply mere echoing but also a revealing--"it is visible"--that simultaneously is a reveiling of the existence of innocence. The echoes end the suppositions about innocence that concern the first five stanzas of canto eight, and the final three stanzas draw conclusions about innocence that return to the "Arctic effulgence flaring" in the autumnal sky:

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

Or symbol of malice. (CP 418)

The auroras here refer not only to the light in the sky but also to the poem as a set of auroras that are "not a spell of light." The poem is not merely a set of letters spelled out on the page, reflecting the truth of the auroras and spelling out the light of existence. Nor is the poem an enchantment meant to dazzle, stun, and leave helpless its
viewers. As "these lights," the poem is "innocence," an innocence similar to the philosopher's "pure principle," a vacancy through which the refractive reader's antiphonal evasions echo.

Such interaction seems bleak in the extreme, indeed falls heavily into the category of the inevitable impoverishment of disfigured existence: "An innocence of the earth and no false sign / Or symbol of malice." The signs and symbols of language have apparently no correspondence with the "innocence of earth." Nature and mind are forever sundered, leaving poet and reader abandoned to their language. There is only the purest form of innocence, the evacuation of meaning, complete vacancy. Disfiguring poet and refractive reader play in an unbridgeable rift between object and subject, where language echoes in the vast vacancy of itness and "an innocence of the earth."

But there is a final attempt to veer out of what seems to be an abyss of bleakness, and that attempt re-invigorates the communion of imaginations:

That we partake thereof,
Lie down like children in this holiness,
As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep,

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark
Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,
Created the time and place in which we breathed.

(CP 418-19)

The tone here is ministerial, as if the speaker were offering up a communion service in accordance with his
secularized and worldly ministry. The final two stanzas form an incomplete subordinate clause that hangs "like hives in hell," waiting to be filled out by the supreme reader's own evasive refiguration as the poet's words dissipate into invocational ellipses. But there is also a hint of an imperative in "lie down" that invites the refractive reader to participate in the canto's antiphony of evasion. Poet and reader take part in the service of antiphony through innocence-as-vacancy that invites exchange in the evasion of that vacancy. They "lie down ... in this holiness" to assume a position for sleep in which they only pretend to sleep: "As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep." Such ingenuous pretense sounds very much like the "naive pretense of sleep" that occurs in canto five during the festival. But here reader and poet lie both in the sense of reclining and in the sense of surreptitiously speaking, which refigures the poem of innocence. And they lie "in this holiness" both as a sacredness and wholeness and also as a hollowness or vacancy, an innocence evacuated of all meaning.

The reader's as well as the poet's posture at the end sounds vulnerable and naive, especially given the correspondence with the "naive pretense of sleep" from canto five. At any moment the wind may come pounding on the door with its rifle-butt of reality. But a simultaneity of
awareness inheres in their lying like children; they are both vulnerable in their naivete and extraordinarily strong in their ability to evade the absolute vacancy of the "innocence of the earth." Lying in holiness, they half-hear their own creation, the mother-as-muse singing "in the dark / Of the room and on an accordion." They create, or at least half create, the mother who has "created the time and place in which we breathe." The mother, who is the vacancy of innocence and whom both reader and poet create, is the supreme recreator of their own breath. With the inhalations and exhalations of her accordion, she makes the music that they half hear, half compose and in their composing fashion her as the highest hearer of their own music. She is their ultimate audience, watching them "Lie down like children," and in her watching she sings, creating "the time and place in which we breathed." Out of her own inspired awareness she inspires their efforts to half make what they half hear.

Canto nine (CP 419-20) begins in mid-sentence as if continuing from the incompletion of canto eight: "And of each other thought—in the idiom / Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth, / Not of the enigma of the guilty dream." "The work" or poem, as an effort of the imagination, interacts with the "innocence of the earth" instead of with "the enigma of the guilty dream." The
"Sunday" considerations—those complicated puzzles and confusions of transcendence and the universal being's involvement with our "guilty dreams"—have dissolved into the innocent vacancy of an earth that is, purely and simply. The absence of the heavenly and its inhabitants, whether they are called Apollo or Yahweh or Allah, leaves poet and reader with nothing but their own language and the itness of the "innocent earth," innocent in the sense that it has no characteristics, including innocence, besides those poet and reader variously and evasively assign to it.

This terrain of disfiguration is where poet and refractive reader must interact, as suggested in the fable of canto nine:

We were as Danes in Denmark all day long
And knew each other well, hale-hearted landsmen,
For whom the outlandish was another day

Of the week, queerer than Sunday. We thought alike
And that made brothers of us in a home
In which we fed on being brothers, fed

And fattened as on a decorous honeycomb.
This drama that we live—We lay sticky with sleep.
This sense of the activity of fate—

The rendezvous when she came alone,
By her coming became a freedom of the two,
An isolation which only the two could share.

(HP 419)

In the fable's innocent world, communion of minds is as brother to brother, intimately familiar and healthy. Interaction is heroic. "Danes in Denmark," while
wonderfully tinged with the comic clowning of *Harmonium*, recalls the *comitatus* relationship in *Beowulf*. Indeed in such a world, the "outlandish"—such as the manifestation of monsters like Grendel or Grendel's mother—seems commonplace, "another day / Of the week."

But the Danes' comfortable world is, of course, disrupted in *Beowulf* by the incursion of Grendel and later of Grendel's mother. Their "fattened" complacency and their honey-coated slumber disappears with the advent of mortality in the guise of the monsters from the mere. The mead hall is thrown into chaos until the heroes from outside, Beowulf and his retainers, cleanse the realm. All of this suggests that a naive communion of minds is deadly, since the "rendezvous"—the advent of mortality in whatever form—is inevitable. Death disturbs easy communion, here specifically the communion between disfiguring poet and refractive reader, and we are left with "This sense of the activity of fate-- / The rendezvous." Strong echoes of "Death is the mother of beauty" resound through canto nine, but the mother is less Grendel's mother than the mother of canto eight that plays "on an accordion, half-heard," and fashions "the time and place in which we breathed." As supreme reader, she is the mother of the poet's evasions, while she herself eludes detection, "half-heard" and moving through the dark of the room. She is in fact the
manifestation of the muse as supreme reader, and her descent into the mortal world forces the poet to liberate himself from the dangerous complacency of easy, naive interaction. As supreme reader, she provides for the communion of their imaginations, through their antiphonies of evasion. Her descent into the world, her manifestation as supreme reader, emblematic of the poet's mortality and the futurity of his readership, announces the advent of the world's new innocence.

Barren, cold, and impoverished, this disfigured innocence seems frightening: "Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt." But the necessary disfiguration also suggests an enticement of nakedness, an ascetic eroticism between the supreme reader and the poet that derives from the implied sexual relationship between poet and muse. The rendezvous foreshadows the onset of winter, in all its bare, naked, vacant innocence, and leaves the poet asking "Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?" Essentially the poet wonders whether there will be a renewal of the former comitatus, or brotherhood of readers and poet, but the relationship has become "An isolation which only the two could share." This suggests a more profound intimacy of intercourse between poet and refractive reader but also hints at the poet's inevitable union with death. Still, the hope is for a renewal or rebirth instead
of final death, and such blossoming of the trees into the leaves and fruit of a new text— the poem that is the antiphonal exchange between supreme reader and poet— depends upon the evasion of complacency and the refiguring of the innocence of the earth:

The stars are putting on their glittering belts. They throw around their shoulders cloaks that flash Like a great shadow’s last embellishment.

It may come tomorrow in the simplest word, Almost as part of innocence, almost, Almost as the tenderest and the truest part. (CP 419-20)

The stars are rediguisled in their "cloaks" and "glittering belts," just as the poem itself becomes cloak and glittering adornment, both elusory and shadowy and an embellishment of the surrounding vacancy. But the naivete of poet and reader is lost. The disfiguration of the muse and her refiguration as supreme reader creates the mutuality of evasion necessary for Stevens's post-romantic communion of imaginations in a world that seems only a cold and barren innocence. The innocence itself undergoes a reversion into an "almost" of innocence and this new innocence bares the simplicity of deep complication, the tenderness of antiphonal evasion that allows freedom to the imagination as "the truest part" of innocence.

The final canto of "Auroras" (CP 420-21) twists hortatorily, evoking the rabbi as reader and calling upon
him to read "the phases" of relationship between the world and its people. The poet presents each possible phase, voicing the rabbi's anticipated objections to their weaknesses as representative models of reality. He finally returns to the first phase, the one that the rabbi seems to prefer: "Turn back to where we were when we began: / An unhappy people in a happy world." The turn here—not an evasion so much as a return to the past and the sources of the phase, passed along through ossified tradition—consoles the rabbi because it resides in authority. The imperative mood of the verbs (read, turn back, solemnize) suits the rabbi, sounding like authoritative pronouncements that must be followed. If the rabbi's turn is an evasion at all, it is an incredibly limited one, done out of desperation, out of a need to avoid the notion of the world as a bar eternally inhabited by Buffo wisecracking his way through drink after drink. There must be something serious and sacred about life, so the "never-failing genius" must be preserved through a return to "where we were." One is tempted to add to this "and where we are no longer," for the poet and supreme reader (merged in the voice of "we") seem to reside outside the rabbi's temple, watching with an ironic gleam the futile return to "this extremity, / This contrivance." The poet and supreme reader resemble the "we" picnicking in "August (5)," relaxed, lying on the grass,
listening "to that which has no speech." In "Auroras" the poet and supreme reader listen to the rabbi address his congregation as he searches vainly for "A name for something that never could be named." The rabbi's reading and/or writing relies not on antiphonal evasion but on authority. His service is ritualistically ossified, a ceremony that offers nothing beyond a desperate consolation for a desperate people, "an unhappy people in a happy world." 18

The rabbi of "Auroras" must "solemnize the secretive syllables" just as the rabbi of "August" "wears the words . . . / Within his being." The canonized text, sacred and ossified, is hidden and mysterious and available to only the few who know the code. Indeed this text must be preserved and protected, "A crown within him of crispest diamonds." But "the secretive syllables" ultimately work against the rabbi's own desires for reading and for the preservation of the text. The double sense of "secretive," as in "August," suggests not only mystery and hidden sanctity, but also secretions, out-flowings (or even overflows) of meaning, with hints at bodily functions themselves as opposed to the spirituality of holy text. There is an uncontainable quality to the rabbi's text and both poet and supreme reader understand that quality. Indeed, such understanding allows them to reside outside of the holy temple and yet still see within, still comment upon the rabbi's activities both
ironically and admiringly. They do not completely disdain the rabbi's reading; on the contrary, the rabbi's need to preserve the tradition of "the never-failing genius" is the same need that motivates an antiphonally evasive reading. But antiphonal evasion seems less desperate, more playful, more willing to see the "innocence of the world" and to play Buffo, though also unwilling to be completely trapped in the role of Buffo. Antiphonies of evasion move constantly, complexly circulating as blood through the body, not as simple circular return to "where we were."

With poet and supreme reader looking on, the rabbi cannot contain the "secretive syllables." They slip and slide in a variety of directions in the final two stanzas, belying the careful control of the diamond cabala:

In these unhappy he meditates a whole,
The full of fortune and the full of fate,
As if he lived all lives, that he might know,

In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,
To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick.

(CP 420-21)

Ambiguous gaps in modification and syntax allow the secretive syllables to pour out of their ark. The rabbi's God and the rabbi merge into indistinguishable forces so that we cannot tell whether it is the rabbi or his God that "meditates a whole." "These" perhaps refers to the "unhappy people," but it also suggests these lines of this poem where the rabbi as reader finds himself unhappy. On the other
hand, the rabbi himself seems powerful as a reader, for unhappy with the lines of Buffo, he evades them by recreating his creator. As reader he makes his life by evasively imagining his own maker. "In these" lines, "by these lights"--the illuminating lights of the poem as well as the figurative and threatening lights of the auroras, which dash the hopes of the scholar of one candle by the immense flashings of absurd emptiness--the rabbi veers and creates his own text, even if that text is a return "to where we were when we began."\footnote{20}

But poet and supreme reader have evaded the rabbi's evasions; they are outside his congregation, watching the process of his refuguration, even admiring its creativity and its forceful authority. But they watch with evasive irony somehow knowing both the beauty of his evasion and also its futility against the "wind and weather" and "winter's nick." Their own evasion of the rabbi's authority allows their refuguration of wind and weather against "the spectre of the spheres," but this evasion is perhaps just as futile as the rabbi's. Their outside is really no more beyond the threat of ossification than the rabbi's. They are no nearer the itness of the innocent world than he or his congregation. Still, they have a different perspective, an ironic as well as admiring point of view, and this allows for more freedom of imagination. None, after all, can
escape "winter's nick," the final two words of the poem, which pronounce a seemingly undeniable finality, regardless of the brief and warming "blaze of summer straw." For all of its apparent bleakness, still the end of "Auroras" suggests that poet and supreme reader can fashion a poem out of the rabbi's struggle to recreate "the never-failing genius" and to understand his people's relationship with the world in which they reside. The rabbi (or his God) "meditates a whole" and it is in the gaps that manifest themselves in the rabbi's sacred text, the holiness/hollowness of that text, that the poet's and supreme reader's antiphonies of evasion awaken.
Notes

1 The quote is taken from James Longenbach's *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, p. 144.

2 Bloom has remarked upon the connection between the father in "Auroras" and Prospero: "We can describe the father in canto V as a failed Prospero, a fetcher of pageants but one who then cannot dissolve his own airy fictions at will" (PC 268).

3 The musicians are interesting in themselves. Their "Clawing" at the line's beginning presses tensely against "instruments" at its end, the latter a tool for structuring and ordering, the former the use of a natural appendage for rending and tearing apart. This juxtaposition accomplishes an amazing balance between the primitive, the primordial and the sophisticated. There is an interesting fusion here between the chaotic (the primal condition when clawing was a technique of survival) and the ordered (the civilized when one strums an instrument to produce an effect of beauty). The "sing-song"—a fusion between process and product—participates in both states simultaneously, just as the negresses' dancing is "like curious ripenesses / Of pattern in the dance's ripening." The coming to be and the being, the chaotic creating and the ordered state, arrange each other.
Concerning priority and order between reader and poet, Margaret Dickie has this to say:

Both Dickinson and Stevens allegorize, as Derrida says, the "catastrophic unknown of the order" of reader and writer. The writer creating her or his own reader reverses the order of writing and reading, of what comes, comes before, or comes after, or comes back. Writing on the "blank walls," the poet simultaneously erases himself, making in the process of making the present act of creation a future of destruction where some distant children: "Will say of the mansion that it seems / As if he that lived there left behind / A spirit storming in blank walls" (159). The postcard [in "A Postcard From the Volcano"] forces us to ask what comes before: the message or the picture, the writer or the reader. (Lyric 114)

Although Gerald Bruns draws conclusions about Stevens's poetry that I do not always agree with, I find his approach in "Stevens Without Epistemology" intriguing and important to my point:

From a hermeneutical standpoint the main problem for Stevens is not how the mind links up with reality but what to do about other people. This is not a problem of knowledge or of language (that
is, it is not a problem of how language links up with reality); rather it is a problem of dialogue, of speech that presupposes and even engages the discourse of other people. In current jargon, it is a problem of alterity rather than one of intersubjectivity. (25-26)

Ironically, even his own words such as "disordered" or "mooch" play the part of "curious ripenesses" in the midst of the "tumult." The disorder of chaos is itself a sort of order; dis/ordered is Hades/ordered, an infernally ordered world despite the chaotic complications. And "mooch" simply suggests more of the same evasion that so thoroughly saturates the relationship between reader and poet, audience and performer, in antiphonal evasion.

In agreement with Bloom that "festival" is generally used negatively by Stevens, most critics have read canto five in a negative light. For example, Helen Vendler claims that at the end of the canto

The autumnal wind has blown pretenses away, and the creator-father becomes, in consequence, the object of contempt, the "fetcher" of negroes and clawing musicians and slavering herds, the hospitalier of a disorderly riot. With this denial of meaning to poetic gesture, the first half of the poem comes to a close, in a cynicism
that touches both the events and their poems:

"There are no lines to speak. There is no play."

