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COMING TO TERMS WITH THE DISENCHANTMENT OF
THE WORLD: THE EXTENT AND LIMIT OF IMMANENT
NUMINOSITY IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

2016



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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Unless otherwise noted, all page references to Wallace Stevens' poetry and prose will be to the following edition:

Stevens, Wallace, (1997). *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, eds., New York: The Library of America.

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Other abbreviations used:

(L) – Stevens, Holly, sel. and ed., (1966). *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, London: Faber and Faber.

(NA) – Stevens, Wallace, (1951). *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, New York: Alfred A Knopf.

(OP) – Stevens, Wallace, (1957). *Opus Posthumous*, London: Faber and Faber.

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PRELIMINARIES

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The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And, as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V. Scene I.

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We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

- Robert Frost, 'The Secret Sits'

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Obviously God was a solution, and obviously none so satisfactory will ever be found again.

- E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble With Being Born*

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...the limits of the imagination are the conceivable, not the real, and it extends over death as well as life.

- Northrop Frye, 'The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens'

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High modernism is numinous through and through, as the work of art provides one of the last outposts of enchantment in a spiritually degenerate world.

- Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*.

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The poet is the priest of the invisible.

- Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*

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INTRODUCTION: PRESIDING OVER THE INVISIBLE

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(1) 'BEGIN, EPHEBE, BY CONCEIVING THE IDEA...'

The following thesis does not pretend to arrive at a definitive conception of what literary modernism was, or for that matter is, in the rigorous sense required of a taxonomist. Attempts to define or classify modernism have been fraught with contradictions and counter-examples too numerous to be resolved within the limited scope of the present thesis. Suffice it to say, I am in agreement with Peter Nicholls, who insists that it is more sensible to speak pluralistically of 'modernisms'.¹ I would, indeed, prefer to avoid using the term altogether, were it not for the fact that the inspiration for this thesis stems, as will be shortly seen, from Gabriel Josipovici's endearingly eccentric study *Whatever Happened to Modernism?*. My preference is for the term 'modern', which, as solid an arbitration as any, I would align with the period concurrent with the establishment of what we commonly refer to as the language of 'modern English', taking in as it does the rise of Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment, historical developments that are integral to the position my thesis wishes to advance. Nonetheless, I will seek recourse to the use of the term 'modernist', simply to distinguish, as per convention, a period in literary history spanning the close of the nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth, while reserving the right to bracket

¹ See Nicholls, Peter, (1995), *Modernisms: a literary guide*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Following Nicholls' lead is the compendious *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, (2010), Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

out what does not immediately concern my thesis, namely a descriptive account of what exactly modernism *qua* modernism entails. Instead, the provenance of this thesis issues from the implications of Josipovici's suggestion that modernism, which he dates from approximately 1850 to the mid-twentieth century, might be revealingly considered 'a response...to that 'disenchantment of the world' to which cultural historians have long been drawing our attention' (Josipovici, 2010, 11). This thesis will explore the implications of Josipovici's suggestion specifically in relation to the work of the so-called 'major' modernist poet Wallace Stevens.

My usage here of a circumspect qualifier is not to imply that I care to assail the canonical status that has been endowed upon Stevens by the academy, nor is it to suggest that I think it is necessarily wrong-headed to analyse his work in the context of modernism, howsoever this category—if that is what we can call it—has come to be revised and by whom. Rather, by situating Stevens in the broader historical narrative of disenchantment, the present thesis will throw into relief many of the tensions that would arise with the ascendancy of what Charles Taylor calls 'exclusive humanism' (Taylor, 2007, 19). Taylor characterises exclusive humanism as an extreme anthropocentrism entailing the moral and political dispensation of human society derived entirely from an immanent self-sufficiency no longer reliant on appeals to, or extrapolations from, anything perceived to transcend the mundane world.² Arguably, exclusive humanism arrives at a watershed with the advent of Romanticism in the late 18th century. Romanticism, in large part, came about as a reaction against the Enlightenment's mechanistic worldview, to its tendentious scientism, sovereignty of reason, and post-deist marginalisation of humankind's spiritual interconnection with

² For a thoroughgoing explication of 'exclusive humanism' see: Charles Taylor, (2007), *A Secular Age*, Cambridge MA & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, esp. 19-21, 26-28, 41, 88, 98-99, 130, 134, 221, 233-234, 242-269, 636-642, 656, 768-769.

the divine. This thesis will discern Stevens' work, for the most part implicitly, as a later development—whether combative, cooperative or collusive—of Romanticism's afore-summarised reaction to the disenchantment of the world.

As this thesis presupposes, Stevens inherits the basic dialectical conflict that his Romantic forebears—and, in turn, the Romantics' myriad 19th century successors (French Symbolists, Victorian aesthetes, fin de siècle decadents, et al.)—had rendered explicit: namely the reception of discontents perceived to be brought about by disenchantment, and the myriad responsive strategies that are counterposed to these perceived discontents. For Stevens, though, disenchantment is not exclusively a source of discontent. The frequently invoked 'modernist crisis of faith' would constitute an alarmist hyperbole when applied to the case of Stevens. Scott Freer, to cite a recent instance, correctly observes that: 'Stevens is not a disillusioned modernist and the death of God is a positive condition for poetic liberation' (Freer, 2015, 185). Stevens, as we will come to see, believes that the world has been disenchanted (although he does not phrase it in these terms), and that in consequence there is a desire, a necessity even, to undertake a comprehensive project of spiritual renovation. Leon Surette argues that Stevens is quite unique among his major contemporaries: 'Eliot, returned to orthodox Christianity; others, such as Yeats, Robert Graves and Ezra Pound, turned to more esoteric forms of belief. Stevens alone among the major figures sought to articulate an alternative faith, one that made shift to do without transcendence, and without divinity, but without surrendering the emotional intensity of religious belief. In choosing that route, Stevens chose the more difficult course' (Surette, Spring 2005, 144-45). Stevens' choice to dispense with orthodox and esoteric belief systems, and yet still strongly defend what he considers art's spiritually compensatory function in an age in which he would say 'We believe without belief, beyond belief' (295), is what makes him such an

interesting poet to study from the perspective of secular disenchantment. It is primarily for this reason that I have chosen a similarly difficult course in taking Stevens as the subject of this study.

The following series of quotations collocate a number of Stevens' most pertinent claims for art's spiritually compensatory function. In a late essay entitled 'The Relations Between Poetry and Painting', Stevens remarks, 'that in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost' (748). In 'Two or Three Ideas', another late essay, Stevens makes a closely worded claim for poetry in particular: 'In an age of disbelief, or, what is the same thing, in a time that is largely humanistic, in one sense or another, it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style' (841). Poetry is, after all, Stevens' vehicle for engaging in the compensatory activity of spiritual renovation: 'After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence that takes its place as life's redemption' (901). This attitude finds its starkest expression in section V of the long aphoristic poetic sequence 'The Man With the Blue Guitar': 'Poetry / Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns, // Ourselves in poetry must take their place' (136-37). According to Stevens the art can provide an alternative means to religion to reveal and confirm value: 'The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support they give' (916). The poet's 'role, in short, is to help people to live their lives' (661).

The rest of this introductory chapter will elaborate upon the aforementioned claims Stevens makes for art and particularly poetry. This investigation will be

conducted in relation to further and frequently inconsistent positions Stevens expresses on religion and belief over the course of his adult life. This will also involve rehearsing some critical objections to Stevens' claims. Beyond that, I will describe a theory of immanent numinosity that I will be using as a hermeneutic apparatus to interpret the compensations and satisfactions of belief and spirit that I infer Stevens' poetry is attempting to rhetorically perform. However, before getting to this, in the next section I will provide an account of Max Weber's argument for 'the disenchantment of the world', as it is a concept germane to, and corroborative of, Stevens' previously mentioned perception of 'an age of disbelief'.

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(2) 'EVENING WITHOUT ANGELS'

The German sociologist Max Weber is the widely acknowledged promulgator of the disenchantment of the world thesis, which 'in its broadest terms, maintains that wonders and marvels have been demystified by science, spirituality has been supplanted by secularism, spontaneity has been replaced by bureaucratization, and the imagination has been subordinated to instrumental reason' (Saler, 2006, 692). Weber's argument for the disenchantment of the world posits the claim that coextensive with modernity the conjoined historical processes of intellectualization and rationalization have progressively divested the world of magic and spirit culminating in a cosmos devoid of meaningfulness and purpose.³ Weber articulates his argument thus:

³ On this last point Taylor would characterize the process as a conceptual shift from cosmos to universe. See Taylor, *op cit.*: 59-61, 300, 322-351, 361, 364, 366-367, 446-447, 531.

...increasing intellectualization or rationalization do *not*...indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives.

It means something else, namely the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means. (Weber, 1991, 139, original italics).

In this passage we can discern one of Weber's central claims, namely the 'in principle' notion of calculability; this is not to say that intellectualization is a completed project in Weber's view, but that 'in principle' it has the potential to 'master all things'. In the following passage, Weber demonstrates how this *mathesis universalis* in principle, coupled with empirical science, comes into conflict with religion:

The tension between religion and intellectual knowledge definitely comes to the fore wherever rational, empirical knowledge has consistently worked through to the disenchantment of the world and its transformation into a causal mechanism. For then science encounters claims of the ethical postulate that the world is a God-ordained, and hence somehow *meaningfully* and ethically oriented, cosmos. In principle, the empirical as well as the mathematically oriented view of the world develops refutations of every intellectual approach which in any way asks for a 'meaning' of inner-worldly occurrences. Every increase of rationalism in empirical science increasingly pushes religion from the rational into the irrational realm... (Weber, 1991, 350-51, original italics).

Taken together, these two passages strike at the heart of Weber's formulations on the disenchantment of the world. Before we proceed, though, a few distinctions must be made.

First, Weber's arguments are by no means original. At least as early as Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (1st Century BCE) had the 'notion of science as primarily a benign kind of weedkiller designed to get rid of religion' (Midgley, 2001, 23) been propounded. Lucretius's poem, the fullest expression of Epicurean philosophy to survive antiquity, presents an atomistic theory of the universe in which atoms (on this view the smallest, indestructible units of matter that make up all things) exist in an eternal flux of creation and destruction. The gods, whom are still believed to exist, are nonetheless entirely indifferent to human, mundane affairs. Death is conceived of as a mere return to nothingness, a reshuffling back into the degenerative/regenerative flux of primal atomic matter. Ostensibly lost for centuries, a transcription of Lucretius's text was rediscovered in the early fifteenth century by Poggio Florentinus. It was subsequently widely disseminated, and would come to constitute one of the foundational texts of Renaissance humanism.⁴ For Lucretius, this worldview was on the one hand inherently wondrous (to contemplate that we are made of the same stuff as the stars, etcetera) and on the other hand it provided grounds for the pursuit of pleasure, the more intellectually refined the better, in the absence of divine retribution or ultimate purpose. It is not difficult to construe in Lucretius' text Weberian (and, it must be said, Stevensian) disenchantment in germinal form: the substitution of random physical forces for divine purposeful influence; the foregrounding of matter over against

⁴ See Stephen Greenblatt's article 'The Answer Man', (08.08.2011), *The New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/08/the-answer-man-stephen-greenblatt>, for a concise historical account of the rediscovery and dissemination of Lucretius' poem during the advent of the Renaissance.

spirit; the negation of superstitious belief; in short, a turn from transcendence towards immanence.

Second, it is from Friedrich Schiller that Weber adapts the phrase ‘the disenchantment of the world’. Bruce Robbins outlines how Weber’s *‘Entzauberung’* differs from Schiller’s *‘Entgötterung’* in quite a crucial respect:

Schiller’s version of disenchantment– it turns out that Weber was not quoting him directly– is “Entgötterung” (de-divinization). When Schiller used the phrase “die entgötterte Natur” (nature from which the gods have been eliminated) in his 1788 poem “The Gods of Greece,” he was criticized for seeming to lament the end of polytheism, and he backed down. Weber’s term is “Entzauberung” (the elimination of magic). It may bow gently to Schiller but, whether for reasons of diplomacy or not, it certainly takes the emphasis off divinity. (Robbins, 2011, 2).

This leads us to a third consideration: that supposedly Weber’s version of disenchantment accounts only for the displacement of concrete magic from the world, and leaves supernatural divinity, especially *the* transcendent God of post-deist Protestantism, somewhere beyond its dismissive radius. Weber, in point of fact, makes the argument that ascetic Protestantism is the culmination of a long-standing religious agenda to eliminate magic from the world that began (at least in Western tradition) with the ‘old Hebrew prophets’ who ‘in conjunction with Hellenic scientific thought, repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin’ (Weber, 1958, 105). Weber collocates here what typifies for him the two prime, and in fact collaborative, motors of disenchantment throughout history: science and monotheism. However, in spite of what certain commentators might argue to the contrary, rationalisation, on Weber’s telling, pushes orthodox religious belief to the edges of plausibility just as

forcefully as it does the putatively animistic worldview of the so-called primitive savage and ancient pagan.

Taylor warns against confusing 'disenchantment with the end of religion' (Taylor, 2007, 553), a trap that he believes 'Weber seems to have fallen into...at times' (Ibid). However, Taylor himself later connects 'real, thoroughgoing disenchantment' (Ibid, 708) with 'a total escape from religion' (Ibid). Disenchantment, then, to recapitulate Weber's 'in principle' notion of calculability,⁵ if followed to its logical conclusion, would presumably exact the dissolution of religion, and thus the belief in divinity, altogether. Disenchantment, on this view, exhibits an unmistakable conceptual overlap with the narratives of secularization.

Fourth, and finally, much contentious debate among Weberian scholars has revolved around the extent to which Weber regards the disenchantment of the world as a negative and subtractive view of history, or as a positive and progressive one. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills state the distinction (which points to a theoretically useful ambivalence on Weber's part) succinctly: 'The extent and direction of 'rationalization' is...measured negatively in terms of the degree to which magical elements of thought are displaced, or positively by the extent to which ideas gain in systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency' (Gerth and Mills, 1991, 51). H. C. Greisman maintains that '[t]he dominant chord sounded in Weber's formulation of disenchantment is sober resignation' (Greisman, Dec. 1976, 498), while insisting that 'Weber strove towards value-neutrality' (Ibid). Alternatively, a critical tendency to align Weber's perception of disenchantment with cultural pessimism persists. Weber's *ominatio* at the conclusion of 'Politics as a Vocation' is often rallied in support of this view: 'Not summer's bloom lies

⁵ Which could be summarized as the mathematical explication of physical reality dispelling both a recourse to mystification and deference to a heteronomous referent (i.e. God).

ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness' (Weber, 1991, 128). Interestingly, Stevens himself dramatizes a similar reaction on the part of the human species to the dissolution of the gods: 'It was their [the gods] 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' (842).

The dissolution of gods, the divestment of magic and spirits, the continued viability of religious belief in a disenchanted world—as to whether or not disenchantment or secularization will succeed in wiping these things from the face of the earth is a moot point. Any contemporary believer or practitioner of magic would probably argue not. We may want to ask, moreover, what might be the implications of disenchantment for the continued viability of the poet? Orpheus is presumably outstripped by the mathematician and the Large Hadron Collider at bringing into apparent being what had previously lain beyond the horizon of potential articulation. The encompassing cosmic vision of an age, such as that of Homer, Virgil or Dante, is inconceivable—the variables are too many and their esoteric currencies nonexchangeable for the common coin of *lingua franca*.⁶ The secular authority of the poet is rendered increasingly private, in which an alienated subjectivity encroaching upon the mirror-game of solipsism prevails. A poetics of necessary failure thus assumes

⁶ George Steiner points out that 'until the seventeenth century, the sphere of language encompassed nearly the whole of experience and reality; today, it comprises a narrower domain. It no longer articulates, or is relevant to, all major modes of action, thought, and sensibility. Large areas of meaning and praxis now belong to such non-verbal languages as mathematics, symbolic logic, and formulas of chemical or electronic relation. Other areas belong to the sub-languages or anti-languages of non-objective art and *musique concrète*. The world of words has shrunk' (Steiner, 1967, 43).

the throne of expressive communication. In the humanities, confusion and indeterminacy reign supreme.

The jeremiad I have improvised just now is a well-worn plaint. Its sanguine counter-ode is the celebration of assumed freedom, of the throwing off of the chains of superstition and myth, of the overturning of benighted ecclesiastical authority and feudal government supposedly ordained by divine fiat. Freedom and limit, however, are indissoluble antagonists. David Jasper, repurposing Milton, remarks that the modern poet writes ‘the words were all before them, which to choose’ (Jasper, 1989, 107). Geoffrey Hill keenly observes this choice induces the following chiasmic predicament: ‘There is something in constraint which frees the mind, and something in freedom which constrains it’ (Hill, 2008, 573). Stevens himself arrives at a similar formulation in a letter to Norman Holmes Pearson, June 14, 1937: ‘A free form does not assure freedom’ (*L*, 323). It is in this connection that Josipovici cites (and indeed names a chapter of his book after) Kierkegaard’s formulation from *The Concept of Anxiety*, that ‘anxiety is the dizziness of freedom’ (Josipovici, 2010, 39-47, *passim*; Kierkegaard, 1980, 61). Anxiety, for Kierkegaard, ‘is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite’, emphasising that it ‘is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility’ (Kierkegaard, 1980, 42). The possibility of possibility *made possible* by a self-reliant (or, as Taylor would say, exclusive) humanism—the putative victory of enlightened disenchantment. In the absence of a guiding, extra-human authority, the human animal, decoupled from an ultimate telos, is left to his or her own anxiogenic devices.

The abiding concern is that this freedom could terminate in existential vacuity and creative paralysis. Hugo von Hofmannsthal epitomises this existential quandary in his ‘Letter of Lord Chandos’, in which the fictional 17th century epistoler explains to

Lord Bacon the reasons for his complete abandonment of literary activity: 'In brief, this is my case: I have completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all' (Hofmannsthal, 2005, 121). Chandos, at the tender age of twenty-six years, an erstwhile litterateur of no small accomplishment, has arrived at the belief that language is no longer adequate to convey his experience, and feels ashamed to accept his former work as belonging to him. He can no longer discourse on philosophical and moral matters; everyday opining and passing judgements become increasingly insubstantial to him; and finally, his recourse to classical models, that 'edifice of Latin prose whose abstract plan and structure [had once] gladdened his heart' (Ibid, 118), is met with utter incomprehension. All of his subsequent epiphanies are irrevocably lost as soon as he tries to set them down on paper. Consequently, Chandos concludes that the 'the language in which I might have been granted the opportunity not only to write but also to think is not Latin or English, or Italian, or Spanish, but a language of which I know not one word, a language in which mute things speak to me and in which I will perhaps have something to say for myself someday when I am dead and standing before an unknown judge' (Ibid, 127-8).⁷

This silent language, or language of silence, capable of discoursing with 'mute things', the primordial language before the moment of speech in which the world and all that constitutes it is entirely trans-communicant, is one of the greatest paradoxes and most enticing desiderata ever to beset the poetic imaginary. 'Poetry is the search for the inexplicable' (911), Stevens would say, and propose 'an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning' (790), a 'Pure rhetoric

⁷ It is worth considering as a positive counterpart to Chandos' unknown language, Hart Crane's speculation, no less enigmatic, on poetry's ability to reveal a supra-linguistic 'word' to its reader: 'It is as though a poem gave the reader as he left it a single, new *word*, never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate, but self-evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness henceforward' (Crane, 1982, 16).

of a language without words' (324). The poet of the supreme fiction asks: 'Is there a poem that never reaches words'? (343). This question is of course unanswerable.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hofmannsthal's near coeval and fellow Viennese, echoes Chandos' retreat from the inadequacy of language in the oft-cited proposition concluding his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (Wittgenstein, 2001, 89). Wittgenstein also claims, however, that 'what can be said at all can be said clearly' (Ibid, 3).⁸ That which can be said clearly would find its strongest prescription during the modernist period in the verificationist principles of the Vienna Circle logical positivists, Wittgenstein's immediate (and contemporary) descendants.⁹ Victor M. Hamm as late as 1960, in his suggestively titled lecture 'Language, Truth and Poetry', argues that '[w]e are still living intellectually—despite recent developments away from its crude original form—in the atmosphere of positivism' (Hamm, 1960, 3). The title of Hamm's lecture is a wry nod to A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, the book responsible for transposing the ideas of the Vienna Circle into the Anglosphere. According to Ayer's arguments the only propositions that are cognitively meaningful are either synthetic propositions whose truths 'could be conclusively established by experience' (Ayer, 1952, 37) (e.g. 'It rained in London during Ayer's day of birth', if in fact it did rain in London on Ayer's birthday, which, being London, is quite likely); or analytic propositions, which are true either by tautological definition (e.g. 'all sisters are female') or mathematical correctness (e.g.

⁸ In a letter to Alice Corbin Henderson, March 27, 1922, Stevens would write a sentence uncannily similar to that of Wittgenstein's: 'Whatever can be expressed can be expressed clearly. Epater les savants is as trifling as épater les bourgeois. But one cannot always say a thing clearly and retain the poetry of what one is saying' (937). See: Andrew Osborn, (Spring 2004), "'A Little Hard To See": Wittgenstein, Stevens, and the Use of Unclarity', *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 28:1, 59-80, for an exposition of the parallels between Stevens and Wittgenstein's thought.

⁹ It would be doing the genealogy of the Vienna Circle a disservice were one to fail to mention the influence of Ernst Mach, Gottlob Frege, David Hilbert and Bertrand Russell, not to mention the revolution in physics ushered in, primarily, by the work of Albert Einstein.

'2+2=4'). What Ayers infers from these principles of verification are that all metaphysical utterances are meaningless, ethical concepts are at best pseudo-concepts, and aesthetic declarations do not state facts but merely express feelings. Ayers' only sustained statement concerning the poet is in relation to, tellingly enough, the scientist:

The difference between the man who uses language scientifically and the man who uses it emotively is not that the one produces sentences which are incapable of arousing emotion, and the other sentences which have no sense, but that the one is primarily concerned with the expression of true propositions, the other with the creation of a work of art. Thus, if a work of science contains true and important propositions, its value as a work of science will hardly be diminished by the fact that they are inelegantly expressed. And similarly, a work of art is not necessarily the worse for the fact that all the propositions comprising it are literally false. (Ibid, 44-45).

Hamm argues that '[o]n the terms of this school, therefore, poetry as a cognitive transaction becomes impossible, all that remains of it being, as the early I. A. Richards put it, "emotive utterance" and "pseudo-statement"' (Hamm, 1960, 7). Another of (early) Richards' remarks comprises a speculation that could not more neatly encapsulate the central anxiety of disenchantment inasmuch as poetry is concerned: 'There is some evidence that Poetry, together with the other Arts, arose with [the] Magical View.¹⁰ It is a possibility to be seriously considered that Poetry may pass away with it' (Richards, 1935, 53). Notwithstanding the fact that poetry has not passed away, the rationalist

¹⁰ We should be familiar enough by now with what Richards means by 'Magical View'. Nonetheless, as a safeguard against uncertainty: 'By the Magical View I mean, roughly, the belief in a world of Spirits and Powers which control events, and which can be evoked and, to some extent, controlled themselves by human practices. The belief in Inspiration and the beliefs underlying Ritual are representative parts of this view' (Richards, 1935, 53). Richards' 'Magical View', as was common currency at the time, derives from E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* wherein Tylor reintroduced into popular circulation the concept of animism, and was to have an enormous influence on his disciple J. G. Frazer of *The Golden Bough* fame, which in turn became a touchstone work for countless philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, artists and poets.

position exemplified by Ayers and Richards is merely a late iteration of the ancient quarrel instigated by Plato's banishment of the poets from his ideal republic ruled by philosopher kings. The poet's imitative third-hand removal from the truth of the ideal forms, and their tendency to corrupt the youth and incite the passions rather than the faculties of reason, is simply a strong version of the claim that all that poetry is good for is to stir the emotions. Christopher Clausen argues that a similar reaction against poetry that occurs in 'classical Greece at the coming of the age of philosophy' occurs during the seventeenth century 'in Europe on the brink of modern science' (Clausen, 1981, 8). Francis Bacon, Clausen argues, finds poetry 'too various to be characterized as either virtuous or vicious, [but] is in general the product of credulous ages, and as we advance in reason we ought to outgrow it' (Ibid). Clausen also refers to Locke's condemnation of figurative language as an abuse of words: 'Its use was harmless where the intention was merely to entertain, but its presence in all other contexts served "for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment"' (Ibid, 9). Locke's criticism is almost identical with Plato's, only Locke's is in service to natural as much as alethic philosophy: 'The language of the modern scientific world,' Clausen glosses, 'like its knowledge, was to be denotative, univocal, empirical. Poetry and its rather different attitudes toward language were a major threat to this view of knowledge; therefore poetry, as a major cultural force, would have to be displaced' (Ibid, 9). Edmund Wilson describes this seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 'in Europe as the great period of the development of mathematical and physical theory...[in which] Descartes and Newton were influences as important as those of the classics themselves' (Wilson, 1931, 3). Wilson traces the Romantic 'revolt of the individual' (Ibid, 2) against this period's conception of the universe as 'a fixed mechanical order' (Ibid, 3), on the grounds that 'it excluded too much of life—or rather, the description it

supplied did not correspond to actual experience. [...] The universe was not a machine, after all, but something more mysterious and less rational' (Ibid, 3). Wilson then points out how the Romantic's organic worldview gave way to its mechanistic counterpart with the arrival of Darwin (Ibid, 6-7), and compares the differing tendencies of naturalism and symbolism in response. Nietzsche, during this late period of the nineteenth-century, would lob an anti-foundational powder-keg into the philosophical mainstream: 'Against the positivism which halts at phenomena - 'There are only facts' - I would say: no, facts are just what there aren't, there are only interpretations' (Nietzsche, 2003, 139). The logical positivists and their liege lord scientists would, of course, reject Nietzsche's perspectivism out of hand and assert the primacy of apodictic fact; and so our little peregrination has come full circle.

Stevens, familiar with these developments, acknowledges that Locke and Hobbes had denounced the connotative uses of words, desiring instead 'a mathematical plainness; in short, perspicuous words' (650) but asserts that, following the nineteenth-century, 'the connotative tendency is the tendency today' (650). He also cites Ayer's passage in which the latter discusses the fashion 'to speak of the metaphysician as a kind of misplaced poet' (Ayer, 1952, 44) and wonders whether or not 'the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed' (727). Stevens uses this as a springboard to implore that 'we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic' (727). He believes the romantic 'belittles' the imagination, which he conceives of as 'the liberty of the mind' (727) and 'the only genius' (728), because the romantic 'is incapable of abstraction' (728). Stevens' holds the imagination's capacity for abstraction and artifice, its metaphysics, to be its greatest value. Speculating upon Freud, Stevens wonders if a 'science of illusions' (728) might not provide 'the clue to reality' (728), in which 'the deliberate fictions arising out of the contemporary mind' (728) will prove

'the forerunners of some science' (728). Stevens, it is clear, does not necessarily consider the disenchantments of science and logical positivism anathematic to poetry.¹¹ But in a letter to Hi Simons, August 10, 1940, he expresses the following doubt: 'I don't know that one is ever going to get at the secret of the world through the sciences' (*L*, 363). Stevens would reserve the secret of the world, what I will seek to bring under the banner of immanent numinosity, as falling within the purview of the poetic imagination.

*

(3) 'HYMNS OF THE STRUGGLE OF THE IDEA OF GOD
AND THE IDEA OF MAN...'

Northrop Frye writes, in an early study published two years after the poet's death: 'Wallace Stevens was a poet for whom the theory and the practice of poetry were inseparable. His poetic vision is informed by a metaphysic; his metaphysic is informed by a theory of knowledge; his theory of knowledge is informed by a poetic vision' (Frye, 1957, 353). Upon investigation one does find in Stevens' theory and practice a circular *causa sui*, epitomised, as Frye alludes to, in section XXVIII of 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven': 'The endlessly elaborating poem / Displays the theory of poetry, / As the life of poetry' (415). The endlessly elaborating poem self-reflexively theorises itself, and from this issues, in the manner of the ouroboros, its continued self-sustention. Stevens rearranges this construction, quasi-chiasmically, in the following stanza, and, in so

¹¹ Mark Noble, for instance, in his chapter on Stevens 'Matter at the End of the Mind: Stevens and the Call for a Quantum Poetics' from his *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens*, 'traces the features of Stevens's interests in materiality and modern physics in order to gather a sense of their consequences for his conception of poetry' (Noble, 2015, 147).

doing, identifies the theory of poetry with that of life itself: ‘A more severe, // More harassing master would extemporize / Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life’ (Ibid). This is a characteristically adaptive Stevensian manoeuvre: in order to persuasively displace the idea of God, poetry must work to fill the ideational gap God’s removal would necessarily leave behind; hence Stevens’ rhetorical transfiguration of poetry’s capacity to do what God had been formerly imagined capable: to provide a self-perpetuating agency out of which everything else is instantiated. In his essay ‘The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet’, Stevens refers to Shelley’s *Defense of Poetry*: ‘He says that a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. It is “indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge...”’ (669-70). Kenneth Burke takes Shelley to be ‘pantheistically merging divinity and poetry into one’ (Burke, 1969, 226), but argues that this is not Stevens’ approach: ‘The next step is to drop from pantheism the *theos*, whereupon imagination equalling knowledge, one is left with the *pan*: Mr Stevens’ “*modo* of the imagination.”’¹² (Ibid, original italics). A notebook entry, collected in Stevens’ *Adagia*, reads: ‘God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry’ (907). In dropping, or better yet, reinventing the *theos*, the endlessly elaborating poem does not become the atemporal omnipresent centre whose circumference is nowhere, as certain medieval scholars, and the Renaissance and Enlightenment theologians and philosophers who succeeded them, had held of God. It becomes instead an all-subsuming *orationem generans, continuationem perseverans* (continuation of a persistent speech generator).¹³ However, in that Stevens does not situate the endlessly-

¹² The Stevens’ quote Burke reproduces is from later in the same essay just quoted (679).

¹³ This phrase is derived from the fourth definition of God proposed in the 12th Century pseudo-Hermetic text *Liber XXIV philosophorum*, and reads in full: ‘*Deus est mens orationem generans, continuationem perseverans*’ (‘God: the mind that generates utterance prolonged continually’. This text also provides the *locus classicus* for the definition of God as an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere

elaborating poem anywhere beyond the immanent lifeworld, it is therefore *sub specie temporalis*, and thus subject to change, modification, development—one could say to the imperfect contingencies of history.