(EW 259)

But of course this omits the final sentence of the canto--
"Or, the persons act one merely by being here"--which
certainly qualifies all of the "cynicism" that Vendler
hears. Instead of a cynical finish, then, at "Aurora's"
halway point, the poem glistens with an affirmation of the
primitive, the "first idea." This surely modulates more
harmoniously with Vendler's own assessment of "Stevens's
best verse" that
trembles always at halfway points, at the point of
metamorphosis, when day is becoming darkness, when
winter is becoming spring, when the rock is
becoming the ivy, when a shadowy myth takes form
before dissolving, when the revolving mundo
hesitates in a pause. (EW 47)

8 Bloom, with whom I agree here, views this moment's
effect on the scholar as quite devastating, whereas Vendler
claims that "What [the scholar] sees, inhuman though it is,
repays his glance: he sees, but only after he has abjured
land-flowerings, the great gusts and colored sweeps of the
Northern lights, and they are exhilarating" (EW 255).

9 About the scholar, Charles Berger says that
By the end of the poem, the scholar will become a figure of greater largesse: "a vital, a never-failing genius." But here he remains a monkish figure, a beacon of light in a dark age. His last candle seems society's as well, the last flicker of civilization. (61)

The scholar certainly is monkish in his interaction, but his is a secularized communion between poet and refractive reader instead of that shared between monk and heavenly father.

10 Vendler's comments about Stevens's auroral light help establish their resemblance to his enthroned imagination:

As changeful light, the aurora is innocent; as flame, it is dangerous; as cold fire, Arctic effulgence, it is the intimidating unknown. Stevens, in this version of "the multiform beauty" (OP 12), has found the final correlative for his reflections on middle age and for the fear and fascination of ongoing process. (EW 263)

11 Bloom defines Stevens's use of cabala as "a sublimating knowledge that takes the place of our instinctual fulfillments" (PC 274). But how does this explain the devastation, intellectual or otherwise, that the cabala leaves in its wake?
Though James Longenbach would likely disagree, I believe that what he says about the commonplace in "Notes" applies as well here: "[Stevens] wants something more than merely human, something unrepresentable and universal, yet something that remains merely human in the finest sense—ordinary, humdrum, a state or place where all human beings might feel at home" (259).

Among other turns of phrase, the interesting etymology of "partake" indicates the communal emphasis of the service; the word is derived from the Latin particeps which means partner, sharer, comrade.

In her interesting discussion of Dickinson and Stevens, Margaret Dickie comments upon the complicated and interwoven nature of reader, poet, and muse in Stevens:

The words of the poet cannot quite bring the "conception sparkling" out of "obstinate thought," nor can the reader fully focus what lies deep within his vision. And yet, in the effort to overreach themselves, poet and reader engage in that same creative and self-engendering act by which they are reborn in words. The genius of poetry that "sits alone with her candle in a moving solitude" is the maternal muse that elicits their rebirth, nurtures their adventures in "the
incalculable expanse of the imagination as it reflects itself in us and about us." (154)

15 No critic has yet drawn a connection between canto nine and Beowulf. If it is uncertain whether Stevens has this in mind, it is at least obvious that he considered fellowship an important aspect of life even though he often had difficulty fitting comfortably into such a fellowship:

[O]ne is always desperately in need of the fellowship of one's own kind. I don't mean intellectual fellowship, but the fellowship of one's province: membership in a clique, the fellowship of the landsman and compatriot. (L 644)

16 Of Stevens's critics, Barbara Fisher comes nearest to naming the reader as Stevens's muse. In discussing the figure of the pythoness in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Poetry," she says

The Pythoness is a sibyl, of course, who speaks in riddles but speaks the truth. The figure represents, for Stevens, an interior reader and an oracular voice that is archaic, erotic, prophetic, priestly, and unfamiliar. Stevens's half-savage, half-divine Ariadne-figure provides an essential clue to the nature of his paramour and underscores the riddling presence of the pythoness. The poet himself defines his "muse" as an expression of
"the intelligence that endures" (NA 52), and invokes her with a peculiar intensity. . . ."
(58)

17 Barbara Fisher has spoken lucidly about the contrast between Stevens's interior paramour (which she refers to at one point as an "interior reader") and the traditional figure of the muse. In order to distinguish between a discourse of interchange and an external source of inspiration, she says that

Stevens's paramour is neither dread mother nor classical muse, nor for that matter, "imagination, pure and simple." The literary muse, conventionally summoned from above and beyond, represents inspiration that strikes from without; she is external to the poet. In contrast, the paramour is an inner presence. She dwells in the "hermitage at the centre," always within range of the poet's consciousness. She is conceived as an interior love object, not an externalized force. Finally, where the classical muse speaks to or through the poet, Stevens speaks with the paramour. "Fool," cries Sidney's famous muse: "look in thy heart and write." In contrast, the discourse between the modern poet and his paramour develops as an interchange: "those exchanges of
speech in which your words are mine, mine yours."

(56)

What I object to here is that Fisher, in her attempt to demonstrate the intimate eroticism inherent in Stevens's poetry, cripples the tension between interiority and externality, which dots the landscape of almost every Stevens poem. Certainly there is an eroticism implied between disfiguring poet and reader/muse, but Stevens's desire is coupled with an equal pressure to distance the lover. Thus the paramour is both interiorized as reader who "speaks with" the poet, and externalized as disfigured muse who "strikes from without." Joan Richardson, in her excellent biography of Stevens, treats throughout her two volumes this paradoxical need for both intimacy and distance. Margaret Dickie also addresses this paradox in speaking about the muse in Stevens:

From spouse to sister, the women are gradually domesticated in the men's imaginations and simultaneously exiled from them. They cannot be "too near, too clear" if they are to serve as the muse Stevens had identified in "To the One of Fictive Music." The dynamics of craving and spurning in [Notes] spells out the poet's discomfort with the psychic pressures that they reveal. (94)
18 As Lisa Steinman has made clear, intellectuals, artists, and writers in the early part of the century "believed the arts should be made relevant to the lives of common Americans, in part to give value to their spiritually empty existence" (17). And this is of course precisely what the rabbi's service does not and cannot do, since it has relevance to a past belief system now dead.

19 Speaking about the symbolic value of the auroras, Vendler captures the complexity of Stevensian circulation:

Wherever he found the symbol [the auroras], whether in literature or in nature, it corresponds perfectly to the bravura of his imagination, even more so than the slower transformations of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." And certainly these changing auroras match his solemn fantasia better than the effort, so marked in Credences of Summer, to hold the imagination still. Stevens's restless modulations need an equally restless symbol, and the lights (with their lord, the flashing serpent) are, like his poetry, "always enlarging the change." (EW 246)

20 In a letter to Renato Poggioli (July 1953), Stevens remarks about the rabbi figure in his poetry that the figure of the rabbi has always been an exceedingly attractive one to me because it is the
figure of a man devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes. (L 786)
CHAPTER 8

THE SIGNAL TO THE LOVER: "AN ORDINARY EVENING, I-XII"

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night, How is it I find you in difference, see you there In a moving contour, a change not quite completed? You are familiar yet an aberration. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"

In my discussion of canto nine of "Auroras" I make explicit what I have been implicitly gesturing toward throughout this study, that Stevens's supreme reader achieves the status of a muse in his poetry.1 My examination of Stevens's supreme reader has progressed from reflective reader in "Esthetique du Mal" to refractive reader in "The Auroras of Autumn," and now to what I shall refigure as the Pierian reader in chapters eight through ten, which focus on "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (CP 465-89).2 As the title of Stevens's last long poem suggests, "An Ordinary Evening" is concerned with the commonplace or "vulgate of experience."3 But words such as ordinary or commonplace take on a multivalent shimmer in the context of the communion between disfiguring poet and Pierian reader. A favorite Stevensian sleight, ordinary puns on its Latin derivation--ordo means order or arrangement--and serves here to remind the Pierian reader
that antiphonal evasion, ironically, relies upon the ordering and arranging of words into form. In addition, the idea of the commonplace—the "plain version" of things—suggests the poem's status as a region of exchange, mysterious limina held in common by poet and Pierian reader (or by various other oppositions such as the real and the imaginary, revelation and evasion, invitation and resistance).

"An Ordinary Evening" pursues an equilibrium (an evening) between these oppositions and achieves moments of precarious poise that suggest a new haven or refiguration of the city's disfigured terrain, one that provides a commonplace view of earth to replace the obsolete transcendent vision of heaven: "Poetry / Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns" (CP 167). The "plain version" of heaven is to be a non-transcendent haven, a sleight-of-phrase refiguring of the otherworldly into the mundane. "An Ordinary Evening" presents the self's unembellished account of itself—"The eye's [and I's] plain version"—but also, as "version" implies, a turning and twisting through the starkness and necessary poverty of New Haven's disfigured terrain. Such a version becomes "a thing apart," an account, even if straightforward, that separates itself from the self and
becomes a part of the inaccessible other whose pressure shapes the terrain of the poem.

In the first canto of "An Ordinary Evening" (CP 465), the speaker lectures to an audience: "Of this, / A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet." The line unveils "An Ordinary Evening's" technique, its pursuit of liminal regions of interaction through relentless repetitions that qualify and requalify what has come before. These appositive elaborations present polysemous variations that complicate but also invite the Pierian reader to make further turns and further complications. Such textual multivalence reverberates between poet and Pierian reader: "As part of the never-ending meditation, / Part of the question that is a giant himself" (465). With this "never-ending meditation," the disfiguring poet insists upon continual movement toward infinitely imagined futures of an always altering "Ordinary Evening."

The wordplay on himself (hymn of the self) calls to mind Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Like Whitman's "Song," "An Ordinary Evening" meditates upon the relation between self and other, especially as that relation involves poet and Pierian reader:

Of what is this house composed if not of the sun,

These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
Appearances of what appearances,
Words, lines, not meanings, not communications,
Dark things without a double, after all,  
Unless a second giant kills the first-- (CP 465)

The appositive elaborations (the "and yet") of "this house"--houses, difficult objects, dilapidate appearances, words, lines, dark things--evasively answer the question "Of what is this house composed" by positing the threshold between poem and object and then suggesting a means of crossing that threshold: "A second giant" must kill "the first." Such a life and death struggle--here between poet and Pierian reader--involves the most evasive of maneuvers. "An Ordinary Evening's" words and lines--"Dark things without a double"--remain unilluminated, merely "dark things" that do not mean or communicate until the Pierian reader "kills" the disfiguring poet.8 The giant hymn of the self arises out of this agonistic contention between reader and poet, each raised exponentially to titanic stature, as in "Chocorua To Its Neighbor":

To speak quietly at such a distance, to speak  
And to be heard is to be large in space,  
That, like your own, is large, hence, to be part  
Of sky, of sea, large earth, large air. It is  
To perceive men without reference to their form.  
(CP 296)

The severity of such a confrontation awakens evasive strategies that result in

A recent imagining of reality,  
Much like a new resemblance of the sun,  
Down-pouring, up-springing and inevitable,  
A larger poem for a larger audience,  
As if the crude collops came together as one,
A mythological form, a festival sphere,
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age.

"Recent" unfolds into a potent perpetuation of future readings, "the never-ending meditation." The Pierian reader's resemblances, or refigurations of what has gone before, "kill"—recall the "violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA 36)—while revitalizing, and such strength provides the impetus, indeed, the inspiration for the poet's evasive making. The poet's "larger audience," his "second giant" and his rival in meaning-making, helps fashion the larger poem that is "An Ordinary Evening." This communion of imaginations, the antiphony of evasion possible between Pierian reader and poet opens "a festival sphere" or ceremony of evasion that both provides and is the aim of inspiration in the poet. The giant reader is Stevens's refigured muse; through sleight-of-imagination, the "crude collops" (Stevens's most disfigured shape for the muse) becomes a "great bosom, beard and being, alive with age," and so provides the poet with his desired inspiration.

Communion between poet and Pierian reader shapes the mysterious limina of the poem, those "transparent dwellings of the self" (CP 466) that are places of evasion for both. At these thresholds, each both reveals and reveils him or herself; each capitulates to intimate entanglement but also escapes as an individual mind. Their sleights-of-
imagination "move in the movement of the colors of the mind," glistening brilliantly through appositive embellishments such as the gradation from "houses" to "dwellings" to "habitations." These shelters of the self finally yield "The far-fire flowing and the dim-coned bells / Coming together in a sense in which we are poised." Poet and Pierian reader balance together in the ceremonies of antiphony that continuously compensate for slips or slides through "perpetual reference" and "perpetual meditation." Such referring is always a deferring, but out of the realization of the necessity of such deferral arises an "enduring, visionary love, / Obscure, in colors whether of the sun / Or mind, uncertain in the clearest bells."

Distance and intimacy merge paradoxically in the evasive exchange between Pierian reader and poet. Their evasive communion is

The spirit's speeches, the indefinite
Confused illuminations and sonorities,
So much ourselves, we cannot tell apart
The idea and the bearer-being of the idea.

(CP 466)

The illumination derived from such an interaction is confused and far and dim and yet "so much ourselves, we cannot tell apart [that is, separately]."

The "point / Of . . . visionary love"--not so much a goal aimed at or an end to be obtained as a gesture or directing of attention--invites and invokes the Pierian
reader to read and inspire the poet. Canto three repeats this invocative movement:

The point of vision and desire are the same.  
It is to the hero of midnight that we pray 
On a hill of stones to make beau mont thereof.  
(CP 466)

The poet's gesture becomes a petition for the transmutation of "a hill of stones" into "beau mont," for a consolatory transformation of our waste land into a new paradise. But the motions of invocation toward "the hero of midnight" fall suddenly away, and the poet willfully evades the "ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth":

If it is misery that infuriates our love,  
If the black of night stands glistening on beau mont,  
Then, ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth,  
Say next to holiness is the will thereto. . . .  
(CP 467)

The say hovers for an instant near a conventional invocation before it veers towards a more idiomatic sense; the near imperative or exhortation dissolves into a say similar in meaning to perhaps or possibly. As elsewhere with Stevens's invocations, the address to the "ancientest saint" is well disguised, an evoking of the convention in order to forge that convention into something new. The poet points or gestures towards the sacred and transcendent in order to desacralize and thus to evade more powerfully. "Next to love," he tells us, "is the desire for love," but desire
means more than a mere craving after what is unattainable. Desire insinuates as well a deauthorizing or desacralizing of heaven for the sake of love. The poet supplants celestial love with a worldly love that nurtures itself upon antiphonal evasions, establishing "[love’s] celestial ease in the heart." Such desiring—a simultaneous longing for transcendence and a desacralizing of that very transcendence—"cannot possess" since possession implies ossification instead of flux and antiphonal evasion. The modern romantic poem, the "this" that "cannot / Possess," springs out of the imagined reader’s own imaginative act of evasion:

It is desire, set deep in the eye,
Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene,
In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall,

Always in emptiness that would be filled,
In denial that cannot contain its blood,
A porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof.  (CP 467)

The modern romantic poem is "set deep in the eye" as well as deep in the I or ego of both the poet’s and the reader’s self. But the poem is also deep in the eye/I of the other, into which the self gazes deeply, lovingly, most intimately. The eye as deep mirror does not simply reflect the desiring gaze looking into it, but instead resides "behind all actual seeing," in the imaginative seeing that evades antiphonally, "in the actual scene." The poem and its mysterious limina reside "in the actual scene," that is in the performance.
The antiphony of evasion enacts this drama both against and with the actual. The mysterious limina of the poem comprise the "emptiness that would be filled." As "A porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof," the poem exists in that "as yet" or limen that is emptiness comprised always of a gesturing from both poet and Pierian reader. The "hero of midnight" is the Pierian reader, inviting, indeed enticing the poet with interpreting gestures from a dark "far-fire flowing" or "dim-coned" future, which frames the poet's "mother of beauty," the muse that "infuriates [his] love." Antiphonal evasion perpetually defers the finish of the porcelain poem-as-artifact. It frames an "object of the perpetual meditation," which is always ready to be turned and is always turning though never completed and thus never set aside.13

For a contrast to the "hero of midnight," canto four turns to the plain man, descending from mythic, giant reader to plain reader:

The plainness of plain things is savagery,  
As: the last plainness of a man who has fought  
Against illusion and was, in a great grinding  
Of growling teeth, and falls at night, snuffed out  
By the obese opiates of sleep. Plain men in plain towns  
Are not precise about the appeasement they need.  