As is often the case in Stevens' poetry, though, epitomical projections are tempered by a sceptical chariness, which suspends the relevant poem's vatic utterance in an inchoate or provisional state, commonly bound to the futurity of a possibility as yet unrealised. In the example just presented, a more capable master than the poem's speaker would be required to provide 'Subtler, more urgent proof' of the totalising claim.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the claim, though unsubstantiated by this conditional proof, is taken for granted.¹⁵

Admittedly, this capsule reading of but a part of one section of a long poem coming very late in Stevens' career might tempt the following questions: Is this what

(*'Deus est sphaera infinita cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam'*); a definition that was taken up and adapted by, among others, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Nicolas Copernicus (whose application of the metaphor would have enormous consequences for the future of astronomy), Giordano Bruno and Blaise Pascal. See also: Karsten Harries, (Jan. 1975), 'The Infinite Sphere: Comments on the History of a Metaphor', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13:1, 5-15. Harries, taking Jorge Luis Borges' essay 'Pascal's Sphere' as a point of departure (wherein Borges advances the following: 'Perhaps universal history is the history of the various intonations of a few metaphors' (Borges, 1999, 353)) to trace the historical development of the infinite sphere metaphor, specifically in regards to Nicholas of Cusa's 'transference of the metaphor of the infinite sphere from God to the cosmos' (Harries, 14). Harries also acknowledges the 'intelligible sphere' variant of the metaphor, which Borges attributes to Alain de Lille's discovery of it in another pseudo-Hermetic text, *Asclepius: 'Deus est sphaera intelligibilis, cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam'* ('God is an intelligible sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere'), (See: Borges, 1999, 351-52; Harries, Jan. 1975, 8, n. 14). The twenty-four definitions of God recorded in *Liber XXIV philosophorum* are compiled in an *editio minima*, (that is to say without the commentaries), in the original Latin with accompanying English translations by The Matheson Trust, and can be found at: <http://themathestrust.org/papers/metaphysics/XXIV-A4.pdf>.

¹⁴ Stevens' frequent, often repetitious, use of the extensional 'more' will afford greater attention in due course.

¹⁵ Stevens composed 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' in 1949. Reiterations of the conception of absolute poetry as I have interpreted it here can be found in 'A Collect of Philosophy', a lecture Stevens gave two years later at the University of Chicago in mid-November 1951. Paul Weiss, the editor of *Review of Metaphysics*, had invited Stevens to contribute to the journal. This lecture would be Stevens' contribution, which, dishearteningly for him, Weiss rejected (Richardson, 1988, 384-7). In this lecture, Stevens draws upon, among others, the thought of Jean Wahl, Jean Paulhan, and Max Planck, to demonstrate his thesis that: 'It is often the case that the concepts of philosophy are poetic' (CPP, 850). Here is one of his apposite glosses on Hegel: 'Hegel called poetry the art of arts, specifically because in poetry the material of which the poem is made, that is to say, the language of the poem, is wholly subordinated to the idea. A poem in which the poet has chosen for his poem a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems' (Ibid, 854).

Stevens' is doing? Is he trying to replace God with poetry? Or is it rather that he is adapting the idea of God to 'our different intelligence' (*L*, 378)? And why all of this talk about God anyhow in a pair of stanzas that do not apostrophise God at all? Stevens does not provide any easy, much less conclusive, answers to these questions. However, it should become shortly apparent why these questions are eminently pertinent to reading Stevens' poetry, bearing in mind the claims he makes for art and poetry previously outlined.

Part of the reason why no conclusive answers are to be found within Stevens can be paradoxically attributed to one of the fundamentals that any such answer Stevens does give must entail, namely, as J. Hillis Miller has it: 'Everywhere in Stevens the reader confronts another proof that the sovereign law of reality is change' (Miller, 1966, 231). This aligns, of course, with the second of the three imperative sub-headings of his 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', to wit, '*It Must Change*' (336). It is the protean, processual aspect of the positions informing Stevens' poetry that are recalcitrant to a terminal summary; they are, by quite deliberate design, deviant, circuitously qualified, and extensional. The imagination's fictions, in Stevens view, are narratives under ongoing emendation. These emendations are ongoing due to the imagination being subject—as Stevens doggedly insists in a lecture he gave at Princeton in 1941, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words'—to the 'pressure of reality': 'By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation' (654). In effect, then, the pressure of reality is that which forcibly bars the mind from its will to pensive reflection. It would follow, axiomatically, that the mind can only contemplate the pressure of reality after the fact, if it is able to do so at all, depending on how overwhelming the pressure of reality might be in any given eventuality. Due to the sovereign law of reality being change, the imagination is coerced

into according with this changing reality: 'It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality' (656).

Reality itself is a maddeningly unstable concept in Stevens' theoretical vocabulary. Harold Bloom refers to Stevens' frequent recourse to the term as 'the problematic Stevensian image that he unhelpfully always called "reality"' (Bloom, 1977, 306), and complains that it is 'a word I wish Stevens had renounced, since it takes away more meaning that it intends to give' (Ibid). Bloom then proceeds to quote Frank Doggett's account of Stevensian 'reality', which he judiciously characterises as the 'best attempt to reduce it to order' (Ibid, 307):

Reality, in Stevens' use of the word, may be the world supposed to be antecedent in itself or the world created in the specific occurrence of thought, including the thinker himself and his mind forming the thought. Often the term offers the assumption that if the self is the central point of a circle of infinite radius, then *reality* is the not-self, including all except the abstract subjective center. Sometimes *reality* is used in the context of the nominalist position—then the word denotes that which is actual and stands as a phenomenal identity, the existent as opposed to the merely fancied. Stevens usually means by *reality* an undetermined base on which a mind constructs its personal sense of the world. Occasionally he will use the word *real* as a term of approval, as a substitute for the word *true*, and, therefore, no more than an expression of confidence. (Doggett qtd. in Bloom, 1977, 307, original italics; Doggett, 1966, 200).

Stevens complicates the deterministic influence of reality on the imagination later in the same essay when he affirms the imagination's ineluctable resistance to reality (reality, in this case, to be thought of as 'an undetermined base on which a mind constructs its

personal sense of the world'). In his notebooks, Stevens writes: 'The real is only the base. But it is the base' (*OP*, 160). But it is a base, apparently, whose violent incursions upon the mind are violently opposed by the imagination: 'It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality' (665).¹⁶ It is, despite the bellicose rhetoric, 'an interdependence of imagination and reality as equals' (659) wherein poetic fictions are created, through which, according to Robert E. Doud, 'meaning is infused into the world, and more meaning is derived out of the world. Imagination and reality work together to generate meaning: this is the great discovery of Stevens. Static facticities are transformed by imagination into dynamic organisms, and this does not frustrate reality, but augments it and helps it to reveal itself' (Doud, Sep. 1984, 483).¹⁷ We will return later to the vexatious issue of what comprises these fictions in Stevens' work; for the time being, we will refer to what Stevens has to say concerning the effect of the imagination on reality:

The world is no longer an extraneous object, full of other extraneous objects, but an image. In the last analysis, it is with this image of the world that we are vitally concerned. We should not say, however, that the chief object of the imagination is to produce such an image. Among so many objects, it would be the merest improvisation to say of one, even though it is one with which we are vitally concerned, that it is the chief. The next step would be to assert that a particular image

¹⁶ It is worth remembering that 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' was composed during the beginning of the Second World War, but prior to America's entry into it. Given this historical context, we may construe the pressure of reality as especially disruptive to the non-committal detachment so beloved of Stevens: 'This much ought be said to make it a little clearer that in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive' (659). Stevens, in this essay and elsewhere, idealises the Belle Époque as a period of comparative social harmony, 'a time when only maniacs had disturbing things to say' (788); see: Jahan Ramazani, (Spring, 1991), 'Elegy and Anti-Elegy in Stevens' "Harmonium": Mockery, Melancholia, and the Pathetic Fallacy', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 17:4, 567-82: 568.

¹⁷ Doggett is striking at a similar point when he argues that 'Stevens' poetry envisions a world burgeoning in the flow of consciousness and created continually in his sense of it. Stevens finds the actual to be an intermutation of an outer reality and the life within; he knows it through an interpretation of the indeterminate course of perception that interpretation itself alters' (Doggett, 1966, 201).

was the chief image. Again, it would be the merest improvisation to say of any image of the world, even though it was an image with which a vast accumulation of imaginations had been content, that it was the chief image. The imagination itself would not remain content with it nor allow us to do so. It is the irrepressible revolutionist. (736).

Stevens, in a letter to Bernard Heringman, July 21, 1953, refers to what he calls his 'reality—imagination complex' (*L*, 792). Robert Rehder takes this admission to imply that Stevens 'was aware of the obsessive, almost pathological quality of his interest' (Rehder, 1988, 133) in 'the relation between imagination and reality' (*Ibid*). For Rehder, this relation contains Stevens' 'single subject' (*Ibid*). Miller addresses the creatively enabling failure of this obsession: 'After the death of the gods Stevens seemed faced with the relatively easy problem of reconciling imagination and reality, but such a reconciliation is impossible. This way and that vibrates his thought, seeking to absorb imagination by reality, to engulf reality in imagination, or to marry them in metaphor. Nothing will suffice, and the poet is driven to search tirelessly for some escape from struggle. This seeking is the life of his poetry' (Miller, 1966, 258). 'There would still remain the never-resting mind,' (179), writes Stevens in 'The Poems of Our Climate', which has its irrepressibility affirmed by 'The Well Dressed Man with a Beard': 'It can never be satisfied, the mind, never' (224). In another letter to Heringman, March 20, 1951, Stevens writes: 'I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion. Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that' (*L*, 710). This lack of fixity and license to improvise is indeed an expression of freedom from the static rigidities of a world authored by and ultimately terminating in God. Providential stasis is one of Stevens' greatest anathemas:

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?

(55).

There are occasions when stasis is idealized as a necessary condition for realizing postlapsarian paradise. The singularly outstanding example of stasis as desideratum is to be found in Stevens' wonderwork of compounded superlatives: 'Credences of Summer'. The speaker in this poem desires of the aestival pastoral that it be suspended in a midsummer pleroma, 'Beyond which there is nothing left of time' (322); to take the sun—'the centre that I seek'—'in its essential barrenness' and 'Fix it in an eternal foliage // And fill the foliage with arrested peace, / Joy of such permanence' (323). But these occasions are rare in Stevens, and even in this abeyant idyll is 'right ignorance / Of change still possible' (323); impermanence and flux resurge as the figural mainstays. Stevens' frustration, of course—if ever there was a poet more obstinately committed to revolving in the dark crystal of paradox—is in his desire to arrest flux in an eternal moment or ultimate epiphany,¹⁸ only, whether by necessity or strategic determination, to skeptically dismiss it on the grounds of ephemeral deficiency, and thus repeat the procedure over and again.

¹⁸ Perhaps the single most concentrated lyric expressing this desire in Stevens' *oeuvre* is the marvellous Heraclitean-inflected poem 'This Solitude of Cataracts' (366).

David H. Hesla argues in this connection that Stevens markedly deviates from the tradition of philosophical realism—which Hesla traces through Plato, Plotinus, Thomas Aquinas, Bishop Berkeley and, somewhat egregiously, A. N. Whitehead—a lineage of thinkers who, in various ways, ‘grounded the being or reality of the Ideas in the Divine’ (Hesla, May 1985, 253). Hesla, in making his case for Stevens being a ‘philosophical realist for whom the ideas which inform his poetry are “unsponsored” by the holy’ (Ibid), continues:

Because the ideas are the creatures of the poet's mind and not of God's they cannot have the independence and permanence of being which the philosophical tradition ascribed to them. This does not make them any the less real however. They are real because they are believed. God himself as a postulate of the ego (*OP*, 171) could be said to be real only so long as he could be said to be believed. It is, after all, the belief and not the god—the object of belief—that counts (*OP*, 162). Hence, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations (*OP*, 159). (Ibid, 253-54).¹⁹

As it would be unhelpfully digressive to rehearse these arguments here, we will put to one side the debate surrounding the respective merits or faults of allying Stevens with either a realist or nominalist position. The important thing to keep in mind is the restless indecision of belief, and what might comprise the object of that belief, resulting from Stevens’ eschewal of divine sponsorship. As he says in a letter to Hi Simons, August 28, 1940: ‘If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible to merely disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else’ (*L*, 370). The speaker of ‘Flyer’s Fall’, advancing the point, declares of the deceased pilot’s ‘nothingness of human

¹⁹ The citations recorded in this quotation are to the same edition of *Opus Posthumous* as listed in the abbreviations at the beginning of this document.

after-death' (295), in typically equivocal Stevensian fashion, that it is the 'dimension in which / We believe without belief, beyond belief' (Ibid).

We have now begun to discern Stevens' tenacity for evading any categorical lynchpin with which we might care to secure him. 'Self-division, contradiction, perpetual oscillations of thought', writes Miller, 'these are the constants in Stevens' work' (Miller, 1966, 258). He goes on: 'It is possible to develop radically different notions of Stevens' aims as a poet, and for each of these it is easy to find apposite passages from the texts' (Ibid). This appraisal is closely echoed by Nathan A. Scott, Jr.: 'So generous is the hospitality that this Connoisseur of Chaos offers to a wide variety of divergent perspectives and projects that one can, of course, find some basis in the poetry on which to ground any one of a dozen or so quite different views of his basic tendency' (Scott, 1993, 10).²⁰ As such, Stevens' poetry is susceptible, depending upon one's perspectival or prejudicial emphases (which probably amount to the same thing), to being variously interpreted as humanistic and/or atheistic in its basic tendency. One must tread carefully, however, when it comes to affixing these labels too readily to Stevens' work. There are plainly too many watchwords punctuating Stevens' own pronouncements on belief, elaborations of which are intertwined throughout his poetic *oeuvre*, forbidding the reduction of his poetry to a pervasively humanistic and/or atheistic tendency. In another letter to Hi Simons, January 9, 1940, for instance, he

²⁰ Theodore Sampson is less gregarious about Stevens' openness to diverse interpretation than Scott Jr., more lacerating than Miller, when discussing Imre Salusinszky's strategy of asking 'participants to provide an on-the-spot interpretation of Stevens' poem "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself"' (Sampson, 2000, 186-87). On Sampson's evaluation, Salusinszky's interviewees—whom are comprised of such critical heavyweights as Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida (who declined to offer an interpretation of the poem), Northrop Frye, Geoffrey H. Hartman, Barbara Johnson, Frank Kermode, Frank Lentricchia, J. Hillis Miller and Edward Said)—'either interpret the poem in a way that best suits his or her *a priori* theorizations about literature in general; or, lacking a theory in which to frame their argument, they proceed to bluff their way to what sounds like a plausible interpretation—something that almost all of Stevens' poems allow us to do with impunity' (Ibid, 187).

writes: 'My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe. Humanism would be the natural substitute, but the more I see of humanism the less I like it' (*L*, 348). The forked implication of this statement is that on the one hand there is an alternative to be sought outside of the institutionalised God of Judaeo-Christian tradition—in Stevens' case the 'dried-up Presbyterian' (*L*, 792) faith of his childhood—and on the other hand, that a reduction to humanism is unsatisfactory. In a similarly ambivalent statement made in a late letter to Sister Bernetta Quinn, December 21, 1951, Stevens reiterates his abandonment of the God of his upbringing while flatly denying an alignment with atheism: 'I am not an atheist although I do not believe to-day in the same God in whom I believed when I was a boy' (*L*, 735). But to claim, in the light of this pronouncement, that Stevens is hereby a theist would be entirely misguided. The poet who would write in one of the most centrally important of his poems: 'The death of one god is the death of all' (329),²¹ and would celebrate the dissolution of the gods thus: 'To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing' (842), is not a person to whom the title of theist could be conscientiously ascribed. A good deal of the indeterminacy surrounding Stevens' non-theistic position can be cleared away by bearing a crucial distinction in mind: Stevens does believe that the world exists *post mortem Dei*, both the God of monotheism and the gods of ancient mythology are dismissed, but the *idea* of God emphatically remains. How Stevens translates this idea into our modern intelligence is, in Scott Jr.'s memorable

²¹ The poem in question is of course 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'. This line is also independently recorded in his notebooks (see: 905), assuming there the stature of a standalone maxim.

phrase, '[t]he long meditation recorded by his poetry' (Scott, 1993, 10). Stevens gives the elusive nature of this long meditation a suitably evasive description in an earlier letter to Sister Bernetta Quinn, April 7, 1948:

I don't want to turn to stone under your very eyes by saying "This is the centre that I seek and this alone." Your mind is much too much like my own for it to seem to be an evasion on my part to say merely that I do seek a centre and expect to go on seeking it. I don't say that I shall not find it or that I do not expect to find it. It is the great necessity even without specific identification. (*L*, 584).

This elusive centre that Stevens expects to go on seeking, which he concedes to identifying as 'the great necessity without identification', is the numinous target of what this thesis will heuristically posit as Stevens' interrogative immanentism. AS this thesis will argue, interrogative immanentism is fundamentally a revisionary activity through which Stevens attempts to reorient a transcendent social imaginary²² to an immanent domain. We will discover throughout Stevens' work, however, that this transition is not a simple logical procedure of replacing *x* with *y*, but might more accurately be conceived of as a rhetorical transfusion of *x* into *y*, with a diverse array of borrowings,

²² I must acknowledge an indebtedness to the work of Matthew Mutter, within which I was first alerted to the term 'social imaginary' (Mutter, 2009, 27). Mutter adopts the term from Charles Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries*: 'By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations...There are important differences between social imaginary and social theory. I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (Taylor, 2004, 23).

transfigurations, eliminations, syntheses, and substitutions imbricating the passage of transfer.

Charles M. Murphy, an American Roman Catholic priest and commentator, makes the contradistinction between Stevens and St Teresa of Avila, that whereas for the latter 'the divine and earthly realms are simply opposed to one another' (Murphy, 1997, 11), for Stevens, spirituality '[t]o be believable...must be rooted in the earth to which we belong' (Ibid). 'The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world' (286), opines the speaker of 'Esthétique du Mal'. This 'transcendence downward' as Scott Jr., inverting the typical axial trajectory, insightfully phrases it (Scott, 1993, 10-39 *passim*), is what Murphy identifies as Stevens' 'most significant contribution to our present spiritual situation' (Murphy, 1997, 11).

The stirrings of Stevens' immanentist worldview can be discerned in journal entries dating from his early adulthood. One such entry of August 1st, 1899, during the summer before Stevens' third year at Harvard, reads: 'I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force' (*L*, 32). Mutter characterises the disposition informing this remark as 'a Symbolist mystical attitude that would be completely anathema to his mind a couple of decades later' (Mutter, Fall 2011, 765, n. 18). Both James Longenbach and Joan Richardson infer from this statement an Emersonian influence, the latter suggesting that in following Emerson, the young 'Stevens considered the divine not as the idea of eternal or imminent being but as an immanent activity' (Longenbach, 1991, 18; Richardson, 2007, 13). This inference finds a striking parallel with one of Stevens' later *Adagia*: 'The world is a force, not a presence' (911). The shift from divine to worldly force is characteristic of Stevens' immanentism (as it is of Weber's disenchantment). However, rather than concede to Mutter's consideration that the former betrays a Symbolist mysticism that is anathema to the

maturer Stevens' naturalism, I would contend that it is more constructive to acknowledge the fundamental continuity between these two propositions, namely that they are both posited as occurrences within the world—whatever the ontological identity of the agency of the force might be, neither configuration is postulated as, in fact neither can be, transcendent. It is in keeping with this logic that Stevens can write: 'God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)' (911). This apothegm does not amount to an admission that God exists, but asserts that the condition for God's existence is that it is immanent or else it is not at all. It is only a short stride from this position to stating, as Stevens also does in his *Adagia*, that 'God is a postulate of the ego' (910), to: 'This happy creature— It is he that invented the Gods. It is he that put into their mouths the only words they have ever spoken' (906)—variants on the familiar trope of inverting Genesis 1:27.²³

²³ This notion receives its most extended prose treatment in Stevens' essay 'Two or Three Ideas', in which he discusses the proposition that 'the style of the gods and the gods themselves are one' (841). Stevens claims this part of his discussion pertains to 'the gods, both ancient and modern, both foreign and domestic' (841), but that for the sake of simplicity he will 'speak only of the ancient and the foreign gods' (843). This is, of course, an underhanded manoeuvre on Stevens' part in order to smuggle in implications pertaining to all gods. Stevens' expatiates on the idea that in an age of disbelief '[o]ne attitude is that the gods of classical mythology were merely aesthetic projections' (843), and asks the question: 'Is it one of the normal activities of humanity, in the solitude of reality and in the unworthy treatment of solitude, to create companions, a little colossal as I have said, who, if not superficially explicative, are, at least, assumed to be full of the secret of things and who in any event bear in themselves even, if they do not always wear it, the peculiar majesty of mankind's sense of worth, neither too much nor too little?' (843). He insists that '[t]he people, not the priests, made the gods' (843), by which he means the poets or their closest analogues: 'he that composed the most moving of Apollo's hymns' (843). The two propositions that he examines surrounding that pertaining to 'the style of the gods and the gods themselves are one', are 'the style of a poem and the poem itself are one...[and] the style of men and men themselves are one' (844). In typical conditional fashion, Stevens proposes that 'if there is any true relation between the propositions, it might well be the case that the parts of these propositions are interchangeable' (844). He later proceeds to claim that '[i]n the presence of the gods, or of their images, we are in the presence of perfection in created beings. The gods are a definition of perfection in ideal creatures' (847). This is all preamble to the ultimate point that Stevens' is wanting to make, which is that if the foregoing propositions are interchangeable, and that 'we use the same faculties when we write poetry that we use when we create gods or fix the bearing of men in reality' (850), then 'the unity of style and the poem itself is a unity of language and life that exposes both in a supreme sense. Its collation with the unity of style and the gods and the unity of style and men is intended to demonstrate this' (850). In sum, Stevens' triadic connection of god, poem and man in a stylistic holism, is a rhetorical demonstration of the poet's supreme importance as both the creator of gods and fixers of reality.

(4) 'I WISH THAT GROVES STILL WERE SACRED—OR, AT LEAST, THAT
SOMETHING WAS'

Stevens' dissatisfactions with the consolations of the church find an early expression in other journal entries recorded during his young adulthood. On June 10, 1899 he complains that '[t]he mind cannot always live in a "divine ether." The lark cannot always sing at heaven's gate' (*L*, 32). On August 10, 1902, he rehearses an argument inherited from Wordsworth, Emerson and Whitman: 'An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses. [...] As I sat dreaming with the Congregation I felt how the glittering altar worked on my senses stimulating and consoling them; and as I went tramping through the fields and woods I beheld every leaf and blade of grass revealing or rather betokening the Invisible' (*L*, 58-59). Five years later, during the long courtship of his future wife Elsie née Moll—a still practising Christian—he confides, after a fit of house-cleaning during which he threw out his Bible, that 'I hate the look of a Bible' (*L*, 102). Two years after that, in a somewhat more conciliatory disposition, he writes to Elsie on the subject of God's existence: 'I think that everyone admits that [God exists] in some form or other. — The thought makes the world sweeter—even if God be no more than the mystery of Life' (*L*, 140). One could amass further examples, but the point by now should be sufficiently made: Stevens' turn from the orthodoxies of the church to the search for immanence is manifestly apparent from his earliest adulthood. Three decades later, Stevens makes a frank admission: 'I ought to say that it is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion' (*L*, 348). Stevens is sixty years old

when he writes this, and—famously a late publisher—in his mid-career as an established poet with three collections in print.²⁴ The significance of this chronology is that Stevens, having already lived for six decades on this earth, and with only fifteen years remaining in his life (though he wasn't to know this of course), could summarily remark that the revisionary activity of religious substitution was a habit of mind with him, that is to say an *idée fixe*, and one that would only become increasingly stark in the latter half of his poetic *oeuvre*.²⁵ Furthermore, Stevens notably makes this statement in the present continuous, which would indicate that this 'substitute for religion' is yet an ongoing and inconclusive concern for him. As late in his life as when he wrote a letter to Thomas McGreevy on October 24, 1952, Stevens would still be no more certain of where he stood on the issue: 'At my age it would be nice to be able to read more and think more and be myself more and to make up my mind about God, say, before it is too late, or at least before he makes his mind up about me' (*L*, 763). In a letter to Henry Church, written back in October 15th, 1940, we find Stevens' oft-cited 'Memorandum' (from which I have already briefly quoted), in which he declares:

The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing, but the intention

²⁴ Stevens' first collection *Harmonium* was published in September 1923 (revised in 1931) when he was already 43 years old, succeeded by *Ideas of Order* (1936), *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Parts of a World* (1942), *Transport to Summer* (1947), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* including *The Rock* (1954), which taken together comprise the collections he had published during his lifetime; *Opus Posthumous* (1959) and *The Palm at the End of the Mind* (1967) gather together his uncollected poems, both late and early, as well as several items of prose, his few plays, and a miscellany of journal-culled adagia. It would be misleading, of course, to suggest that Stevens hadn't begun writing poetry until well into adulthood. Stevens had written poems and published variously, albeit not prolifically, in magazines and journals since his teenage years; a poem written in adolescence entitled 'Autumn' (481), for instance, appeared in his high school magazine in January 1898, a full quarter of a century before his first published collection.

²⁵ Admittedly the much larger half, ranging from *Parts of a World* to the late uncollected poems.

is not to foster a cult. The knowledge of poetry is a part of philosophy, and a part of science; the import of poetry is the import of the spirit. (*L*, 378).²⁶

It is tempting, in light of the evidence thus far accumulated, to claim that Stevens' position regarding the function of poetry is ostensibly Arnoldian. Many critics have done just that. Miller is among the earliest of Stevens' critics to baldly advance this case: 'In defining poetry as a substitute for religion Stevens is joining himself to a tradition extending from the romantics through Matthew Arnold down to our own day' (Miller, 1966, 224). Herbert J. Stern, writing at the same time as Miller, says that 'for Stevens, no less than for Matthew Arnold, the salient function of art was one we may legitimately call a religious function' (Stern, 1966, 89). Adalaide Kirby Morris argues that although 'he plays Pater in proclaiming "the morality of the poet's radiant and productive atmosphere" to be the "morality of the right sensation" (*NA* 58), Stevens is more like Arnold in the serious elaboration of his ethics. He too believed that "we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to sustain us"' (Morris, 1974, 7).²⁷ So entrenched had this

²⁶ Mutter, however, is insistent that Stevens' distinctions do not mean the same thing. In fact, he erects the entire structure of his argument on the scaffold of a scrupulous maintenance of these very distinctions. In Mutter's view, the first option—'adaptation'—'is a revisionist strategy. One takes what began as a religious concept and prunes it, reinterprets it, or translates it in the light of "modern knowledge"' (Mutter, Fall 2011, 743). He presents, by way of illustration, the examples of eschatological doctrine being transformed into modern doctrines of progress, or of recontextualising the doctrine of the Fall, or the alienation of man from God, as the alienation of the subject from the object (Ibid). He then proceeds to criticise this strategy on the grounds 'that it tends to disfigure the original concepts to the point where they are no longer recognizable. It raises questions of legitimacy and coherence that force one to ask whether original religious ideas remain authentic and intelligible in an alien framework' (Ibid, 743-44). Substitution, he argues, 'overlaps with adaptation but has a different logic. Substitution shifts the attention from the content of the religious idea to the needs and desires that generated it' (Ibid, 744), and claims that this 'method is at the heart of Stevens's well-known interest in a "supreme fiction"' (Ibid). He further claims that under this model 'secularization does not necessitate the expulsion of religious content, only its rearticulation outside of mythic categories' (Ibid). Mutter labels the last strategy 'elimination', which, he argues, 'challenges the assumptions of both the adaptive and substitutionary models. Elimination does not look for substitute satisfactions, but uproots the very needs, desires, and moral assumptions that were a part of the religious framework' (Ibid, 745). Mutter rightly discerns that 'Stevens never definitively chose among the three paradigms, but he experimented with them throughout his career, exploring their difficulties and limitations' (Ibid). This thesis will assimilate, where appropriate, Mutter's well extrapolated distinctions.

²⁷ Morris is quoting from Arnold's famous essay "The Study of Poetry": 'More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science

critical position become that Frank Lentricchia in 1975, reviewing two recent books on Stevens (one of them the Morris book just quoted), could parody 'the dominant mode of criticism of Wallace Stevens' (Lentricchia, March 1975, 75), in the following terms: 'Stevens fulfils the prophecy of Matthew Arnold that after the ravages of science had been totally visited upon the magical world-view, the poet (of all folk) will provide us "our consolation and our stay"' (Ibid, 76). Daniel R. Schwarz, who would appear to remain wilfully ignorant of this commonplace, writes of Stevens in 1993: 'To an extent he has a more Arnoldian temperament than has been realized and believes, like Arnold, that poetry can be a substitute for religion' (Schwarz, 1993, 13).

There are some detractors. 'After one has abandoned a belief in God poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption,' quotes David Daiches, but dissents with: 'This was not Matthew Arnold's position, that the best part of religion is its poetry and that the documents of religion should be interpreted as poetry. Stevens had no wish to preserve a belief in Christianity by moving from a literal to a poetic interpretation of its biblical sources' (Daiches, 1984, 162). Perhaps not, but Stevens, as we will come to see, was not shy of utilising biblical and other Christian figures as manipulable *materia poetica*. David R. Jarraway admonishes that 'it would be a mistake to think that the modern poet might offer himself and his work as a replacement for the loss of faith as Matthew Arnold once suggested. To the contrary, Stevens remarks, "we do not say that the poet is to take the place of the gods" (842). To do so would be an argument for humanism, and Stevens is quite emphatic that "the more I see of humanism the less I like it"' (Jarraway, 2007, 193-94). Jarraway, whose work on Stevens' complex relationship with belief is otherwise quite cogent and meticulous,

will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes for religion and philosophy will appear incomplete without it' (Arnold, 1970, 340). The Stevens' quotes that Morris cites are to the same edition of *The Necessary Angel* as listed in the abbreviations section at the beginning of this document.

seems to be neglecting in this instance Stevens' comments in a letter to Barbara Church, August 12, 1940: 'As scepticism becomes both complete and profound, we face either a true civilization or a blank; and literature ought to be one of the factors to determine the choice. Certainly, if civilization is to consist only of man himself, and it is, *the arts must take the place of divinity*, at least as a stage in whatever general principle or progress is involved' (L, 564, my emphasis). Eleanor Cook claims that '[a]t first, [Stevens] seemed to suppose, like Matthew Arnold, that poetry could take the place of religion, a vague humanist view' (Cook, 2007, 20), but goes onto argue the following:

Arnold's simple substitution of poetry for religion has one great weakness: the obvious fact that poetry or imaginative literature simply did not have the force of religion in Victorian society, nor did it seem likely to attain such force. "Biblical imagination is one thing and the poetic imagination, inevitably, something else" (731). Imagination, Stevens said late in life, is the *next greatest* power to faith. This important qualification needs to be remembered; it turns up in 1949: "next to holiness is the will thereto, / And next to love is the desire for love" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" III). And it turns up in 1951: "Men feel that the imagination is *the next greatest power* to faith: *the reigning prince*" (748, [Cook's] italics). To be sure, Stevens's phrase, "the reigning prince," bears watching. A reigning prince is something more than a crown prince, though something less than a reigning king. Stevens is leaving open the question of eventual reign. (Ibid, 21).²⁸

What these detractions all gesture towards is the inherent problematics of advancing art, literature, poetry, what have you, as a surrogate for religion. It is an inevitable problem for any artist who would presume to arrogate for their art such a role, and as such is a problem for Stevens. One of the most striking aspects of this problem, as

²⁸ The Stevens quotes cited in this passage are to the same Library of America edition of *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* as listed in the abbreviations at the beginning of this document

Michael Kaufmann points out, is that ‘all versions of the Arnoldian replacement theory rely on an analogical paradox: to arrive at a final act of differentiation, these narratives must initially rely on a supposed similarity’ (Kaufmann, Autumn 2007, 616). The paradox turns on the presupposition that there is such a thing as essentially secular and essentially religious categories. Kaufmann, following the lead of Talal Asad, contends that although ‘[t]here is no idea, person, experience, text, institution, or historical period that could be categorized as essentially, inherently, or exclusively secular or religious’ (Ibid, 608), non-essentialist distinctions between the same terms nevertheless ‘function meaningfully within particular contexts or what [Asad] calls, borrowing from Wittgenstein, “discursive grammars”’ (Ibid, 610). ‘Since the secular and the religious depend on *each other* for meaning,’ Kaufmann continues, ‘they must always be present at the same time; we can never therefore trace a simple trajectory from one to the other because each concept is meaningless in isolation’ (Ibid, original italics).