(CP 467)

Though diminished in stature, the plain reader is not less supreme. His portrait recalls Andrew Jackson Something in
all his naive power. As often in Stevens, a primal quality clings to "plain things" and "plain men." Stripped of their cultural embellishments, they possess a primitive originality, but one which is perhaps brutal, violent, and especially threatening to established institutions. We tend to associate such savagery with a past beyond recovery, our prehistoric blank, but the plain reader's savagery is contemporary, especially insofar as it is "the last plainness" (one might interpolate "the last possible plainness").

The plain reader struggles against but fails to defeat "the obese opiates of sleep," those irrational, surrealistic sources of illusion that appear as "a great grinding / Of growling teeth." As a modern Jacob wrestling with his Lord, the plain reader suffers "falls at night," and his plainness grows dark ("snuffed out") against the strength of absurd dream elusions. But the plain reader nonetheless derives strength from this snuffing out of his light: "Plain men in plain towns / Are not precise about the appeasement they need." His imprecision makes him shifty and unpredictable, and thus as strong as Andrew Jackson Something in his "ignorance." This savage strength provides a means of interaction: "they hear [or read] / Themselves transposed, muted and comforted" in their exchange with the "diviner opposite."
The plain reader experiences an epiphanic silence arising out of the "surprised accords" between himself and his opposite: "A matching and mating of surprised accords, / A responding to a diviner opposite." Such immense advents of the transcendent are like "lewd spring" after "winter's chastity" or "the cold volume of forgotten ghosts" after summer's heat. The former is chaotically lush, alluring, and affirmative in its wild strength. The latter, with its jarring "cold volume," provides an exhilarating defamiliarization by way of harsh contrast. The ghostly volumes of old texts—"soothingly, with pleasant instruments, / So that this cold, a children's tale of ice, / Seems like a sheen of heat romanticized"—open before the evasive Pierian reader, who responds with a "simple harmony." The antiphonal evasion re-inspires the poet in his effort to create the supreme fiction, that "sheen of heat" to warm and brighten the dim frost of mortality.

In his plainness, then, the plain reader veers with a high (and highly disguised) degree of virtuosity. Unlike the sentimentalist, who is trapped in "a lake of reflections in a room" with his "inexquisite" (unseeking) eye, the plain reader escapes the "Inescapable romance" with his exquisite (because "ignorant") eye (CP 468). For the sentimentalist, questioning and questing are futile activities: "Why, then, inquire / Who has divided the world, what entrepreneur? / No
man." But with his exquisite eye, the plain reader's inquiring (and in/choiring) about the origin of imagination and reality—"Who has divided the world, what entrepreneur?"—must proceed. For the unsponsored reader, the answer to such a question is that "No man" (and no God) "divided the world"; instead imaginations of antiphonal evasion perpetually renew origination, desiring through ceremonies of the irrational and pursuing the self as "chrysalis of all men." The communion itself comprises the self that

Became divided in the leisure of blue day
And more, in branchings after day. One part
Held fast tenaciously in common earth

And one from central earth to central sky
And in moonlit extensions of them in the mind
Searched out such majesty as it could find.

(CP 468-69)

Both "blue day" and the "branchings after day" invite the exquisite eye's attention. Evasion of the "Inescapable romance" turns upon the exquisite imagination's evasive revealing and reveiling of "such majesty" as it can find, whether in common earth and the explorations of those limitations or in the central earth and central sky, re-extended back to the common earth and the self as "chrysalis of all men."

Stevens invests some of the Andrew-Jackson-Something simplicity of the plain reader in the fable of "Naked Alpha" and "the hierophant Omega" (CP 469), yet neither Alpha nor
Omega develops into a version of the Pierian reader. Alpha, who seems to read what "you never wrote," moves along unsteadily--"the infant A standing on infant legs"--and though he is somewhat elusive, escaping from traditional interpretations embodied in "Omega's men," he finally proves to be the same as Omega: "both alike appoint themselves the choice / Custodians of the glory of the scene." As an interpreter of the sacred canon, the hierophant Omega resembles the rabbi of "Things of August (V)." He is a reader of immense learning, but one who lacks a desire to maneuver evasively and thus resides comfortably within the authority of tradition. Clothed in the "investitures" of his office, he "kneels always on the edge of space," in a perpetual posture of worship, prayer, and invocation to a higher authority. He resides at the liminal division between the worldly and otherworldly, but always as one of the "Custodians of the glory of the scene." His reality is transcendent, so he remains paralyzed "In the pallid perceptions of its distances." Like "August's" rabbi, Omega is keeper of the holy text, which must neither be evaded nor denied. He is a chanter of orthodox antiphony, repeating throughout time the ossified text of the same ritual and thus perpetuating the durance of humanity through his "prolongations of the human."
As either naive reader or hierophant, Alpha and Omega both, in exclusionary guardianship, inhibit antiphonal evasion between poet and Pierian reader. Both become part of the scene—"These characters are around us in the scene" --as if characters to be ironically viewed, "immaculate interpreters of life" who are not actually involved in life. Obsessed with either perpetual beginnings or perpetual endings, they oppress the exchange that thrives on the "profound absentia"--that is, the mysterious limina--that neither begin nor end.

Such readers in Stevens are "Men turning into things," "rigid realists" who have "lost, as things, / That power to conceal they had as men" (CP 470). They are the institutions ("such chapels and such schools") in whose presence their "impoverished architects appear to be / Much richer, more fecund, sportive and alive" (CP 469). The necessary poverty of disfiguring poet and Pierian reader establishes the point of departure for antiphonal evasion. Sanctuaries and sheltered towers protect the "rigid realists" from the disfiguration that paradoxically enriches the architects, who are busy refashioning the new imagination's dwelling out of the dissatisfying (and therefore crumbling) orthodox antiphonies between poet, muse, and reader. These "impoverished Architects" who are "much richer" for their impoverishment are the first workers
who inspire the poem; they are the refigurations of Stevens's disfigured muses.

The new antiphonies of evasion swell out of the Pierian reader's and the poet's "power to conceal," and from this antiphonal exchange come

Conceptions of new mornings of new worlds,

The tips of cock-cry pinked out pastily,
As that which was incredible becomes,
In misted contours, credible day again. (CP 470)

With its sounds, word play, and allusiveness, as well as the sheer beauty of the final image evoking the morning's sunrise, the language sways, both comically and lyrically, away from the rigidity of realism. "Tips" is especially interesting since it recalls the first stanza of "Auroras" and the serpent's "tip at night." In "The tips of cock-cry pinked out pastily," poet and Pierian reader refigure the "misted contours" of the poem as simple sun appearing above the horizon.¹⁶ The poem is the object that tingles both in its commonplace and in its miraculous moments as poet and Pierian reader move with and through its elusive terrain.

The mysterious coupling of poet and Pierian reader--"Two bodies disembodied in their talk"--bears "new mornings of new worlds" in a descent "to the street" and an inhaling of "a health of air" (CP 470). The passion between poet and Pierian reader is Stevensian in its reserve, struggling
after control, working to give order to the chaos of violent desire:

We fling ourselves, constantly longing, on this form.
We descend to the street and inhale a health of air
to our sepulchral hollows. Love of the real
Is soft in three-four cornered fragrances
From five-six cornered leaves, and green, the signal
To the lover, and blue, as of a secret place
In the anonymous color of the universe. (CP 470)

Love must be secretive ("soft," "the signal to the lover," "a secret place") and surreptitious. "The signal" between elusively interacting poet and Pierian reader is the lover's gesture, a suggestive movement or phrase to indicate a place of rendezvous and intimacy, "a secret place / In the anonymous color of the universe." Such points of assignation, the mysterious limina of the poem, are both intensely near and yet simultaneously distant, maintaining a peculiar eloignement between lovers, a necessary formality that calms our desperate gropings after communion: "Our breath is like a desperate element / That we must calm."17

The calming of the poet's breath is necessary to awaken "a mother tongue" that is secretive and alluring, one "with which to speak to her" as to the Pierian reader. The calming of despair, in which the breath grows "capable / In the midst of foreignness," prefigures an acquisition of strength. Thus poet and Pierian reader thrive upon their
eloignement, surviving the harsh disfiguration of New Haven. Eased of pain, they gain the power to recognize, avow, even cry out, but passionately instead of desperately. As remote lovers, poet and Pierian reader exchange

The cry that contains its converse in itself,  
In which looks and feelings mingle and are part  
As a quick answer modifies a question,  

Not wholly spoken in a conversation between  
Two bodies disembodied in their talk,  
Too fragile, too immediate for any speech.  

(CP 471)

Such a cry exhibits both anguish and Nietzschean gaiety, avowal and disavowal at once. It is a cry that is "straight to the word (and heart)" but also evasive, complicated, seemingly contradictory. Disfiguring poet and Pierian reader exchange lovers' words—the cry of antiphonal evasion—as between "two bodies disembodied." Such antiphony is "the quick answer" (the answer that is both swift and evasive and also vital instead of ritually ossified) that "modifies a question." The Pierian reader refigures the poem in a ceremony "not wholly spoken," one which lacks the sanctification of ossified ritual but which provides meaning elusively, through gestures and nuances that transgress the poem's mysterious limina but that the poem's words cannot contain. The poem is "talk" that passes both casually and intensely "between / Two bodies disembodied," and is "Too fragile, too immediate for any speech." Secretive and elusive, easily destroyed by the
formality and publicity of "any speech," the antiphonal ceremonies mysteriously interpenetrate the imaginations of poet and Pierian reader.

Through repetitious returns—an apposing of ideas longingly and hopefully, until those ideas seem to become transvaluations of what they were—poet and Pierian reader "seek / The poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation" (CP 471). They imagine softly (that is, without "trope or deviation") with imaginations that are stripped, stark, intentionally impoverished, and most impoverished when mutually evading tradition's tainting tropes in order to experience "talk" between "two bodies disembodied." This secretive sneaking up on poetry moves "straight to the word, / Straight to the transfixing object." The "transfixing object" here is the poem as "talk" between disembodied poet and Pierian reader, each interpenetrating the other, but mysteriously, evasively, with conversation "not wholly spoken." Note that the poem-as-talk is not a transfixed object but one that is transfixing; in other words, such a poem is in the process both of being transfixed by and of transfixing reader/poet interaction. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" provides a helpful gloss: "Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation" (CP 383). Proximity or apposition reveals the "strange relation" between poet and Pierian reader, their
intimacy as well as the inordinate distance separating them. But as canto nine suggests (CP 471), there is mutual motion between poet and Pierian reader, each seeking the "poem of pure reality" and each piercing and thus perpetually altering the other.

Such transfixing occurs "At the exactest point at which [the poem] is itself." Pinpoint (as well as pen-point) precision makes the poem a piercing instrument, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the poem is a gesture indicating a direction, a path pointed out with a gesture that is itself a changing motion. The mysterious limina of the poem merge poet and Pierian reader, ego and other, where the poem becomes itself "by being purely what it is, / A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye, / The eye made clear of uncertainty." Emerson's transparent eyeball peeks into the poem's terrain here but it is not the "current of the universal being" that "circulates" through Stevens's eye/I. Rather the commonplace object, "A view of New Haven, say," "pierces us with strange relation." The "say" is flippant and casual, mere talk, but a hint of hesitant uncertainty shifts beneath the surface as well as a rather veiled invocation/invitation to the Pierian reader. This is, after all, a piercing "through the certain eye," which gestures toward a ceremonial blinding of certainty's eye in order to aid evasion. Stevens's transparent
eyeball is pierced through not by the current of the universal being but instead with disfigurative irony. His is "The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight / Of simple seeing, without reflection." In one sense the eye/I achieves a transparency that cures uncertainty, but it also contains "its converse in itself." Uncertainty—the uncertainty and evasive secretiveness of the poem—shapes Stevens's transparent eye. The visual acuity of poet and Pierian reader—"simple seeing, without reflection"—sees disfiguratively the "nothing beyond reality" and then resees "Everything" that remains "within it." Ironically, such a "within" includes the Emersonian spirit:

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Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
And through included, not merely the visible,

The solid, but the movable, the moment,
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.
(CP 471-72)
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Canto nine closes not only with echoes of Emerson but with Whitmanian intonations as well, and canto ten (CP 472) seems also to be remotely akin to Whitman. Like the poet in Song of Myself who leads his readers on a knoll and points to "landscapes of continents and the public road" (LG 83), Stevens's poet invites his Pierian reader to gaze upon the surrounding terrain. But the Stevensian panorama offers a disfigured contrast to the Whitmanian:

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It is fatal in the moon and empty there.
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But, here, allons. The enigmatical Beauty of each beautiful enigma

Becomes amassed in a total double-thing. (CP 472)

The "empty there" is a barren locale, but "here," in the terrain of the poem, the enigma or ainos\(^2\) arouses the evasive imagination of the Pierian reader. The poem's ainos relies upon the complicated dimension of "a total double-thing," amassed through reader/poet interpenetration, to advance the possibility of articulating the inarticulable. The Pierian reader inspires the poet's ambition to speak his way out of the aporia of absence around which is amassed the poem and its "double-thing":

We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore died. We are not men of bronze and we are not dead. His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.

But ours is not imprisoned. (CP 472)

The ainos about the man of bronze can be read as a reader-tale that depicts a statuesque reader of bronze with his mind "made up." As a bronze reader,\(^2\) he relies upon the text's authority to supply him with certainty and to keep his mind neat, well-ordered, and safely sterile. His is a mind created instead of creating, and thus his orthodox encounter with the moon-as-text provides a contrast to the interaction between poet and Pierian reader: "We are not men of bronze and we are not dead." The vitality of the communion of imaginations depends upon the poet's and the
reader's unmade minds, minds that reconstitute themselves out of the chaotic disarray of what they find apposed to them. The "constant change" that imprisons the bronze man's spirit liberates the unmade imagination, which "resides / In a permanence composed of impermanence." Establishing its residence in chaos, the unmade imagination's dwelling apposes itself to the lunar light's emptiness, which is fatal if not seen in its full starkness, as disfigured ainos stripped down to its enigmatic beauty. The ceremonies of antiphony depicted in the poem's ainos celebrate a secular faith--"this faithfulness of reality"--that refigures the poem as "this mode, / This tendance and venerable holding-in." The poem's "tendance" (which suggests a play on the Latin tendere, to stretch or extend) simultaneously gestures outward ceremonially and gathers inward secretly and intimately. As outward and inward pulsations, the poem's invitations and evasions arouse a form of Eros24 between poet and Pierian reader.

Because both poet and Pierian reader act evasively in the fashioning of the ainos, they disfigure the dimension of interaction; ironically this provides for the communion of imaginations. In this ever-elusive dimension--"In the metaphysical streets"--antiphonies of evasion take place that simultaneously desire and create desire:

In the metaphysical streets, the profoundest forms
Go with the walker subtly walking there.
These he destroys with wafts of wakening,

Free from their majesty and yet in need
Of majesty, of an invincible clou,
A minimum of making in the mind.

(CP 473, emphasis added)

For "walker subtly walking" substitute "reader subtly reading" or "poet subtly composing." The Pierian reader, reading supremely, destroys the old phrases like "lion of Juda" through his "wafts of wakening," which are both driftings over the surface of language and gestures of waking. These tendances destroy and then recreate evasively, making "gay the hallucinations of surfaces."