Returning now to the paradox of Arnoldian replacement theory:

...the larger trajectory of a secularization narrative aims at a final differentiation between the religious and the secular, between religion and literature. And yet along the way it must assert that the two are so similar that they are practically interchangeable: literature can replace religion with very little fanfare, very little conflict. Asad helps explain this paradox in part by reminding us that the interplay of similarity and difference is a function of any two terms in binary opposition, or in an analogy. What is more important here is that these two particular sets of terms—religious/secular, literature/religion—are placed both in an analogy and in opposition in the first place. “Secular” literary culture, so goes the theory, is analogous enough to dogmatic religion to be able to replace, and then eventually oppose it. The initial act of identification in the replacement narrative enables a final and determinative act of differentiation. (Ibid, 616).

Kaufmann suggests a possible way out of this paradoxical bind by referring to the work of Colin Jager, whose 'complex account of Romanticism...positions the literary as a third term, neither merely secular nor a replacement religion, but through imaginative acts of aesthetic representation, able to stand within and beside both categories' (Ibid, 622). Stevens applies a similar logic to free himself from the either/or bind of the analogous categories of theism and humanism. In a letter to Henry Church, 21 April, 1943, he writes: 'We are confronted by a choice of ideas: the idea of God and the idea of man. The purpose of the NOTES is to suggest the possibility of a third idea: the idea of a fictive being, or state, or thing as the object of belief by way of making up for that element in humanism which is its chief defect' (Stevens qtd. in Bates, 1985, 203). We will return to Stevens' 'third idea', as to the content of his 'fictions', in due course.²⁹

²⁹ Another aspect of the art as replacement religion problem is the 'adequacy' argument. Robert Onopa, attempting to push irrecoverably the discourse of art as a spiritual project into a corner of ill-repute, argues that '[a]lthough a connection between art and religion has been asserted in a variety of ways since the beginnings of Romanticism, the institutionalization of art into a formal religion has never taken hold' (Onopa, 1973, 363). To qualify Onopa's assertion: nobody has ever made the attempt in the wake of Romanticism to institutionalize art into a formal religion in any socially prescriptive and binding fashion; there has never been a Nicene Council convened on behalf of art, nor would such an intervention necessarily be desirable even were one proposed. Certainly, individual exponents have attempted to extol the spiritual and compensatory value of art in a putative age of religious scepticism—Shelley, Arnold and Stevens, as we have seen, are but an exemplary triad of the case in point—but without, as Jacque Barzun argues, resultant enjoyment. 'Art is of all things the worst-suited to the purpose' (Barzun, 1974, 90), Barzun writes, of establishing a unified spiritual community:

By its very richness and variety art cannot do the simplest things that religion, philosophy, and the state do by *their* nature. In our cant phrase, art cannot be "a way of life" because—to take examples at random—it lacks a theology or even a popular mythology of its own; it has no bible, no ritual, and no sanctions for behavior. We are called to enjoy but we are not enjoined.

[...]

Since art brings to life in [the] realm of Imagination a thousand unrelated truths, art cannot be the unifier of either the individual consciousness or mankind's spiritual beliefs. Art is inescapably Pluralistic. It thrives on diversity and knows nothing of contradiction: all its opposite truths are equally true, because its type of knowledge is knowledge *of*, not knowledge *about*. Hence its power of endless growth. No one can tell what the next artist will discover and transfix as new truth, any more than one can tell him what he shall discover. He is not himself aware of his terminus, however conscious he may be of his means. This being the state of affairs, it is absurd to speak of "what all art teaches us." Even should there be such a lesson, there are no penalties for deviating from it. (Ibid, 90-91).

Although I find Barzun's argument compelling, I would contend that the shortcomings of both Onopa and Barzun's criticisms is in their tendency to conflate the openness of spiritual seeking with the closure of religious finding.

When Stevens asserts, as has been illustrated, that poetry is a spiritual project, what he is indicating is that poetry is the medium in which he has elected to reckon with, speculate upon, reaffirm, challenge, reject and/or transfigure the culturally inherited articulations, figurations and beliefs of spiritual discourse. It does not follow from this that he is trying to establish a religious program for other people to follow—as quoted earlier, Stevens’ ‘intention is not to foster a cult’. To put it bluntly, he is making inquiries rather than he is proselytizing. Stevens may indeed, and does, make various pronouncements in his poems—provisional answers to his various inquiries—but nowhere deludes himself into thinking that readers will assent to his pronouncements as though they were authorised by divine fiat. Moreover, Stevens, a thoroughly discursive poet, does present arguments in his poems, but as with all arguments it is up to their recipients to affirm or deny the validity and applicability of the arguments in question.³⁰ Leaving Stevens’ position on the matter to one side for the moment, an individual could declare ‘Art is my God’, and further claim to find an immanent salvation in the engagement with, or practice of, art. The critic, whether or not he or she might deem this individual deluded or naïve, would be at a loss to refute this individual’s claims or the validity of his or her purported salvific experience with art—such is the impassable way with declarative commitments of faith.

That said, it is by no means the intention of this thesis to construct something that Stevens himself, in the final analysis, does not construct: a programmatic system of belief. Stevens does not, in the manner of William Blake or W. B. Yeats, develop a systematic cosmo-mythology—an accomplished supreme fiction we might say—of his own making. In the letter quoted earlier, in which Stevens states that it is a habit of

³⁰ Poetic argument is a phenomenon frequently neglected by critics and theorists for whom, I imagine, facing up to the evidence of poetic argument would prove catastrophically inconvenient for their respective theses.

mind with him to be thinking of some substitute for religion, he immediately qualifies this statement by saying: 'I don't necessarily mean some substitute for the church, because no one believes in the church as an institution more than I do' (*L*, 348). In a late letter to Bernard Heringman, July 21, 1953, to deflect what he infers as his correspondent's expectation of 'a monumental explanation of my religion' (*L*, 792), Stevens states, without equivocation, 'my activities are not religious' (*Ibid*). He writes in an even later letter, to Robert Pack, December 28, 1954, less than eight months from his death, 'in projecting a supreme fiction, I cannot think of anything more fatal than to state it definitely and incautiously' (*L*, 863), and concludes the letter with: 'The last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system' (*L*, 864). What these late pronouncements retroactively augur is Stevens' awareness that poetry and religion are functionally distinct cultural praxes. That they happen to be in conversation with each other does not make them *essentially* the same thing—an essential identity of either praxis, much less an essential identity of one with the other, we have already dispensed with. What is the case, however, is that they can, and do, inform one another, in all of the other's heterogeneous articulations.

Now that the important problem of Stevens' religious substitution has been contextualised, we can turn to outlining the particular investigation into Stevens' poetry that this thesis intends to conduct, namely, Stevens' rhetorical engagement with the limit and extent of immanent numinosity.

*

(5) 'AND SAY OF WHAT YOU SEE IN THE DARK...'

The early twentieth century Calvinist Theologian Rudolf Otto advances a description of the 'numinous' in an attempt to account for the unique quality of religious experience in his 1917 book *Das Heilige (The Idea of the Holy)*.³¹ Otto's account of the numinous, in short, is of a phenomenological cast and is posited as the idea of the 'holy' (or sacred) minus its rational and moral aspects (Otto, 1950, 1-7). The numinous constitutes an intuited, felt experience of something 'objective and outside the self' (Ibid, 11) which is conducive to a 'feeling of dependence' (Ibid, 10), or what Otto calls 'creature-feeling' (Ibid, 8-11, *passim*). The 'nature and the modes of its manifestations' (Ibid, 11) finds its expression in what Otto terms the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Ibid, 12-40, *passim*), which, simply described, is the experience of a wholly mysterious other (on *mysterium* see: Ibid, 25-30), a '*numen praesens*' (Ibid, 11), which inspires feelings of awefulness, overpoweringness, and urgency on the one hand (on *tremendum* see: Ibid, 12-24), but also 'shows itself as something uniquely attractive and *fascinating* [...] in a strange harmony of contrasts' (Ibid, 31, original italics), inspiring bliss, intoxication, rapture and grace on the other (on *fascinans* see: Ibid, 31-40). The underpinning thrust of Otto's argument is that the experiences which he describes are unique to and contingent upon the presence of the divine, which, he argues, evolves over time in human awareness from a primeval feeling of uncanny daemonic dread, a feeling which endows a manifold conception of ghosts, occupant spirits, and the soul, which progresses eventually to a conception of gods, before culminating in worship of *the God* (Ibid, 14-17; 26-29) whose ultimate expression is found, quite presumptuously, in Christianity which 'stands out in complete superiority over all its sister religions' (Ibid,

³¹ It is Otto's descriptions of the numinous in *The Idea of the Holy* whence this term enters popular modern discourse. The most famous exponent of the numinous after Otto is C. G. Jung, for whom the numinous becomes an important part of his individuation process, of the coming into consciousness of the ultimately unknowable Self. See: Leon Schlamm, (2007), 'C. G. Jung and numinous experience: Between the known and the unknown', *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 9:4, 403-414.

142). Otto also argues that human beings are universally predisposed towards a religious impulsion (see: Ibid, 136-142), and that numinous experience is the originary motive force of this impulsion (Ibid, 14-15).³²

Otto's foregoing account of the numinous can be stripped of its phenomenological and theological trappings without doing any violence to the concept of *mysterium* at its core; the *mysterium* is, after all, the *a priori* condition upon which Otto's numinous phenomenology and theory of evolutionary theology is predicated:

Taken, indeed, in its purely natural sense, *mysterium* would first mean merely a secret or a mystery in the sense of that which is alien to us, uncomprehended and unexplained; and so far *mysterium* is itself merely an ideogram, an analogical notion taken from the natural sphere, illustrating, but incapable of exhaustively rendering, our real meaning. Taken in the religious sense, that which is 'mysterious' is—to give it perhaps the most striking expression—the 'wholly other' ...that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny', and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment. (Ibid, 26).

The implication here is that *mysterium* taken in its natural sense is mysterious only until comprehension and explanation have disclosed its secret, which is somewhat analogous to Weber's principle of calculability previously outlined. Otto himself distinguishes a 'mystery' from a 'problem' in a way that accords with Weber's disenchantment thesis regarding the latter, while taking leave of it on behalf of the former:

³² I haven't the space, much less the requirement, to enter into a prolonged analytical critique of Otto's arguments here. I would direct the interested reader to: David Barstow, (Jun., 1976), 'Otto and Numinous Experience', *Religious Studies*, 12:2, 159-176, for a critique of Otto's under-represented indebtedness to the philosophy of J. F. Fries, and, more importantly, of issues of coherency regarding Otto's 'boldness of attempting to unite in one movement of thought, theses of three distinct types, from the disciplines of philosophy, phenomenology of religion, and theology; and thereby, by implication, of grappling with the problems of the relations between the types of judgement made in these disciplines' (Barstow, 1976, 160).

It might be objected that the mysterious is something which is and remains absolutely and invariably beyond our understanding, whereas that which merely eludes our understanding for a time but is perfectly intelligible in principle should not be called a 'mystery', but merely a 'problem'. [...] The truly 'mysterious' object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes chill and numb. (Otto, 1950, 28).

Leaving aside the fact that Weberian intellectualization is an incomplete (uncompletable?) process, the compulsion to recover the *mysterium* of the 'wholly other'—to which 'the concepts of the 'transcendent' and the 'supernatural' become forthwith designations' (Ibid, 30)—presents itself as the strategic *ne plus ultra* of challenging the empirically explicable by means of counterposing the numinously inexplicable. Stevens is driving at an affined notion when in his essay 'Effects of Analogy' he declares that: 'The corporeal world exists as the common denominator of the incorporeal worlds of its inhabitants' (715). The corporeal world is the empirically given world to which we all are commonly denominated; the incorporeal worlds of its inhabitants, on the other hand, are constituted by each of the inhabitants' idiosyncratic interpretations of the corporeal world (hence the shift from singular to plural), which are manifest in accordance with their beliefs and the ordering and transfigurative powers of their imaginations. This interaction between the corporeal and incorporeal worlds could also be characterised as the tension drawn between materialism on the one hand and idealism on the other. Stevens plays on this opposition in his early long poem 'The Comedian as the Letter C'. In the opening canto the narrator states that 'man

is the intelligence of his soil / The sovereign ghost' (22), which presupposes that the soil, a synecdoche for the corporeal world, is but the product of the sovereign ghost's intelligence, that is to say, the creative mind of 'man'. By the fourth canto the formulation is reversed: 'his soil is man's intelligence. / That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find' (29). Crispin, the poem's protagonist, is now better satisfied that 'man's intelligence', a synecdoche for the collective incorporeal worlds of each corporeal inhabitant, is a product of the soil, the corporeal world as above. The oscillations and teetering balances between these polarities prove a fecund source of rhetorical generativity throughout Stevens' poetry. Suffice it to say, it is the incorporeal worlds of each individual's imagination, unsurprisingly, that are most amenable to numinous perfusion.

The ultimate limitation to the description and expression of the mystery at the heart of the numinous, on Otto's account, in fact of the numinous *per se*, is that it can only be recovered *via negativa*. The most direct means of description and expression of the numinous in art in particular, according to Otto, which 'are in a noteworthy way *negative*' (68), are 'darkness', 'silence' and 'emptiness' (68-69). It is worth emphasising that the numinous thus described is ontologically negative, a metaphysical abstraction entirely absented of spirits, souls, ghosts, daemons, angels and gods. The manifestation of these entities believed to populate a supramundane realm are, on Otto's evolutionary model, later developed through humankind's diverse mythologies: it is the intuition of this 'wholly other' whatever, the numinous experience in its most incipient form, that first stirs the primeval consciousness to conceive of the divine. It is of the utmost importance, however, to contend that the *mysterium* for which Otto claims that the concepts of the transcendent and the supernatural have become forthwith designations, could just as readily be designated immanent and natural. There is nothing inherent to

the concept of the mysterious, inexplicable, 'wholly other' which could not be predicated on mundane experience alone. In point of fact, this latter dyad is the more compelling predication. It is epistemologically consistent that this intuition for the *mysterium* is immanent and natural in its provenance as the transcendent and supernatural are, by any definition that has been coherently attributed to them, necessarily inaccessible to our mundane occupancy. To put it another way, if the transcendent and supernatural are concepts whose ontological status could be proven null and void, that is, if we could prove (which we can't) that the transcendent and supernatural simply do not exist other than as concepts, it would make no difference at all to our intuition of *mysterium* as Otto defines it. Otto's argument falls down because it is, quite simply, a flagrant non sequitur which can be reduced to the following form: we have this feeling, intuition, or sense, of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, therefore the transcendent, the supernatural, or God, must exist (the evidence for which is the evocation of these feelings—which also begs the question). A sounder, more circumspect formulation would run: we have this feeling, intuition, or sense, of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, therefore we are clearly susceptible to forms of experience of radical 'otherness' we are as yet incapable of understanding (and possibly never will). I would oppose to Otto's *numen praesens*, as a contrary predication of numinous experience, *numen abest* (the absence of divinity), for the negative experience of absence is the utmost formulation of something 'wholly other'. This absence also opens the numinous to being reformulated and thus 'filled' by an alternative presence, which is precisely what Stevens attempts to poetically hypothesise with prodigious rhetorical variation. We could state this revised conception quite pithily: the numinous is that which we are ultimately not.

Another crucial interjection should be made at this point. Otto is guilty of a sin of omission when it comes to his means of direct expression of the numinous in art. 'Darkness', 'silence' and 'emptiness', if we situate those at the kenotic nadir of an axial continuum, would implicate their polar counterpoints at the plerotic zenith of the same continuum. I would appoint to the occupancy of these vacant polar coordinates the following: 'illumination', 'logos' and 'fullness', all of which are conventional signifiers for numinosity, and should not therefore consternate the reader. The rhetorical interplay between these kenotic and plerotic polarities, and their openness to perpetual analogical revision, delineate the rudimentary limit and extent of Stevens' triangulations of immanent numinosity.

As I will be using the terms plerosis and kenosis to plot these polarities throughout this thesis, I should provide a short description of what I intend them to indicate. Kenosis and plerosis are traditionally used to categorize ancient rites and rituals observant of seasonal patterns. Theodor Gaster in his *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, summarises the respective rituals as such: 'In most parts of the world, seasonal rituals follow a common pattern. This pattern is based on the conception that life is vouchsafed in a series of leases that have annually to be renewed. [...] They fall into two clear divisions of *Kenosis*, or Emptying, and *Plerosis*, or Filling, the former representing the evacuation of life, the latter its replenishment' (Gaster, 1977, 17). Stevens' own observance of seasonal cycles follows a similar logic. As Sebastian Gardner cogently argues, winter is for Stevens

...bare, stark reality [regarded] as at once uninhabitable and beautiful on account of its purity, freshness and absence of human disorder. We arrive at the world of winter via an operation of subtraction on the ordinary world (Stevens calls it abstraction): the world of winter is a

contraction of the ordinary world, created through disposing of the clutter of ordinary beliefs, habits, and practices, and it exposes the features of the ordinary world that make it humanly habitable as illusion, mythology and the residue of projection. [...] Stevens' vision of the world of winter may be identified with reality as conceived in any metaphysic that aims to exclude, by reduction or elimination, those features of reality which have a human face. (Gardner, 1994, 326).

In contrast to the kenotic world of winter, the world of summer is plerotic. Gardner again:

The world of summer, by contrast, is the world apprehended in the full blaze of what Stevens calls imagination, the mental power that pervades everyday human experience but realizes itself more fully in poetry and art, where it represents a world as a fulfilment and incarnation of value, more than adequate for the purposes of human habitation. [...] So, whereas the contracted world of winter represents implicitly the everyday world of winter represents implicitly the everyday world as illusory, as containing appearances of things to which no reality corresponds, the transfigured world of summer represents it as incomplete, as failing to display the full, abundant, valuable features of reality. (Ibid, 327).

Accordingly, spring and autumn represent transitional phases between these two worlds; the former a renewal of the ritual cycle of filling toward summer's plerosis, the latter a declination toward winter's kenosis. This is the basic narrative of Stevens' poetry, which 'consists in movements between the different seasonal worlds, this temporal movement symbolizing changes in the subject's sense of reality' (Ibid, 325). I will not be rehearsing Stevens' seasonal narrative in this thesis as that work has already

been prodigiously addressed elsewhere.³³ I am interested in abstracting the concepts of plerosis and kenosis together with their aforementioned correlates as I think they are fundamentally at the basis of all contemplation, poetic or otherwise, of numinous experience.

It would be relevant at this juncture to review Eric Gould's insightful summary concerning the problematic situation of maintaining the usefulness of the numinous:

From the point of view of defining the numinous, we can say that it is nothing if not the paradox of exteriority demanding interiority. For the numinous to remain a useful term, it must remain problematic. To define it, then, from the perspective that Rudolf Otto has taken, is to use repetitively analogous terms for the "full" and "empty": "mighty" and "fearful" *mysterium tremendum*, and the "empty distances" of "silence," "darkness," and "void." But that is evasive, turning merely to function to account for the numinous. We are reminded also that what Otto describes as the elusiveness of *numena* is no stranger, of course, to the nonreligious poet.

[...]

We are not, it is clear, any nearer to knowing what the numinous is, even when we can offer interminable analogues for the "full" and "empty," or show that its expression is fraught with ambiguity and doomed to inaccuracy. Instead, perhaps all we can say about the numinous consciousness is that it leads to a persistent set of opposites, to a dismantling of its own terms to show its hermeneutic structure, a fondness for a dualistic and allegorical explanation of experience, a necessary mediation between the transparent and the opaque, the interior and the exterior, as reasonable extremes which force us to seek a hypothetical synthesis. (Gould, 1981, 260-61).

³³ I have in mind George S. Lensing's *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*. As I will be quoting from this work later in this thesis, I would refer the interested reader to the Works Cited list at the end of this document for publication details.

This reads rather like a series of nails being hammered into the lid of numinosity's coffin, the glaring implication being that tracing the path of the numinous is an exercise in aporetic futility. Perhaps Gould is right, and has accurately predicted what all attempts at numinous recovery will eventually discover. He is certainly correct in asserting that we are no nearer to knowing what the numinous *is*—such knowledge would necessarily negate its object. Whatever the case, it is an attempt perennially made, and it is one that Stevens makes over and again. The schematic I have outlined above is simply a rhetorical geometry, as it were, for establishing a way into Stevens' 'intricate evasions of as, / In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness, / The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands' (415). What Gould's summation elides are the peculiarities and priorities of each attempt at recovering the numinous in the specific probe of a particular poem. The risk, of course, is that any particular attempt at recovering the numinous becomes mired in a generic swamp of unknowing. As such, a case has to be made for how the *mysterium* of the wholly other is implicated in and across a series of exemplary poems in order to discern what implications are being made and to what ends.

Such as it is, Kenneth Burke argues in *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* that: "Words" in the first sense have wholly naturalistic, empirical reference. But they may be used analogically, to designate a further dimension, the "supernatural." Whether or not there is a realm of the "supernatural," there are *words* for it' (Burke, 1970, 7, original italics). He proceeds to demonstrate how a series of words—'grace', 'create', 'spirit', specifically—had their etymological roots in words with secular, natural meanings, which were then borrowed and translated (analogised) into referents for the supernatural realm, and then eventually borrowed back for secular usage, only now

altered by the connotations ascribed to them in their supernatural application (Ibid, 7-8). In this sense, language is already functionally transcendent:

The quickest and simplest way to realize that words “transcend” non-verbal nature is to think of the notable difference between the kind of operations we might perform with a *tree* and the kind of operations we might perform with the *word* “tree.” Verbally, we can make “one tree” into “five thousand trees” by merely revising our text, whereas a wholly different set of procedures would be required to get the corresponding result in nature. Verbally, we can say, “To keep warm, cut down the tree and burn it” and we can say this even if there is no tree. Or whether we call the tree generically a tree or refer to it as some particular species of tree, the fact remains that our term for it has “transcended” its unique individuality. And if we put an apostrophe after the word “tree,” thereby getting the possessive form, “tree’s,” we’d have something quite different from the way a tree “owns” its bark, branches, etc. Finally, since the word “tree” rhymes with the words “knee,” “be,” and “see,” we have here an order of associations wholly different from entities with which a tree is physically connected. (Ibid, 8-9)

Significantly, this means that ‘[t]here is a sense in which language is *not* just “natural,” but really *does* add a “new dimension” to the things of nature (an observation that would be the logological equivalent of the theological statement that grace perfects nature)’ (Ibid, 8). The addition of new dimensions to nature and the endless play of analogies that language enables therefore makes possible the postulation and population of a supernatural realm, irrespective of whether one exists or not. The same can be said for the postulation and representation of the *mysterium numinosum*. Short of making a Kierkegaardian leap of faith or undergoing divine revelation, the most *that can be said* is that the numinous designates the hypothesis of a metaphysical entity or ontological gap to which we have no means of epistemological access. Furthermore, we would not even be able to posit the possibility of its being, or non-being, as the case may

be, other than through our symbol-making practices, which, in respect of poetry, implicates language specifically. Gould thus concurs: ‘The sense of the numinous and the sacred—any apostrophic term to convey the idea of the holy on which religion depends—is both inside and outside the text at once. The experience of the holy outside the text, which may infiltrate writing, can only be mediated in discourse. It resists writing and speech, yet it is only in writing and speech that the definition of the boundaries of the holy and the uniqueness of the experience can take place’ (Gould, 1981, 260).

The ‘apostrophic terms’ used to convey the numinous are, of course, legion. The names and identities of deities and the various functions they serve in their respective mythologies are in and of themselves complex networks of analogous forms, metonymically borrowing aspects of their individual natures, physical constitutions and attendant symbols from our physical world. The Supreme Being, ‘God’, is the most abstracted manifestation, and thus least apprehensible, of all deities. Nevertheless, God, too, bears *his* anthropomorphic taint: ‘The fault lies with an over-human god’ (278).³⁴ Regardless, all of these apostrophic referents—the named and conceptualised deities that populate humanity’s diverse mythologies—serve to undermine the truly radical postulation of the numinous: that of a mysterious alterity which remains interminably elusive to fixed nomination and human knowing, but of which we are still capable of at least hypothesising, or, as Stevens would almost certainly prefer, imagining.

The task ahead, then, is one of ‘hermeneutically dismantling’, to borrow Gould’s terms, what is already an interpretation of a postulated mystery using the kenotic/plerotic apparatus previously formulated. Fortunately, the primary difficulty—

³⁴ Stevens goes as far as to say, in a letter to Hi Simons, March 29, 1943, that ‘God is the centre of the pathetic fallacy’ (L, 444).

the initial interpretation of the numinous hitherto described—has been done in each of the poems that will be examined. The secondary difficulty, the burden of this thesis, will be in establishing a cogent argument that these interpretations can be read as strategic ‘turns’ from a merely disenchanting world to a world that is both empirically actual as well as numinously potent. This argument will ground itself by tracing a pair of underpinning though differentiating topoi, which I will designate as the commonplaces³⁵ wherefrom Stevens embarks on his poetic explorations of immanent numinosity. The structure of these topoi are indicated by the titles of the first and second chapters in which they will be respectively dealt with: ‘Emptying the Heavens, Filling the World’ (chapter one) and ‘Decreating the World, Figuring the Blank’ (chapter two). The two topoi I have designated for Stevens are suitably ad hoc, though not without rich precedent. These topoi can be placed, as it were, in ‘the world as our true spiritual home’ (Stevens himself asserted in his notebooks: ‘Reality is the spirit’s true center’ (913).) and ‘embodied mind in the world as place of mysterious though generative blanks’ respectively. The first of these topoi will situate what I refer to as Stevens’ religious naturalism. In brief, Stevens’ religious naturalism entails the naturalization of ritualised behaviours such as devotion, veneration, celebration and

³⁵ I am using ‘commonplace’ here in its specific sense derived from ‘topoi koinoi’ (Greek, literally, ‘common places’). The term comes down to us from classical rhetoric where it was used to signify modes of argument, notably ‘Aristotle’s four common or universal arguments...arguments by degree, by possible and impossible, by past and future, by amplification and depreciation’ (Cook, 1988, 44 n. 30). Postclassical topoi, such as those we find collated in medieval florilegia and Renaissance commonplace books, include numerous exemplary treatments of recurrent themes, formulas and figurations plucked from diverse texts, which serve as didactic, ethical and, latterly, aesthetic models for imitation. For an extended treatment of topoi in the sense of a standard topic in literature, and its various manifestations thereof, see: Ernst Robert Curtius, (2013), *European Literature in the Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 79-105, (first published in 1948 under its original German title *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*). See also: Roland Greene et al., ed., (2012), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edition, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, s.v. ‘Commonplace’ (285-86), s.v. ‘Topos’ (1442-43). Topos, in modern literary discourse, has been largely supplanted by the discussion of motif; see: M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham ed., (2012), *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th edition, Boston: Wadsworth, s.v. ‘Motif and Theme’ (229).

exaltation, ordinarily directed toward a supernatural or transcendent order, and will be developed further in the following chapter. The second of these topoi will situate Stevens' formulations and meditations upon the *myterium numinosum* as I have hitherto described it, and align the focus of the second chapter.

I would like to finish this lengthy introduction by quoting Allen Curnow. Curnow writes of Stevens' knack for being 'Capable to detect where reality was not / And scrupulous what to put in place of it' (Curnow, 1997, 202) in his tribute to the elder poet 'Mementos of an Occasion'. Curnow's lines will serve as something of a guiding principle in the chapters to come.

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CHAPTER ONE: EMPTYING THE HEAVENS, FILLING THE WORLD

Stevens, in his 1948 lecture 'Imagination as Value', writes: 'And I say the world is lost to [the poet], certainly, because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written' (730). We might wonder whether we should take this to imply that Stevens fancies himself the very poet who would write the great poem of the earth. I believe that we should, at least in the importantly qualified sense of it being a poem to which Stevens aspires to contribute toward; this is to say, it is not a finite and singular, but rather a collective and accumulative, poem he has in mind. Stevens, intimate with the work of Shelley, would have been doubtless impressed by the latter's vision in *A Defense of Poetry* that individual poems are but 'episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world' (Shelley, 2007, 354). This is an idea that finds its culminant expression in Stevens' late poem 'A Primitive Like an Orb', particularly in the three-stanza long sentence of its seventh through ninth sections, of which I present the seventh:

The central poem is the poem of the whole,
The poem of the composition of the whole,
The composition of blue sea and of green,
Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems,
And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,
Not merely into a whole, but a poem of
The whole, the essential compact of the parts,

The roundness that pulls tight the final ring

(379)

Stevens had recommended to his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, that his first collection be published under the title ‘The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae’ (*L*, 237)—or, so we could say, in words chosen out of the clarity of hindsight, notes toward the ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’. Three decades later, when he and Knopf were putting together what would eventually become *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, Stevens had proposed naming the collection ‘The Whole of Harmonium: Collected Poems of W. S.’ (*L*, 831). Knopf discouraged him from using these alternative titles on both occasions.³⁶ Nonetheless, as Richardson remarks, ‘the “grand” intention was never abandoned’ (Richardson, 1986, 528), neither at the beginning nor, it must be said, at the end of his career. It is readily apparent throughout his poetry that Stevens’ grand intention to contribute to the great pluralistic collective poem of the earth impels him to empty the heavens and relocate the old nobilities,³⁷ rapturous experiences, and ascetic

³⁶ See: Richardson, 1986, 527-28; Richardson, 1988, 412-13.

³⁷ Nobility is a word Stevens commonly used to refer to a force of qualitative heightening, whether it be in poetry or in life, and one that he says ‘is the peculiarity of the imagination’ (664). This quote is taken from ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’, wherein the notion receives its most sustained treatment. Stevens takes the figure of the soul as a pair of winged horses and a charioteer from Plato’s *Phaedrus* his starting point. He construes it as an example, following Coleridge, of Plato’s ‘dear gorgeous nonsense’ (643). He says that after ‘we have identified ourselves with the charioteer’ (643) driving the winged horses through heaven, ‘suddenly we remember, it may be, that the soul no longer exists and we droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground’ (643). Nonetheless, he later identifies this nobility fallen from the heavens as the marker ‘of our spiritual height and depth’ (664). Stevens, it should be acknowledged, in keeping with his logic that the gods are anthropomorphic projections, writes in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, November 21, 1935: ‘It is an old story that we derive our ideas of nobility, say, from noble objects of nature. But then, it is an equally old story that we derive them from ourselves. For convenience, and in view of the simplicity of the large mass of people, we give our good qualities to God, or to various gods, but they come from ourselves’ (*L*, 295). Another of his *Adagia* reads: ‘Only a noble people evolve a noble God’ (912). It is worth bearing in mind how precisely this line of thought follows Burke’s logological pattern of religious language outlined in the introduction: nobility is transposed from the world to the heavens and then back to the world again, yet this reabsorption, whether we like it or not, bears the traces of its transcendent detour. This re-secularisation of the term allows Stevens to endow imagination with the power of nobility-giving: ‘...the imagination gives to everything it touches a peculiarity, and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility’ (663-64).

meditations, which had been formerly predicated upon a transcendent order, to an immanent domain.

Doggett, and I think correctly, discerns in Stevens' poetry a 'preference for naturalistic thought and for ideas that lean on the imagery of organism' (Ibid, ix). Moreover: 'In general, throughout Stevens' poetry, the only continuous strand of thought is a fundamental naturalism that is immediately apparent in the poems of *Harmonium*. This naturalism is as much a sentiment, as much an expression of an allegiance—a piety and an affection—as it is an expression of thought. The allegiance is to earth, and the sentiment is expressed in many celebrations of the reality that is the substance and support of his existence' (Ibid, ix). This last quotation leads me to the unenviable decision that any expository critic of a poet as challenging as Stevens must make, which is to arrive at a certain commitment as to how to address one's subject, recognising in advance that one must bracket out other potentially fruitful means. To this end, the current chapter is intent on exploring the tensions between agnosticism and religious naturalism which arise in Stevens' poetry. But first I must say a few words on what religious naturalism is in order to account for why I think it is fitting to include Stevens under this conceptual banner.

Religious naturalism broadly refers to a heterogeneous belief system espoused by a diverse group of people who 'find religious meaning, value, and importance solely in nature or in some aspect of the natural order' (Crosby, 2007, 672), and who seek 'to explore and encourage religious ways of responding to the world on a completely naturalistic basis without a supreme being or ground of being' (Stone, 2008, xi). Jerome A. Stone claims that the historical roots of religious naturalism 'go back at least to Spinoza' (Ibid), but begins his study 'in the early twentieth century with George

Santayana and Samuel Alexander' (Ibid).³⁸ Interestingly, Stevens was familiar with both of these thinkers. As Helen Vendler reminds us, Santayana was one of Stevens' early mentors and confidantes: 'At Harvard, Stevens abandoned the Protestantism of his parents for the Lucretian naturalism of his acquaintance George Santayana' (Vendler, Winter 2003, 102). Not only does Stevens refer to Santayana several times in his letters and prose, he evidently held the philosopher in high enough regard to compose a poetic tribute for his old mentor: 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome' (432-34). Regarding the latter, Stevens quotes from Alexander's *Time, Space and Deity* concerning the philosopher's theory of 'compresence' in 'A Collect of Philosophy' (859-60).

The problem for the proponents of religious naturalism, as Mikael Stenmark points out, is to provide a philosophically satisfying explanation for what distinguishes them from non-religious naturalists, that is to say, to account for why they see fit to append the qualifier 'religious'. Stenmark cites the example of Richard Dawkins, whom he identifies as a non-religious naturalist who believes that '[r]eal science does not diminish the enchantment of nature, but rather enhances the poetry of experience by revealing the workings of the natural world in their full wonder. [Dawkins] says that, when it comes to feeling awe about living things, he has more in common with the Reverend William Paley than with atheists such as Ayer and Hume. [...] If religious naturalists are to be known for their reverence and awe of nature, Dawkins seems to qualify as one' (Stenmark, 2013, 542-43). Stenmark proceeds to refer to Thomas Nagel,

³⁸ Stone, in his comprehensive study *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*, identifies and discusses a wide array of thinkers under the banner of religious naturalism: 'Former religious naturalists included George Santayana, Samuel Alexander, John Dewey, Roy Wood Sellars, John Herman Randall, Mordecai Kaplan, Ralph Burhoe, founder of *Zygon*, and such Chicago theologians as Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Meland, and the later Bernard Loomer. Recent religious naturalists include William Dean, Willem Drees, Ursula Goodenough, Charley Hardwick, Henry Levinson, Karl Peters, myself, and perhaps Gordon Kaufman' (Stone, 2008, xi).

whom he suggests 'might offer religious naturalists some help here' (Stenmark, 2013, 543).

Nagel (of whom it should be pointed out does not use the phrase religious naturalism) wants to explore naturalistic alternatives to what he calls the 'default or zero-position [of] affectless atheism, or hardheaded atheism' (Nagel, 2010, 8). He recognises that there are people, including himself, who are dissatisfied with scientific naturalism as an all-encompassing worldview, but who nevertheless do not ascribe to a theistic alternative. The distinction that he wants to draw between the scientific naturalist and the dissatisfied naturalist is one of *religious temperament*. Those susceptible to a religious temperament, Nagel suggests, are inclined to ask the following cosmic question: 'How can one bring into one's individual life a recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole, whatever that relation is?' (Ibid, 5). He is adamant that this question be distinguished 'from the pure desire for understanding the universe and one's place in it' (Ibid). He continues:

It is not an expression of curiosity, however large. And it is not the general intellectual problem of how to combine an objective conception of the universe with the local perspective of one creature within it. It is rather a question of attitude: Is there a way to live in harmony with the universe, and not just in it?

Without God, it is unclear what we should aspire to harmony with. But still, the aspiration can remain, to live not merely the life of the creature one is, but in some sense to participate through it in the life of the universe as a whole. To be gripped by this desire is what I mean by the religious temperament. (Ibid, 5-6).

Nagel believes the hardheaded atheist simply rejects the validity of the question. He characterises the view of the hardheaded atheist thus:

The universe exists and meets a certain description; one of the things it has generated is us; end of story. Of course, a new story begins with our existence, since we find our own lives extraordinarily interesting. But this is a local phenomenon of perfectly understandable self-absorption, unconnected to the big picture. The big picture is of purely theoretical interest. (Ibid, 8).

Stenmark aligns Nagel's pronouncements on hard-headed atheism with the position of the non-religious naturalist vis-à-vis the religious naturalist whose worldview is oriented by the temperament Nagel proposes. Stevens, in his aspirations to realise through his poetry harmonious relations with the world, the earth, the cosmos, nature *in toto*, belongs to this latter camp.³⁹ I will endeavour in this chapter to qualify this claim by first investigating Stevens' improvisations on the idea of God, before moving onto his attempts to poetize the interpenetrative experience of belonging in the world.

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Although it has been widely denounced as apocryphal, there is a well-known anecdote recounting an exchange between the French mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon Laplace and Napoleon Bonaparte concerning the former's magnum opus *Mécanique Céleste*. Napoleon, upon learning that this work contained no mention of God,

³⁹ Gyorgi Voros goes as far as to endorse Stevens as a proto-deep ecologist: 'Like Emerson, Stevens addressed and praised the larger context that gives rise to human categories of thought and action, namely, the dynamic relation between the physical world and individual human beings or, on the larger scale, between Nature and culture. However, Stevens deliberately effected a figure / ground shift in focus and in doing so not only rewrote romanticism but proleptically—and prophetically—forecast a vision evolved by "deep ecologists" today. Deep ecology, like traditional environmentalism, is a response to the environmental crisis. Unlike traditional environmentalism, which is anthropocentric and utilitarian in pursuing wise use of natural resources for human benefit, deep ecology bases itself on philosophical, religious, and ethical reconsiderations of Nature's intrinsic value and "right" to self-realization' (Voros, 1997, 82).

conveyed his surprise to Laplace that his system of the universe did not once refer to its creator. Laplace declared in response: *'Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là'*.⁴⁰ We might imagine a similar apocryphal exchange taking place between Stevens and the Romantics and Transcendentalists to whom his preeminent literary inheritance is commonly attributed.⁴¹ It is from these poetic forebears that Stevens inherits the topos of the world as our true spiritual home. What distinguishes Stevens from these same forebears is his insistence that he can make-do in his poetic-spiritual engagement with the world without the hypothesis of the universe's divine origins, much less of an appellate judge ruling over an empyreal court. God does make frequent appearances throughout Stevens' poetry though, both in the upper and lower case, in singular and plural manifestations, as well as under entirely different designations than 'god/God' altogether. Stevens often stages both supernatural and worldly religious figures and their attendant beliefs and traditions in order to perform rhetorical enactments of their negation, expiry, or obsolescence, or to trivialise them through parody, mockery and satire.⁴² However, it would be improper to imply that Stevens spurns all of what

⁴⁰ 'I had no need of that hypothesis'. A version of this fabricated encounter is recounted in W. W. Rouse-Ball, (1960), *A Short Account of the History of Mathematics*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 343.

⁴¹ The literature on Stevens' situation in the genealogy of Romanticism is immense. A very good and concise account of Stevens' late Romanticism is 'The New Romanticism of Wallace Stevens', in George Bornstein, (1976), *The Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 163-230. The literature on Stevens' indebtedness to his 19th-century compatriots is similarly extensive. Practically everything Harold Bloom has written on Stevens propounds the Transcendentalists' myriad influence, especially that of Emerson and Whitman (if we may be allowed to label Whitman thus), on Stevens' thought and work. As Bloom's work is so widely known, and that I am quoting from a number of items of it throughout this thesis, I need not detail their particulars here.

⁴² Examples of poems performing various rhetorical enactments of the negation, expiry, or obsolescence of supernatural and worldly religious figures and/or their attendant beliefs and traditions include the following: 'Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb' (45), 'Sunday Morning' (53-56), 'Negation' (82), 'Lunar Paraphrase' (89-90), 'Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu' (104), 'Evening Without Angels' (111-12), 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' (135-51), 'A Thought Revolved' (171-73), 'The Men That Are Falling' (173-74), 'The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man' (205), 'Esthétique du Mal' (277-87), 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' (329-352), 'St Armorer's Church from the Outside' (448-49). Examples of poems parodying, mocking or satirising the same include the following: 'Ploughing on Sunday' (16); 'Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges' (17), 'The Doctor of Geneva' (19), 'The Worms at Heaven's Gate' (40), 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' (47), 'Cortege for Rosenbloom' (63-64).

traditional religious observance and ritual has to offer. George S. Lensing points out, for instance, that Stevens exhibits a 'lingering admiration for the pageantry of religious gestures and dress in poems like "Winter Bells," "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons," "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home," and "St. Armorers Church from the Outside."' (Lensing, 2001, 41).

Most importantly, though, are Stevens' frequent improvisations⁴³ upon the 'idea of God', which run the entire course of his poetry. Perhaps Stevens reasons, as Morris does, that 'the creation of a new god is the automatic supersession of the old' (Morris, 1974, 92). Lensing claims '[t]hat most frequently he promotes a new religion to replace the old one that will have at its center the human self and the natural world' (Lensing, 2001, 41). Lensing also acknowledges Stevens' 'disenchantment with humanism' (Ibid, 40) and his counter-proposals of 'the possibility of a modern redeemer, a poet, a hero, a giant, who would be fully human but a human-epitome, a figure who can be imagined now but whose impossibilities enticed him in poem after poem' (Ibid). All the same, God for Stevens is by no means an inadmissible idea requiring permanent erasure, but rather, as I have been arguing, renovation. I will now survey, for reasons that will become readily apparent, three of Stevens' improvisations upon the 'idea of God'.

The first and most salient example of Stevens' improvisations is Ananke, the Greek Protogenos personifying inevitability, compulsion, and, most importantly, necessity. Although a feminine personification in Greek mythology, Stevens genders Ananke male. Stevens' version of Ananke appears most prominently in 'The Greenest Continent' from *Owl's Clover*, wherein he invokes this deity with what is for him an

⁴³ I could have just as well used the term 'variations'. Many critics have pointed out the influence on Stevens' work of the musical form of variation. Angus Fletcher, for instance, argues that '[t]he governing rhetorical figure in Stevens is a figure equivalent to musical variations' (Fletcher qtd. in Eeckhout, 2002, 54). See also: Northrop Frye, (1976), 'Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form', *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society*, Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 275-94.

uncommon forthrightness: ‘Fatal Ananke is the common god.’ (580); ‘Fateful Ananke is the final god.’ (581).⁴⁴ The starkly declarative syntax in these two isolated lines comprising predicate nominatives stripped of qualification, compounded appositives, and figural subterfuge, is uncharacteristic of Stevens’ wider style. Moreover, that they should pertain to something as momentous as a common and final god is especially atypical in Stevens, who generally prefers to pose his major figures as hypothetical inventions embedded in networks of evasive syntax and figural complexity.⁴⁵ An earlier appearance of Ananke occurs in section XII of ‘Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery’: ‘The sense of the serpent in you, Ananke, / And your averted stride / Add nothing to the horror of the frost / That glistens on your face and hair.’ (122). This short piece alludes to the Ananke we find in the Orphic theogonies described by the 5th-6th CE Neoplatonist scholar Damascius. According to Damascius, Ananke was thought to have self-emerged at the beginning of time entwined with the winged serpent Chronos. She is represented, paradoxically, as an incorporeal serpent whose arms extend the expanse of the universe, thus signifying her reach of influence, which is to say, everywhere and through all time.⁴⁶ Reading ahead to the fourth canto of ‘The Greenest Continent’ we

⁴⁴ Stevens reflects in a letter to Hi Simons, August 28, 1940, that ‘Ananke may have been an improvisation, or an importation from Italy’ (L, 370). Whether the geographical misattribution evidenced in Stevens’ latter clause is willed so as to cavalierly distance himself from the poetic sequence *Owl’s Clover* in which Ananke features, or from the ‘improvisation’ itself as he has moved on artistically, or that it is simply a casual oversight, is finally indeterminable. We do know that Stevens’ substantially revised and heavily cut the 1936 version of *Owl’s Clover* (which he had Alcestis Press publish as a stand-alone volume) for inclusion in *The Man With the Blue Guitar* the following year. Furthermore, we know that he chose to omit *Owl’s Clover*, in either of its versions, from his 1954 *Collected Poems*, on the grounds that it was, according to Samuel Morse, ‘rhetorical’ (OP, xxiii). Stevens’ familiarity with Greek and Latin diction, etymology, and mythology, would call into doubt his misattribution as a casual oversight. Nonetheless, these cavils will persist as the stuff of irresolvable conjecture.

⁴⁵ For further reading on these structural aspects of Stevens’ poetry, see footnotes 70, 71, and 72, below.

⁴⁶ For an analysis of the Damascian-Orphic account of Ananke, see: M. L. West, (1983), *The Orphic Poems*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, esp. 70, 178, 194-98. As to where Stevens discovered the the serpent-Ananke connection is unclear. He would have been familiar with Plato’s description of Necessity in Book X of *The Republic*, wherein she is depicted as seated at the centre of the universe with a spindle in her lap, thus accounting for the maternal lineage of the three Fates; see: Plato, (1991), *The Republic*, 2nd edition, ed. & trans. Alan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, 300. A. Walton Litz accounts for Stevens’ introduction to the deity in his correspondence with the Italian scholar Mario Rossi, who calls her ‘imperscrutable Ananke’. Stevens

learn that 'the serpent might become a god' (577) and that 'Death, only, sits upon the serpent throne' (577). By the eighth canto, in which the 'unmerciful pontifex' (581) Ananke appears, we can assume that the serpent from the fourth canto *has* become a god, in the light of the serpent-Ananke association Stevens has previously drawn our attention to. Ananke's 'voice / In the jungle is a voice in Fontainebleau' (581), is a metonymy for the god's universal influence as it resounds through time and space from the primordial African jungle to modern European civilisation. This fatal serpent god, emerging from the African jungle, is an example of Stevens' primitivism—a widely recognised and exotically distorted appropriation made by countless modernist artists and writers.⁴⁷ It is an improvisation that looks ahead to a later jungle-god vision, possibly a Mayan-inflected revision of the Yucatan jungle scene in 'The Comedian as the Letter C' (25-26), in the third canto of the 'It Must Give Pleasure' section of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction':

A lasting visage in a lasting bush,
A face of stone in an unending red,
Red-emerald, red-slitted-blue, a face of slate,

An ancient forehead hung with heavy hair,
The channel slots of rain, the red-rose-red
And weathered and the ruby-water-worn,

The vines around the throat, the shapeless lips,

considers this a 'magnificent word', and copied part of Rossi's letter into his commonplace book, latterly published under his ascription *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets* (Rossi and Stevens qtd. in Litz, 1977, 121). Stevens also quotes the passage on Necessity from Horace's *Odes*, Book I.35, which, nonetheless, bears no mention of Necessity figured as a serpent.

⁴⁷ For an extended discussion of Stevens' primitivism, see: Jeffrey Westover, (Fall 2009), 'Wallace Stevens' Savage Commonplace', *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 33:2. 217-37.

The frown like serpents basking on the brow,
The spent feeling leaving nothing of itself,

Red-in-red repetitions never going
Away, a little rusty, a little rouged,
A little roughened and ruder, a crown

The eye could not escape, a red renown
Blowing itself upon the tedious ear.
An effulgence faded, dull cornelian

Too venerably used. That might have been.
It might and might have been.

(346)

Whether or not it might have been, this vision of 'a lasting visage' has ossified into a statuesque entity, thus fixing it in a state segregated from life. Although this statuesque visage is replete with asteriated spectral effects emphasising its otherworldliness, it is nonetheless in a state of ruination. As such, it is subject to reclamation by the natural region its mythology had presumably once reflected.⁴⁸ It is ultimately a vision of deical extinction. This is, of course, later Stevens. Ananke is allowed to live in *Owl's Clover* before 'the gods are annihilated' (Vendler, 1969, 120) in that suite's later companion piece, 'Man With the Blue Guitar'.⁴⁹ It is in this latter poetic sequence, composed shortly

⁴⁸ I am improvising here on Stevens' construction from the first line of his late untitled poem beginning: 'A mythology reflects its region.' (476).

⁴⁹ Ananke is never mentioned by name again after the Man With the Blue Guitar's annihilation of the gods, save for in a rejected stanza of 'Examination of the Hero in a Time of War': 'The self-same rhythm / Moves in lamenting and the fatal, / The bold, obedience to Ananke.' (1002). The serpent figure, however, reappears in 'The Bagatelles the Madrigals'. The serpent in this poem, as with the serpent-Ananke in 'Like Decorations of a Nigger Cemetery', is associated with a foreboding winter vision:

after the publication of *Owl's Clover* during the winter of 1936-37, that poetry is called upon 'to take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns' (137). This sequence also announces 'A substitute for all the gods' (144):

This self, not that gold self aloft,

Alone, one's shadow magnified,

Lord of the body, looking down,

As now and called most high,

The shadow of Chocorua

In an immenser heaven, aloft,

Alone, lord of the land and lord

Of the men that live in the land, high lord.

One's self and the mountains of one's land,

Without shadows, without magnificence,

The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.

(144)

Where do you think, serpent,
Where do you lie, beneath snow,
And with eyes closed
Breathe in a crevice of earth?

In what camera do you taste
Poison, in what darkness set
Glittering scales and point
The tipping tongue?

(193)

The serpent's most significant reappearance is in 'Auroras of Autumn', where it has been transformed into the terrific lights of the aurora borealis: 'This is form gulping after formlessness, / Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances / And the serpent body flashing without the skin.' (355). Note here the serpent's indeterminate corporeality compared with Damscius' description of Ananke as an incorporeal serpent outlined above.

Here is the human brought nobly low, where 'the mind alone confronts the world alone, without any sacred parental influences' (Vendler, 1969, 120), to seek out 'A poem like a missal / Found in the mud,' (145)—which brings us to the second of Stevens' improvisations, the 'Mud Master':

The muddy rivers of spring
Are snarling
Under muddy skies.
The mind is muddy.

As yet, for the mind, new banks
Of bulging green
Are not;
Sky-sides of gold
Are not.
The mind snarls.

Blackest of pickanines,
There is a master of mud.
The shaft of light
Falling, far off, from sky to land,
That is he—

The peach-bud maker,
The mud master,
The master of the mind.

(119)

This poem is from *Ideas of Order*, and thus precedes Ananke and the annihilative interventions of 'Man With a Blue Guitar'. This poem could be read with Jarraway, mistakenly I believe, as an indicative example of 'the transcendent perspective of ascent [that] is unmistakably the metaphorical radical' (Jarraway, 2007, 195) in *Ideas of Order*:

"Mud Master," for instance, moves much beyond the dilemma of determining the superiority of intelligence over soil or soil over intelligence in "The Comedian as the Letter C" back in *Harmonium*. By scaling a falling shaft of light, the Mud Master transcends reality and lays claim to a metaphysically superior realm *both* soil and self. (Ibid).

Precisely the opposite trajectory is taking place. The Mud Master is not at all a quasi-Adamic being emerging from the mud to scale a falling shaft of light and thus assume a metaphysically superior realm. The Mud Master, as the poem unequivocally states, *is* the falling shaft of light itself, which is to say, a metonymy for the sun. The Mud Master is, quite simply, the sun. The world is muddy so the mind is muddy, an equation that is perfectly in keeping with the second of the propositions from 'The Comedian as the Letter C' to which Jarraway is alluding, namely, 'his soil is man's intelligence' (29). It is the intervention of the sun, personified in the appositive epithets 'The peach-bud maker, / The mud master, / The master of the mind', which is responsible for realising the 'new banks / Of bulging green' and the 'Sky-sides of gold'. This apposition reveals the dual function Stevens' frequently attributes to the sun: that of life-giver and illuminator of marvels. The sun, as animator in this double sense, mastering the mud into producing new life and the sky into providing spectacle, is by metaleptic extension the master of the mind, as the mind too is emergent from the sun-animated mud. What's

more, the trajectory follows the immanent perspective of descent, the sunlight come down to earth not from heaven, but simply the heavens.

What we have then is a covert naturalist rewriting of the creation myth of Genesis. The fundamental elements are cognate: mud for dust, mind for soul, animating light for inspiriting breath, and thus sun for God, taking place on Earth, which substitutes as an unfallen yet muddily imperfect Eden.⁵⁰ Stevens would later write in 'The Poems of Our Climate': 'The imperfect is our paradise.' (179), which is no less than an aphoristic summary of his recurrent naturalist argument in favour of a temporally-bound state of incompleteness as our right and proper good.

What frequently emerges from Stevens' poetry, and is arguably the preeminent 'theology' to which it bears witness, is a pseudo-heliotheism. It is 'pseudo' in that we must constantly remind ourselves of the shibboleth 'this most heliocentric of poets' (Eeckhout, 2002, 168) imparts to us at the beginning of his poetic career. I am referring to the neo-pagan opening of the penultimate canto of 'Sunday Morning':

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, a savage source.

(55-56)

⁵⁰ As with a lot of Stevens poetry preceding 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', 'Mud Master' also looks forward to that major poem, specifically in the overhaul of the Edenic narrative performed in the fourth canto of 'It Must Be Abstract': 'There was a muddy centre before we breathed. / There was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable, articulate and complete.' (331).

The sun should be perceived with and when reading Stevens: 'Not as a god, but as a god might be'. This is no less than an indispensable crux for any satisfactory apprehension of Stevens' poetry. It should also be noted that the sun is a *pars pro toto* for nature, and that Stevens' religious naturalism variously treats all of nature 'Not as a god, but as a god might be'. This important example of one of Stevens' many 'intricate evasions of as' (415), denotes a significant emphasis of his spiritual perspective. Stevens' abandonment of belief in a supernatural God does not entail his abandonment of exercising devotion. Instead, as we have come to see, Stevens exercises his devotion toward what is immanent in the natural world. One of the obvious ways in which Stevens accomplishes this is by reorienting religious vocabulary to secular ends. This follows the logological procedure that we have seen outlined by Burke: the application of secular terms to a transcendent, supernatural realm that have been latterly taken back and reapplied to an immanent, natural realm.⁵¹ Stevens' purpose in doing this is neither to propound a faux mysticism nor is it to espouse pantheism. Stevens rejects mysticism⁵² and nowhere ascribes to the notion that nature is in itself a total and immanent god. Stevens' purpose, rather, is to emphasise that nature is, or at least should be, a sufficient substitute for God as an object of devotion.

This said, there is a rare instance of Stevens' entertaining the notion of a god immanent in nature. This god occurs in the third and last of Stevens' improvisations presently under review—in his poem 'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit'. The

⁵¹ For a discussion of Stevens' employment of traditional Christian language and biblical forms see Morris' chapter 'Lineage and Language' (Morris, 1974, 9-44). Morris points out that 'Stevens' poetry, like his prose, consciously incorporates biblical wording and echo' (Ibid, 41). 'The major biblical forms that Stevens uses in his poetry are the parable, the proverb, the prayer, the hymn, and the psalm' (Ibid, 18).

⁵² In his essay 'The Irrational Element in Poetry', Stevens is assiduous in assuring his reader that: 'I do not for a moment mean to indulge in mystical rhetoric, since for my part, I have no patience with that sort of thing' (791). It must be said, of course, that Stevens' reservations are by no means a prophylactic against mystical interpretations of his work. Stevens' awareness of being misconstrued as a mystic evinced in this statement could itself be interpreted as a self-realisation that he has a tendency to sail close to the mystical wind.

speaker of this poem prescriptively accedes to a god, if, for some unbeknownst compulsion, there must be a god in the house:

If there must be a god in the house, must be,
Saying things in the rooms or on the stair,

Let him move as the sunlight moves on the floor,
Or moonlight, silently, as Plato's ghost

Or Aristotle's skeleton. Let him hang out
His stars on the wall. He must dwell quietly.

He must be incapable of speaking, closed,
As those are: as light, for all its motion, is;

As color, even the closest to us, is;
As shapes, though they portend us, are.

It is the human that is the alien,
The human that has no cousin in the moon.

It is the human that demands his speech
From the beasts or from the incommunicable mass.

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

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

Milton J. Bates suggests that this poem expresses the same idea, only ‘more obliquely’ (Bates, 1985, 254), as that which we encounter in the third canto of ‘*Esthétique du Mal*’.⁵³ An ‘over-human god’ is reimagined in this poem, though not pejoratively, as something less and less human. It is a god stripped of logocentricity, in that it can neither hear nor speak. Its demanded silence is transmuted into the imperceptibility of Plato’s ghostly Form(s) and the physical laws of Aristotelean materialism—the skeleton of motion concealed in the flesh of matter. Gyorgi Voros identifies the god’s positive attributes ‘as physical phenomena perceivable to the senses...sunlight, moonlight, color, and shape’ (Voros, 1997, 75), while neglecting to include the most arresting of these occurring in the poem, namely temperature. Voros introduces the simile that this god ‘is like a force of Nature’ (Ibid). However, it is difficult to comprehend how colour, for instance, could be conceived of as a force rather than as a property of nature. Alternatively, it is tempting to identify this household god with the inscrutability of nature—light, colour, shape, although perceptible to us are nonetheless ‘closed’. The

⁵³ The passage Bates presents, and which I have earlier quoted from, reads as follows:

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

Because we suffer, our oldest parent, peer
 Of the populace of the heart, the reddest lord,
 Who has gone before us in experience.

If only he would not pity us so much,
 Weaken our fate, relieve us of woe both great
 And small, a constant fellow of destiny,

A too, too human god, self-pity’s kin
 And uncourageous genesis . . . It seems
 As if the health of the world might be enough.
 (315)

Again, note the compensatory gesture of ‘the health of the world might be enough’.

masterful pun on 'incommunicable mass' is apposite. The pun signifies on the one hand that the human is incapable of communicating with the mass of nature 'Of which we are too distantly a part' (itself a pun: a part/apart). On the other hand it signifies a religious communion that cannot be communicated. Part of the poem's implicit argument is that we alienate nature when we attempt to demand it to speak to us in our own language, much less when we try to find anthropotheistic cousins in the heavenly bodies.

Therefore, we should reconcile ourselves with nature, rather than have nature reconcile itself with us. We will find this injunction recurring throughout Stevens' poetry, and often more explicitly than in the present context. The larger rhetorical argument would seem to advance an appeal against an anthropomorphic deification of nature drawn along the following lines: that if god there must be, and nature there is, then nonhuman they simply co-immanently are.

This reading, however, remains problematic due to the nondisclosure of who or what is enjoining the speaker to make these concessions to a god in the house in the first place, and with the identification of this god with the personifying pronominal 'him'. We might resolve the first of these problems by conjecturing that the speaker has wrestled with the 'idea of God' for some time, and that the poem soliloquizes his or her provisional submission to this idea. The second problem is trickier. Stevens is too careful a poet not to have realised that he could have substituted the neutral pronoun 'it' for its masculine counterpart and thus avoid the compromise of personification altogether. The kenotic emptying of this numinous 'it' from a god 'Saying things in the rooms or on the stair' to a god that is silent and deaf (thus 'incommunicable') would already take care of negating the metonymic attributions of *homo loquens*. But that Stevens has made this compromise opens up a disjunction. On one side of this disjunction, the argument could be made that Stevens' attempt to configure a nonhuman

god is self-refuted by identifying it as a 'him'. On the other side of this disjunction, one could make the argument that this is not what Stevens' is attempting to do at all. Rather than configuring a nonhuman god, one could argue that Stevens is instead confecting a more and more, but not entirely, inhuman god—thus a god in the process of becoming inhuman (the clue, as often with Stevens, is in the poem's title). Stevens posits that we are, after all, a part, albeit distantly, of the mass of which this god is a fellow constituent. That leaves us then with the sorts of insoluble contradictions in which Stevens revels: with a god that is and is not us, alien and a part thereof.

There still remains of course the troubling image of 'A vermilioned nothingness'. Jarraway suggests, in reference to this image, that 'we may find a Heideggerian discourse helpful...in particular, the "concept" of *Ereignis*, or experience' (Jarraway, 1993, 194). Jarraway quotes Robert Bernasconi's reading of Heidegger's concept, from which I will do the same:

Mystics have found God in the dark night of the soul and it is now almost commonplace among theologians to recognize the experience of the loss of God in a secular society as an experience of God. Such experiences do not reestablish presence in the midst of absence. They break with the dichotomy of presence and absence, establishing absence as present precisely in its absence. (Bernasconi, 1985, 84).

This harkens back to the *numen abest*, which I have previously discussed. Nothingness is a pure abstraction in the strongest sense, in that it entails the complete absence of concretion. 'A vermilioned nothingness', on the other hand, is figurally cognate with 'An abstraction blooded' (333).⁵⁴ Blood-coloured, this 'vermilioned nothingness' could be

⁵⁴ This quote occurs in the sixth canto of the 'It Must be Abstract' section of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'.

read as a capsule ‘variant upon the Incarnation’ (Hoffman, 1966, 264) which Frederick J. Hoffman claims ‘is to be found in almost every major modern writer’ (Ibid). Though rather than an incarnation of the Word made flesh in the body of Christ, here we have a dis-incarnation of the *numen praesens* in blood-haunted nothingness. It is nothingness as though seen through a glass, redly. As a cross-hatching between kenotic nothingness and plerotic illumination it too breaks its formative dichotomy. Stevens’ breakage with, or what I think is the stronger claimant, *synthesis* of the kenotic/plerotic dichotomy is locally exemplified in the paradoxical figures of ‘A vermilioned nothingness’ and ‘An abstraction blooded’. His myriad figural variations issuing from the alternate poles of kenosis and plerosis, and especially in their synthetic consummations, locate his recoveries of immanent numinosity at their most rhetorically impressive. Extended forays into the paradoxical frontiers of the intelligible, however, underwrite the tops of the next chapter, and will receive due elaboration there.