Poet and Pierian reader desire to refigure, with "an invincible clou," what has been disfigured. They reveil their transfixing nail as subtle clue, their iron point as faint gesture to suggest direction. These reveilings require "A minimum of making in the mind, / A verity of the most veracious men." They are baffling to the reader "whose mind [is] made up" but liberate the unmade mind composing perpetually its permanence of impermanence. The interactive dimension of the ainos shines forth from "the central of the earth," non-transcendent in kind. But such a locale also calls to mind the chaotic core of the earth's interior, violently roiling with red magma, a fitting image for the imagination-in-action erupting volcanically, disfiguring the landscape, and then refiguring as it cools into terrains
over which poet and Pierian reader wander mentally, celebrating their "hallucinations in surfaces."

The poem—"a violence from within" (NA 36)—streams forth from the fissures of the text, the mysterious limina where the forces of poet and Pierian reader collide. As an eruption of voice, "The poem is the cry of its occasion" and "Part of the res itself and not about it" (CP 473). The pun on res/race suggests that the poem is not only a thing itself (beyond mere figuration of things) but also a part of the frenzied, human activity of culture-making. Perhaps more in keeping with the magma analogy, the poem is perpetually of the present—"as it is, / Not as it was"—which suggests that all poems are always just spoken, newly arisen and perpetually shaping themselves out of the reader. They are fresh flows over original, primal terrain or the "reverberation / Of a windy night as it is." The idea of poem-as-reverberation calls to mind Stevens's own style of appositional repetitions,25 which echo each other throughout his oeuvre but with slight and sleight revisions of sound and sense. These reverberings occur "when the marble statues / Are like newspapers blown by the wind," and when, listening intently, the Pierian reader reads them as if in the dark street. The dissolution of ossification in the poem transmutes the poem from statuesque artifact to a dynamic interaction resulting in new papers whisked
chaotically along the common scene, like so many leaves in the gutter.

Such dissolution seems oddly interrupted, in the middle of canto twelve, as a result of the necessary, perpetual present of the poem: "There is no / Tomorrow for him [and hymn]. The wind will have passed by, / The statues will have gone back to be things about" (CP 473). Despair seems deep here, as if the poet were lamenting over the possibility that the poem might never be anything other than an ossified artifact. It appears to become merely a static form about the "res" and not the "res itself." Communion all but fails at the end of stanza three, but poet and Pierian reader stealthily reestablish the dynamism in the latter half of the canto:

The mobile and the immobile flickering
In the area between is and was are leaves,
Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees

And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
Resembling the presences of thoughts. (CP 474)

The poem's mysterious limina lie "In the area between is and was," and occasion the ceremonies of antiphony between poet who was and reader who is. The interrelationship perpetuates the poem through an eternal dynamic of "leaves in whirlings in the gutters" that resembles "the presences of thoughts," as if poet and Pierian reader were present to each other and participating in a mysterious, perpetually
present moment. The whirling dynamic of the transfixed poem resembles (and reassembles)

the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
together, said words of the world are the life of the world. (CP 474)

Antiphonally exchanged in a ceremony of evasive re-imagining, words fashion the "life of the world" as the life of the imagination in its perpetual struggle to liberate itself. The push-and-pull tension between restlessness and complacency or between obliteration and vital interaction rises out of the evasive maneuverings of poet and Pierian reader "in a casual litter" of disordered repose.
Notes

1 Only one Stevens critic, A. Walton Litz in *Introspective Voyager*, has suggested a tie between reader and muse. In a brief mention, while discussing Stevens's celebration of "eternal change and freshness" (267), Litz says that the "powerful evocation of cyclic change, embedded at the very center of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, culminates in a passionate address to the compound figure of reader-muse, the poet's other self" (266).

2 Pieria, a part of Macedonia, is one of several possible regions where the muses dwell. According to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* "The most ancient cults of the Muses were in Pieria and Ascra." Mark Morford and Robert Lenardon add this interesting footnote about the Pierian muses:

The Muses are sometimes called the Pierides, but Ovid (Metamorphoses, 5.295-678) tells a story of nine daughters of Pierus of Pella in Macedonia who were also called Pierides. They challenged the Muses to a musical contest, lost, and were changed into magpies, birds that imitate sounds and chatter incessantly. (56)
That Pierian or Pierides suggests both muse and magpie seems fitting for Stevens's disfigured muse refigured into his supreme reader.

It is also interesting to note here that these three types of supreme reader roughly parallel the three theories of poetry that J. Hillis Miller identifies as "operative in Stevens's work": poetry as mimesis (reflective reader), as revelation (refractive reader), and as creation (Pierian reader). And what Miller says about the interwoven nature of these seemingly contradictory theories applies as well to Stevens's supreme readers:

The three theories are not . . . alternatives among which one may choose. Their contradictory inherence in one another generates the meditative search for "what will suffice" in Stevens's poetry. (275)

3 In May 1949, Stevens wrote a letter to Bernard Heringman in which he says that "my interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get" (L 636). At the very least, this claim complicates Bakhtin's idea that poetry "gives rise to the conception of a purely poetic, extrahistorical language, a language far removed from the petty rounds of everyday life, a language of the gods" (331).
Thomas Fink makes the point that "The three 'and yets' represent a 'never-ending' procession of qualifications, a wandering farther and farther from any inaugural focal point" (88).

B. J. Leggett founds Stevens's strength as a poet at least partly on the idea that "Stevens . . . projects the great poem of the earth into the future so that even the strongest contemporary poets can compose no more than notes toward the supreme fiction, which lies always beyond us" (67). Unending process, the "never-ending meditation," defers always the final word. And as Leggett points out elsewhere, "To resist the intelligence is, in Stevens's view, to preserve the potency of poetry, to maintain an interest in it as art against the destructive tendency of the intellect to reduce it to statement" (119). But of course, antiphonal evasion implies that no such statement is even possible as long as the Pierian reader is reading right.

In discussing Stevens's various meanings of "reality" as used in "An Ordinary Evening," Bloom says that

The commonest is the Emersonian one in which reality is the not-self, or as Emerson said, Nature or the Not-Me, including one's own body, other selves, the external world, and the anteriority of art. That leaves only one's own
mind or imagination to set against a reality that comprehends all otherness, in a dialectical struggle without a victory. (307)

7 Note the similarity between "Esthetique's" "dark italics" and "An Ordinary Evening's" "dark things," both of which refer to the mysterious limina between poet and reader.

8 In "Large White Man Reading," Joseph Kronick refers to the "second giant" as a reader who reimagines the world, that is, hears the echo that is a giant's question, for the question itself remains unheard, even unspoken, unless it can be uttered in an answer that is its double. . . . [T]he production of poetry as a doubling of an original speech undoes metaphor's dependence upon proper meaning, for there can be no poetry of a first giant, an originary being who exists outside language. (96-97)

9 Margaret Dickie helps shed light on the paradoxical combination of dangerous rival and desired lover in Stevens: The "self as sibyl" is the self as other, and in that metaphor the poet is transformed. The sibyl is unknowable, the woman as enigma and as the creator of enigmas. She is a seer, an even more interminable adventurer than Ulysses in worlds
beyond, in divinations. As the poet's self, she
has come home, returning to her source from
wanderings enforced upon her by the poet's refusal
to identify himself with her. Impoverished and
blind, she comes arrayed in the poet's own blind
imagery. (101)

This "self as other," I contend, is most often imagined by
Stevens as his Pierian reader who is, in her or his power,
both frighteningly threatening and intensely desirable.

10 In its archaic sense, "to dwell" means to lead
astray or to hinder.

11 Although I do not necessarily agree with all of Mark
Halliday's assertions in his interesting book *Stevens and
the Interpersonal*, Halliday gives a thorough accounting of
the intense desire but simultaneous extreme fear of intimacy
implied in Stevens's poetry. Joan Richardson, as well,
documents the problematics of Stevens's relations with other
people in his life. I believe that Stevens tries to
compensate for this "trouble"—"Life is an affair of people
not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and
that is the trouble"—by establishing the intimately distant
relationship with his imagined reader. This was his
compensation for the lack of intimacy in reality. Mark
Halliday seems to suggest something similar. (In the above
mentioned book, see his last chapter "Stevens and the
Reader.

In speaking of a gift Stevens had received from James Powers in 1945, Richardson touches upon Stevens's need for distance in his intimate relationships:

The poet was obviously touched by the little offerings of gifts that still came from some of his friends. Sharing this warm detail with a man he had not seen in twenty years was a metaphor for the structure of Stevens's inner being: The more distance, the greater the possibility for expressing tenderness. (*Wallace Stevens: The Later Years* 248)

12 Note Vendler's remark in *Words Chosen Out of Desire* that in Stevens's poetry "desire stays alive only by obliterating former objects of desire" (40).

13 As Leggett points out, "because any particular reading of Stevens can be challenged by another equally defensible reading, readers cannot be 'perfectly sure of a poem' and consequently 'have no further interest in it'" (139).

14 For Longenbach, Stevens's heroes mingle the plain and the supreme:

The Stevensian hero is always nothing but human and yet somehow more than human; nothing but a human form and yet formless. Or to put it in more precise terms of gender, he is a man and yet not a
man. Measured against the categories with which Stevens himself measures the virile poet or the central man, the problem with this hero is that he is in danger of being feminized. If he receives his being out of others, he is derivative; if he is inhuman and substanceless, he lacks contact with the real world of experience; if he is a fictive thing, a fancy, he is not masculine.

(231)

15 T. J. Jackson Lears discusses modernist valorization of the primitive and primal as "widespread gropings toward 'real life'" and adds that Desperate quests for authentic experience led often to the discovery of the "pristine savage"—uncivilized, uninhibited, and aggressive. The link between fin-de-siècle fascination with primal, aggressive impulse and the emerging search for authenticity discloses one of the most important undercurrents in twentieth-century cultural history: the desire to recombine a fragmented self and re-create a problematic reality through aggressive action. (137)

16 Patke calls this image of the cock at dawn "an emblem of the 'miraculous' possibilities which the poet reserves for his poem, even in New Haven" (219).
In his attempt to name the feeling that Stevens evokes in the reader, Mark Halliday says that

**Intimacy** is not quite an acceptable word for what is felt, since a fastidious hauteur nearly always keeps the poet at a calm distance from us—he is never looking straight into our eyes—and yet the cumulative effect of the "we" and "one" passages calls the word **intimacy** to mind.

While I do not claim to be able to name the emotions that actual readers of Stevens must feel upon experiencing "An Ordinary Evening," I do think that Stevens characterizes just this sort of distant intimacy between his intratextual readers and poets. This characterized **eloignement** is an intimacy of sorts, but one that is highly problematic as the entirety of this study shows.

In attempting to explain Stevens's rise to poetic power, Bloom says that "Stevens writes a poetry centered on the **aporia** between rhetoric as persuasion ["deviation"] and rhetoric as a system of tropes ["trope"], and in a curious way this centering became a guarantee of his poetic importance" (PC 105).

Leggett touches on this "strange relation" in his discussion of the interaction between poet and ephebe in "Notes":
It is as if the instructor, in the course of the lecture, exposes the paradox of his instruction. He is counseling the ephebe to wipe clean all he has inherited from the past--whatever stands between him and the first idea--of which the instructor, his view of poetry, and his metaphor for the sun are a part. (56)

Frank Lentricchia comments that

The transparent-eye-ball passage in Emerson is father to the moment of vivid transparency in Stevens, but between Emerson and Stevens falls not so much the struggle of fathers and sons--this is not their chief difference--as a thorough commodification of everyday life. (226)

"We must learn to read diacritically as well as semantically," Michael Davidson remarks and goes on to say that

When Stevens says of the poem, "It must be abstract," he means abstraction not as generalization but, paradoxically, as the intensification of particularity to the point where a word no longer exists within any conventional context. In order to see a thing we must "unsee" it, abstract it and defamiliarize it,
create a language with the same freshness and poignancy as the thing itself. (153)

22 Enigma's Greek root, ainisesthai, means to speak in riddles, and is derived from ainos, tale or story.

23 There is perhaps an echo of Hesiod's myth of the ages of gold, silver, and bronze here. The bronze reader would be twice removed from the ideal or golden age.

24 Note the word play on "venerable"—"This tendance and venerable holding-in"—which is taken from the Latin Venus, Veneris. Such veiled eroticism complicates, at the very least, Margaret Dickie's claim that eroticism fails in Stevens:

Traditionally, the poet's desire is the desire for the muse, the desire to be satisfied by her and to be satisfying to her. Stevens fails on both counts, and what fails is the erotics of his art. It is not that his speaker is too "civil," although he is certainly that; it is rather that he is not civilized enough to convert a desire for the forbidden object into a desire for the permitted object. (92)

25 Vendler has wonderfully labeled this style "barrages of apposition."
One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.

Emerson, "The American Scholar"

The ephebe in Stevens's poetry is, at least partly, a portrait of the reader as a young man. In canto thirteen of "An Ordinary Evening" (CP 474-75), he provides a contrast to professor Eucalyptus: the frenetic Ephebe versus the sedentary Eucalyptus. As the vital and dynamic young supreme reader, the ephebe seems more powerful than the professor who "sits in his room, beside / The window, close to the ramshackle spout." But at times the ephebe demonstrates his foolish immaturity and naivety. He impatiently circumvents the suffering and despair of disfigurative impoverishment that seems so powerfully unavoidable for a Pierian reader: "He skips the journalism of subjects, seeks out / The perquisites of sanctity." An ironic version of the solipsistic and Emersonian Hoon—"I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard
or felt came not but from myself" (CP 65)—the ephebe is happily solitary and relishes his estrangement from the rest of the "neighborhood." Indeed, he is so out of step with the neighborhood, that he becomes comic in spite of himself. The poet mocks him for being a "serious man without the serious." He is unintentionally clownish and as such vulnerable to the poet's gently disdainful irony at the end of the canto.

The ephebe defines, whereas the poet and Pierian reader interact to predicate. Each focuses on "A difficulty"—"A coldness in a long, too-constant warmth"—but poet and Pierian reader provide the canto with appositional transmutations of "A difficulty," which, to the ephebe, is only "A thing on the side of a house." The evasive antiphonies of poet and Pierian reader stir

The difficulty of the visible
To the nations of the clear invisible,

The actual landscape with its actual horns
Of baker and butcher blowing, as if to hear,
Hear hard, gets at an essential integrity.

(CP 474-75)

The "big X of the returning primitive" features the sounds of New Haven complicating the ideas of "the nations of the clear invisible." Ideas about transparency must now account for the hard sounds of the traffic in the street, as well as the fact that these sounds, if heard hard (that is, with intensity), provide new inspiration for new imaginations.
Such an intensity and immediacy of hearing approximates direct experience of the primal sounds that renew the world: "as if to hear, / Hear hard, gets at an essential integrity." Such sounds approach a purity that cannot be evaded and yet must be to preserve the imagination. But it is not within the ephebe's solipsistic stroll that such antiphonies of evasion can actualize themselves, for they must involve "the self, / The town, the weather, in a casual litter" in order to both reveal and to reveil "The actual landscape" so painfully unapparent to "the nations of the clear invisible."  

As a contrast to the ephebe, cantos fourteen and fifteen (CP 475-76) introduce professor Eucalyptus whose name, derived from the Greek Kalyptein, means well covered or well disguised. Like all of Stevens's supreme readers, professor Eucalyptus "sits in his room, beside / The window," near the disfigured terrain outside. He confronts the "res itself"--"the ramshackle spout in which / The rain falls with a ramshackle sound"--because "He seeks / God in the object itself." Professor Eucalyptus looks "grimly" at things, with an unflinching and stern stare that will transfix the object as object. But the supremely evasive Eucalyptus is the grand example of the reader unrelentingly eluding captivation. As the one who "does not look / Beyond the object," he evades by pretending to be unevasive. He
intentionally blinds himself to the possibility of transcendence, deliberately impoverishing visionary eyesight, while all along understanding that such blinding and impoverishment are necessary disguises beneath which the imagination can continue to thrive and to seek "God in the object itself."  