I have chosen to survey these particular improvisations upon the ‘idea of God’ as I believe they represent what I take to be Stevens’ three fundamental modes of engagement with immanent numinosity. The first mode involves the treatment of received mythologies, which tends to find Stevens at his most dismissive. It is the most easily recognizable mode and will be addressed wherever pertinent. The second mode entails Stevens’ religious naturalism. This mode treats nature—which entails human beings, non-human animal and plant life, Earth as such and the greater cosmos—‘Not as a god, but as a god might be’, in all of the rich complexity this qualification connotes. It is this mode that will lead the continued focus of the current chapter. The third mode is that of the *mysterium numinosum* proper, which, broadly speaking, tropes on the negations of absence and its correlates (e.g. silence, darkness, emptiness, nothingness). As I have previously indicated, this mode will receive a full hearing in the following

chapter. I must also emphasise that these modes are not mutually exclusive. They often inform or converge upon each other, as we have already seen, in peculiar states of confrontation and complement.

*

The American poet and critic J. V. Cunningham, a former student of Yvor Winters,⁵⁵ furnishes us with a pertinent summary of the relationship between Stevens' poetry and his spiritual disposition:

The central concern of Stevens' poetry...is a concern to be at peace with his surroundings, with this world, and with himself. He requires for this an experience of the togetherness of himself and Nature, an interpenetration of himself and his environment, along with some intuition of permanence in the experience of absoluteness, though this be illusory and transitory, something to satisfy the deeply engrained longings of his religious feeling. (Cunningham, 1960, 122).

I would like to recite, in this connection, Gould's aforementioned definition of the numinous: 'that it is nothing if not the paradox of exteriority demanding interiority' (Gould, 1981, 260). One of Stevens' late personae, Professor Eucalyptus from 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', declares: "'The search / For reality is as momentous as / The search for god.'" (410). The speaker of the poem proceeds from the Professor's declaration with the following: 'It is the philosopher's search / For an interior made

⁵⁵ Winters was among the earliest of Stevens' critics to most influentially disseminate the hotly contested view that his poetry 'gives us...the most perfect laboratory of hedonism to be found in literature' (Winters, 1947, 458). He would later revise his opinion in a 1959 postscript to his original essay, included in a reprint of the 3rd edition of his *Anatomy of Nonsense*. Winters now took Stevens to believe 'that we live in a nominalistic universe made up of unrelated and inscrutable particulars, and that the only order possible in such a universe is that created by poetic imagination' (Ibid, 459).

exterior / And the poet's search for the same exterior made / Interior' (410). The speaker tells us, then, that whereas the philosopher wants to project her mental constructs onto the world, the poet wants instead to introject the world into himself. This introjection of the world into the self is the inverse of anthropomorphism, and has a name: physiomorphism.⁵⁶ The poet's introjection of the world into himself is an expression of the desire for plerotic fulfilment, which would necessarily collapse the dualisms between self/world, subject/object, mind/matter, interior/exterior, and so on, into a dynamic monistic unity. The obverse of this coin, exteriority demanding interiority, would involve the world projecting itself into the poet. Were this latter transference to eventuate, the circuit of interpenetration would be complete and plerotic fulfilment achieved. The problem with this dynamic, of course, particularly once you have done away with God, is that it presupposes at the very least ascribing some form of intentionality to the material world. The best candidate to account for this

⁵⁶ Physiomorphism is a term Claude Lévi-Strauss employs in *A Savage Mind* to refer to the inverse of anthropomorphism. Lévi-Strauss introduces the term in a discussion comparing magic and religion, in which he argues that 'although it can, in a sense, be said that religion consists in a *humanization of natural laws* and magic in a *naturalization of human actions* - the treatment of certain human actions *as if* they were an integral part of physical determinism - these are not alternatives or stages in an evolution. The anthropomorphism of nature (of which religion consists) and the physiomorphism of man (by which we have defined magic) constitute two components which are always given, and vary only in proportion. As we noticed earlier, each implies the other' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 221, original italics). Graham Richards defines physiomorphism thus: 'The psychological assimilation of, identification with, or introjection of, properties found in the external world. Thus external phenomena such as coldness, hardness and slipperiness enable us to identify ourselves and others as cold, hard or slippery in a psychological sense' (Richards, 2009, 173). More recently, the ecocritic Ashton Nichols argues for an analogous concept which he calls 'ecomorphism': 'Ecomorphism is the antithesis of anthropomorphism. Instead of seeing myself at the center of my world, I can now help both myself, and the world around me, if I come to see my own activity—indeed, all human activity—in terms of its connectedness to nonhuman life. For centuries the poets have said, "that bird's song is sad in the same way that I am sad" or "that flower looks happy, just as I am happy." But the time has come to reconsider the tenor and the vehicle of such anthropomorphic metaphors. The vehicle is the personal subject—humans—from which the metaphor's characteristic (sadness or happiness) is taken. The tenor is the natural subject (bird or flower) to which the human characteristic is given. Poets, and other metaphor-makers, should now consider reversing this metaphoric order as often as possible in the interest of ecocentrism. No longer should ants be imagined to resemble humans: "The ant colony is just like the corporation for which I work; every ant is trying to work for the good of the whole, but individuals can often seem frustrated in their efforts to help others." The time has come to reverse this claim and point out that humans often act like ants, or birds, or even flowers, not vice versa' (Nichols, 2011, 77).

world-intention would be panpsychism, which, I will maintain, is a philosophical position Stevens' frequently entertains.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the poet, allowing himself to entertain the notion of world-intention, has no determination over if and when the world does project itself into him. The dissolution of self in the world has often been described in the Western tradition as an effect of sublime *ekstasis*—the experience of feeling transported outside of oneself.⁵⁸ This experience is analogous to plerotic interpenetration insofar as the self is seized and assimilated by the object of its contemplation. If the poet is fortunate enough to experience this *ekstasis* his powers of cognition are momentarily suspended, rendering him dumb to articulation.

Nonetheless, the memory of the experience, although inexplicable, leaves its indelible trace. The poet, disappointed with the transitory nature of his experience, seeks its restitution. That he is a poet, his method of restitution is to try and write himself into it. And thus the rhetoric of plerotic desire is born.

Plerosis thus described as self-fulfilment by way of interpenetration with the 'otherness' of the exterior world, is not by any means the motivation of every poet, but it is almost certainly the motivation of every Romantic poet, of which Stevens is a late and

⁵⁷ To entertain is not the same as to believe. I am not making a claim for Stevens' belief in panpsychism *per se*, but instead suggesting that there is evidence in many of Stevens' poems which proffer a panpsychic perspective of the universe—his invocation of a 'central mind' in both 'Chocorua to Its Neighbour' (265) and 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour' (444), later rephrased in 'A Child Asleep in Its Own Life' as 'that single mind' (468), provide the most obvious examples (which bear some resemblance to Anaxagoras' theory of *nous*). Nowhere in Stevens' letters or essays does he explicitly refer to panpsychism. As is well known, however, Stevens does convey an interest in and familiarity with the work of William James and A. N. Whitehead, both of whom present arguments for particular forms of panpsychism—see, for instance, the following: William James, (2008), *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy*, Rockville: Arc Manor, esp. 126-28; William James, (1916), 'Novelty and Causation—The Perceptual View (Chapter XIII)', *Some Problems of Philosophy*, New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 208-19; A. N. Whitehead, (1978), *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York: The Free Press; A. N. Whitehead, (1933), *Adventures in Ideas*, New York: Macmillan. Any parallels between James and Whitehead's respective panpsychic arguments and Stevens' thought would remain highly speculative, and beyond the scope of the present thesis. Suffice it to say, Stevens' poetry is rich with examples that gesture toward some form of mental or experiential aspect intrinsic to the material world at various levels of aggregate complexity.

⁵⁸ What I have explicitly in mind here is the Longinian account of the sublime. See: Longinus, (1965), 'On the Sublime', *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. & trans. T. S. Dorsch, London: Penguin, 97-158

exemplary case. Another is Whitman, as epitomised in his 'Song of Myself': 'My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,' (Whitman, 1997, 25). This apposition steers us toward one of Stevens' earliest plerotic personae—the eponymous protagonist of 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon':

Not less because in purple I descended
The western day through what you called
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
I was myself the compass of that sea:

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

(51)

Bloom interprets Hoon as 'a composite of Stevens and Whitman' (Bloom, 197, 63), citing the start of section 25 of 'Song of Myself' in support of this claim.⁵⁹ We might imagine

⁵⁹ The Whitman passage Bloom cites runs as follows:

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.

We also ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun,

Hoon rewriting Whitman's great poem of self, beginning thus: 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume *all* shall assume, / For every atom belonging to *all* as good *becomes from me*.'⁶⁰ This rewriting implicates the solipsism that so many of Hoon's detractors have accused him of typifying.⁶¹ My reading of Hoon, as we will see, rejects this charge.

In the context of this poem, Hoon is recollecting a past experience, presumably to an unrepresented conversant with whom he is speaking over tea. We are prompted to construe Hoon as an aristocratic figure due to his account that 'in purple I descended / The western day'. In Hoon's recollection, the old rituals of anointment and their attendant hymns are transposed to his sublime communion with nature. The golden ointment that had rained from his mind and the blowing hymns that his ears had made do not prove him a solipsist. They signify instead that Hoon, if we take him at his word, had temporarily accomplished plerosis, a man who had succeeded in orienting the sweep of the sea because he and the world had interpenetratively fulfilled each other;

We found our own O my soul in the calm and cool of daybreak.

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,
It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,
Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?

Come now I will not be tantalized, you conceive too much of articulation,
Do you know O speech how the buds beneath you are folded?
Waiting in the gloom, protected by the frost,
The dirt receding before my prophetic screams,
I underlying causes to balance them at last,
My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning of all things,
(Whitman, 1977, 50).

⁶⁰ The original text reads: 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.' (Whitman, 1977, 25).

⁶¹ I often wonder what goes through the minds of those people who continue to reiterate the critical commonplace of Hoon as solipsist when they read the phrase 'through what *you* called / The loneliest air, not less was I myself'.

thus his will had been consistent with the will of the sea.⁶² Simply put, the night, the air, the sea, had become Hoon and Hoon had become them; Hoon had been embodied by the world and the world had been embodied by Hoon.⁶³ Solipsism, in this light, is a faulty gauntlet to throw at Hoon's feet. I would suggest that we better read Hoon as a panpsychic advocate recollecting his experience from the perspective of a manifold world-mind, of which Hoon's assertive self was but a representative part. We do not, of course, have to assent to the veracity of Hoon's account. We might write him off as delusional, as I suspect many of us do. I am of the opinion that Stevens is himself sceptical of Hoon's hyperbolic reflection, the evidence for which, as I will argue presently, is underwritten in the ambiguity of the poem's concluding line. Furthermore, it is of no small significance that Whitman wrote his majestic song of self in the present infinitive, whereas Hoon's testimony is relegated to the past tense.

We learn from 'Sunday Morning', one of the earliest and most intertextually informative compositions in Stevens' first collection, that the world of *Harmonium* is an 'island solitude, unsponsored, free' (56). As such, the devotional object of Hoon's anointment and hymnal praise was not an absent God, but was the immanent world with which we are told he had become plerotically integrated. This is to say that Hoon,

⁶² Richard P. Adams speculates that 'a knowledge of Schopenhauer's ideas may help us to understand Stevens' poems' (Adams, 1972, 135). Stevens' only sustained reference to Schopenhauer, as Adams acknowledges, occurs in 'A Collect of Philosophy'. Stevens' journal entry of February 21, 1906, wherein he refers to 'Schopenhauer's psychological observations' (L, 88), indicates that he was at least partially familiar with the philosopher's work some forty-five years before writing the aforementioned essay. I am drawing upon Adams' inference of a Schopenhauerian influence on Stevens' thought regarding Hoon's will's consistency with that of the sea. Adams refers to 'the contrast made by Schopenhauer between the "the thing itself", which for him was the world as will, and "ideas about the thing," which of course belonged to the world as idea' (Adams, 1972, 136). I am suggesting that Hoon's claimed plerotic interpenetration with the sea itself would, following Schopenhauer's arguments, conflate the world as will with the will of Hoon himself.

⁶³ Another common interpretation of Hoon is as a figure of apotheosis. Curiously, part of Stevens' own gloss on Leibniz's *Monadology* in 'A Collect of Philosophy' is written in language that reads quite pertinently to such an interpretation of Hoon: '...in a system of monads, we come, in the end, to a man who is not only a man but sea and mountain, too, and to a God who is not only all these: man and sea and mountain but a God as well' (853). It should also not go by unnoticed that Leibniz's concept of the monad is a panpsychic theory.

in anointing himself, was simultaneously anointing the world with which he had become one. The absence of God also informs the ambiguity of the poem's concluding line, of which I am yet to read a compelling interpretation. To stay with Bloom, he reads the line thus: 'as his triumphant line makes clear, he is *not* a solipsist, because the "there" of his world is an arena in which he is at work finding himself, more truly the more he expands, and more strange, probably because Pater, one of his high priests, had defined the Romantic imagination as adding strangeness to beauty' (Bloom, 1977, 65). I am not sure this is what the line makes clear at all, and at least Bloom is honest enough to admit to his speculation concerning Pater's influence on it. I accept Bloom's point that the world is where Hoon is at work finding himself, but he does not sufficiently account for the proper implications of what Hoon had *found*, not least of all because he makes the rather novice error of interpreting the line in the present continuous. What the poem does make clear is that Hoon perceives the experience he recounts as having occurred in *Harmonium's* unsponsored world. The ointment and hymns that had issued not from God's church, but from Hoon's plerotic interpenetration with nature, attest to this. I contend that the last line should be read as Stevens' authorial intervention into Hoon's brief narrative: the 'I' of the hyperbolic persona brought down to size by the authorial 'I' who feels dwarfed by the oversized mask he has just adorned. As such, I maintain that as Hoon's atonement was with the natural unsponsored world and not with God, accounts for *Stevens-as-Hoon* having found Hoon more truly therein.

Margaret Peterson argues, not in connection with this poem, but nonetheless applicably, that '[t]he nobility of man is a continuous theme and one concomitant with [Steven's] original rejection of Christian belief. Moreover the conception of Stevens as a hedonist turned humanist overlooks the fact that his supposed humanism is based, from *Harmonium* on, upon the naturalistic evolution of man from nature' (Peterson, 1983,

94). Hoon, as a rhetorical projection of an aspect of Stevens' own plerotic desire, is a figure coherent with the poet's apperception of reality, which, as Peterson correctly argues, entails a naturalist belief system predicated upon the theory of evolution.⁶⁴ Stevens' frequently literalizes evolutionary emergence as an identity between the emergent subject and that from which it has emerged. We have already seen this in 'Mud Master'—the world is muddy so the mind is muddy.⁶⁵ Thus Hoon's evolutionary continuity with nature is also inscribed in how Stevens-as-Hoon found Hoon more truly. Once we understand this, we begin to see how Stevens has pulled Hoon away from his plerotic interpenetration with nature and into finding himself 'more strange'. To begin with, Hoon's pseudo-apotheosis was a castle he had built in the air with the hands of Emersonian self-reliance. Without something like a doctrinally established formalisation of dispensation to support him, Hoon would have found himself at odds with the foundations upon which his sacred expropriations were substantiated. We recall Stevens' aforementioned argument that after the gods had come to nothing, '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' (842). This confession's psychological perspective underwrites Hoon's estrangement: as a descendant of God-absented nature, he is made strange in a cosmos that has no superordinate personality with which to identify.

⁶⁴ A rhetorical antagonist, to provide but one counter-example to a poetic figure made to compensate a personal desire, would maintain a belief system that did not accord with the poet's apperception of reality so as to provide a foil with whom to argue.

⁶⁵ Another early example of this literalization of the identity of emergent subject with that from which it has emerged can be found in 'Anatomy of Monotony':

If from the earth we came, it was an earth
That bore us as a part of all things
It breeds and that was lewder than it is.
Our nature is her nature. Hence it comes,
Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows
The same. We parallel the mother's death.

(90).

Although Hoon claims to have had achieved natural plerosis, this would have receded commensurate with his finding himself more strange: continuity is not identity, and so a difference perceived between self and a world that preceded selfhood *in toto* would have emerged. This emergent difference would have been quickened in that to find oneself strange in a world that is oneself is to become self-estranged. It is with this last line that Stevens deflates Hoon's plerosis by drawing his 'I was the world in which I walked' into an ambivalence between truth and estrangement, which in this context is an ambivalence equivalent to that between identity and difference, between the world-self and its simultaneously distancing 'there', wherein Stevens-as-Hoon had found himself more strange.

Bloom collocates 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon', 'The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad' and 'The Snow Man' 'as though they formed one larger, dialectical lyric when run together' (Bloom, 1977, 50). He is adamant that '[t]he reader who masters the interrelationships of these three brief texts...has reached the center of Stevens' poetic and human anxieties and of his resources for meeting those anxieties' (Ibid). Bloom continues: 'The *Pharynx* poem states the crisis of poetic vision; *The Snow Man* meets the crisis by a reduction to the First Idea; exuberantly, the great hymn of Hoon, so invariably misread as irony, reimagines the First Idea and restitutes, momentarily yet transumptively, the contraction of meaning provoked by the crisis' (Ibid). Read intertextually, these three poems do indeed yield useful insights into Stevens' praxis in the main. However, I would reinterpret Bloom's reading of the 'The Snow Man' as 'a reduction to the First Idea' as a figure of fully achieved kenosis. I have already reinterpreted Bloom's reading of Hoon as a figure of 'expansion' (Ibid, 51, 160) in terms of plerotic fulfilment. Hoon's plerotic assertiveness, I would argue, is deflated by the poet's epistemological doubt concerning his powers of expression in 'The Man Whose

Pharynx Was Bad'. The title of this latter poem is in itself a naturalized, anatomical trope for a poet whose powers of expression have been compromised—rather than the disappearance of the muses or the absence of divine afflatus, it is simply that his own throat is at fault. The poem reads:

The time of year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know:
I am too dumbly in my being pent.

The wind attendant on the solstices
Blows on the shutters of the metropolises,
Stirring no poet in his sleep, and tolls
The grand ideas of the villages.

The malady of the quotidian. . . .
Perhaps, if winter once could penetrate
Through all its purples to the final slate,
Persisting bleakly in an icy haze;

One might in turn become less diffident,
Out of such mildew plucking neater mould
And spouting new orations of the cold.
One might. One might. But time will not relent.

(81)

The indifference of the time of year forecloses the poet's capacity to differentiate the world's particulars. The seasonal variations have dissolved into an indistinguishable

routine, thus relegating him to a mute confinement. Not even the wind⁶⁶ blowing at the plerotic zenith of summer's solstice, nor at the kenotic nadir of winter's, can stir the poet from his sleep. Moreover, in a marvellous metalepsis, the wind *tolls* the grand ideas of the villages. This metalepsis operates in a typically Stevensian double sense by punning on the verb. The 'grand ideas of the villages' is in itself a complex figure, no less than a metonymy of a synecdoche. The synecdoche is the village church, whose bells the wind is tolling, which stands *pars pro toto* for institutionalised religion. The grand ideas, then, are a metonymy for the creeds of the church. The wind tolling these grand ideas at once signifies their stale routineness metaphorised as measured time, while ironizing their very designation as grand. For Stevens, inert routine stands next to death, hence the wind tolls these grand ideas in the second sense as an announcement of their demise in the disenchanting 'malady of the quotidian'. This metalepsis also serves as an instance of Stevens' overthrowing the old transcendent order with the immanent world. The natural power of the wind has overturned the divine power of God—it has in fact delivered it of its death-knell.

The ellipsis marks an anacoluthic break as the mood changes from the present indicative to an optative conditional. The poet hopes that if the winter will clarify the muddle of its purple periphrases into a 'final slate',⁶⁷ a finality that in fact instantiates a new beginning,⁶⁸ then he *might* be able to regain confidence in his ability to differentiate the world's particulars again into a workable *poesis*. This 'might' is charged with an

⁶⁶ Wind serves as Stevens' commonplace metonymy for natural utterance, a favourite trope of the English Romantics. See, for instance, Stevens' short apostrophe: 'To the Roaring Wind' (77).

⁶⁷ The 'final slate' is thematically cognate with 'The air is not a mirror but bare board,' (332) in the fourth canto of 'Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction: It Must Be Abstract'. The speaker, revising Eve's making air the mirror of herself, asserts that the air is a bare board, that is to say, a tabula rasa free of any pre-imposed identity.

⁶⁸ Again, this is thematically cognate with the figure of 'Omega refreshed at every end.' (400) concluding the sixth canto of 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'. T. S. Eliot, in many respects Stevens' *bête noire*, finishes 'East Coker' with an uncannily similar trope: 'In my end is my beginning.' (Eliot, 1974, 191). Of course Eliot begins 'East Coker' this lines inverse: 'In my beginning is my end.' (Ibid, 184).

acute urgency, however, as the future realisation of his hope is suppressed by the relentlessness of the ongoing present.

‘The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad’ is a symptomatic figure of Stevens’ epistemological doubt. Stevens’ uncertainty as to whether the poet can say anything about the world as it is, of things as they are, of mere being, is the tempering cap with which he intermittently stops the lens of his refractive imagination. It takes many forms in his poetry, whether it be through dramatizing an expressive crisis as in the poem just read; through the defensive use of impersonal voice or distancing personae;⁶⁹ through self-conscious interrogation of and within a poem; through his frequent use of evasive syntax, hypotheses, contradictions, and qualified assertions;⁷⁰ through complex figural deviations;⁷¹ or by composing and arranging poems in sets that establish intertextual networks of contrary or differential variations on a guiding theme, trope or idea.⁷² It would perhaps be supererogatory to add that doubt is a deep pool of renewed creativity for Stevens, as this poem exemplifies. ‘The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad’, after all, is a poem generated by the doubtfulness of being able to poetize, of being able to spout new orations of the cold.

We might suppose that the speaker of ‘The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad’ could attempt to pursue Hoon’s path of plerotic interpenetration, which, as we have seen, collapses back into an ambivalence between identity and difference. This eventual

⁶⁹ Stevens’ frequent predication of his syntax on the objective pronoun ‘one’ is telling in this regard.

⁷⁰ See: Helen Vendler, (1965), ‘The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens’, *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 163-178; Helen Vendler, (Winter 2003), ‘Wallace Stevens: Hypotheses and Contradictions’, *Representations*, 81:1, 99-117.

⁷¹ See: Frank Doggett, (1980), *Wallace Stevens: The Making of a Poem*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 150-54; Laury Magnus, (Spring 1987), ‘“And Things Beyond Resemblances”: On Stevens’ Embedded Similes’, *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 11:1, 12-20.

⁷² ‘Stevens made a habit of publishing poems in carefully organized sets, particularly in pairs in which one poem questions, undercuts, and cycles into the other’ (Schulze qtd. in Eeckhout, 2002, 96).

collapse into an ambivalence between identity and difference could in fact be one remedy to the speaker's indifferentism. Yet the speaker of the poem would appear to desire realising what the kenotic 'final slate' of winter might entail. This latter path would involve going the way of 'The Snow Man'.

As I will be giving a fuller reading of 'The Snow Man' in the next chapter, I will only make some perfunctory remarks on it here. Elements we are by now familiar with from our reading of Hoon also appear in 'The Snow Man', only in sharper focus, which is eminently befitting of the poem's starkness. I am of course referring to the panpsychic/physiomorphic amalgam. The titular snow man, whatever else 'he' might *be*, possesses a 'mind of winter', performs perceptual and cognitive acts (regarding, beholding, thinking, listening), and is perplexingly embedded within a triply compounded nothing: 'And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.' (8). Whereas Hoon was fulfilled with the world-self, the snow man is a figure of profound emptiness—but it is an emptiness which surpasses in magnificent quietude anything of which Hoon in all of his enraptured grandiloquence is capable. This distinction points to a marked difference in the tone and style of the two poems. 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon' is written in a sublime, lofty register, importing its purple diction and hieratic phrasing from the Victorian aesthetes, all perfectly suitable to its ecstatic subject. 'The Snow Man', by comparison, is lexically spare, as per the credos of Imagism with which Stevens' briefly flirted. It is, however, syntactically sinuous,⁷³ hypotactic in its phrasing, and, if a forebear it must have, the most viable contender would be Emily Dickinson at her most non-exclamatory. It is a poem in the meditative tradition, and would provide the model for all of Stevens' superb late pensive lyrics. But

⁷³ William W. Bevis refers to 'The Snow Man' as 'a periphrastic striptease' (Bevis, 1988, 24).

we must further explore the Hoonian impulse for immanent plerosis, as it is such an integral component of Stevens' religious naturalism.

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Hoon reappears (or is recast), Bloom correctly points out, as Walt Whitman in the first section of 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery':⁷⁴

In the far South the sun of autumn is passing
Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore.
He is singing and chanting the things that are a part of him,
The worlds that were and will be, death and day.
Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end.
His beard is of fire and his staff is a leaping flame.

(121)

The simile in this passage should give us pause. Is it the sun who is walking along the shore, or is it Walt Whitman? The appositive gerunds confuse the sense. Bloom's solution, which this confusion enables, is 'that Whitman is both the sun and the world in which he walks' (Bloom, 1977, 66), and thus accounts for his alignment with Hoon. The same problem, of course, that beset Hoon—that of the ambivalence between identity and difference—occurs here. The ambivalence is in fact more pointed in this example, as the connection hinges on a simile as opposed to Hoon's metaphorical pronouncement.

⁷⁴ 'I would judge that [Hoon] appears again in 1935 as the Walt Whitman in section I of *Like Decorations*, and in his own name and right again, later in 1935, in *Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz*, and finally as the insouciant *Well Dressed Man With a Beard* in 1941' (Bloom, 1977, 65). I agree with Bloom on the first, the second is beyond dispute, whereas the third I consider somewhat idiosyncratic.

Likeness and unlikeness, as every poetry reader knows, are simultaneously implied in the very grammatical structure of *A is like B*. Stevens revises Hoon's self-world integration a perspectival step further in 'A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts':

And to feel that the light is a rabbit-light,

In which everything is meant for you

And nothing need be explained;

Then there is nothing to think of. It comes of itself;

And east rushes west and west rushes down,

No matter. The grass is full

And full of yourself. The trees around are for you,

The whole of the wideness of night is for you,

A self that touches all edges,

You become a self that fills the four corners of night.

(190)

Here we see Stevens extending the self-world integration to include non-human animals. 'A self that touches all edges' is a wonderful synaesthetic stroke, especially when we consider our taken for granted conflation of feeling and tactility. When a person says 'I feel moved', they do not feel it with the eye, ear, tongue or nose, but in that most plerotic and least defined of bodily senses, touch. Our sense of touch covers the surface of our skin and goes all the way down, as it were, from head to toe, heart to gut. It is cooperative in all of our other senses, and is the primary recipient of pleasure and the exclusive recipient of pain. It is the only sense coextensive with our entire body,

and is therefore foremost in our contact with the phenomenal world; one need only imagine navigating an unfamiliar pitch-black room to bear home the point. It is for these reasons that it is synaesthetically bound up with our emotional being and imparts to our understanding the complex sense embedded in the verb phrase 'to feel'. As such, it is arguably the sense most intimately linked with our intuition of being an embodied self in the world. Thus, 'A self that touches all edges', is to absorb the Hoonian figure of expansion and amplify it to the fullest degree. It takes the pronouncement 'I was the world in which I walked'—a claim which appeals solely to the ego—and physicalizes it with and through the emotional colouring we have seen embedded in the sense of touch, and thus renders Hoon's boast rather paltry in comparison.

We can enumerate Stevens' non-human extension of subjects in various states of plerotic achievement or desirousness even further: the bantam chastising the 'Damned universal cock' in 'Bantams in Pine-Woods': 'Your world is you. I am my world.' (60); 'the parakeet of parakeets' in 'The Bird with the Coppery Keen Claws' (65), which operates as a satire upon a modern idealist conception of God (see: Peterson, 1983, 97-100); the 'green vine angering for life' in 'Nomad Exquisite' (77); 'the eminent thunder from the mouse', a universal, heroic mouse who survives and outstrips all contemporaneous human endeavour, and predominates as 'one of the not-numerable mice' in 'The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air' (196-97); the bird who 'kept saying that birds had once been men,' and 'In the little of his voice...proclaimed himself, was proclaimed', in 'On an Old Horn' (210-11); 'The dry eucalyptus' who 'seeks god in the rainy cloud' in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' (405), which illustrates in miniature Mutter's thesis concerning Stevens' strategy of substitution, in that it 'shifts the attention from the content of the religious idea to the needs and desires that generated

it' (Mutter, Fall 2011, 744); and the titular mountain-monologist in 'Chocorua to Its Neighbour', who declares from afar:

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.

(263).

We can discern in this by no means exhaustive gathering Stevens' gestures toward the natural world in its nonhuman otherness. This is significant, because it intimates a fundamental aspect of the shortcomings Stevens' perceived in humanism. In a letter to Henry Church, May 18, 1943, he writes: 'The chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction' (*L*, 449). Leon Surette suggests that 'in Stevens' view humanism is characterized by a denial of the inhuman, of that which exceeds, or, to use a Derridean term, "supplements" the human' (Surette, Spring 2005, 147). Derrida's 'supplement' is an interesting term to invoke in this connection. Derrida describes the supplement as having a double signification. In the first signification it is additive: 'The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence' (Derrida, 1997, 144, original italics), The second signification is compensatory: 'But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void' (Ibid, 145, original italics). In the first instance the supplement adds itself to a thing already whole in itself; in the second it replaces something lacking in the thing that it supplements, thus

subverting the integrity of the lacking thing as a self-contained whole and thus replacing it with a supplemented thing. I agree with Voros that the 'something else' Stevens alludes to in his letter to Henry Church is 'the physical universe, which exists prior to and beyond the human and for which Stevens's primary word was "reality."' (Voros, 1997, 6). Voros describes Stevens' reality as 'a demythified, nontranscendental *naturalistic* Nature' (Ibid, 5); he also qualifies it as both 'nonteleological' and 'nonanthropocentric' (Ibid, 6). I would argue that Stevens' conception of a nonhuman nature denuded of God and ultimate purpose is the necessary supplement to the humanism he found wanting. Stevens' 'reality' accords with humanism insofar as it does not seek a reality beyond the natural, but goes further than humanism in asserting that the human is not a sufficient end in and of itself. The human, for Stevens, is supplemented by nature in that attending to it extends human concern to a veneration of something beyond itself. Thus nature also supplements, in a compensatory sense, the humanist's lack of God. With this in mind, I think we can and should read Stevens as an eloquent critic of anthropocentrism.

The foregoing, however, should not be taken to imply that the human is excluded from this expanded ambit of veneration. Stevens is not, by any means, an anti-humanist. His gloss on his poem 'A Fading of the Sun' (112-13) in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, November 21, 1935, is about as direct a humanist statement as you will find:

It is an old story that we derive our ideas of nobility, say, from noble objects of nature. But then, it is an equally old story that we derive them from ourselves. For convenience, and in view of the simplicity of the large mass of people, we give our good qualities to God, or to various gods, but they come from ourselves. In A FADING OF THE SUN the point is that, instead of crying for help to God or to one of the gods, we should look to ourselves for help. The exaltation of human nature should

take the place of its abasement. Perhaps I ought to say, the sense of its exaltation should take the place of its abasement. (*L*, 295).