Professor Eucalyptus chooses "the commodious adjective," but commodious here connotes something akin to "ramshackle." This should not be surprising since the impoverishment suggested by adjectives such as ramshackle provides the new dwelling for the imagination in the "rainless land" of Stevens's disfigured terrain. Professor Eucalyptus desires "description that makes [the object] divinity":

\[
\text{still speech}
\]
\[
\text{As it touches the point of reverberation—not grim Reality but reality grimly seen}
\]
\[
\text{And spoken in paradisal parlance new. . . .}
\]

(CP 475)

But the pun that Stevens uses with desire (desire) applies to describe as well. The professor as Pierian reader describes the object of his contemplation—the poem before him—and thus opens a space or "commodious adjective" for his imaginative recreation. His description of the poem "makes it divinity"; the eucalyptic muse inspires the poet's own act of divination, his "still speech / As it touches the point of reverberation." This is the central
"point" of the poem, its mysterious limina that gesture with invocation as well as indication, and in its touch or pointing reverberation—an echoing back from the future that is its most powerfully imagined source—the poem's limina initiate the ceremony that liberates the imagination.

Perpetually describing and rescribing the poem, this ceremony of antiphony opens "paradisal parlance new" and "the human grim / That is a part of the indifference of the eye [and I]." The describing that disguises itself as an objective examination of the "res" (a pseudo distinction between the figurative terrain of the imagination and the antefigurative terrain of what is always "not yet well perceived" is involved here) proves to be a gesture toward divination, a search for God that "does not look / Beyond the object." Neither the "res" nor the poem nor the "tink-tonk / Of the rain in the spout" replaces the act of imagination, but instead each (or all, or one) motions from "the essence not yet well perceived." The artifact is always already absent, the perpetually deferred and elusive antefigurative terrain that can never be reached.

Or perhaps to reach the antefigurative terrain is simply to stop living. Thus the same primitive instinct drives professor Eucalyptus and the "dry eucalyptus": "The dry eucalyptus seeks god in the rainy cloud." The imagination originates in a primitive instinct to survive,
an instinct that evades and defers mortality at every turn. Professor Eucalyptus "preserves himself against the repugnant rain / By an instinct for a rainless land." In accordance with a primal twitch, the professor veers not toward "The instinct for heaven" but toward "The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room." New Haven plays fully on the secularization of heaven into haven, with a suggestion that the poet's new heaven is on earth and provides a safe haven for the imagination. This haven camouflages itself as the commonplace—the professor's room for example—but beneath the costume is a common place or liminal arena between poet and Pierian reader. The professor's preference for a rainless land coincides with the poet's turn toward disfigurative impoverishment. Eucalyptus looks upon the waste of a land marred by the erosive and inditing effects of the poet's disfigurative inundation and evasively describes a plain untouched by the effects of the storming weather.

What the professor craves above all is a haven "In which he is and as and is are one." Such a liminal arena—where poet and Pierian reader might engage each other—would provide "a kind of counterpoint" or appositional countergesture of invitation and indication that would avoid the impulse to transcend in order to irk (and ink) "the wet wallows of the water-spout." As a melody accompanying
another melody, the counterpointed chant calls to mind the
antiphonal engagement between poet and Pierian reader in
"The hibernal dark that hung / In primavera, the shadow of
the bare rock." But through their ceremony of antiphonal
evasion the bare rock "Becomes the rock of autumn,
glittering, / Ponderable source of each imponderable, / The
weight we lift with the finger of a dream." Communing poet
and Pierian reader exchange "the soft / Touch and trouble of
the touch of the actual hand" that refigures the "bare
rock." "Faint" and "sensitive," ever elusive in approach,
this is the brush of a desiring hand, which can offer the
needed touch because of its very elusiveness.

Intercourse between poet and disfigured muse means
descent into and an embracing of the most barren poverty
from which the Pierian reader reascends into the commonplace
and its new arena in the imagination: "The oldest-newest day
is the newest alone" (CP 476). Isolated in his novelty, the
Pierian reader perpetuates the newest solitude, which does
not "creak by, / With lanterns, like a celestial
ancientness." The Pierian reader is of the earth and
humanity, not heavenly and deific. The ceremony of
antiphonal evasion silently yields its inspiration:

Silently it heaves its youthful sleep from the
sea—
The Oklahoman—the Italian blue
Beyond the horizon with its masculine,

Their eyes closed, in a young palaver of lips.
And yet the wind whimpers oldly of old age
In the western night. (CP 476-77)

Combining the sublime and the ordinary, "palaver" suggests both the formal dialogue and informal chatter between poet and Pierian reader, an exchange in which "The venerable mask, / In this perfection, occasionally speaks / And something of death's poverty is heard." Such an antiphony of evasion necessarily serves as a memento mori, for the poet takes inspiration from his future refiguration, the always-yet-to-be Pierian reader who prefigures his own death. But the liberation of the imagination through these antiphonies celebrates "something of death's poverty" through the potency of the human impulse to continually create. Affirmation of this type often approaches the sublime status of the heroic (a part of the "celestial ancientness"), but the final stanza of canto sixteen retains the commonplace.

Poet and insufflating reader remain in the stark, refigured landscape of New Haven and its winter leaflessness, a self-referential return to the silent limina of the poem. Each gestures and whispers his slight indication to the other:

It is a bough in the electric light
And exhalations in the eaves, so little
To indicate the total leaflessness. (CP 477)
These commonplaces—the tree in streetlight or the whistle of wind—acquire "almost the color of comedy" but "not quite":

It comes to the point and at the point,  
It fails. The strength at the centre is serious.

Perhaps instead of failing it rejects  
As a serious strength rejects pin-idleness.  
(CP 477)

The poet comically gestures with invitation and indication but at last veers away from the Pierian reader, adopting a solemn persona. Like the sun of "Esthetique (6)," he is "clownish . . . but not entirely a clown" (CP 318). The poem itself veers toward vacancy since poet and Pierian reader—"the strength at the centre"—commingle within the void of language, the "blank" that "underlies the trials of device." As a "trial" or experiment, the poet examines the poem's conventions and finally settles upon antiphonal evasion and the refiguration of the muse into supreme reader as a means of achieving "An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought" (CP 385):

This is the mirror of the high serious:  
Blue verdured into a damask's lofty symbol,  

Gold easings and ouncings and fluctuations of thread  
And beetling of belts and lights of general stones,  
Like blessed beams from out a blessed bush  

Or the wasted figurations of the wastes  
Of night, time and the imagination,  
Saved and beholden, in a robe of rays.  
(CP 477)
The reference to Moses and the burning bush recalls the relation between audience and sacred creator, but the myth is desacralized here, a part of the poet's disfiguration of the "wasted figurations." The poet redresses the muse in a robe of rays, but the rescue from wasted figurations "is composed / Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace" as well as the commonplace or the silence of the poem's mysterious limina.

One difficulty for Stevens's poet is his desire for escape in the "pejorative sense of the word," especially since poetry provides a window upon the past: "It is the window that makes it difficult / to say good-by to the past and to live and to be / In the present state of things" (CP 478). This is especially trying when the present state of things is so entirely impoverished, as it is for Stevens, surrounded by his disfigured terrain. But to gain a view of the contemporary dilapidation requires a "looking out / Of the window and walking in the street and seeing, / As if the eyes were the present or part of it." This is the Stevensian experience of transparency, and it contrasts starkly with the Emersonian. In Stevens, the poet merges with the commonplace, the disfigured terrain of the "ever physical," instead of with the oversoul and its circulating current. Such vision is an "as if" experience; it involves a disguised or camouflaged seeing, a subterfuge that
facilitates the poet's "walking in the street" as a "part of it." On such a walk, the poet hears the unmediated noise of New Haven—"any shocking sound"—and understands his being "part of it."

In stanza four of canto eighteen (CP 478), the poet becomes a type of guide through the streets of the ordinary city, as if pointing out this or that example of the commonplace: "The life and death of this carpenter depend / On a fuchsia in a can." The line echoes, mockingly, Williams's "so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens" (Selected Poems 30). Stevens seems to concede that a great deal does indeed depend upon the disfigured terrain of things as in "no ideas but in things," but he adds another variable to the equation: life and death also depend upon "iridescences / Of petals that will never be realized." The moon that rises "in the mind," in canto nineteen, must have its place as well. The gay swirl of colors in the mind is a part of "a carpenter's iridescences," no matter how "Wooden" or how "slapped up like a chest of tools" New Haven may be. Stevens sardonically associates the carpenter with the imagist poets who tack together lines of poetry to build a physical object "slapped up like a chest of tools," but no matter how shoddy and mechanical the poetry (and Stevens is likely including himself in the group who can slap together
such a dilapidated terrain), still the poet (and the reader) must have his or her iridescences.

Above this collapsing, clanking city rises the moon "in the mind," as the poet makes gestures of abandonment in an attempt to leave behind the past with its "radial aspect" that rises out of "a different source." Canto nineteen begins with a jab at Romanticism and the crisis of the mind:

The moon rose in the mind and each thing there
Picked up its radial aspect in the night,
Prostrate below the singleness of its will.

That which was public green turned private gray.  
(CP 478-79)

The disfiguring poet criticizes Romanticism for its tyrannizingly willful and life draining solipsism, its "private gray." Developing the self into a "personage" (note the pun on person/age) and "A man who [is] the axis of his time," the romantic imagination overpowers the commonplace, leaving the poet to ask "What is the radial aspect of this place, / This present colony of a colony / Of colonies."

The poet, of course, evades even the pretense of answering such a question; indeed, the question tenders another well disguised invitation/invocation to the Pierian reader who now appears as "A figure like Ecclesiast, / Rugged and luminous," who "chants in the dark / A text that is an answer, although obscure." The two meanings of Ecclesiast merge nicely here. As the minister of a church,
the Ecclesiast leads in the chants of antiphony, with the congregation answering ritually. But this antiphonal chanting is anything but orthodox. Instead, the Ecclesiast shares in a text chanted in the dark and "an answer, although obscure." Ecclesiast also means a member of the Greek Ecclesia, or governing body of the city-state. In Athens, at least, the members of the Ecclesia had an equal say in matters of government, since Athens was a relatively democratic form of government; thus the Athenian Ecclesia suggests a mutual and equal interaction of reader's and poet's imaginations.

Stevens's Ecclesiast is the muse refigured as the supreme reader reading evasively "A text that is an answer, although obscure." But the Pierian reader never quite fully is the reader so much as he is always becoming the reader. He is always in the process of re-imagining or antiphonally evading: "A neuter shedding shapes in an absolute." This line from canto twenty (CP 479-80) exemplifies the protean elusiveness of "the nameless, flitting characters" that inhabit the disfigured terrain of New Haven. Poet and Pierian reader evade, perhaps unintentionally, by shedding the shapes that they try to hold, through a shaping of the poem's endless process. Such shedding makes and remakes forms endlessly in an absolute necessity of creative frenzy. But the shapes are never quite captured, since the process
is unending. The shedding is itself a transmogrifying that strips and refines the "residuum" that the speaker tries to corner in the canto:

Yet the transcripts of it when it was blue remain; And the shapes that it took in feeling, the persons that

It became, the nameless, flitting characters-- These actors still walk in a twilight muttering lines. (CP 479)

The transcripts, the shapes, the persons that supposedly remain and are traceable finally transmute into "the nameless, flitting characters," and the dash after "characters" suggests the baffled exasperation and hesitation that recalls the beginning of the canto and the transcripts that "were like clouds," opaque and shifting constantly and unidentifiably through the air. Finally, after the dash, comes the frustrated admission that "These actors still walk in a twilight muttering lines." Like "These actors," the poet's words and phrases "still walk" through the poem, creating an oxymoronic clash between ossification and protean transformation. The "still walk" through the town is the poem's limen where poet and Pierian reader meet and greet elusively, where "It may be that they mingle, clouds and men, in the air / Or street or about the corners of a man, / Who sits thinking in the corners of a room." The poet's attempt to corner some definite shape, to search out and define the "still walk" of the poem,
culminates in the depiction of a reader meditating "In this chamber." Thus "the pure sphere escapes the impure, /
Because the thinker himself escapes." The mysterious limina of the poem become habitable because of the Pierian reader's evasiveness, his sitting in the corners of the room instead of in its center. The Pierian reader inhabits the corners of the poem--its mysterious limina--in order to escape, and because he escapes, the poem "escapes the impure."

The disfiguring poet's process--his poems' ceremonies of antiphony--depends upon the Pierian reader's own evasiveness: "To have evaded clouds and men leaves him / A naked being with a naked will / And everything to make."

The poet and Pierian reader are refined remainders, powerful creative residues on the edge of recreating everything. But the final supposition of the canto creates a residue of fearful solitude: "He may evade / Even his own will and in his nakedness / Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere."

Evasive strength may create its own hypnotic solipsism; on the other hand, "the will of necessity, the will of wills" may save poet and Pierian reader from such isolation. Thus the ceremonies of antiphony are powerful rituals of liberation, an ironic idea since the Pierian reader and poet "cannot evade / The will of necessity." But it is precisely the ultimate limitation of our mortality that frees us to
create, a notion that looks back to "Death is the mother of beauty."

What Pierian reader and poet do evade is "Romanza out of the black shepherd's isle" in canto twenty-one (CP 480-81). Romanza arises from the isolation of the solitary isle surrounded by "the constant sound of the water of the sea." Its origin is "Out of the isle, but not of any isle" (emphasis added); in other words, its source is untraceable in a world of unending process, of "neuter shedding shapes." The Pierian reader must willfully blind himself to the Romanza of origins, indeed to the origin of the poem itself, and thus by evasion give breath to the poet of evasion. His eyes must no longer receive but instead transmit; his breath must transpire antiphonally. Such intentional and antiphonal blinding—the will to necessity or the acceptance of necessary impoverishment—creates the poet's and the reader's solitude:

Close to the senses there lies another isle
And there the senses give and nothing take,

The opposite of Cythere, an isolation
At the centre, the object of the will, this place,
The things around—the alternate romanza

Out of the surfaces, the windows, the walls,
The bricks grown brittle in time's poverty,
The clear. (CP 480)

In their "isolation / At the centre" poet and Pierian reader veer away from the exoticism and sexual luxuriance of Cythere toward ordinary New Haven as city and as poem, the
habitation that is the "alternate romanza." Ironically the Pierian reader's and poet's intentional blinding inverts the Miltonic physical blindness that awakens spiritual vision. The Pierian reader and poet must blind themselves spiritually and suffer "in time's poverty" in order to open their physical eyes to the commonplace: "the windows, the walls, / The bricks grown brittle in time's poverty, / The clear." This catalogue of "the things around" arranges the alternate romanza out of the disfigured terrain. It is nevertheless a romanza where "A celestial mode is paramount," but the alternate romanza's "celestial" is located on earth, near instead of distant, elevated heavenward "If only in the branches sweeping in the rain." In the end, the romanzas that are so different--"the distant and the near"--combine in "a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind." In the same way the voices of poet and Pierian reader provide the "apposite ritual" (CP 39), the ceremony of antiphonal evasion that resides against the incomprehensible forces that surround them. The communion of imaginations makes those forces seem like a dark pleasure that poet and Pierian reader can derive from their own fears.

Canto twenty-two (CP 481) asserts that the philosopher moves outward in his search for public knowledge and that which all can, at least ideally, understand. The poet, on
the other hand, moves inward and his becomes a search of, as well as for, his own interior terrain where "breathless things" are "broodingly abreath / With the inhalations of original cold / And of original earliness." The poet's search breathes life into the apparently unmoving, static terrain, but it is, after all, his own interior that is "broodingly abreath" and meditating with the inspiration arising out of "original cold" and "original earliness." But the primitive instinct or "sense" for these resides in the commonplace: "Yet the sense / Of cold and earliness is a daily sense, / Not the predicate of bright origin." The source of inspiration is within the human, the earthly, and the ordinary according to the disfiguring poet; it lies near the commonplace or threshold between poet and disfigured muse as supreme reader. The disfiguration of "the predicate of bright origin" reveals that "Creation is not renewed by images / Of lone wanderers." Creative energy arises rather out of the communion of imaginations in the ceremony of antiphonal evasion. The ossified texts of solitude, those "images / Of lone wanderers," are reanimated by the Pierian reader reading evasively. To do this, to "re-create," is "to search." The search for the "interior fons" (CP 301) is a chant of imaginations in communion, participating in the antiphonies of evasion. Stevens's disfigured muse refigured as the Pierian reader provides the interior illumination and
elusive glitter that awaken his search of "a possible for its possibleness."
Notes

1 As Mark Halliday says,
While presuming that the reader is like a younger
version of himself, Stevens avoids a Whitmanesque
seizing of the reader's lapels. There are some
poems in which a sort of stand-in for the reader
is directly addressed--as ephebe, infant, nino,
boys, Fernando, etc. (100)

2 As Lisa Steinman has suggested, part of the problem
for modern American poets was in determining who comprised
their audience, or if there even was an audience to whom
they could address themselves:

American poets who stayed in this country, then,
tried to address two audiences: They wished to
prove to the world that America could produce
great art as well as great automobiles and they
wanted to reach an American audience that seemed
to care little about art of any kind. (48)

3 About Professor Eucalyptus, Bloom comments,
[Clanto XV raises Eucalyptus to a first glory and
implicitly reveals why the Yale Professor of
Metaphysics has received the name of so aromatic a
tree. The flowering leaf of the eucalyptus is a
well-covered flower until it opens, hence the
tree's name from the Greek for "covered" or "hidden." (PC 322)

See also Eleanor Cook's discussion of the word eucalyptus in *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, p. 269.

4 In "Large White Man Reading," Joseph Kronick paraphrases Stevens as recommending that "We must learn to read a little blindly, to close our eyes to the sun in order to 'see it clearly in the idea of it'" (92).

5 In a letter to Hi Simons in February 1942, Stevens makes clear that

Poetry as a narcotic is escapism in the pejorative sense. But there is a benign escapism in every illusion. The use of the word illusion suggests the simplest way to define the difference between escapism in a pejorative sense and in a non-pejorative sense. (L 402)

6 In "Stevens in Corsica, Lear in New Haven," Alison Rieke remarks that "In the 'boo-ha' of the wind's voice (XXI/345), in its tears and laughter, tragic and comic come together and cancel each other out" (53), and this leaves us with what she calls the "third term" or the commonplace of "An Ordinary Evening."

7 Berger's remark on this phrase suggests that the reader is the source of poetic inspiration:
the process of internalization represents the
ideal of a living tradition in which re-creation
becomes a daily sense, and the firmament of great
poets is found within us. The "possible" that
Stevens searches for "its possibleness" may be a
paradigm of poetic immortality that he can live
with. (98)
CHAPTER 10

THE HIDALGO'S SONG: "AN ORDINARY EVENING, XXIII-XXXI"

It is a text that we shall be needing,
To be the footing of noon,
The pillar of midnight,

That comes from ourselves, neither from knowing
Nor not knowing, yet free from question,
Because we wanted it so
And it had to be,

A text of intelligent men
At the centre of the unintelligible,
As in a hermitage, for us to think,
Writing ad reading the rigid inscription.

"Things of August"

Canto twenty-three of "An Ordinary Evening" (CP 481-82) refigures Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" with night taking on the role of "the fierce old mother incessantly moaning" (Leaves 251). Stevens starts with the bodiless in order to arrive at the body:

There is always this bodiless half,
This illumination, this elevation, this future.

Or, say, the late going colors of that past,
Effete green, the woman in black cassimere.
If, then, New Haven is half sun, what remains,

At evening, after dark, is the other half,
Lighted by space, big over those that sleep. . . .

(CP 482)

For the disfiguring poet, the elevated figuration of the bodiless, with its sophisticated image of the muse--"the woman in black cassimere"--resides in an "effete green"
past. Only "what remains, / At evening" arouses interest now. The residues of disfiguration take their "brilliancies" from the pure vacancy of the sky "Lighted by space." The poet's engagement with his Pierian reader relies upon his recognition of the reader as emblem of his mortality. Poet's and reader's primal illumination--"The most ancient light in the most ancient sky"--derives from awareness of the body's mortality, but because of the implicit bond--"the fellowship of men that perish" (CP 70)--inspired by this awareness, it offers a consolation. It is Of the single future of night, the single sleep, As of a long, inevitable sound, A kind of cozening and coaxing sound, And the goodness of lying in a maternal sound, Unfretted by day's separate, several selves, Being part of everything come together as one. (CP 482)

Stevens's "single sleep" resembles Whitman's ocean that "Lisp'd to [the poet] the low and delicious word death" (Leaves 252), especially as it resolves into a Whitmanian visionary merge--"everything come together as one." But the final four lines of the canto refigure the Whitmanian terrain in a paradoxically Stevensian fashion:

In this identity, disembodiments Still keep occurring. What is, uncertainly, Desire prolongs its adventure to create Forms of farewell, furtive among green ferns. (CP 482)
Stevens disengages the all-in-one, dispersing the "effete" past into new disembodiments. He refigures the all-engulfing "fierce old mother" into his Pierian reader who, "furtive among the green ferns," endlessly recreates "Forms of farewell." The future's "cozening and coaxing sound" passes mutually between disfiguring poet and Pierian reader, inviting evasion as it evades. The disfiguring poet deviates because of the deviation of the Pierian reader, each celebrating, with antiphonies of evasion, the "disembodiments / That still keep occurring."

Events beyond the poet's control bring about the necessity of disfiguration as the beginning of canto twenty-four suggests:

It was
In the genius of summer that they blew up
The statue of Jove among the boomy clouds.
It took all day to quieten the sky
And then to refill its emptiness again. . . .
(CP 482)

The quietening of the sky, its disfiguration or stripping down to its bare vacancy, precedes and is a necessary step toward the refilling of "its emptiness again," its refiguration "at the edge of afternoon." The process of disfiguration and refiguration occurs as a liminal transparency, "a clearing," that is also "a readiness for first bells, / An opening for outpouring." The play on readiness—an eagerness for the search after original sounds
which perhaps produces the readability of those sounds—
emphasizes again the importance of poet and reader communion
that shapes itself around the mysterious limina of the poem,
those places "for outpouring" where "the hand was raised."
One of the "forms of farewell" mentioned at the end of canto
twenty-three, this gesture of simultaneous invitation and
deferral culminates in the poem's transparent limina and
awakens "a willingness not yet composed." The poet's will
to inhabit a "not yet composed" text, always deferred and
thus both evasive and evaded, binds him to the disfigured
muse and her refiguration as the Pierian reader.

Such a willingness implies an odd condition of
knowledge, both a state of knowing that is consoled by its
very uncertainty and a requirement that one take consolation
in such impoverished uncertainty in order to experience even
the fiction of knowing. This state is in fact the Pierian
reader's gift of inspiration to the disfiguring poet, an
inspiration that arises out of the disfiguration of "the
statue of Jove." The muse's refiguration as a Pierian
reader provides for

An escape from repetition, a happening
In space and the self, that touched them both at
once
And alike, a point of the sky or of the earth
Or of a town poised at the horizon's dip.

(CP 483)
The endlessly deferred text—"a happening / In space and the self"—evades repetition while it simultaneously relies upon evasive repetition to accomplish the ceremonious chanting that repeats but avoids repeating, creating the "appositive ritual" of antiphonal evasion between disfiguring poet and Pierian reader. "An Ordinary Evening" itself demonstrates this appositive ritual, with its repetitions that are slight permutations from one line to the next. In canto twenty-four for example "a willingness" becomes "a knowing," "an escape," "a happening," and finally "a point" (CP 482-83). This "point" is a varied and evasive repetition of the "willingness not yet composed," the always deferred and ever evasive poem constantly refigured by the yet-to-be Pierian reader. The point of the poem gestures in invitation and farewell, waving indicatively at and yet also dismissing "The consolations of space" that are the "nameless things," the silent limina of the poem. The momentary poise "at the horizon's dip" resolves itself out of and back into the communion between evading imaginations in the always deferring creation of the poem as mystery, as a nameless thing.

The poet stands on his balcony, in canto twenty-five (CP 483-84), gazing into "distances," and out of this liminal dark, "Life" stares back "With its attentive eyes." Such a stare both refreshes ("fixes" or heals) the poet and
transfixes his uncertain "wandering on the stair of glass."
The poet's life depends upon a relationship with the Pierian
reader as inspiring force, as disfigured muse refigured:

This was
Who watched him, always, for unfaithful thought.
This sat beside his bed, with its guitar,
to keep him from forgetting, without a word,
A note or two disclosing who it was. (CP 483)

As the daughters of Mnemosyne or Memory, the classical muses
remind the poet with the insufflation of their breath.
Refigured as the hidalgo that sits beside the poet's bed,¹
the Pierian reader accomplishes this reminding "without a
word," silently, out of the distance that provides the
"consolations of space."

The disfiguring poet must be evasive—"Nothing about
him ever stayed the same"—but the imagined hidalgo creates
a certain poise, a momentary coupling within the limina of
the poem. The hidalgo inspires a fixity that can change
because the Pierian reader is a reader-yet-to-be, the always
defered moment of refiguration out of the disfigured
terrain of the poet's own impoverishment: "The commonplace
became a rumpling of blazons." The communion of
imaginings between hidalgo and poet is a common place, the
mysterious limen of the poem, "rumpling" or disordering or
disfiguring the ornamentation of the past's figurative
terrain. Solitude occasions communion instead of solipsism;
isolation both is and is not ("In isolated moments--
isolations / Were false"). As this implies, the pure solitude of the poet is a delusion. Instead, "The hidalgo was permanent, abstract, / A hatching that stared and demanded an answering look" (emphasis added). The responsive ceremonies of antiphony rescue the poet from complete isolation, and these ceremonies, paradoxically, originate out of the Pierian reader-yet-to-be. This "hatching"--one of Stevens's astonishing word-blossomings where the "dark italics" seem to acquire a brilliant, intellectual glitter of myriad meanings that comprise the mysterious limina of his poetry--suggests both the originary moment of the poem and the scribing or engraving of an artifact that shadows forth, with its various parallel and intersecting lines, the shadowy realm of the new imagination.

"Hatching" anticipates "These lineaments" of canto twenty-six (CP 484) where the inamorata replaces the hidalgo. The canto's first four stanzas describe the lineaments that "were the earth / Seen as inamorata" prior to the poet's disfiguration:

How facilely the purple blotches fell
On the walk, purple and blue, and red and gold,
Blooming and beaming and voluming colors out.

Away from them, capes, along the afternoon Sound,
Shook off their dark marine in lapis light.
The sea shivered in transcendent change. . . .

(CP 484)
This finely figured terrain suggests the Nature of Emerson and Whitman, whose "voluming colors" and "lapis light" provide a transparent vision of transcendence. The capes, the sea, and the mountains shape the "lineaments" of a former terrain, "the earth, / Seen as inamorata, of loving fame / Added and added out of a fame-full heart." But this inamorata or former lover—the earth as corresponding emblem of spirit—has become disfigured, commonplace instead of transcendent; the poet's lover is now earthly reader instead of heavenly muse:

But, here, the inamorata, without distance
And thereby lost, and naked or in rags,
Shrunk in the poverty of being close,

Touches, as one hand touches another hand,
Or as a voice that, speaking without form,
Gritting the ear, whispers humane repose.

(CP 484)

The missing distance is that of transcendent separation between the earthly and the heavenly, the body and the spirit. The muse's descent to earth means a "being close" that impoverishes the "fame-full heart" or soul of the poet. But to lose the celestial muse is to gain the earthly body. Losing here suggests again a leaving behind or eluding of what has become—through addition after addition, "Added and added out of a fame-full heart"—mere ornamentation, a "wateriness of green wet in the sky." The diminishment of the inamorata, her fall into the condition of an earthly reader,⁴ liberates both poet and reader, and awakens
imaginative communion, albeit in a terrain stripped "naked or in rags."

Out of her penury, the disfigured muse "touches, as one hand touches another hand," as a physically near lover touches her lover. But Stevens refigures this "being close" into an intimate distance that can touch "as a voice that, speaking without form, / Gritting the ear, whispers humane repose." The Pierian reader speaks out of the imagined future, both as disembodied possibility of an imagination yet-to-be and as a supremely elusive imagination providing the form for antiphonies of evasion, the always deferred finish of the poem. Such a voice sounds grittingly in the ear of imagination, with a harsh, hoarse, grating sound as of stones rubbing together in a fully stark, rocky terrain. The hoarse whisper recalls again Whitman's "Out of the Cradle," but here the quietly harsh sounds rise out of "humane repose," not from "the fierce old mother incessantly moaning" who awakens the visionary poet ecstatically to the transcendence of the self. The refigured inamorata reclines in "humane repose" and inspires a reposing or refiguring of the imagination's terrain. Pierian reader and poet are left alone on earth, humanely, with only their communion of imaginations as the new ceremony of celebration.

The scholar-as-reader serves as a foil to the Pierian reader in canto twenty-seven (CP 485). His responses to his
readings—his "segmenta"—characterize the impoverished implications of his suppositions in overly majestic figures: "The Ruler of Reality," "the Queen of Fact." Disguising the barren terrain of New Haven as something grand, the scholar's ornamentation is an evasion of the pejorative kind. His response is mere window-dressing, skirting the wintry impoverishment of the city. His sibilant sounds are not whispered grittingly nor are they "A hatching" that "demand[s] an answering look," but instead are "audible, / As the fore-meaning in music is." Instead of "speaking without form," they offer meaning too early, too loudly, and too absolutely, in their full composition. As such, they neither comprise nor allow antiphonal evasion, but instead suggest only an orthodox response to an orthodox meaning, one already thought out and to be thought out repetitively: "He has thought it out, he thinks it out, / As he has been and is and, with the Queen / Of Fact, lies at his ease beside the sea." This is not "humane repose" but tyranny reclining canonically on the establishment of its own meanings ever and monotonously perpetuated. The scholar ultimately indicts himself with his own silly segmenta: "This man abolishes by being himself / That which is not ourselves: the regalia, / The attributions, the plume and helmet-ho." He extinguishes the fantastic version of
himself as the Ruler of Reality along with the regalia of
his realm.

The poet offers a different supposition about reality
in canto twenty-eight: "If it should be true that reality
exists / In the mind," then "it follows that / Real and
unreal are two in one" (CP 485). The components that shape
this reality of the mind are the commonplace details of a
secularized communion service: "the tin plate, the loaf of
bread on it, / The long-bladed knife, the little drink and
her / Misericordia." The communion of imaginations provides
for the mind's reality as well as for the mind's consolation
against the wintry impoverishment of New Haven. But if real
and unreal are "two in one," then New Haven's drudging
ordinariness is one with the exoticism of old world cities
such as "Salzburg with shaded eyes / Or Paris in
conversation at a cafe."