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I have already argued that Stevens departs from his Romantic and Transcendentalist forebears by dispensing with their predication of communing with nature as a means to find God. For Stevens, communing with nature is a sufficient good in and of itself, and it is through his poetry that he bears witness to this good. Whereas a conventionally religious poet such as Gerard Manly Hopkins would say: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' (Hopkins, 1953, 27), the religious naturalist Stevens would say: 'The most beautiful (the only beautiful) (beautiful is an inadequate and temporizing improvisation) thing in the world is, of course, the world itself. This is so not only logically but categorically' (907).⁷⁵ Mutter describes Stevens' tautological thinking regarding the sufficiency of the natural world as follows:

Stevens's ambition to make language tautological with the experience of the world in its immanence is an ambition to overturn this prejudice against the world, to experience it as

⁷⁵ Stevens' transcendence downward, to reprise Scott Jr.'s phrase, is emphasised in another fragmentary journal entry: 'Feed my lambs (on the bread of the living) . . . The glory of god is the glory of the world . . . To find the spiritual in reality . . . To be concerned with reality' (914). The trajectory is typical of Stevens: rather than feed the Christian flock on heavenly manna, Stevens insists on feeding a worldly flock on worldly sustenance. On the face of it, the second phrase would seem to bear a close affinity to Hopkins' previously quoted line, but this would be a specious comparison. Hopkins' is making a dualistic assertion between spirit and matter: that the world is charged with a divine force, but a force nonetheless issuing from something beyond the material world. Stevens' is a monistic tautology, he is equating the glory of god with the glory of the world, which is to say that they are one and the same. It is as close as Stevens gets to a pantheistic attitude and bears no repetition elsewhere in his poetry or prose, other than, so far as I can determine, in section XIV of 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'. In this section, Professor Eucalyptus is depicted seeking 'God in the object itself, without much choice.' (405). Stevens in imparting this pantheistic search to one of his personae removes himself from the commitment, but nevertheless allows it in as another 'celestial possible' (433). Stevens' expressed desire to find the spiritual in reality, which is quite obviously of an immanent persuasion, is arguably analogous to Professor Eucalyptus' search to find God in the object itself.

something “complete,” “sufficient,” “adequate,” or “enough.” These sorts of words appear in Stevens’s poetry again and again. To experience the world as sufficient, even as a plenitude, is to repudiate the intuition he, following William James, thought the beginning of religious consciousness; namely, that there is something wrong with the world, and that our difficulty here means we must refer our discontented desire to something “beyond” in order to render it intelligible and relieve our misery. (Mutter, Fall 2011, 749).

As we have already seen, Stevens does not repudiate the intuition toward religious consciousness outright, only what he perceives to be, as Mutter points out, its pernicious tendency to transcend the natural. Mutter proceeds to argue that Stevens prioritises sensory experience: ‘Stevens looks to the sensory because it ends with itself, is satisfied with itself, asks nothing beyond itself. It makes no sense to say of a color, a shape, or a landscape, “Is it enough?” The visual imperative in Stevens can therefore be understood as an attempt to overcome the uneasiness toward the visual in monotheistic religions, with their proscriptions of idolatry and their preference for the interior or the inward’ (Mutter, Fall 2011, 749). As I have already demonstrated, for Stevens the outward or exterior is often proposed to be a manifestation of the inward or interior. A striking example of this is the early ‘Anecdote of Men by the Thousand’:

The soul, he said, is composed
Of the external world.

There are men of the East, he said,
Who are the East.

There are men of a province
Who are that province.

There are men of a valley

Who are that valley.

There are men whose words

Are as natural sounds

Of their places

As the cackle of toucans

In the place of toucans.

The mandoline is the instrument

Of a place.

Are there mandolines of western mountains?

Are there mandolines of northern moonlight?

The dress of a woman of Lhasa,

In its place,

Is an invisible element of that place

Made visible.

(41)

The emphasis here is again on outward manifestations of numinous interior qualities peculiar to specific places. The supposition, presumably, is that the inward is to be inferred from its outward manifestations. 'I am what is around me' (70) declares the speaker of 'Theory'. Stevens' pseudo-heliotheism resituates this equivalence between inward and outward from the specificity of worldly loci to their solar source. In his early suite of epigrams 'New England Verses' it is stated bluntly: 'All things in the sun are sun.' (87), and in section VI of 'Esthétique du Mal': 'The sun is the country wherever he is.' (281). In 'Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu', a poem dismissive of Christian notions of an

afterlife and asserting the poignancy of death's finality, concludes with a conciliatory resignation: 'Ever-jubilant, / What is there here but weather, what spirit / Have I except it comes from the sun?' (104). Not only is place and spirit formed from the sun, but so too the products of human making: 'Of what is this house composed if not of the sun,' (397) asks the speaker of 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'. And finally, in the magnificent late retrospect 'The Planet on the Table', Stevens announces that his poems are also 'makings of the sun':

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.

They were of a remembered time

Or of something seen that he liked.

Other makings of the sun

Were waste and welter

And the ripe shrub writhed.

His self and the sun were one

And his poems, although makings of his self,

Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive.

What mattered was that they should bear

Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,

In the poverty of their words,

Of the planet of which they were part.

(450)

These notions of environmental determinism would recur throughout Stevens' poetry to the end. His late posthumously published poem, 'A mythology reflects its region', which Samuel Morse speculates 'may very well be the last poem Stevens wrote' (*OP*, xxiii), bears this out:

A mythology reflects its region. Here
In Connecticut, we never lived in a time
When mythology was possible—But if we had—
That raises the question of the image's truth.
The image must be of the nature of its creator.
It is the nature of its creator increased,
Heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
And it is he in the substance of his region
Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields
Or from under his mountains.

(476)

The 'true' image must be of the nature of its creator, but the creator 'in a freshened youth', is nonetheless embedded in the substance of his region. This is to say that the 'truth' of the mythological image, were it possible, must be derived from the substance of its region. Stevens' essay 'The Figure of Youth as a Virile Poet' is a crucial intertext to an understanding of this poem. In this essay the youthful, virile poet is a figure of 'intelligence that endures' (675) the 'antique imagination of the father' (*Ibid*). He is an emergent figure 'stepping forward in the company of a muse of its own, still half-beast

and somehow more than human, a kind of sister of the Minotaur' (675)⁷⁶ to discover 'a pleasure of agreement with the radiant and productive world in which he lives' (678). This figure of the emergent poetic imagination is concerned, according to Stevens, with poetic truth. Whatever poetic truth involves, and Stevens himself admits this, is ambiguous. It is said to involve 'the belief of credible people in credible things' (675). This is tied to Stevens' notion of the youthful, virile poet who must overcome 'the burden of the obscurities of the intelligence of the old' (675) to discover a credible truth for his contemporaries. It is also concerned with fact, but not, as Stevens' insists, with the absolute fact of reality, but with poetic ideas that satisfy the imagination (668). These poetic ideas and their truth, however, are said to be congruent with reality: '...the truth that we experience when we are in agreement with reality is the truth to fact' (680). Poetic truth, Stevens argues, arises from the world as it is in our process of perceiving it. Whereas the philosopher limits him or herself 'to the gaunt world of reason' (678), the poet lives in a '*mundo* of the imagination...[whose] pleasure is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation' (679). Sensory experience as it is experienced, then, is the basis of poetic truth. But the figure of the youthful, virile poet transfigures this raw data of experience through his imagination. His imagination is in conversation with his half-beast though more than human muse (a chimerical hybrid of the primordial real with a metaphysical being), which compels him to make the following address:

⁷⁶ For a lively disputation as to who or what the sister of the Minotaur might be, see: Stanley Cavell's 'Reflections on Wallace Stevens at Mount Holyoke'; Jeffrey Mehlman's response to Cavell 'Thoughts on Wallace Stevens's Contribution at Pontigny-en-Am rique'; and Cavell's counter-response to Mehlman 'Postscript: Response to Mehlman'; collected in Christopher Benfey and Karen Remmler, eds., (2006), *Artists, Intellectuals, and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke College, 1942-1944*, Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 61-88.

Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur, enigma and mask, although I am part of what is real, hear me and recognise me as part of the unreal. I am the truth but the truth of that imagination of life in which with unfamiliar motion and manner you guide me in those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours. (685)

This amounts to an admission that the poet and his imagination aspire to mythopoeic truth—but one that must be rooted in its time and place, as the foregoing poem suggests, in order to be credible. The pollination of the real with the unreal will be the source of this mythology. The indefinite historical period the speaker refers to in Connecticut was evidently not germane to a credible mythology. But the speaker has left another note toward a supreme fiction, as it were, a fragmentary blueprint for some future poet in a freshened youth to realise a possible mythology which adequately reflects its region.

This rhetorical manoeuvre is typical of Stevens. He is continuously positing possibilities that remain unrealised. The realisation of a mythology, a supreme fiction, is something that he only composes notes toward. This effectively places the onus on the reader to contemplate what a supreme fiction might entail in his or her own historical context. For Stevens, the finality of a fully realised supreme fiction or mythology would be anathema to his pluralistic restlessness. 'July Mountain', another short, late poem emphasises this point:

We live in a constellation
Of patches and pitches,
Not in a single world,
In things well said in music,

On the piano, and in speech,
As in a page of poetry—
Thinkers without final thoughts
In an always incipient cosmos,
The way, when we climb a mountain,
Vermont throws itself together.

(476)

The plurality of worlds made up of patches and pitches for each thinker without final thoughts suggests that the mind (interior) will never find a wholly congruent satisfaction with the world (exterior). Section VI of 'Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas' tells of a thinker who

...wanted to think his way to life,
Sure that the ultimate poem was the mind,
Or of the mind, or of the mind in these
Elysia, these days, half earth, half mind;
Half sun, half thinking of the sun; half sky,
Half desire for indifference about the sky.

He, that one, wanted to think his way to life,
To be happy because people were thinking to be.
They had to think it to be. He wanted that,
To face the weather and be unable to tell
How much of it was light and how much thought,
In these Elysia, these origins,
This single place in which we are and stay,
Except for the images we make of it,
And for it, and by which we think the way,

And, being unhappy, talk of happiness
And, talking of happiness, know that it means
That the mind is the end and must be satisfied.

It cannot be half earth, half mind; half sun,
Half thinking; until the mind has been satisfied,
Until, for him, his mind is satisfied.
Time troubles to produce the redeeming thought.
Sometimes at sleepy mid-days it succeeds,
Too vaguely that it be written in character.

(231-32)

The satisfactions of the mind are achieved, so the poem tells us, in a somnolent realm of unintelligibility, yet only 'sometimes'. These satisfactions are still subject to the sovereign law of necessity, which, as Bloom has it in reference to the serpent in 'Auroras of Autumn', is the law of 'time and mutability' (Bloom, Winter 1966, 40). To put it in Spinozan terms, Stevens is more interested in *natura naturans* than in *natura naturata*, in process rather than completion, an incipient rather than an already developed cosmos. I would argue that this is why Stevens is so emphatically discursive. David Ayers presents an argument not dissimilar to the one I have been making: 'Stevens sees poetry as basically discursive. He does not, however, think of writing as something that can transcend and fix experience, but as immanent to experience, permanently circulating within it, indeed *constituting* it. So language, though it is a discourse, is not a discourse of finality, but of openness' (Ayers, 2004, 41). Where I would differ from Ayers, however, is that I would argue that Stevens' poetry in its very discursiveness does indeed mimic the experience of thinking itself: its misgivings and equivocations, its occasional bursts of aphoristic certainty, its constant revisions and revolutions of ideas,

formulations, theories, beliefs. Stevens, we could argue, achieves a paradoxical resolution of mimesis in transcending and fixing the experience of non-fixedness. And this, I would further argue, is fundamentally reflective of Stevens' attitude towards mind and nature—that they parallel one another inasmuch as they are always in a state of mutable becoming and never resolved. A contrary thrust in Stevens, which we will explore further in the following chapter, is that the mind or the sense of selfhood is often so resistant to assimilation that it perceives of itself as alienated from the world. As we have seen, however, Stevens also constantly reiterates their unification:

I am a native in this world
And think like a native thinks,

Gesu, not native of a mind
Thinking the thoughts I call my own,

Native, a native in the world
And like a native think in it.

(147-48)

The thoughts are not the thinker's own, but are immanent to the world in which the thinker indigenously belongs. More than just his thinking, his imagination is determined by the world around him:

The world imagines for the beholder.
He is born the blank mechanic of the mountains

The blank frere of fields, their matin laborer.

He is the possessed of sense not the possessor.

(420)

So to his very self:

If he will be heaven after death,
If, while he lives, he hears himself
Sounded in music, if the sun,
Stormer, is the color of a self
As certainly as night is the color
Of a self, if, without sentiment,
He is what he hears and sees and if,
Without pathos, he feels what he hears
And sees, being nothing otherwise,
Having nothing otherwise, he has not
To go to the Louvre to behold himself.

(179)

Music, the sun, the night, are all externalities which sound out and colour a self, or a mutability of selves, changing in coextension with the changing external conditions. This is, I would maintain, a fundamentally plerotic attitude. Whereas Hoon's plerosis is characterised by an assertive boastfulness approaching the apotheosis of self, the plerosis Stevens appears to find more satisfying is characterised by a passive openness to the experiential unity of self and world.

It is of no small significance that in this passage Stevens executes something of a performative contradiction. The Louvre stands as a synecdoche for the institution of art. Stevens' means of articulating the sufficiency of experiential being in the world is via the

art of poetry. By extension, we can take this to imply that poetry, as with the art collected in the Louvre, is not required to behold oneself. This can be done, so Stevens seems to tell us, by merely being assiduously cognizant of one's own experience in the world. His way out of this contradiction that would begin to dominate his thinking on poetry from the 40's onwards is to synonymise poetry with life itself. We recall his insistence from 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' that the theory of poetry is the theory of life. This notion was seeded as early as the famous 'Memorandum' letter that he wrote to Henry Church, October 15, 1940:

What is intended is to study the theory of poetry in relation to what poetry has been and in relation to what it ought to be. Its literature is a part of it, and only a part of it. For this purpose, poetry means not the language of poetry but the thing itself, wherever it may be found. It does not mean verse any more than philosophy means prose. The subject-matter of poetry is the thing to be ascertained. [...] It is the aspects of the world and of men and women that have been added to them by poetry. These aspects are difficult to recognize and to measure. (*L*, 377).

Here poetry is not merely its literature, nor its form (verse), but more importantly, its subject matter. Its subject matter, in a typically vague formulation, is said to be poetry's aspectual additions to the world of men and women. If we were to make a type/token distinction, then, Stevens would appear to be saying that poetry's literature and form, that is to say actual poems, are its tokens. Poetry's type would appear to be a mode of perception—a way of viewing the world that recognises aspects of it that, presumably, had not been previously ascertained. Stevens writes in 'The Man With the Blue Guitar', some few years before composing this letter:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,

From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse.

(144-45).

This canto would seem to lend credence to critics who want to suggest that the primary subject matter of Stevens' poetry is poetry itself. However, although the poem issues from and returns to itself, it does so by way of an 'absence in reality, / Things as they are'. The apposition of an absence in reality with things as they are suggests that poetry is that which presences things as they are. Without the Orphic intervention of poetry, things as they are remain absent or, as it were, unissued. But it is as much the things as they are interfusing the presencing power of poetry that imparts to poetry, upon its return, its own presence, its 'true appearances'. Poetry here seems to assume a metaphysical numinous agency of its own, as though it is the agency responsible for reality coming into awareness of itself. The green of the sun and the red of the clouds

are defamiliarising modifiers, but no less a part of the phenomenal aspects that both the sun and the clouds are capable of exhibiting. A feeling earth and thinking sky are primary contributors to the universal intercourse of which poetry is the articulating power. What is giving or taking at any given time in this intercourse remains indeterminate. Or so Stevens might be saying. Many years later he would write in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven': 'The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it.' (404). Poetry is here also postulated as being part of the 'res', the Latin for 'thing'. Poetry, the cry, is occasioned by the thing; the thing is cried through poetry. This circular interrelationship between poetry and thing, or its functional cognates in Stevens' theoretical terminology, namely imagination and reality, is the arch-substitute for the idea of God. In this sense his theory of poetry, which his actual poetry frequently seeks to articulate in practice, could be described as meta-poetry. A meta-poetry in that it declares itself to be both realising agent and signifier of the ground of reality, or we might say, being, to which it is immanent. I would argue that poetry, then, as Stevens declares as early as 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' (47), is his supreme fiction. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, Stevens envisions poetry as the vehicle for articulating a supreme fiction that is, paradoxically, inarticulable. Stevens' poetry so frequently returns to rhetoricising an ultimate expression that is actually impossible to contain in expression:

High poetry and low:

Experience in perihelion

Or in the penumbra of summer night—

The solemn sentences,

Like interior intonations,

The speech of truth in its true solitude,
A nature that is created in what it says,
The peace of the last intelligence;

(418)

Does this passage tell us what high poetry and low experience in perihelion or in the penumbra of summer night? Or should the colon indicate an anacoluthic break, and that what follows is an imperative command to high poetry and low? Irrespective of which grammatical path one chooses to read this passage, they both invariably lead to the postulation of an experiential truth in the solitude and the peace of the last intelligence. Troublingly, the nature of this experiential truth is said to be created in what it says, but it is not in the premise that this saying is communicable in human language. Such an experience, were it possible, cannot be said. This demonstrates a rhetorical collision between the plerosis of the absolute—an experience of finality in perihelion—and the kenosis of silence absenting this experience's expressibility. Language, alas, can only gesture towards the encircling silence against which it conspires to elicit veneration for its absenting delimiter.

Another demonstration of the venerable relationship between poetry and immanent being is given by one of Stevens' numerous personae, 'A Pastoral Nun':

Finally, in the last year of her age,
Having attained a present blessedness,
She said poetry and apotheosis are one.

This is the illustration she used:
If I live according to this law I live
In an immense activity, in which

Everything becomes morning, summer, the hero,
The enraptures woman, the sequestered night,
The man that suffered, lying there at ease,

Without his envious pain in body, in mind,
The favorable transformations of the wind
As of a general being or human universe.

There was another illustration, in which
The two things compared their tight resemblances:
Each matters only in that which it conceives.

(327)

Poetry here assumes a spiritually therapeutic function. The nun, approaching death, illustrates her thesis that poetry and apotheosis are one. Significantly, the plerotic enlargements of an immense activity that living by this law give her access to have nothing to do with death or what comes after. It helps her, as we have seen Stevens elsewhere claim of poetry, to live her life. Living by this law enables her to conceive of life and her part in it as belonging to something immense in which everything, in principle, becomes. Stevens elusively foreshortens the nun's second illustration to an ambiguous aphoristic fragment. Whatever the case, the tight resemblances between poetry and apotheosis have something to do with the significance of which each conceives. The self-reflexivity of this statement opens the matter, as it were, to whatever the comparatist finds resemblant among the conceptions of poetry and apotheosis. Again, this displaces the onus of contemplating these resemblances onto the reader. It is a rhetorical tactic that compels the reader to think about how poetry and

apotheosis are one in that which they conceive, and in so doing, elevates the reader into a contemplation that partakes of the immense activity such a comparison requires.

Stevens' rhetorical persuasions to these elusive ends deflect the culpability of commitment to any final pronouncements on what poetry as the supreme fiction makes manifest. This is certainly the case for poetry *qua* poetry conceived of as the supreme fiction, or, as I have said, its vehicle. However, within the 'supreme fiction' that Stevens actually writes, that is to say his body of poems, we find him concocting an array of fictive beings—his heroes, giants, major and central men (the 'human-epitome' figures Lensing refers to),⁷⁷—to populate his not so disenchanting world. Some of these figures will receive attention in the following chapter, so I will not expand upon their appearances in Stevens' poetry here. To finish this chapter, I will return to the natural world, so beloved of Stevens, to explore the consolations of adequacy he finds there.

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I have previously alluded to Stevens' frequent invocations of the adequacy, sufficiency, even the completeness, to reiterate Mutter, of 'the experience of the world in its immanence' (Mutter, Fall 2011, 749). Adequacy and sufficiency betoken a somewhat muted plerosis of immanent experience; completeness an increase in degree rather than a difference in kind. They are all, nonetheless, forms of fulfilment.

The earliest and best known example of the sufficiency of the experience of the immanent world is of course Stevens' 'Sunday Morning', which Nancy N. Frankenberry judges 'very probably the finest expression of religious naturalism in American poetry'

⁷⁷ Of which the previously discussed figure of the poet as a virile youth is an example originating outside of the poetry.

(Frankenberry, 2007, 292). The eight-stanzaed sequence takes the form of a dialogical indirect discourse between a woman who is not in attendance at church at the titularly appointed time and the poem's expository commentator. Over the course of the poem's eight stanzas, the woman, dressed in her peignoir and enjoying a late breakfast of coffee and oranges, contemplates the 'that old catastrophe, / [...] silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.' (53). This reverie induces her to question her ambivalence toward her religious commitments, or lack thereof, in comparison with the psychological and physical satisfactions derived from the immanent world. Throughout this inquiry, the commentator reaffirms the sufficiency of the immanent world to meet the satisfactions she desires. We are told along the way that

Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

(53).

She wonders whether these measures destined for her soul 'shall... / Seem all of paradise that we shall know' (54). Her indirect interlocutor grants on the one hand that if we accept the doctrine of incarnation 'The sky will be much friendlier than now,' (54), but on the other hand assures that

There is not any haunt of prophecy,

Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures; or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

(54)

Nonetheless, 'She says, "But in contentment I still feel / The need of some imperishable bliss.'" (55), to which the speaker declares that 'Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires.' (55). Death, so it is implied, is what sharpens our acuity of bliss and beauty in the here-and-now of lived experience. She is the author of change, without which, in an eternal paradise, we would experience only stasis. Presumably, without the transiency that charges beauty and bliss with temporal allurements—which seems to be one of both of their distinguishing, albeit contingent, properties—our desire for these experiences would be nullified, which, in consequence, would eliminate the very experiences themselves. The following and penultimate stanza returns us from a meditation on Edenic stagnation to the world at dawn in which a neo-pagan ritual is improvised:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,

Naked among them, like a savage source.
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
That choir among themselves long afterward.
They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
Of men that perish and of summer morn.
And whence they came and whither they shall go
The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

(55-56)

The chant of paradise will be a chant of earthly paradise, as it will be ‘out’ of the men’s own human blood commingled with the voices of the windy lake, the trees, and the echoing hills—each of which are appointed their naturalised roles in this terrestrial congregation: the windy lake as speculum of their lord the sun’s delight; the trees as singing angels; and the hills that resound in a reverberant choir. The heavenly fellowship that these chanters shall know is the immanent cycle of death and renewal, which is thematically cognate with the ‘old dependency of day and night’ in the final stanza. The final stanza comes full circle wherein the woman’s reverie on the dominion of blood and sepulchre is encroached upon by ‘A voice that cries, “The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering. / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.”’ (56). The incarnation is refuted: Jesus is merely a man who died and remained dead. The poem then closes with a Virgilian pastoral scene, which I will unabashedly join the choir of Stevens’ enthusiasts in affirming that what we have here are some of the finest lines of blank verse to have been written in the twentieth-century:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

(56)

This closing pastoral implicates the expansion of the woman's coexistence in a world of life comprising vastly more than her fellow human species. She has already admitted in the fourth stanza that 'I am content when wakened birds, / Before they fly, test the reality / Of misty fields with their sweet questionings;' (54). Her misgiving with this form of contentment, though, is marked by an eschatological wariness: 'But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields / Return no more, where, then, is paradise?' (54). The speaker's recurrence to illustrations of the natural world as being not only sufficient in and of themselves, but actually preferable to an inert paradise, together with an appreciation of immanent experience in all of its sensuous detail, admonishes the woman that here and now is salve enough—it requires no supplementation from beyond. One is put in mind of Mr Overton's remark in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*: 'All animals, except man, know that the principal business of life is to enjoy it' (Butler, 1987, 95). 'Life is Motion', another brief poem collected in *Harmonium*, is persuasive of this principal:

In Oklahoma,

Bonnie and Josie,
Dressed in calico,
Danced around a stump.
They cried,
“Ohoyaho,
Ohoo” . . .
Celebrating the marriage
of flesh and air.

(65)

This poem reprises the neo-pagan ritual from the seventh stanza of ‘Sunday Morning’. Only this time, the revellers are two women in a sort of mock-May Day celebration, ironised by the vestigial presence of a stumped maypole. The phallus thus truncated, Bonnie and Josie celebrate an immanent, naturalised, not to mention desexualised, hieros-gamos of flesh and air, replete with a Whitmanian barbaric yawp. The circular form of these rituals Stevens would later transmute into a whimsical pleasure, as in ‘The Pleasures of Merely Circulating’: ‘The garden flew round with the angel, / The angel flew round with the clouds, / And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round / And the clouds flew round with the clouds.’ (120). In a later revision of the motif, from ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, the pleasure of circulation is declared as a good:

One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood.

This canto concludes: ‘Perhaps, / The man-hero is not the exceptional monster, / But he that of repetition is most master.’ (350).⁷⁸ The repetition of circulation is congruent with both the repetition of ritual and routine. Eleanor Cook points out, by way of Northrop Frye, that Kierkegaard conceived of repetition in a religious context (Cook, 2007, 234): ‘By it he apparently means, not the simple repeating of an experience, but the recreating of it which redeems or awakens it to life, the end of the process, he says, being the apocalyptic promise: “Behold, I make all things new.”’ (Frye, 1971, 345). Frye’s account of Kierkegaard’s concept is entirely appropriate to the ritual underpinnings of Stevens’ apocalyptic rhetoric—which is not a rhetoric of terminal destruction, but of renewal. We may recall the Alpha and Omega canto from an ‘Ordinary Evening in New Haven’: ‘Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end.’ (400). To the last, Stevens was ensconced in the ritual celebration of new beginnings. ‘A Discovery of Thought’, a late, uncollected poem first published in 1950, attests to the persistence of this leitmotiv in his work. This poem imagines, from ‘the antipodes of poetry, dark winter’ (459), a kenotic reduction to the real, ‘an infancy of blue snow’ (459) wherein ‘One is a child again’ (459), the future arrival of ‘the susceptible being’ who will disclose ‘The true tone of the metal of winter in what it says:

⁷⁸ The ‘exceptional monster’ harkens back to section XIX of ‘The Man With the Blue Guitar’. The exceptional monster is effectively a composite of two monsters: ‘Being the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone.’ (143). The lion in the lute is an emblem of the imagination, the lion in stone an emblem of life/reality. In conflating ‘the two together as one’ (143), the poet hopes to ‘play of the monster and of myself, // Or better not myself at all, / But of that as its intelligence,’ (143). This is to say that the poet hopes to accomplish a synthesis of the monster of life/reality with the monster of his own intelligence in order to become a form of supra-intelligence of both. Stevens’ own gloss of this section in a letter to Hi Simons, August 8, 1940, is revealing of the connection between his later figuration of the exceptional monster and mastery: ‘The monster is what one faces: the lion locked in stone (life) which one wishes to match in intelligence and force, speaking (as a poet) with a voice matching its own. One thing about life is that the mind of one man, if strong enough, can become the master of all the life in the world. To some extent, this is an everyday phenomenon. Any really great poet, musician, etc. does this’ (L, 360).

// The accent of deviation in the living thing / That is its life preserved, the effort to be born / Surviving being born, the event of life.' (459). What is remarkable about this poem is how Stevens achieves, by way of a telescoped prolepsis, the gestation of the inevitable event of life in the barrenness of winter, deftly captured in the image of 'The cricket of summer forming itself out of ice.' (459). Yet all of this is merely an elaborate conceit for the poem's true subject, which is a renewal of the 'first word' (459) of the discovery of thought, which promises a rejuvenation of the earth and with it the poet's powers.

As is so often the case with Stevens, it comes down to a matter of perspective. The overriding perspective in Stevens' poetry is comic—not in the sense that we are to expect a happy ending, but rather in the sense that there are these constant assurances of renewals of happiness, of joy, of life, to come. At his bleakest, Stevens is rarely tragic, but rather faces the existential void with a cool equanimity (we will have more to say on this in the following chapter). His short poem 'Gubbinal', for example, is an ironic exercise in demonstrating his comic perspective by way of parodying its opposite: 'Have it your way. // The world is ugly, / And the people are sad' (69). Irrespective of whatever misery or pain may occur in the world, Stevens is forever counterposing the potential for joy, pleasure, or diversity of perspective in worldly experience. Even in 'Esthétique du Mal', his long meditation on 'the relation between poetry and...pain' (L, 468),⁷⁹ the speaker muses:

It seems

⁷⁹ Stevens was prompted to compose 'Esthétique du Mal' after reading a letter sent to John Crowe Ransom published in *The Kenyon Review*, in which the correspondent, 'a soldier in foreign service' (Ransom, Spring 1944, 276), complains: 'I find the poetry in *Kenyon Review* lamentable in many ways because it is cut off from pain. It is intellectual and it is fine, but it never reveals muscle and nerve' (Ibid).

As if the health of the world might be enough.

It seems as if the honey of common summer

Might be enough, as if the golden combs

Were part of a sustenance itself enough,

As if hell, so modified, had disappeared,

As if pain, no longer satanic mimicry,

Could be borne, as if we were sure to find our way.

(278).

This long poetic sequence concludes with the famous canto beginning: 'The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair.' (286). Here again is a critique of an otherworldly paradise that lacks the necessary physicality required of differentiation and discernment. The speaker imagines: 'After death, the non-physical people, in paradise, / Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe / The green corn gleaming and experience / The minor of what we feel.' (286).⁸⁰ Although the speaker concedes that 'The adventurer / In humanity has

⁸⁰ This theme of posthumous beings desirous of physical experience in the immanent world is later revisited in 'Large Red Man Reading':

They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae,
The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:
Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked.

(365)

not conceived of a race / Completely physical in a physical world' (286), he nonetheless affirms that for the revenant dead the physical is the truly plerotic state of affairs: 'The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals / Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat, / The rotund emotions, paradise unknown.' (286). This conflation of the metaphysical and the physical induces the speaker to utter one of the most unblushingly liturgical exclamations found in Stevens' poetry: 'This is the thesis scrivened in delight, / The reverberating psalm, the right chorale.' (286).⁸¹

A physical, and more disarmingly, impersonal world, is what Stevens calls his 'ultimate inamorata' (915). In *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets*, the commonplace book Stevens kept in the 30s, he quotes the American clergyman R. S. Storrs thus: 'The philosopher could not love the indefinite and the impersonal principle of order pervading the universe, any more than he could love atmospheres or oceans' (*OP*, xxxii). Stevens' response is, unsurprisingly, entirely to the contrary: 'For myself, the indefinite, the impersonal, atmospheres and oceans and, above all, the principle of order are precisely what I love; and I don't see why, for a philosopher, they should not be the ultimate inamorata. The premise to Storrs is that the universe is explicable only in terms of humanity' (915). Stevens himself, however, vacillates between personification and objectification of the world. For example, in seeing the earth specifically 'as

⁸¹ One also detects in the minors and majors of feeling in this canto, Stevens' recurrent synonymy of music and feeling. We first encounter this in 'Peter Quince at the Clavier': 'Just as my fingers on these keys / Make music, so the self-same sounds / On my spirit make a music, too. // Music is feeling, then, not sound;' (72). It is also interesting to note that the crescendo of this later poem's closing canto ('This is the thesis scrivened in delight, / The reverberating psalm, the right chorale') echoes the conjugation of music and liturgy concluding the earlier 'Peter Quince at the Clavier':

Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings
Of those white elders; but, escaping,
Left only Death's ironic scraping.
Now, in its immortality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes constant sacrament of praise.

(74)

inamorata' (413), as we find in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', is to feminise it, to cast it in the role of lover, companion, or muse. Stevens does this again and again: in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', the earth is addressed as 'Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night, / [...] my green, my fluent mundo.' (351); the ocean is a feminine genius loci in the early 'Infanta Marina' (6), as is the venereal soil in 'O, Florida, Venereal Soil' (38-39); 'The moon is the mother of pathos and pity' (89), in 'Lunar Paraphrase', in comparison to the masculinised sun 'That brave man' (112) in 'The Brave Man'; even the light produced by the sun and moon are respectively gendered in 'Of Hartford in a Purple Light': 'But, Master, there are / Lights masculine and lights feminine.' (208), (the 'Master' being addressed, again, is the masculinised, and inexplicably Francophone, sun 'Master Soleil' (208)). An extensive cento of further examples could be enumerated. Suffice it to say, Stevens does not shy away from the use of prosopopoeia, and is therefore being somewhat disingenuous in criticising Storrs for perceiving the explicability of the universe in human terms. If we recall Gardner's previously quoted analysis, we could align Stevens' figurations of the universe with a human face with his summer mode, which is ostensibly one of transfigurative addition to the material base of the universe. The contraposition is of course Stevens' winter mode, which is an ostensibly subtractive procedure to arrive at the contracted world of stark physical reality entirely absented of anthropocentric cultural additives. In 'An Evening Without Angels', the speaker asserts 'Bare night is best. Bare earth is best.' (112). It is precisely this barrenness that is celebrated in 'How To Live. What To Do':⁸²

Last evening the moon rose above this rock

⁸² Stevens remarks in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, November 15, 1935, that of all the poems in *Ideas of Order* 'How to Live. What to Do' is the poem he 'preferred to all the others. [...] I like it most, I suppose, because it so definitely represents my way of thinking' (L, 293).

Impure upon a world unpurged.
The man and his companion stopped
To rest before the heroic height.

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

Instead there was this tufted rock
Massively rising high and bare
Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown
Like giant arms among the clouds.

There was neither voice nor crested image,
No chorister, nor priest. There was
Only the great height of the rock
And the two of them standing still to rest.

There was the cold wind and the sound
It made, away from the muck of the land
That they had left, heroic sound
Joyous and jubilant and sure.

(102-03)

However, as these foregoing examples illustrate, Stevens is yet encumbered by making human value judgements on the numinous otherness of the nonhuman world: bare night and earth are 'best'; the cold wind and the sound it made is a 'heroic sound / Joyous and jubilant and sure'. It is a bind that Stevens knew he could not undo. Even at

its most objectively descriptive, the act of the mind that becomes a poem is exactly that: a verbal representation produced by a perceiving subject. The representation of a view from nowhere remains impossible. 'The Plain Sense of Things', to run the risk of an excruciating pun, makes this impossibility quite plain. The speaker, beholding a winter scene, proposes that 'It is as if / We had come to an end of the imagination, / Inanimate in an inert savoir.' (428), struggling 'even to choose the adjective / For this blank cold, this sadness without cause' (428). (Tellingly, the adjective that is settled for is the resoundingly kenotic 'blank'. Moreover, the perceived sadness is without cause, as though to suggest it is concurrently intrinsic to the perceiver and the thing perceived.) But then the speaker alights upon a crucial realisation: 'Yet the absence of imagination had / Itself to be imagined.' (428).

Stevens' manifold response to this bind is at least tripartite. One layer of this manifold is phenomenological in its bearing: to accept the world as it is as it appears to us. This is why throughout the poetry such emphasis is placed on the act of sensory perception, on the mere appearances, sounds, smells, and feel of things, and their susceptibility to change in accordance with environmental conditions. Arguably, the deepest mine of Stevens' raw *materia poetica* is indeed the act of perception itself, and with it, as I have previously alluded to, perspectivism. One of his anthology pieces, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' from *Harmonium*, is a famous instance of the latter. Another is 'Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It' from his last published collection *The Rock*. The later poem, a diptych, starkly juxtaposes two illustrations: the first, a version of Stevens' kenotic vision of winter: 'The sky seemed so small that winter day, / A dirty light on a lifeless world, / Contracted like a withered stick.' (435); the second, a version of his plerotic vision of summer: 'He discovered the colors of the moon // In a single spruce, when, suddenly, / The tree stood dazzling in

the air // And blue broke from the sun, / A bullioned blue, a blue abulge, / Like daylight, with time's bellishings, / And sensuous summer stood full-height.' (437). This poem, then, exhibits a microcosm of Stevens' ritual cycle of kenosis and plerosis, emptying and filling.

Another layer is to make explicit that the bare earth, night, what have you, is the foundation of human percipience. The human reduced to merest perceiver of bare reality approaches in Stevens' poetry the essential unity of being: 'It was in earth only / That he was at the bottom of things / And of himself. [...] // The odor / Of earth penetrates more deeply than any word. / There he touches his being. There as he is / He is.' (216). This is an example, not uncommon in Stevens, of language being used against itself to assert the primacy of non-linguistic experience. It is as though the language is compelling the reader away from itself and into the inimitable experience of odour-induced unity to which it is at both an anterior and posterior remove. Stevens points quite pronouncedly to the image of the 'rock', his most contracted figure for bare physical reality. In its namesake poem—"The Rock"—we are told that it is 'the gray particular of man's life, / The stone from which he rises, up—and—ho, / The step to the bleaker depths of his descents...' (447). Here, then, we see the rock as the nonhuman ground for both the plerotic rise and the kenotic descent of the human. The rock is 'The starting point of the human and its end' (447), which seems to ape the pronouncements of Genesis 3:19: 'for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (KJV). However, the gaze of the other half of Stevens' Janus-faced phenomenology perceives the enhancements of reality that language can imbue to perception: 'Words add to the senses. The words for dazzle / Of mica, the dithering of grass, / The Arachne integument of dead trees, / Are the eye grown larger, more intense.' (214). And of metaphor:

The bouquet stands in a jar, as metaphor,
As lightning itself is, likewise, metaphor
Crowded with apparitions suddenly gone

And no less suddenly here again, a growth
Of the reality of the eye, an artifice,
Nothing much, a flitter that reflects itself.

(384)

In 'On the Road Home', the poem's interlocutor recollects his pronouncement that 'The world must be measured by the eye' (186). Mutter argues that 'for Stevens experience at its most authentic is spatial rather than hermeneutic [...] Sight is tautological: it discloses the intensity of the unmediated, non-linguistically-altered being of the world' (Mutter, Fall 2011, 750). The importance of sight for Stevens and its non-pejorative superficial proclivity to 'Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces.' (403) is difficult to overstate. It is a rich variety in Stevens' poetry of the plenitude of immanent experience. In a short early poem, 'Tattoo', Stevens' assimilates and physicalizes the filaments of Whitman's 'A Noiseless Patient Spider'. In Whitman's poem, the speaker is watching a spider launch forth 'filament, filament, filament, out of itself.' (Whitman, 1977, 399). Whitman then transposes the spider's filaments into a metonymy of the speaker's searching soul:

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them.
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

(Ibid)

Stevens' poem begins with a simile: 'The light is like a spider.' (64), which he then literalizes:

It crawls over the water.
It crawls over the edges of the snow.
It crawls under your eyelids
And spreads its webs there—
Its two webs.

The webs of your eyes
Are fastened
To the flesh and bones of you
As to rafters or grass.
There are filaments of your eyes
On the surface of the water
And in the edges of the snow.

(64)

Thus Stevens' tropes on the interconnection between light, eye and object, in such a way as to incarnate vision as a palpably material conjunction between inner and outer. The poem is manifestly about the act of visual perception, quite apart from Whitman's hermeneutic allegory. The illuminant entanglement of eyesight and snow produces, in my opinion, one of the single most beautiful images in all of Stevens' poetry. It occurs in 'No Possum, No Sop, No Taters': 'Snow sparkles like eyesight falling to earth, // Like seeing fallen brightly away.' (261). The cinematic shift in perspective from a ground's-

eye-view of the falling snow, to that of a bird's or god's-eye-view looking down from the snow-clouds, is a quiet masterstroke.

The third layer is in Stevens' many gestures towards the ineffability of the nonhuman world, toward its resistance to the human propensity for interpretation. This layer takes the form of abstraction and *via negativa*, and, I would argue, comprises Stevens' strongest observance of the world's numinous bearing upon us. The world is there and we perceive it, classify it, look for patterns, for ways of reading it. Nonetheless, the pigeons 'make / *Ambiguous* undulations as they sink / Downward to darkness, on extended wings' (56).⁸³ The undulations the pigeons make defy our augury. We are left only with ambiguity, with the mystification of uncertainty. That they are sinking downward to darkness only focuses their numinous trajectory toward the unknown. The blankness of the world underlying our interpretive cognition, and how Stevens' frames its representation, is where we will now turn.

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⁸³ It is interesting to note, in passing, that the penumbra overshadowing the ambiguity of the pigeons' undulations has a lucent, though still extra-linguistic, counterpoint in the 'bright, discursive wings' (221) of the little (is it too much to assume Minervan?) owl in 'On the Adequacy of Landscape'.

CHAPTER TWO: DECREATING THE WORLD, FILLING THE BLANK

*

Decreation is a concept that Stevens adapts from the mystical writings of Simone Weil. He refers to Weil only once throughout the entirety of his work in the lecture he gave at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951: 'The Relations Between Poetry and Painting'. Here is the relevant quotation:

Simone Weil in *La Pesanteur et La Grâce* has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything. (748).

There is no way of knowing for how long Stevens had been familiar with Weil's work. His encounter with Weil's concept of decreation could not have occurred any earlier than 1947 when *La Pesanteur et la grâce (Gravity and Grace)* was first published, four years after Weil's death.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, this has not prevented some of Stevens' critics from reading this concept retroactively into his earlier poetry. Eleanor Cook, for example, uses the concept to analyse the first and last cantos of 'Notes Toward a

⁸⁴⁸⁴ It should also be noted that Weil had never intended the material in *La Pesanteur et la grâce* to be published. In point of fact, the book is comprised of a collection of excerpts from her notebooks, selected, edited, and organised under subject headings by Weil's friend Gustave Thibon.

Supreme Fiction' (Cook, Fall 1980, 46-57, *passim*), and James Lindroth reads it as a subtext of the more chronologically plausible 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' (Lindroth, Spring 1987, 43-62, *passim*).⁸⁵ In fairness, Cook uses the concept as per Stevens' adaptation of it. She correctly acknowledges that 'Stevens, following Weil, is using the word in another sense. He is turning her term to his own uses' (Cook, Fall 1980, 46). She does not, however, account for why she is using a concept that Stevens would have only called by this name several years after writing 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'. As I will be drawing upon the concept to orient the current chapter, I suppose I will have to justify it myself. This can be simply enough done: 'decreation', as Stevens uses the term, is a procedure, as I intend to demonstrate, that he had been following from the beginning of his poetic career. Weil's term, I would argue, is simply a serendipitous find on Stevens' part signifying what to an integral component of his poetic praxis. That leaves us then to explain how Weil and Stevens differ in their usage of the term, and to argue for why it is a relevant notion to read into Stevens, both forward and back.

For Weil, 'to make something created pass into the uncreated' (Weil, 2002, 32) means to divest the self of its createdness, that is to say, of its recognition as being a creature created by God, but distinct from God. God, in Weil's theology, is the creator of the universe, but has hidden himself from his creation: 'God could create only by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself' (Ibid, 38). God is uncreated in the sense that he 'renounces being everything' (Ibid, 33), and 'emptied himself of his divinity' (Ibid, 34) by way of the incarnation: Christ's kenosis was also God's. What remains is the uncreated, hidden God, and the process of decreation of the creature will,

⁸⁵ We know from his letters that Stevens had been working on 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' from at least March 1949. See his letters to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, April 22, 1949 (*L*, 634-35), and to Bernard Heringman, May 3, 1949 (*L*, 635-37). See also: Richardson, 1988, 350-54.

according to Weil, pass through the created into the uncreated, that is to say, the creature's decreation will reunite him or her with God. This process of decreation entails, however, an understanding that 'we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing. [...] May God grant me to become nothing. In so far as I become nothing, God loves himself through me' (Ibid). Weil enjoins us then to undergo our own kenosis, to 'empty ourselves of the false divinity with which we were born' (Ibid), in order to be consummated in the true divinity which is God's love.

Stevens' usage of the term, unsurprisingly, is far removed from Weil's. If I read Stevens' right, his 'reality of decreation' is simply the passage from a universe created by God to one that is not created by God, that is to say, uncreated. That is why decreation, in his usage, passes us through to the revelation of 'the precious portents of our own powers', rather than to a reunification with God. For Stevens, decreation does pass through to nothingness, that is to say, at the base of an uncreated universe is nothingness. There is a *numen abest* inasmuch as the gods themselves have been decreed and have come to nothing. Weil, and other radical theologians, would say that this coming to nothing of God, his absence, is our experience of God. We experience God *in absentia*. Stevens does not go this far—nothingness suffices. This nothingness at the core of *mysterium numinosum*, however, is something that intrigued Stevens throughout his poetic career. He had other designations and designs for this elusive gap—the 'center', 'first idea', and a host of superlatives such as 'utmost', 'final', 'supreme'. Whereas in the last chapter we were focused on Stevens' devotions to the natural, physical world, this chapter will focus on Stevens' metaphysical fictions. These, so far as we can know, properly belong to the abstractions of a mind, and thus pertain to the metaphysics of absence in its most basic sense: as being that which is not present in the physical, empirically observable world. It is inside the playhouse of Stevens'

imagination resisting the given world wherein this meditation on nonphysical being, or, as we will also see, that which is not-yet-become, is confected. However, there is another side to this dualistic story. This side of the story involves the panpsychic-physiomorphic axis that I had outlined in the previous chapter. If we approach Stevens from this perspective then I believe we can read a good deal of his metaphysical fictions as figurations of states of nonhuman or extra-human consciousness. This, however, does not shed an explanatory light on and therefore eliminate the numinosity of these nonhuman or extra-human conscious states, it merely gives speculative form to their otherness. What this approach does do, though, is dissolve the dualism of mind and matter into a fundamental and universal unification of the two. The *mysterium numinosum* nonetheless persists in the seclusion of the nonhuman or extra-human other's subjectivity. To follow this trace through Stevens' poetry we must begin with 'The Snow Man'.

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'The Snow Man' first appeared in the October 1921 issue of *Poetry Magazine* in a series of twelve poems gathered under the title 'Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile'.⁸⁶ In this series 'The Snow Man' appears immediately before 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon'. The original placement of these two poems together (they were later separated in the published order of *Harmonium*) indicates that they are companion pieces. We have seen from our reading of 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon', that Hoon is a figure who boasts to have had achieved a sublime plerotic integration with the world and had thus become, or at least

⁸⁶ [A] "buffo title," as Schulze calls it, meaning "From Out of My Slender Gullet" and "mark[ing] the cycle as an exercise in ventriloquism." (Eeckhout, 2002, 96).

for a time, a man-world. Hoon is the self-asserting human counterpart to the mind of winter kenotically divested of self that is the snow man. Whereas Hoon claims to have had achieved an identity of self and world, the snow man simply is the thing itself—a very specific, though seemingly counterintuitive, form of nothing. The poem:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

(8)

One approaches this poem with a certain degree of trepidation. The countless variety of interpretations that this short piece has given rise to are foreboding in their disputatiousness. I will limit myself to merely two.

Hesla goes to painstaking lengths to demonstrate that the poem should be read, grammatically speaking, as an inferential sentence (Hesla, May 1985, 249-50), of the form: 'If he did X, then he must be—I draw the inference that he is—Y' (Ibid, 250). He likens the poem to a statement such as: 'You must be crazy to think a thing like that' (Ibid). He continues: "The ordinary meaning of this sentence is not, "If you want to believe . . . then you must go insane." It is rather, "From the fact that you believe . . . I infer that you do not have all your wits about you.'" (Ibid). Thus, he draws the conclusion that the poem 'does not tell us what one must do or be in order not to think of any misery. It says, rather, that from the fact that someone does not or cannot think of any misery in the sound of the wind it can be inferred that the person has a mind of winter' (Ibid). This leads Hesla to offer the following reading of the poem:

Once the inferential nature of the poem is recognized the perplexities of the last tercet disappear. The "Nothing that is not there" is of course the something that is—the junipers and spruces, the sun, the ice, the leaves and the sound they make when they blow in the wind. As for the "nothing that is," it is just what Stevens says it is—misery. Misery is nothing, not thing, not a thing, in the sense that the trees and sun and leaves are things, available to seeing, and that the sounds of the winds and leaves are things, available to hearing. But misery is there, and real, as the emotional meaning of the experience of this bleak winter landscape.

[...] What is the case, rather, is that, like misery, the listener himself is "nothing," no thing, not a thing. He is not a thing, not a man of snow, has not a mind of winter, because he is able to behold both the nothing that is not there and the nothing-the misery-that is. The tone of the poem is not that of a steely-eyed positivist calling upon us to distinguish facts from feelings; nor is it that of a dialectical ontologist courageously facing the abyss of nothingness. It is, rather,

the tone of a person bemused, even appalled, by the fact that there can be people who have so far forgotten their humanity as to be unmoved by a winter landscape. (Ibid, 250-51).

The crucial problem, as I see it, with Hesla's interpretation is in what he infers from his inferential reading. If you do not perceive misery in the sound of the windblown leaves then I think you have a mind of winter, logically speaking, implies its inverse: namely, if you do perceive misery in the sound of the windblown leaves then I think you do not have a mind of winter, i.e. you have a mind of humanity. Ergo, the listener is the snow man, who, as Hesla correctly infers, has a mind of winter. The snow man is not, as Hesla otherwise has it, a non-object subjective perceiver who has their humanity to think about misery in the sound of the windblown leaves still intact. In order for Hesla's reading to hold he has to write the snow man off as a person whom the speaker of the poem assumes to be a bit daft in the head for not thinking about the misery in the sound of the windblown leaves, and force the role of 'the listener', who is 'nothing himself', onto the shoulders of a properly humane person who, presumably, is himself (we might otherwise infer that this person is crazy to think that he himself is nothing). If we accept Hesla's inference that the person who does not think about the misery in the sound of the windblown leaves must have a mind of winter, then this only accounts for the subject of the 'and not to think / Of any misery' verb phrase. There is, as I read the poem, a transitional distinction between the person who does not think about misery in the sound of the windblown leaves and the 'listener'. The extent of Hesla's inferential reading effectively ends at the second line of the third tercet, as per his grammatical precis: 'One must have a mind of winter . . . to regard . . . to behold . . . and *not* to think of any misery' (Ibid 250). But this is not where the poem ends, and why Hesla's interpretation of the listener seems so remarkably out of place. One could, however,

expand upon Hesla's inference thus: I infer that if you have been cold a long time regarding the frost and beholding the ice-shagged junipers and do not think of any misery in the sound of the windblown leaves that you must have a mind of winter; but if you literally have a mind of winter and regard and behold all of these things without thinking of the misery in the sound of the windblown leaves then I infer that you must be a snow man, which, as we will shortly see, is not a man at all. The transitional distinction I am referring to occurs between the first and second lines of the fourth tercet: 'Which is the sound of the land / Full of the same wind'. The sound is the same for the listener and the person who does not think about the misery in the sound of the windblown leaves, but the listener and the thinker are not the same entity. The listener, the titular snow man, who has an actual mind of winter, as opposed to an inferred one, is neither thinking nor not thinking about the sound of the windblown leaves. This is because the listener is listening and beholding, but not thinking. More on this shortly.

Bevis, whose thorough book-length study of 'the meditative state of consciousness recorded by especially Buddhist testimonies and the scientific results of neurophysiological and experimental states-of-consciousness research' (Eeckhout, 2002, 78-79) is entirely beyond my competence to summarise here. Suffice it to say, Bevis, taking 'The Snow Man' as his point of departure, seeks to elucidate the ascetic meditative streak that runs through Stevens' poetry, using the aforementioned Buddhist and scientific testimony as a means to demonstrate this propensity.⁸⁷ Bevis emphasises

⁸⁷ Bevis' summary of the meditative state of consciousness reads thus:

A meditative state of consciousness is a naturally occurring physiological phenomenon, possible for any person in any culture and probably experienced by everyone to some degree. There are several characteristics common to its various stages: (1) transience, (2) ineffability, (3) sensations of time and space changed or transcended, (4) sensations of self-loss—that is, absence of thought or feeling according to later reports, and minimal cortical activity as measured by machines during meditation. Such a state of consciousness differs in report and measurable characteristics from other states such as waking, dreaming, day-dreaming, and hypnotic trance, and such calm self-loss differs also from the

that '[c]ontrary to common Western opinion, meditative experience can include vivid sensory perception, as well as reports of nothingness' (Bevis, 1988, 12). This last collocation—that of sensory perception together with reports of nothingness—appear especially pertinent to 'The Snow Man'. Bevis 'begin[s] with the proposition that Western experiences, as described in Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man," who is "nothing himself," or in Emerson's statement in "Nature," "I am nothing," may have something to do with the claim of Yung-Chia (a seventh-century Chinese Buddhist) that in meditation "the roots of mental activity are itself cut out." (Ibid, 20). Maybe so, but my issue with Bevis' work, as informative and fascinating as it is, is that he seems eager to correlate the experience of the listener, the snow man, with a meditative state of consciousness that experiences nothing. My issue is that although I would agree that the poem is stylistically meditative, I would disagree with reading the experience of the snow man as a human experience. This is because I take Stevens' poem at its word, and how I read these words is that they are not about a human subject at all.

A satisfactory reading to me would involve the physiomorphic-panpsychic axis I have already addressed. I must lead off with a very simple premise that is almost universally ignored by critics of the poem. It is quite simply this: that the snow man of the title is exactly that—a snow man that any number of people may have made out of rolling balls of snow together and piling them on top of each other in the vaguest semblance of human form. One may choose to imagine this snow man with a carrot nose, coals for eyes, and twigs for arms if it helps to fulfil the image, but such embellishments are fancifully beside the point. That is because the snow man is simply a

other mystical categories of the occult, vision, and ecstasy (excited self-loss). (Bevis, 1988, 12; also qtd. in Eeckhout, 2002, 79).

synecdochic placeholder for the possession of a mind of winter.⁸⁸ A mind of winter, which the snow man possesses, is exactly that—winter’s mind. The objection could be raised that a mind of winter is merely an anthropomorphism. But this objection can be obviated if we allow the premise of pansychism to stand, in the sense that consciousness is a fundamental and universal aspect of everything that is. We needn’t detain ourselves with the philosophical arguments for or against pansychism, as we are talking about a poem that simply asserts that this is the case. The problem of the snow man ‘himself’ being another anthropomorphic projection—if we are reluctant to settle for the ordinary sense in which we refer to a stack of snowballs as a snow man without actually thinking that it is literally a man—can be dissolved if we invert the projection. The physiomorphic inversion would hold that the idea of personhood has been naturalised into snow. The man with a mind of winter is the actual snow man, not a metaphor for an actual man. Again, we needn’t quibble over why it should be that the snow man possesses a mind of winter and not, say, a frozen lake, or the ice shagging the junipers. Very possibly these particulars also possess a mind of winter. In fact, we might presume that all things that are winter possess a mind of winter, but the poem attributes this possession specifically to the snow man. Now we must address why the snow man, the listener, is ‘nothing himself’. I infer that there are two parts to why the snow man is ‘nothing himself’. The first part is that the snow man is not a self at all, much less a man, ‘he’ is simply snow. The statement ‘nothing himself’ is quite obviously

⁸⁸ David Perkins argues that Stevens’ ‘poem does not describe but merely invokes "The Snow Man" by mentioning him in the title; thereafter the snowman is involved in the poem only as a metaphor of a metaphor. He is a metaphor of a "mind of winter," and this, in turn, is a metaphor of something even more abstract: a mind that entertains nothingness’ (Perkins, 1976, 542). My reading of the poem, as should be quite apparent, does not share in this figurative chicanery. I take the snow man to be literally a snow man, not a metaphor of a metaphor. Neither do I accept that ‘a mind of winter’ is itself a metaphor, except insofar as it applies to what a human subject is inferred to possess were he or she to regard and behold winter and not to think of any misery in the sound of the windblown leaves. The snow man, I contend, literally possesses a mind of winter.

a self-negation in the most literal sense—a negation of self, the ultimate kenosis. The second part is that a mind of winter is itself nothing. Winter is an extrinsically applied human concept to an observable natural state of affairs. To say that winter has a mind, is, in effect, to say that the human concept of winter applied to an observable state of natural affairs has a mind. Moreover, ‘nothing’ is an abstraction, a pure concept. The snow man, and this the poem tells us explicitly, does not think in terms of ‘winter’ or ‘nothing’ because the snow man does not think at all, much less think of itself as winter. It does not think of itself as winter because it neither thinks nor has a self. The snow man’s mind of winter only performs acts of perception: namely listening and beholding. It is non-cognitive in the sense that it does not possess the sort of mind, such as a human mind, that transforms percept into concept. The regarding, beholding, and not thinking of misery in the sound of the windblown leaves from the first three tercets have been dispensed with by our inferential reading from above. The snow man, possessing a mind of winter, cancels itself out by not only being ‘nothing himself’, but also by beholding ‘Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is’. The ‘nothing that is not there’ is simply that which is there, the material world manifesting a state of affairs we humans call winter, and the ‘nothing that is’ is the the snow man’s self-cancelling mind of winter.

What the poem is inviting the reader to do is to imagine being the snow man. The poem then advances what imagining being a snow man could entail. It suggests that if we panpsychically grant to the snow man a mind of winter, this mind will do no more than behold that it is nothing, which is at once only what there is and the nothing that it is. This reading may appear paradoxically vexatious, but it is what the poem, so far as I can determine, actually says. The paradox is insoluble, but it is unavoidably there in the poem. What it tells us is that the snow man possesses a mind that listens and beholds

but does not think, and what it hears and beholds is the nothing of is, or the is of nothing—the barest nouns signifying existence and of that which is not are become one. Bevis' analysis may be allowed a point of entry here insofar as this sort of conscious experience may well be achievable through meditative practice. Be that as it may, the poem is not telling us about a human percipient. 'The Snow Man' retains its numinous charge because it soundly remains ineffably other. I would argue that it is impossible for human consciousness to *perceive* nothing for the entire duration of its existence, and that is why we are so confounded by this poem, because we are presented with a cipher that does exactly that. As the Canon Aspirin learns in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction': 'The nothingness was a nakedness, a point / Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.' (348). The Buddhist who claims to have experienced nothing nevertheless only does so for a limited duration.⁸⁹

Listening and beholding, the snow man's twin perceptions, comprise for Stevens, commonly enough, the two basic building blocks of his poetry. Listening is correlate with the ear, sound, and verbal communication; beholding is correlate with the eye, sight, vision, imagination, and written or symbolic communication. The first branch of correlates culminates in the fictive human-epitome figure we encounter in 'The Creations of Sound': 'a different poet, / An accretion from ourselves, intelligent / Beyond intelligence, an artificial man / At a distance, secondary expositor, / A being of sound, whom one does not approach / Through any exaggeration. From him, we collect.' (275). This formulation is typical of Stevens' figural procedure in the concoction of his fictive beings, which we will take up presently. The second branch of correlates in

⁸⁹ Were one in a less charitable mood, one could refer to Cioran's sketch of a Hindu monk in his aphorism on 'The Language of Irony': 'And when, dazed, we think of some Hindu monk who, for nine years, stood against a wall in paralyzed meditation, irony intervenes once more to inform us that he discovered, at the end of many sufferings, the nothingness by which he had begun!' (Cioran, 1998, 181).

Stevens culminates in his notion of the first idea, or original seeing, which will discuss in the penultimate section of this chapter. To close, we will return to the scene of 'The Snow Man', and the challenge that poem bequeaths to Stevens' later poems to push at the limits of intelligibility.

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Stevens' fictive beings—what we have already seen Lensing refer to as 'human-epitomes'—are quasi-mythological figures. Gary Mike Cronin analyses 'the question that is a giant himself' (397), invoked at the beginning of 'Ordinary Evening in New Haven', by way of alluding to the following startling line from canto VI of 'It Must Be Abstract': 'Abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.' (333). Cronin says that 'Stevens uses his private and cumulative symbology to express the idea that questions, and presumably answers, must be blooded; that is, made human-like. [...] 'Blooding an abstraction is for Stevens a way of apprehending external reality in the lived world by investing a concept with the attributes of a real object. This prosopopeiaic way of making fictions come to life allows Stevens to explore and experiment with his perceptions of the lived world' (Cronin, 1994, 8-9). Not dissimilarly, Grosvenor E. Powell, describes what he calls Stevens' 'persona' as 'personifications, in an epistemological sense, of various subject-object relationships' (Powell, July 1971, 733). He argues that these persona 'replace the gods and heroes of war-like aristocracy as the larger-than-life figures that give us a sense of ourselves and our possible limits. [...] Through them, we see, not quite as a god sees, but usually from a humanly impossible point of view which is, nevertheless, humanly conceivable' (Ibid). These comments trace some of the essential contours of Steven' fictive beings. Often these fictive beings are personifications of concepts or

ideals, but they are often also personifications of sublimated⁹⁰ psychic states, desires, and emotions (and more often than not they are all of these things). They tend to take the form physiomorphic entities bearing human attributes or meta-human entities composed of physiomorphic 'bodies'. Many of them are also protean figures—composed by way of something akin to a cubist multiplicity of perspective. Some of them are the subjects of whole poems or sequences, others make brief cameo appearances in poems in which they play an important, albeit walk-on, role. Some of them reappear across a number of poems, whether as continuations or variations upon their inaugural manifestations. Some of them are given specific names, others are designated common nouns. Many of them are aggregated composites unified in a singular ideal of which they are representative. Some of them are figured as fictive beings that are accessible to a particular way of thinking, others a figured as possible beings that are not-yet-become. And finally, some of them are quite traditional personifications of nature (seasons, earth, moon, sun, etc.), or are drawn and recalibrated from older mythologies, such as Stevens' angels.