In stanza three the canto shifts to a discussion of
poetry in order to wrestle with the communion of minds and
the problem of distinguishing real from unreal. But though
"This endlessly elaborating poem / Displays the theory of
poetry, / As the life of poetry," it cannot give "urgent
proof that the theory / of poetry is the theory of life."
In poetry, which is lived in the imaginations of poet and
Pierian reader, the distinction between the me myself and
the one out there merges in antiphonal evasiveness ("the
intricate evasions of as"). But the dissolution of the difference between real and unreal—"the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life"—is not so easily foisted upon "A more severe, / More harassing master," who provides a stern contrast to the Pierian reader's "Misericordia." The master would have proof that must importunately compel a belief, and such proof destroys the possibility of antiphonal evasion. The master's orthodox antiphonies necessarily ossify into proofs that poetry and life are "two in one." Such orthodoxy eliminates the "endlessly elaborating poem" of antiphonal evasion that "create[s] from nothingness, / The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands."6 These are the desired terrains of the disfiguring imagination, refigured into worlds beyond the ken of "more severe, more harassing" masters.7

Such worlds appear as "the land of the lemon trees" (tropical Key West) and "the land of the elm trees" (wintry New Haven) in canto twenty-nine (CP 486-87). The Key West terrain is luxuriant with the sound of non-sensical words--"the mic-mac of mocking birds"--and is an exotic terrain where the natives roll their r's. Opposite this is the commonplace "mere brown clods" of New Haven where "wandering mariners / Look[] on big women." The mariners' migration to Key West results in a transformation of the poem's lush landscape:
When the mariners came to the land of the lemon trees,  
At last, in that blond atmosphere, bronzed hard,  
They said, "We are back once more in the land of  
the elm trees,  

But folded over, turned over." (CP 487)

As Pierian readers, the mariners' reading of Key West is a re-imagining of its terrain, a disfiguring and refiguring in "Their dark-colored words." The poem they read is "the same / Except for the adjectives, an alteration / Of words that was a change of nature, more / Than the difference that clouds make over a town." The "alteration"—note the homonymic pun on altar/ation—is accomplished by the mariners' words, their evasive reading of tropical Key West as an inverted form of cold New Haven. Such refiguration of the terrain is a secular sanctification, an alteration that is more than a celestial or transcendental altaring, "more / Than the difference that clouds make over a town." The communion of imaginations between the natives who "[roll] their r's" and the "big mariners" whose words are "mere catching weeds of talk" fashions a transformation in all: "The countrymen [natives and mariners] were changed and each constant thing. / Their dark-colored words had redescribed the citrons." The "dark-colored words" evade the text of "rolled r's" and rewrite the figurative terrain, elevating the ordinary of New Haven and facilitating the earthly descent of the too celestial "land of the lemon trees."
The mariners' refiguration of "the land of the lemon trees" leads back to the New Haven winter in canto thirty:

The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen.  
The robins are la-bas, the squirrels, in tree-caves,  
Huddle together in the knowledge of squirrels.  
The wind has blown the silence of summer away.  

(Winter's wind is a disfiguring force that blows away all notions of celestial transcendence. The echo of Walden--"In mud under ponds, where the sky used to be reflected"--only serves to emphasize the absence of heaven on earth that Thoreau discovered at the pond. But absence is not what we are left with in this winter terrain; instead, a "barrenness . . . appears" as an "exposing." The pun on exposing (an X-posing) implies that the winter disfiguration is an active energy, a posing of X as well as a proposing of the possibility of bare X, the same X searched after in "Motive For Metaphor": "The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X" (CP 288). Such exposing is an unmasking or undisguising of this barren X, a laying bare that abandons the figural terrain. But the very abandonment of this disguise is perhaps itself a deviation and thus another masking. The Pierian reader's "dark-colored words" become another emergence of pines "Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks." This "gusty grappling" is both a wrestling with the barren X of
rock and a grasping hold of the rock's solidity as a
foundation for the struggle itself.

But poet and Pierian reader have descended to the "mud
under the ponds" instead of floating on the ponds as
reflections of heaven; "The glass of air" has transmuted
into "an element." Apotheosizing air has been shattered into
simple oxygen, and the "something imagined" of romantic
figuration has "been washed away," replaced by a primitive
clarity:

A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
It is a visibility of thought,
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind,
see at once. (CP 488)

Such clarity is similar to the state of ignorance
recommended to the ephebe at the beginning of "Notes": "You
must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again
with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it"
(CP 380).9 This is not a lonely vacancy born out of the
desperation of an empty winter, but instead is a populated
solitude, the imagination as one mind inhabited by myriad
perspectives, all of which occasion the communion of
imaginations in which evasions revitalize both poet and
Pierian reader.10

The Pierian reader's imagination, "In which hundreds of
eyes, in one mind, see at once," can read "The less legible
meanings of sounds, the little reds / Not often realized."
The meanings rarely read—the disfigured meanings of "dead candles at the window" or "photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank" for example—reside near the "edgings and inchings of final form." Thus at the end of "An Ordinary Evening" (CP 488), the end is ever deferred. Similar to a note written and then torn up, these "edgings and inchings" are the always elusive disfigurations of the poem's "final form, / The swarming activities of the formulae / Of statement." They are the gestures of communion between poet and Pierian reader, and only seem to offer an edge or margin for closure. Their minute movement—"a coming forth," an edging forward slightly that violates the margin—"tears it up" and so disfigures in order to refigure. Such communion swarms chaotically about the disfigurations and refigurations of the poem, thriving upon the possibility that reality is not fixed, determined, ossified: "It is not in the premise that reality / Is a solid." The poet's and Pierian reader's antiphonies of evasion celebrate the idea that reality "may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade," and each evasion by the Pierian reader awakens in the poet "The less legible meanings of sounds" that evade as they are evaded, inspire as they are inspired. The disfigured muse refigures the poet's imagination in the clarity of a new winter, and thus gives birth to him or herself as Pierian
reader, the new haven for the poet in his ever repeated "edgings and inchings" toward the always deferred "final form" of the poem.
Notes

1 Concerning the hidalgo, Berger remarks that
The muse figure Stevens does encounter in
"Ordinary Evening" is much more of a fraternal presence. To see the muse-mother unveiled is to see the face of death, but the masculine watcher (whose eyes alone are visible) is associated with life. (100)

2 In her discussion of the hidalgo, Vendler claims that
Fidelity to this unlikely muse, day by day and moment by moment, is Stevens's new obligation: the serious exchange of look for look, eye for eye. This hidalgo is "the strength at the centre" of canto xvii, the blank which "underlies the trials of device, / The dominant blank, the unapproachable." Over and around that blank go all the embroideries of imagination, but that universal blank of the Auroras still is the ground beneath the figures. (EW 282)

But the hidalgo resembles less the "universal blank" of harsh reality which the poet's imagination embroiders than the refiguration of the muse as Stevens's imagined supreme reader who aids the poet in "pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36).
The latter play on "hatching" depends upon the verb to hatch which means "to mark or engrave with fine, crossed or parallel lines so as to indicate shading" (Webster's). There are other possibilities for this word as well, such as the idea of hatching a plot, which evokes again the stealthy evasiveness of interaction between poet and Pierian reader. Bakhtin's discussion, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, of the play between the heteroglot "light and shadow" of words and the dialogical occasion for such play is similar to Stevens's notion of "hatching" here:

The way in which the word conceptualizes its object is a complex act—all objects, open to dispute and overlain as they are with qualifications, are from one side highlighted while from the other side dimmed by heteroglot social opinion, by an alien word about them. And into this complex play of light and shadow the word enters—it becomes saturated with this play, and must determine within it the boundaries of its own semantic and stylistic contours. The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. And an artistic representation, an "image" of the object, may be penetrated by
this dialogic play of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it; such an image need not stifle these forces, but on the contrary may activate and organize them. (277)

Indeed, Stevens's poetry is saturated with the "dialogic play of verbal intentions" in the characterized interaction between Pierian reader and disfiguring poet.

4 Once again see Riddel's discussion of the fortunate fall in Stevens, The Clairvoyant Eye (171).

5 According to Lewis and Short's Latin dictionary, segmenta are purple or gold colored borders or patches sewn onto garments.

6 Bloom has this to say about the notion of endless elaboration:

Always precise about language, Stevens does not deprecate his poem by describing it as "endlessly elaborating." To elaborate is to execute with truly painstaking detail, to pay attention so that every part is in place, to work the poem out. Yet Stevens says "elaborating" and not "elaborated," which means not that his is a process-poem but that it demands active reading even as it actively reads. (PC 331)

7 Though discussing "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," what Michael Davidson says about Stevens's "endlessly
elaborating poem" applies equally well to "An Ordinary Evening":

The poet is . . . able to step beyond the closed, spatial text of high Modernism into a more speculative, temporarily generative text whose end is not literary history but existential disclosure. As a philosophical project, the authentically Postmodern poem discovers (aletheia) or uncovers the temporal nature of Being, not by reference to some cultural cyclicity on the order of Yeats or Pound, but through its momentary, wandering interrogation. This "endlessly elaborating poem," as Stevens calls it, is able to work out the fullest implications of its subject by constantly exposing itself to change. (146)

Davidson goes on to point out that an important consequence of this is "the way in which the reader, lacking any stable interpretive counters, must engage directly the poet's explorations" (146). As we have seen, such engagement is characterized again and again in the poems.

8 In her discussion of Stevens's use of Edward Lear's Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica, Alison Rieke points out that
Stevens's mysterious substitution of the land of lemons for the land of elms is an anagram. . . . Lemon and elm fold over and turn around their letters—"lemon" replacing "elm" and "no elm" negating and thus obliterating "elm" for the length of time Stevens remains engaged with Lear's Journal. ("Stevens and Lear," 54-55)

Rieke's point is that the more exotic lemon tree replaces the mundane elm. Thus, while acting as a reader of Lear's Journal, Stevens is able to "escape a routine life" (54).

Leggett's discussion of the ephebe in Notes is interesting but finally seems too author-centered:

The ephebe of Notes is the figure who appears in Stevens's essays . . . as the "possible poet" and "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet." By splitting himself into instructor and student, master and ephebe, Stevens represents both the "antique imagination of the father" and "the imagination of the son," the "obscurities of the intelligence of the old" and the "clear intelligence of the young man." In one sense the first section of Notes gives us the poet talking to himself or at least one aspect of the poet—that part of himself that has "lived all of the last two thousand years"—addressing another, "a
younger figure . . . stepping forward in the company of a muse of its own." (56)

But we can just as easily imagine the ephebe as the imagined young supreme reader who, instead of "stepping forward in the company of a muse of its own," in fact becomes the potential new muse, the reader who must learn to evade the poet in order to "see the sun again with an ignorant eye."

10 Discussing such a "visibility of thought," J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton, in The Fluent Mundo, suggest that

In this clarity the transparence of thought becomes visibility. The divisive substitution of "object" for "aspect" has been overcome; what was seen as meta-physical, we now see clearly ("reflectively") as an image of "ourselves." What remains is not a "bottomless sight," a seeing without horizons; and this clearness is not "empty": it is filled with a multiplicity of relational perspectives--as if the whole matrix which is consciousness-as-self-consciousness were directly sighted. (31)

11 According to Vendler, canto thirty-one chooses as its metaphor for apotheosis . . . the diminishing approximations of the calculus, ever approaching closer and closer to the ideal asymptote. Less, once again, is more, and the
celestial becomes the little, the less, the lighter, the inner, the fugitive music in sheets of rain among thunderstrokes, and the candle dimmer than day, as Stevens invokes, in canto xxxi, the poetics of the small. (290)
CHAPTER 11

THE GUNMAN LOVER: CONCLUSION

This cloud imagines us and all that our story
Was ever going to be, and we catch up
To ourselves, but they are the selves of others.
John Ashbery, "Riddle Me"

In Stevens's final poems, we confront a paradoxical combination of reader turned gunman as well as lover; he or she is "an undetermined form / Between the slouchings of a gunman and a lover, / A gesture in the dark, a fear one feels" (CP 531). This notion of the reader as both assassin and paramour encapsulates the ambiguity of The Rock poems, which waver between the deadly aim of the reader as overpowering rival (see especially "One of the Inhabitants of the West" (CP 503-04), which I have discussed in chapter one) and the reader who offers the tender touch of a Penelope or interior paramour.

The poems of The Rock admit a new vulnerability as is apparent from the opening poem's title, "An Old Man Asleep" (CP 501). As if abandoning the project of evasion, the poet seems to surrender to the eternal deferability of the supreme reader, who now with his "dumb sense," that ever receding silence of his refiguration, can outflank (and thus take possession of) the poet's "self and the earth."
most silent and most stealthy of Stevens's characterized readers, the gunman lover creeps up on the poet with the unheard grimness of an assassin, similar to that found in "Esthetique" where "The assassin discloses himself, / The force that destroys us is disclosed, within / This maximum, an adventure to be endured / With the politest helplessness." Stevens imagines a supreme reader here who outlives the poet because she is more (or less) elusive. The gunman lover appears to win the final victory over the disfiguring poet, and the rock of these late poems becomes the poet's headstone, but one which is always being reinscribed by the "dumb sense" of the reader-yet-to-be. The disfiguring poet's project becomes the grim reader's "whole peculiar plot" as slumber replaces the poet's verbal acrobatics.

The sense in the final poems is one of relieved surrender coupled with a fearful need to resist such surrender. The antiphonal exchange has been accomplished and the reader empowered with the necessary strength so that desired authority can be passed on as "your thoughts, your feelings, / Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot." The surrendering of the mantle seems as natural as "The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R." The readiness of the reddish chestnut (as in familiar and oft repeated song or joke or riddle) is now offered to the
The gunman lover as "your reddish chestnut trees," and the poet slips into an oblivion that is "a kind of solemnity." But it is precisely here that the poet's most powerfully skillful evasion occurs, for he disappears into his gunman lover's own "peculiar plot" and not even the headstone itself, with its constantly refigured inscriptions, indicates a clue of the poet's presence. He is quiet beyond all quiet, and the reader is left standing beside "the drowsy motion of the river R."

Inescapable and yet still herself elusive, disguised as half-male, half-female and shadowy "in her dead light," Madame La Fleurie is the gunman lover in her most threatening guise (CP 507). She is the assassin reader decked out as the powerful emblem of the poet's mortality, as if the early phrase from "Sunday Morning" had been inverted to say that beauty is the mother of death. But there is a tone of desperate anger in Madame's voice, essentially because, as in "An Old Man Asleep," the disfiguring poet has slipped away through death's ultimate evasion and now resides beyond any arena to be searched out by the reader. Antiphonal evasion seems to be disrupted; the poet is "devoured" by the gunman lover and yet there is still the need to "Weight him down" as if he were about to escape.
The death of the poet is the severest invocation to his supreme reader and thus draws from her his final song, his own eulogy steeped in irony but still allowing him to slyly slip away "beneath a dew [adieu]," regardless of the urgent imperatives of the reader to "Weight him, weight, weight him." Madame La Fleurie is herself the earth, mother, bearded queen, and thus aptly comments upon the poet's narcissistic stare: "He looked in a glass of the earth and thought he lived in it." Madame's claim is that at last her disfiguring poet has not evaded his own reflection and as a consequence has failed to recognize the alterity of her as reader (or earth, or reality); therefore, "Now, he brings all that he saw into the earth, to the waiting [and weighting] parent." Madame seems victorious since the poet can no longer evade. She waits with the proper emotions of the gunman lover, both lovingly and threateningly as if ready to embrace the long absent child but also ready to coldly gun down the unsuspecting naif.

But is the poet really so unsuspecting? Or has he again slipped away escaping Madame's ability to trace him? After all, she devours the poet's long awaited knowledge "beneath a dew," and the homonymic pun on adieu suggests a picture of the poet gesturing farewell as Madame devours "His crisp knowledge." The gunman lover's seductive echoing of the poet lures him into her trap where she weights him
(and waits for him) "with the sleepiness of the moon" and its apparently mere reflectivity. But once the poet is supposedly weighted, the claim about the text as mirror becomes complicated, mysterious, and anything but reflective:

It was only a glass because he looked in it. It was nothing he could be told.
It was a language he spoke, because he must, yet did not know.
It was a page he had found in the handbook of heartbreak. (CP 507)

Especially in the last line quoted, gunman lover and poet merge in a shared awareness of the poem's "dark italics," its mysterious limina. The poem is a language that must be spoken but not known, because it is a language of "The black fugatos . . . strumming the blacknesses of black." Fugatos, from the Latin *Fugare*, means "those that have been put to flight, turned aside, averted." The poet here has joined the company of "the black fugatos" as one put to flight by his disfigured muse. And yet it is the gunman lover as well who strums "the blacknesses of black," for Madame La Fleurie has been turned away by the poet's escape: "He does not lie there remembering the blue-jay, say the jay." Madame's imperative to the poet to "say the jay" is answered only with a profound silence, and thus she must say it herself and in fact must imagine the grief the poet must feel that "his mother should feed on him, himself and what he saw, /

In that distant chamber, a bearded queen, wicked in her dead
light." Evasion becomes aversion here, and antiphonal communion remains profane and immensely disfigured at the poem's end.

"The World As Meditation" (CP 520-21) moves away from the reader as gunman and toward the reader as lover, although Ulysses is certainly as capable of violence as he is of affection. Indeed if we recall Tennyson's "Ulysses," then Ulysses as a reader/lover figure here seems somewhat ironically qualified at the expense of a naive Penelope, ripe for eventual disillusionment. But the poem's moment remains within the realm of Penelope's imagined interaction with Ulysses, and this is where Stevens encounters continually his imagined gunman lover. Penelope is the disfiguring poet here, and her legendary status as an extraordinarily evasive artificer—she weaves by day a shroud for Ulysses's father Laertes and unravels her work by night in order to elude the marriage proposals of the suitors who have taken up residence in Ulysses's palace—qualifies her perfectly for the poet's role in antiphonal evasion.

Ulysses then is the gunman lover, the reader always yet to be, the "interminable adventurer" who keeps "coming constantly so near," but who always and necessarily veers away. "The World As Meditation" inverts the poet/muse
relationship, making Penelope the poet and Ulysses the reader/muse inspiring Penelope to continue with her work:

Someone is moving
On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she dwells. (CP 520)

Penelope's cretonnes call to mind her skill as a weaver even though it is a shroud for Laertes that she weaves and unravels. Like the poem, which provides a liminal margin that both separates and unites reader and poet, the cretonnes serve to veil diaphanously Penelope from Ulysses, the "form of fire." Indeed, Penelope's seemingly endless separation from Ulysses, of which the cretonnes themselves become the emblem, provides the impetus for her fabrication, her continuous unraveling and reweaving (disfiguration and refiguration) of the shroud. Separation coupled with her always unaccomplished yet ever desired reunion "awakens the world in which she dwells," evading the common rabble of her suitor/readers in the hope of rejoining with her still living supreme reader.7

Penelope is the post-romantic poet composing two selves: her welcoming self or poet-as-lover inviting her supreme reader, and "his self for her" or her supreme reader "which she has imagined." Both of these dwell "in a deep-founded sheltering" of Penelope's composition, in other words, in the dark italics of the poem. Deep-founded
suggests not so much a strong foundation upon which to build one's shelter, but rather a profound pouring of the supreme reader's molten imagination into the mold of the disfiguring poet's dark (or deep) italics. And this results in a sheltering or a protection arising out of the ever altering, imagined interaction between poet and gunman lover, which goes far beyond the mere shelter of the poem as fixed artifact.

This imagined interaction gives rise to "an inhuman meditation, larger than her own." Such is the communion of imaginations arising out of the antiphonies of evasion between Penelope and Ulysses. The communion between disfiguring poet and gunman lover exists outside the arena of human interaction and yet is still comprised of meditation: "It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met, / Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement." The meditation is purely imaginative--as is Penelope as "Companion to his self" and Ulysses as "self for her"--and is made possible only by mutual evasion of disfiguring poet and gunman lover, each willfully misunderstanding the other and thus creating a meditation larger than each but somehow including each as well. Out of this imagined interaction arises "The barbarous strength" that will "never fail" for Penelope. Thus she is able to "talk a little to herself as she comb[s] her hair, / Repeating his name with its patient
"Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (CP 524) offers perhaps the most intimate portrait of imaginative communion between gunman lover and disfiguring poet, but the poem is also shrouded in the desire for darkness and self-surrender: "How high that highest candle lights the dark." The candlelight, which the poet invites/invokes the gunman lover to light at the poem's beginning, does not so much dissipate the dark as it enhances and shadows forth the essence of darkness. The dusky light of the gunman lover's imagination occasions a transgression of the poem's mysterious limina, its "dark italics."

The disfiguring poet's imperative--"Light the first light"--speaks out of a dim, unlighted surrounding, the quintessential backdrop for elusive advance, a careful slipping up on the stealthy gunman lover. Once reader and poet are near to each other--where they "rest and, for small reason, think"--the lighting of the first light provides for "the intensest rendezvous." The wordplay on the French meaning of rendezvous suggests another veiled invitation to the gunman lover. The verb rendre, whose imperative is rendez, has a variety of meanings (to yield, to surrender, to make, to translate) that enriches the sense of interaction here. Stevens's "intensest rendezvous"
occasions the most powerful type of self-presentation and self-creation, but suggests as well the craving for self-surrender encountered everywhere in The Rock poems. But again that very surrender becomes the most evasive of all maneuvers, since it is a surrender ultimately to mortality of which the gunman lover has fully become the emblem.

"It is in that thought"--the desire for dark, for rest, for self-surrender as well as for self-creation and the lighting of the first light--"that we collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing." That one thing is the communion of imaginations between poet and gunman lover for which stanza three provides ample appositives: "a single shawl," "A light," "a power," "the miraculous influence." The last appositive suggests the insufflation of miraculous breath which the reader-as-muse offers the poet. The shawl affords protection for the imagination against the cold and the wind of the real weather as it simultaneously binds tightly together the communing imaginations of reader and poet. But such coupling awakens "a power" that works against the tight binding of the shawl and allows space for antiphonal evasion: "Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves." The self surrender to the tight binding of the shawl (suggestive perhaps of funeral cerements) turns out to be the disfiguring poet's most powerfully elusive turn.
Throughout the poem, the gunman lover and the poet exhibit a high degree of activity that inexorably progresses toward a powerful refiguration at the end: "we rest and ... think"; "we collect ourselves"; "we forget each other and ourselves"; "we feel the obscurity"; "we say"; and "we make a dwelling." Out of their powerfully evasive self surrender—a forgetting of each other through a forgetting of themselves—at the beginning of stanza four comes a transgression across the poem’s mysterious limina ("the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous") and the eventual saying and making of the final two stanzas:

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)

Through the communion of imaginations arising out of antiphonal evasion, the act of saying (together and yet separately) elevates the imaginations of reader and poet while simultaneously disfiguratively derogating God to the status of a mere figment of the imagination, once again leaving poet and supreme reader "un-sponsored, free."

The "highest candle" of mutually communing imaginations "lights the dark" to the extent that the shared insight reveals how empty heaven is; it is "the dark." But it is the light of poet-and-reader communion—"this same light"—
from which each fashions "a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough." The desire for self-surrender seems final in the last line, and the poem sounds uncharacteristically fixed in a comfort of sharing. But the subtle shift from "Here" in stanza four to "there" in the final line suggests that the poet in his self-surrender has slipped away and the supposed dwelling is a there that he no longer inhabits. The poet's wily slide into elsewhere in fact has an ironic effect on the intimate coupling represented in the poem. Thus, the poem avoids ossification at the last possible instant, swerving again into "its vital boundary, in the mind."

Stevens's intratextual readers (reflective reader, refractive reader, Pierian reader, and gunman lover) are, of course, a fiction—are fictions. But their virtuosity exists as a potent virtuality, a hope for unsponsored humanity that makes up a part of Stevens's "mythology of modern death" (CP 435). Like Ulysses, the supreme reader both does and does not exist. Just as the giant figure of the poet does not exist in the poet Wallace Stevens but is the voice of many poets intersecting in the specific moment of the poem, so also there is no single actual reader who is the supreme reader; but certainly the readership that Stevens's poems have generated moves in the direction of his notion of the supreme reader. The critical and poetic
heritage built around Stevens's project is as multivalent and cacophonous as he could ever have desired from his inspiring, evasive heir. This coming together of disfiguring poet and supreme reader is, as Stevens claims, "An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod / And another in a fantastic consciousness, / In a queer assertion of humanity" (CP 525). Such a "queer assertion" looks back to the "strange relation" arising out of "life's nonsense" and is queer because any assertion against the rock is ultimately so. Like Ulysses's presence to Penelope or the interior paramour's to the poet, interaction between supreme reader and poet both is and is not. The supreme reader (and perhaps any reader) is a fiction, but one in which the poet chooses to believe, and out of that belief arises the necessary "cure of the ground," that which keeps us going in our absurdly liberated conditions. These fictions and the awareness of them as fictions provide us with enough:

In this plenty, the poem makes meanings of the rock,
Of such mixed motion and such imagery
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things
And so exists no more. This is the cure
Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves.

(CP 527)

And so disfiguring poet and supreme reader continue, and will continue, their evasive communion in "Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep" (CP 528).
Richardson elaborates upon the lover side of this equation in her general remarks about Stevens's final poems:

In these paper embraces, [Stevens's] readers exquisitely aroused, exhilarated by the movement they give to the lines in which they lose themselves, the poet could disclose himself as lover, unembarrassed by "that monster, the body."

(Wallace Stevens: The Later Years 372)

But this seems to miss the profound sense of terror that lurks beneath the surface of this "embrace between one desperate clod / And another." The gunman and lover are a combined element in the final poems.

With regard to this notion of the reader as a bizarre combination of violence and tenderness, consider this excerpt from a letter to Jose Rodriguez Feo in December of 1948:

The savage assailant of life who uses literature as a weapon just does not exist, any more than the savage lover of life exists. Literature nowadays is largely about nothing by nobodies. Is it not so? What kind of book would that dazzling human animal Consuelo sit down to read after she had finished washing the blood off her hands and had
hidden once more her machete in the piano? (L 624)

Consuelo was evidently a woman who lived near Feo's mother in Cuba and who had threatened his mother's dog as well as her visiting relatives. Joan Richardson also notes in volume one of her biography of Stevens that

The personality trait that Stevens had the greatest trouble managing was his violence, his desire to destroy. Whether inverted under the guise of self-sacrifice during his periods of asceticism or externalized as the macabre celebration of death and destruction in many of his poems, the impulse to hurt, punish, chastise, humiliate was with him. (471)

On The Rock poems in general, Berger remarks, in Forms of Farewell, that

The dual vision of the late poems arises from the mingling of [the] need to continue and the desire for rest and reward--the poet's reward, the species of immortality called fame. The poet must court and fight off canonization; he must celebrate what he has accomplished and disparage it; view poetry sub specie aeternitatis and as the most fragile, provisional activity, in need of daily renewal. (145)
This ambivalence is apparent, of course, in Stevens's characterization of his supreme reader.

4 Speaking about the rather dark period that ensued in Stevens's life after the death of Henry Church in April of 1947, Richardson observes that

Though he had until now maintained in his poems and in his life that death was the "mother of beauty" (turning his niece's attention to the day's shimmering sunshine after her mother's funeral, for example), there was something about Church's death that changed this feeling.

(Wallace Stevens: The Later Years 290)

5 Defending Stevens against claims that he is a cold and passionless poet, Helen Vendler remarks in Words Chosen Out of Desire that

Stevens is a genuinely misunderstood poet, it seems to me, in the world at large; he is rarely called a passionate writer, or a poet of ecstatic or despairing moments--and yet that is what he is. He is often a despairing lover, blaming himself for the failure in love, blaming his wife as well, and finally, in The Rock, blaming only the biological necessity that brings men and women together. . . . (32)
6 See Loren Rusk's "Penelope's Creative Desiring: 'The World as Meditation'" for a discussion of Penelope as an "artist analogue" (15). By making Ulysses entirely a function of Penelope's imagination, Rusk seems to disqualify her own interesting assertion that "The Ulysses for whom Penelope longs, the fulfillment apprehended only as it disappears again . . . is, finally, realization of oneself through the otherness of the world" (21). In order for such realization to occur, Ulysses's alterity must be more powerfully evasive than Rusk's characterization of him allows.

7 I disagree, of course, with Mark Halliday who claims, in Stevens and the Interpersonal, that

In Stevens there is a campaign to wipe out the fact that the self's isolation is a removal from visible other persons—a campaign whereby they either become utterly ignorable or can somehow be shown to be not truly other. (5)

As I have suggested in this study, the reader-as-other is never ignorable and it is absolutely necessary that he or she remain "truly other" in a most radical sense for the sake of a freedom of creativity. Though reader and poet at times seem to merge, such fusion is an illusion from which they eventually emerge through their radical moments of antiphonal evasion. Though Halliday does try to rescue
Stevens from himself by demonstrating that Stevens has genuine concern for his reader, nonetheless since Stevens is so much a poet of solitude, he falls short (according to Halliday) of producing "meditations on the failures and successes and mysteries of interpersonal relations" (6). My claim is that these "failures and successes and mysteries" are exactly what Stevens does produce in his characterization of the poet/reader interaction.

8 Discussing Stevens's notions of intersubjectivity in "Wallace Stevens and the Inverted Dramatic Monologue," Margaret Dickie concludes, rightly I think, that Stevens has written a poetry of collection in which the boundaries of inner and outer, self and other, author and poem, are crossed and re-crossed. Collection is a way to connect that requires neither distinction nor separation, yet allows for differentiation as an on-going process. The speakers [in Stevens's poems] are collected together and collect themselves in his poems. There, they exist in relation and only in relation as speech itself makes and remakes the speaker no less than the listener. (34-35)

9 Stevens's "same light" and his "central light" are both perhaps disfigurations of Wordsworth's light that
alters from "celestial light" to the "light of common day" and his "philosophic mind" in "Intimations of Immortality."

Commenting on this type of potent virtuality, Charles Altieri remarks that

Like Penelope and Ulysses . . . or the lover with his interior paramour, . . . we find ourselves projecting before us a deeper or richer way of sharing the intensity in the gathering and unifying power of the author. Reading can be desiring to become, or glimpsing ourselves becoming, a certain kind of person figured as possible by the activity as well as by the content of a text. Read in a certain way, a world becomes alive—requiring in those who can find a language for it a certain kind of heroism, and, more important, making evident a virtual site where idealizing desires are inherently part of a commonal. As one reads, one sees what is available equivalently to all readers. (114 emphasis added)

J. Hillis Miller points out that

Self in the sense of individual personality is one of the major illusions dissolved by [The Rock]. This dissolution, paradoxically, takes place not by a movement into a more and more vacuous
solipsism, as is sometimes said to be Stevens's fate as a poet, but precisely by incorporating that doubling of self and other which Emerson so resolutely, and by the necessity of his genuinely solipsistic definition of the strong self, rejects. Stevens is more open to the existence of others, more in need of them, and so, in the end, vulnerable, as Emerson and Whitman are not, to an abyssing or dissolution of the self. (25)

12 In *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools*, Melita Schaum gives an excellent overview of the various schools of thought on, and the "endlessly elaborating" approaches to, Stevens's poetry. In addition, Michael Davidson has written about Stevens's profound effect upon Postmodern poets and has pointed out that, while Stevens's poetry may be "entirely monologic rather than part of human dialogue," nevertheless he has helped move Postmodernist poetry toward its attempt "to enlarge the dialogic and discursive possibilities of poetry" (157-58). If Stevens's poetry is indeed monologic in many ways (something I am not entirely convinced of, as this study indicates), in his characterization of his own reception he is thoroughly dialogic. This indeed makes Stevens a transition figure, as Davidson claims: "Stevens, along with Gertrude Stein,
Beckett, and Williams, occupies a central position in the transition between Modernism and Postmodernism" (157).

Richardson also associates the embrace between clods as one between reader and poet:

The process of unlocking meaning from the darkly lucid negatives of words recreates the feeling of what the poet himself was doing. Out of this "embrace" between "one desperate clod," the poet, and "another," the reader, "in a fantastic consciousness" come the buds and blooms, the "engenderings of sense" (CP 527)--the only paradise we shall ever know. (Wallace Stevens: The Later Years 370)

Miller has this to say about the word "cure" in "The Rock":

The multiple meanings of the word "cure," like the meanings of all the key words and figures in "The Rock," are incompatible, irreconcilable. They may not be organized into a logical or dialectical structure but remain stubbornly heterogeneous. They may not be followed, etymologically, to a single root which will unify or explain them, explicate them by implicating them in a single source. They may not be folded together in a unified structure, as of leaves, blossom, and
fruit from one stem. The origin rather is bifurcated, even trifurcated, a forking root which leads the searcher for the ground of the word into labyrinthine wanderings in the forest of words.

(10-11)


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