One way of thinking about Stevens' fictive beings, such as the Hero, Major Man, the giants, the Green Queen, the Glass Man, the figure of capable imagination, and so forth, are as what he proposes to call in 'The Pure Good of Theory' 'A large-sculptured, platonic person' (290). Platonic personages, which I will call for the sake of brevity meta-humans, built from the ground up, as it were. Another comment that I think is useful in connection with these fictive beings comes from 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words': 'But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, so

⁹⁰ I would like to make it explicit that my use of the term 'sublimated' here is not to be misread as the Freudian concept of diverting or modifying instinctual, usually sexual, impulses into a more socially acceptable activity or expression. I intend it in the sense of an elevation of something to a higher state or plane of existence, which also takes under its wing, by catachrestic extension, the chemical process of converting a solid to a gas and vice versa.

nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same' (665). This goes a long way to understanding how these figures generally work: it is not what they are that matters, but what it is that compels their making. We might recall Stevens' comments from a letter quoted earlier that 'we give our good qualities to God, or to various gods, but they come from ourselves' (*L*, 295). Stevens gives what qualities he cares for to his fictive beings. I think it is fair to say, as Powell does, that these fictive beings are, in their respective measures, 'god substitutes' in Stevens' homemade mythology. They are attempts to populate his supreme fiction with figures that are meant to impress by way of their extra-human capacities. Stevens' oft-cited aphorism is apposite in this regard: 'The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly' (903). The relevance of citing this aphorism here I think can be justified by referring to certain remarks Stevens made in a letter to José Rodríguez Feo, February 26, 1945: 'In the other poem I have defined major men for you.⁹¹ I realize that the definition is evasive, but in dealing with fictive figures evasiveness at least supports the fiction. The long and short of it is that we have to fix abstract objectives and then to conceal the abstract figures in actual appearance. A hero won't do, but we like him much better when he doesn't look it and, of course, it is only when he doesn't look it that we can believe in him' (*L*, 489). Understandably, it is well beyond the limits of this thesis to address all of these fictive beings, thus I will have to limit myself to an exemplary few.

'Paisant Chronicle', the poem Stevens refers to in his letter to Feo, provides a useful precis of Stevens' meta-human figurations:

⁹¹ The poem Stevens is referring to is 'Paisant Chronicle' (293).

What are the major men? All men are brave.
All men endure. The great captain is the choice
Of chance. Finally, the most solemn burial
Is a peasant chronicle.

Men live to be
Admired by men and all men, therefore, live
To be admired by all men. Nations live
To be admired by nations. The race is brave.
The race endures. The funeral pomps of the race
Are a multitude of individual pomps
And the chronicle of humanity is the sum
Of peasant chronicles.

The major men—
That is different. They are characters beyond
Reality, composed thereof. They are
The fictive man created out of men.
They are men but artificial men. They are
Nothing in which it is not possible
To believe, more than the casual hero, more
Than Tarluffe as myth, the most Moliere,
The easy projection long prohibited.

The baroque poet may see him as still a man
As Virgil, abstract. But see him for yourself,
The fictive man. He may be seated in
A cafe. There may be a dish of country cheese
And a pineapple on the table. It must be so.

Many of the composite parts listed above are apparent here. The major men are a meta-human composite aggregated out of all men. They are artificial, fictive, beyond reality (i.e. imagined) but composed thereof (i.e. sublimated), but are nevertheless said to be 'Nothing in which it is not possible / To believe'. The major men are a personified ideal, in that they are metaphorical embodiments of the utmost in bravery and endurance, qualities, the poem tells us, to be admired. They are more possible to believe in than casual heroes (i.e. everyday personages given the appellation of hero), or actual historical persons who endure in our collective memories as myths or abstractions. It is the turn at the conclusion of the poem that catches us off guard, however. After rejecting the casual hero and historical persons the speaker tells us to see the fictive man for ourselves. He may be seated in a café, or, presumably, waiting at the bus stop, or buying a loaf of bread from the local dairy. The scenario is irrelevant. What this turn implies is that we can see the major man in each of us, should we so care to look, as it is from us that he arises. We recall that it is not the water but the force that is the wave. It is not the major men, but the force of bravery and endurance that the major men personify that matters, and is presumably there to be found in us all.

'Examination of the Hero in a Time of War' explores a meta-human persona not dissimilar to the major men of this poem, only with greater figural complexity and variation. We are led to believe that the 'common man is the common hero. / The common hero is the hero.' (244). But then, in the following canto, he is physiomorphised:

Make him of mud,

For every day. In a civiler manner,
Devise, devise, and make him of winter's
Iciest core, a north star, central
In our oblivion, of summer's
Imagination, the golden rescue:
The bread and wine of the mind, permitted
In an ascetic room, its table
Red as a red table-cloth, its windows
West Indian, the extremest power
Living and being about us and being
Ours, like a familiar companion.

(246)

The hero is now no longer common man, but a familiar companion sublimated in the mud, the stars, the kenosis of winter and the plerosis of summer, and, ultimately, as the extremest power. It is the ideal of the hero made cosmically ubiquitous. In canto VIII we are told 'The hero is not a person.' (247), but in the following stanza that he is an emblem, which

...stand[s] taller than a person stands, has /
A wider brow, large and less human /
Eyes and bruted ears: the man-like body /
Of a primitive. He walks with a defter
And lithier stride. His arms are heavy
And his breast is greatness. All his speeches
Are prodigies in longer phrases.

(247)

In Canto XII we are told

The hero is a feeling, a man seen
As if the eye was an emotion,
As if in seeing we saw our feeling
In the object seen and saved that mystic
Against the sight, the penetrating,
Pure eye. Instead of allegory,
We have and are the man, capable
Of his brave quickenings, the human
Accelerations that seem inhuman.

(248-49)

The hero as an allegorical figure is rejected, and again, as with the major men in 'Paisant Chronicle' the hero is returned to its source—within ourselves if we look 'As if the eye was an emotion'. But then in the penultimate canto another elevation takes place. 'The highest man with nothing higher / Than himself' (250), assumes the various roles of 'Man-sun, man-moon, man-earth, man-ocean' (250), and is finally rejected for the 'man-man as he wanted' (250). The same deflation of the self-aggrandizing Hoon that I argued Stevens had performed in that poem, is performed here for the hero. The final stanza announces that 'After the hero, the familiar / Man makes the hero artificial.' (280), and then asks:

But was the summer false? The hero?
How did we come to think that autumn
Was the veritable season, that familiar
Man was the veritable man? So

Summer, jangling the savagest diamonds and
Dressed in its azure-doubled crimsons,
May truly bear its heroic fortunes
For the large, the solitary figure.

(280)

This poem is, ultimately, an overly long periphrastic exercise to arrive at the following basic point: 'The hero is summer, when the world is largest.' (Bloom, 1977, 160).

Although I do not particularly care for the two preceding poems, they are useful illustrations of the complexity of Stevens' figural variation regarding the concoction of his fictive beings. I do not think, however, they come anywhere close to achieving his stated aims. They are too pompous, sentimental, and *too* recognisably human to accomplish the radical defamiliarisation required of a numinous mythos. I will finish this section by tracing a handful of Stevens' meta-human fictions through a series of poems that I think are more convincing, not least of all because the human aspect of these fictions 'resist the intelligence / Almost successfully' (306).

'Asides on the Oboe' opens with a challenge: 'The prologues are over. It is a question, now, / Of final belief. So, say that final belief / Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.' (226). The question of belief in a decreed world is front and centre of this poem:

If you say on the hautboy man is not enough,
Can never stand as god, is ever wrong
In the end, however naked, tall, 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.

(226-27)

The glass man is, not unlike the snow man, a physiomorph. The very notion of a man of glass is transparently abstract. He is both central and global, centripetally interior and centrifugally exterior. That he is responsive 'As a mirror with a voice', summing us up in a million diamonds, suggests that he is a figure of collective consciousness. One is put in mind of the closing tercet of the penultimate canto of 'Ordinary Evening in New Haven': '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.' (416). The glass man is a conduit for precisely this visibility of thought.

The figure of the mirror opens a useful ambiguity embedded in the double sense of 'glass', in that the glass man is both transparent and reflective. He can be seen through, but he also reflects back. This is what enables him to both respond and summarise: 'He is the transparence of the place in which / He is and in his poems we find peace.' (227). A kenotic winter figure, the glass man in summer, 'cold and numbered, dewily cries, / "Thou art not August unless I make thee so."' (227). A sharp pun, it is neither summer nor majestic unless he makes thee so. This is because he is so 'perfect a perceiver of his environment that he becomes indistinguishable from it' (Powell, July 1971, 740). As he is thus one with his environment he makes it so, but his intrusions do nothing to interfere with the environment because he is indistinguishable from it. He is another of Stevens' brilliant paradoxes. The poem finishes with a ritual for the dead, during which the speaker observes that

...we and the diamond globe at last were one.
We had always been partly one. It was as we came
To see him, that we were wholly one, as we heard
Him chanting for those buried in their blood,
In the jasmine haunted forests, that we knew
The glass man, without external reference.

(227).

There is a final unity between the glass man and the mourners of the dead. The glass man turned diamond globe has thus become a figure of universal empathy in his assimilation of the mourners' suffering: 'There was nothing he did not suffer, no; nor we.' (227). As an abstraction of universal empathy he requires no external reference to be known.

This epitomical figure is revised in 'Chocorua to Its Neighbour', who is envisioned by the titular mountain (the speaker of the poem), as 'a shell of dark blue glass, or ice, / Or air collected in deep essay, / Or light embodied,' (264), whose 'body seemed / Both substance and non-substance, luminous flesh / Or shapely fire' (264). The mountain recollects: 'He was not man yet he was nothing else.' (264). Chocorua reports this figure's mountaintop speech:

"The moments of enlargement overlook
The enlarging of the simplest soldier's cry
In what I am, as he falls. Of what I am,

XI

The cry is part. My solitaria
Are the meditations of a central mind.

I hear the motions of the spirit and the sound
Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice
That is my own voice speaking in my ear.

XII

There lies the misery, the coldest coil
That grips the centre, the actual bite, that life
Itself is like a poverty in the space of life,
So that the flapping of wind around me here
Is something in tatters that I cannot hold."

(265)

As with the glass man we have here another, albeit chameleonic, physiomorph, possessed of universal empathy. There is also the panpsychic invocation of a central mind, which this figure, in his solitaria, has access to. Stevens revises the 'fiction' of a central mind in a small group of late, uncollected poems: 'The Sail of Ulysses', 'Presence of an External Master of Knowledge',⁹² and 'A Child Asleep in Its Own Life'. The last of these begins: 'Among the old men that you know, / There is one, unnamed, that broods / On all the rest, in heavy thought. // They are nothing, except in the universe / Of that single mind.' (468). This transposes the figure of a central mind to that of a quasi-transcendent single mind borne by an unnamed thinker, and, were it not for his thinking, the rest would be nothing. In section VI of 'The Sail of Ulysses', the titular soliloquist dissertates on the notion of an ancestral mind anterior to all descendant

⁹² It should be noted that 'The Sail of Ulysses' and 'Presence of an External Master of Knowledge', neither published during Stevens' lifetime, are two versions of what presumably began as a single poem. Both of them share identical opening and closing stanzas. 'The Sail of Ulysses', a poem of eight sections, exceeds in length by some few pages the four sestets of 'Presence of an External Master of Knowledge'. The two poems share certain lines and phrases outside of the opening and closing stanzas.

minds, thus invoking the presence of an external master of knowledge, a further revision on the 'bright *scienza* outside of ourselves' (225) from 'Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun' (224). The man on top of Chocorua, however, possesses a central mind because he is another aggregate meta-human containing multitudes: a 'collective being [who] knew / There were others like him safely under roof.' (266). These others include a captain, cardinal, stone effigy, mother and scholar, which, as Lensing points out, signify 'male and female, figure of action and contemplation, religious and secular, living and non-living' (Lensing, 2001, 158). Thus, in spite of his ventriloquized cry of despair in solitude, he grows strong 'because men wanted him to be.' (266).

Chocorua declaims in section XIX what I would argue is this poem's central statement:

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

(267)

The height and depth of human speech reads conspicuously like a self-reflexive comment on Stevens' own poetic praxis. There are in a number of Stevens' poems meta-human sublimations of the figure of the poet. We have already seen from 'The Creations of Sound' the 'other poet' described as 'a secondary expositor' and 'a being of sound'. This figure is a later revision of the 'metaphysician in the dark' (219) from 'Of Modern Poetry', who is the meta-human translator of 'the speech of the place' (218). The speech of one's contemporary place that must 'speak words in the ear, / In the delicatest ear of

the mind, repeat, / Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound of which, an invisible audience listens, / Not to the play, but to itself, expressed / In an emotion as of two people, as of two / Emotions becoming one.' (219). These figures are effectively aural daimons, sonic intermediaries in the 'universal intercourse' (145) between themselves and silence. They are personifications of the unintelligible blank at the heart of mere sound that operate in such a way as to render it eloquent for the receptive poet to act as mere amanuensis. In 'Men Made out of Words' the human species is sublimated into a singular meta-human poet: 'The whole race is a poet that writes down / The eccentric propositions of its fate.' (310), whereas in 'Reply to Papini' the poet-speaker says: 'You know that the nucleus of a time is not / The poet but the poem, the growth of the mind // Of the world, the heroic effort to live expressed / As victory.' (382-83). Here it is 'the poem' that underwrites its age. We have already seen in 'A Primitive Like an Orb' the sublimation of the central poem as Orphic compositor of the world.

Another variation of Stevens' fictive beings can be found in 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans':

One of the countrymen:

There is

A welcome at the door to which no one comes?

The angel:

I am the angel of reality,

Seen for a moment standing in the door.

I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore

And live without a tepid aureole,

Or stars that follow me, not to attend,

But, of my being and its knowing, part.

I am one of you and being one of you

Is being and knowing what I am and know.

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,

Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,

And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,

Like watery words awash; like meanings said

By repetitions of half-meanings. Am I not,

Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man

Of the mind, an apparition appavelled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn

Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?

(423)

This 'necessary angel of earth' hearkens back to the glass man inasmuch as they both rhetorically function as metaphors for cleansers of vision. The primary difference, of course, is that this is not a meta-human fiction at all, but a transcendent being brought down to earth and made immanent. Stripped of its holy trappings, this angel declares, in typically Stevensian tautological logic, that 'I am one of you and being one of you / Is

being and knowing what I am and know'. An identity between subject and pure perceiver is once again made, as it was with the glass man, only this time there is no guarantee of permanency. Through the borrowed eyes of the angel the peasants are assured that they will come to see the earth again, in a wonderfully musical line: 'Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set' (the alliterative stops of 'stiff' and 'stubborn', succeeded by the spondee 'man-locked', to be picked up again by an alliterated sibilant, are suitably evocative of the derisive tone of the angel). But there is a fulgurant ephemerality about this angel's presence that risks its being easily missed. Whereas the angel of reality in the previous poem threatens imminent departure, the 'antipodal, far-fetched creature, worthy of birth,' in 'A Discovery of Thought' is, properly speaking, a personification of anticipation, a thing not-yet-become. The anticipation is for the arrival of a new lease on the 'first word [...] / The immaculate disclosure of the secret, no longer obscured.' (459). This poem, as I had discussed in the preceding chapter, promises the simultaneous rejuvenation of the earth and the poet's powers. It recalls the earlier 'Celle Qui Fût Hèaulmiette':

Out of the first warmth of spring,
And out of the shine of the hemlocks,
Among the bare and crooked trees,
She found a helping from the cold,

Like a meaning in nothingness

(376).

Not to mention the poem Stevens' chose to close his *Collected Poems* in 1954, namely 'Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself', a poem that also 'At the earliest ending

of winter,' (452), yields 'A new knowledge of reality.' (452). This poem develops by way of a concentric gradation moving outward from the speaker's mind. The bird's cry from outside seems first 'like a sound in his mind.' (451). This is negated by way of a reaffirmation: 'It would have been outside.' (452), followed by another negation, 'It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .' (452). Then another affirmation: 'The sun was coming from outside.' (452). Then comes the moment of revelation: 'That scrawny cry—it was / A chorister whose c proceeded the choir. / It was part of the colossal sun, // Surrounded by its choral rings, / Still far away. It was like / A new knowledge of reality.' (452). The 'c' of the bird's cry does a lot of work in this line. It connotes a musical note; the disintegration of the words 'cry', 'chorister', and 'choir', to their initial letter, inscribing in the very text itself the precedence of the bird's cry; allusively echoes 'The Comedian as the Letter C' from Stevens' first published collection; and has a defamiliarising effect inasmuch as the pronounced sibilant of the letter c is not a sound that birds produce. The concentric pattern of affirmation-negation-reaffirmation-negation-affirmation, removing the sound of the cry and the sun itself further outward from the speaker's seeming mind, is transposed into the image the sun's choral rings synaesthetically fusing the bird's cry with the sun's aureole.

Returning to Stevens' figurations of fictive beings, we should by now be able to discern strong patterns. They are ostensibly vehicles for extra-human modes of perception that can only be imagined rather than seen, on the one hand, or projected satisfactions of certain desires or lacks, on the other. No poet of Stevens' generation was given to his prodigious appetite for producing these sorts of fictive beings. This is primarily because, as we recall from Surette's comments, Stevens chose 'the more difficult course' (Surette, Spring 2005, 145) of a rigorously immanent path than most of his major contemporaries. In choosing this path, he had to make over the 'dominant

blank' (407) of the world he had decreed. His fictive beings are important characters in his ongoing 'war between the mind / And sky, between thought and day and night' (351). The reader of Stevens, holding in mind his idea of believable fictions, may not necessarily find his fictive beings sufficiently believable, but I think this is beside the point.⁹³ If I read Stevens properly, he is simply inviting us to entertain possibilities. In a letter to Henry Church, December 8, 1942, Stevens recounts an interaction that he had had with a student at Trinity College:

One evening, a week or so ago, a student at Trinity College came to the office and walked home with me. We talked about this book. I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction. The student said that that was an impossibility, that there was no such thing as believing in something that one knew was not true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time. There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief; if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. (*L*, 430).

⁹³ Gregory Brazeal takes Stevens' challenge of a believable supreme fiction head-on and finds it sorely wanting. His argument draws upon William James' rejection of the psychological possibility of willing ourselves into believing what we know to be untrue, as well as the logical impossibility of doing the same:

It is not so much that we as human beings lack the capacity to believe what we know to be untrue, as though such belief were simply an ability like any other, and some race of aliens might possess it. Rather, our very concept of belief may imply that what is believed is believed to be true. Our customary ways of using the word "belief" simply do not allow for the possibility of believing what one knows to be untrue. In other words, our inability to will belief in fictions recognized as fictions may be less like our inability to fly or see through steel walls, and more like the "inability" of bachelors to be married, or triangles to have four sides. We can imagine a race of creatures with enormous wings and penetrating vision, but what would it look like for a creature to believe in something it knows to be untrue? (What would it look like if a bachelor got married but succeeded, through sheer force of will, in remaining a bachelor?) (Brazeal, Fall 2007, 97-98).

The Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass* admits to Alice: 'Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.' (Carroll, 1987, 149). This is, of course, spoken by a fictional character—but I think it strikes at an intriguing nub. With literature, whether it is poetry, prose, plays, what have you, even if we know that what we are reading is fictional, this knowledge does not necessarily preclude the fictional text from yielding insights that we may find entirely plausible to believe. We will now turn to another of Stevens' sustaining fictions, the first idea.

*

The notion of a pure percipient, such as we might imagine 'The Snow Man' to represent, unsullied by figurative trope or cognitive deviation, is a recurrent motif in Stevens. It is accompanied by his notion of 'the first idea', which is the prominent subject of the 'It Must Be Abstract' section of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'. Stevens explains what he means by 'A thinker of the first idea' (333), in a letter to Henry Church, October 28, 1942: 'If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea' (*L*, 426-27). Stevens' indebtedness to Blake is clearly apparent here.⁹⁴ In brief, Stevens' 'first idea' carries the double sense of pure concept and original seeing (we recall the etymological root of 'idea' derives from the Greek '*ideîn*', meaning to see). The 'hard lesson', as DeSales Harrison has it, for a thinker of the first idea, for the 'ephebe' instructed to perceive 'the idea / Of this invention, this invented world, / The inconceivable idea of the sun.' (329), is 'the burden of paradox...one of the things the

⁹⁴ One has in mind the famous Blakean proverb: 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.' (Blake, 2005, 53). Of course, for Stevens, the cleansing is a way to get at originary thought, rather than a vision of infinity.

ephebe will learn is something about what he cannot learn, cannot know, cannot do with words' (Harrison, 2005, 59). The pedagogical speaker establishes this burden of paradox in the opening tercet by calling the idea 'inconceivable'. The pedagogue never tells the ephebe what the first idea is, of course, but instructs him on how to go about arriving at it. One of the prerequisites is to cleanse the sun of its supernatural provenance, and 'Let Purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest, / Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber' (329). Recalling the admonition of 'The Man With the Blue Guitar', to 'Throw away the lights, the definitions, / And say of what you see in the dark // That it is this or that it is that, / But do not use the rotted names.' (150), the pedagogue proclaims that Phoebus, now lying in rot, 'was / A name for something that never could be named.' (329). He then blatantly contradict himself in the succeeding tercet by reasserting that 'The sun / Must bear no name,' (330), only to immediately qualify this statement by naming it, 'gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be.' (330).

This difficulty of being opens a rupture between our inability to separate things as they are from how they seem to us. As early as 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream', the speaker delivers the following injunction: 'Let be be finale of seem.' (50), as though to suggest that the ultimacy of seeming, of phenomenal appearance, is the truth of that which is. It is a notion carried through the course of Stevens' poetry. 'The Latest Freed Man', a possible precursor to the pedagogue of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', 'having just / Escaped from the truth' (187) of the 'old descriptions of the world' (187), asserts that the sun, '(the strong man vaguely seen)' (187), has overtaken 'the doctrine of this landscape. Of him / And of his works, I am sure' (187). Motivated by 'how the sun came shining into his room' (187) we are given a description of what it would entail for the freed man 'To be without a description of to be,' (187). The irony is not lost on us.

Nonetheless, the freed man, delivered of the 'strength that is the strength of the sun' (187), undergoes a peculiar transformation: 'To have the ant of the self changed to an ox' (perhaps troping on the Cattle of Helios), which, in turn, is what delivers the freed man of his freedom:

It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.

It was being without description, being an ox.

It was the importance of the trees outdoors,

The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much

That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked.

It was everything being more real, himself

At the centre of reality, seeing it.

It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,

(187)

This is possibly one of the plerotic benefits of successfully thinking of the world in its first idea: an accomplishment of the centre of reality from which everything appears not infinite, but merely enlarged and brighter. A later lyric, 'The Red Fern', reprises this visionary aggrandizement of seeing things, as Stevens' phrases it in 'A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream', 'in a world / Of nakedness, in the company of the sun,' (321-22):

The large-leaved day grows rapidly,

And opens in this familiar spot

Its unfamiliar, difficult fern,

Pushing and pushing red after red.

There are doubles of this fern in clouds,

Less firm than the paternal flame,
Yet drenched with its identity,
Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-motes

And mist-mites, dangling seconds, grown
Beyond relation to the parent trunk:
The dazzling, bulging, brightest core,
The furiously burning father-fire . . .

Infant, it is enough in life
To speak of what you see. But wait
Until sight awakens the sleepy eye
And pierces the physical fix of things.

(316-17)

Ostensibly a poem about sunrise,⁹⁵ the speaker in the final quatrain, acting, as with the pedagogue in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *in loco parentis*, gives a contrary lesson to the infant. Admonishing that it 'is enough in life/ To speak of what you see', and further instructing, somewhat hermetically, to 'wait / Until sight awakens the sleepy eye', is entirely at odds with what has preceded these advisements. The sunrise is not referred to at all, but is represented by way of a metaphorical conceit. The sunrise is the subdued tenor to the red fern's dominant vehicle. As such, the unfurling of this conceit does indeed grow quite wildly 'Beyond relation to the parent trunk', and becomes something of an object lesson of 'A seeing and unseeing in the eye.' (333). This seeing and unseeing in the eye is one of the very functions of metaphor. One does not see the

⁹⁵ Miller describes the poem being 'about the day as governed, centered, and powered by the sun' (Miller, 1985, 153), and points out that '[u]nlike some of Stevens's solar poems "The Red Fern" is explicitly about sunrise, the "appearance" of the sun out of its nighttime occultation at dawn' (Ibid).

sunrise as a fern with the eye. However, in the unseeing eye, the eye of the secondary imagination (to borrow a Coleridgean distinction), resemblances between the two are visualised. Is this poem, then, a lesson by way of contrary example? Or is it in fact an exhibit of the speaker's wakened sight? If the latter, then the implication of the poem is that wakened sight is susceptible to the metaphorical transfigurations of an ecstatic imagination. Piercing the physical fix of things, therefore, would be a piercing through to imperceptible relations, rather than a fixing in place of what the eye alone sees.⁹⁶

Later in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', in canto IV of 'It Must Give Pleasure', we are told that 'We reason of these things with later reason / And make of what we see, what we see clearly / And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves.' (346). 'These things' we later reason about, to skip back two cantos, are the things of the world—the sun, the sea, the moon—untransformed by our inherited doctrines and mythologies, that we are nevertheless 'shaken by...as if they were' (345). One of the social outcomes, then, of the labours of thinking through the first idea is to arrive at a self-reliant commonal. It is certainly not to go the way of the Englishman who had died in Florence:

⁹⁶ Paul Ricoeur's analysis of *epoché* in relation to metaphor is revealing in this context. *Epoché* signifies a theoretical moment of suspension wherein our assumptions and judgements of the external world are temporarily bracketed out in order to focus on phenomenal experience in and of itself. Ricoeur conceives of novel metaphor, of which Stevens' 'The Red Fern' is an apposite case, as 'the emergence of a new semantic congruence or pertinence from the ruins of the literal sense shattered by semantic incompatibility or absurdity' (Ricoeur, 1978, 151). This newly arisen congruence is referentially split between the self-abolished literal sense and the emergent metaphorical sense, thus creating an ambiguity in reference (Ibid, 152). *Epoché*, specifically in this context, signifies the imagination's suspension of ordinary descriptive reference as a new semantic congruence emerges. This is to say, the ordinary descriptive reference is not so much negated as it is superimposed by the emergent semantic congruence. Ricoeur contends:

[T]hat one of the functions of imagination is to give a concrete dimension to the suspension or *epoché* proper to split reference. Imagination does not merely *schematize* the predicative assimilation between terms by its synthetic insight into similarities nor does it merely *picture* the sense thanks to the display of images aroused and controlled by the cognitive process. Rather, it contributes concretely to the *epoché* of ordinary reference and to the projection of new possibilities of redescribing the world (Ibid).

Ricoeur thus makes the claim that the interaction between metaphor and imagination reifies the tensive space opened up between the ordinary descriptive reference and the emergent semantic congruence of novel metaphor, thus *bridging* this cognitive gap to form a basis upon which to redescribe reality.

He stood at last by God's help and the police;
But he remembered the time when he stood alone.
He yielded himself to that single majesty;

But he remembered the time when he stood alone,
When to be and delight to be seemed to be one,
Before the colors deepened and grew small.

(120).

The pathos of the Englishman's degeneration is heightened, in Stevens' estimation, by his recourse to authoritarian institutions in his late life: 'If men have nothing external to them on which to rely, then, in the event of the collapse of their own spirit, they must naturally turn to the spirit of others. I don't mean conventions: police' (*L*, 348). But more importantly, the Englishman has lost his grasp on 'When to be and delight to be seemed to be one'.

Perhaps Stevens' most radical treatment of this rupture of seeming and being is in his poem 'Description Without Place'. In this complex poetic sequence Stevens explores the 'idea that we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself' (*L*, 494).⁹⁷ It is among the most explicit of Stevens' poems to explore the notion of linguistic mediation in the human apperception of experience. It reverses the direction of Stevens' 'repeated thrusts for the thing itself and the first idea, his regular attempts at reaching a pure vision of the world untouched in language' (Eeckhout, 2002, 207), by affirming

⁹⁷ The poem is in seven parts and follows, as Cook outlines, the following schema: '(1) A hypothesis that "to seem—it is to be." (2) Actual seemings, which give identity to an age. (3) Potential future seemings. (4) How things seemed to Nietzsche and Lenin. (5) The experience of a place as description without place. (6) Description as revelation. (7) The importance of the theory of description' (Cook, 2007, 194). Unfortunately, I haven't the space here to respond to each of the parts of this poem.

that descriptions of the world are transformative of the world. This in despite of the fact that our descriptions are without place in the sense that they are idealist formulations of the mind:

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 lispings firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,

In which nothing solid is its solid self.

(301)

This Stevens picks up again later at the conclusion of 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven': 'It is not in the premise that reality / Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade.' (417). It is not in the premise that reality is a solid, nor that nothing solid is its solid self, if one accepts that the very concepts of reality and the world are themselves 'fictions', in the broadest sense of them being descriptions we humans have shaped. It could be that any number of descriptions of 'seemings that are to be, / Seemings that it is possible may be.' (299) may prove more compelling than those we already have. There is an eschatology at play. The sun, too, Stevens' primitive emblem of reality, becomes something seemed:

It is possible that to seem—it is to be,

As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are.

Thus things are like a seeming of the sun
Or like a seeming of the moon or night

Or sleep.

(296)

This is not an abstraction of the sun to the first idea, but a postulation of the possibility that what the sun seems it is. This entirely reverses Stevens' materialist insistence on the thing itself by re-posing the thing itself as a purely mental construct: what it seems, that is, what our minds configure as the sun, is what it is—a thoroughly idealist position. Description, as we are told in canto VI, extends to one of the very foundations of numinous discourse:

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

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be,

A text we should be born that we might read,
More explicit than the experience of sun

And moon, the book of reconciliation,
Book of a concept only possible

In description, canon central in itself,
The thesis of the plentifullest John.

(301)

This continues from the previous canto in which description without place is qualified as 'The spirit's universe [...] / Composed of sight indifferent to the eye' (300). In 'The Latest Freed Man', the man was delivered of his freedom specifically because he was able 'To be without a description of to be'. His revelation was purely an experiential enhancement of sight brought about by a concomitant sun-fuelled expansion of his animality.⁹⁸ In the foregoing canto of 'Description Without Place', the freed man's ecstasy is superseded by an ascetic denial of both self and world in favour of a *sui generis* artifice 'Intenser than any life could be // A text we should be born that we might read, / More explicit than the experience of the sun // And moon'. This 'thesis of the plentifullest John' (an allusion to St John the Divine, author of the Book of Revelations) is even said to hold a prescriptive sway over our existence 'we should be born that we might read'. What this book of reconciliation is supposed to reconcile us to is presumably the concept only possible in description, which, as has been established, is not to the world as it is in itself. It is perhaps a reconciliation to the reverse negative

⁹⁸ Mutter describes the man's freedom as

...a condition of animal potency and autotelic desire ("being an ox"), a condition of pure visuality as opposed to hermeneutic discovery: "the importance of the trees outdoors, / The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much / That they were oak leaves, as the way theylooked." In that poem, knowledge ("not so much / that they were oak leaves") and style ("the way they looked") are at odds. The immanence of visuality is more important than the understanding yielded in the linguistic act of naming. (Mutter, 2009, 79).

of the first idea, insofar as the possible is invariably bound to futurity, whereas the first idea is a desire to discover primal anteriority. Desire for that which is absent would seem to be their common meeting ground, as we are told in canto II of 'It Must Be Abstract' that 'not to have is the beginning of desire. / To have what is not is its ancient cycle.' (330).

Structurally speaking, the first idea and description as revelation are rhetorically generative renewals of vision (sight) and revision (translation of sight i.e. description) in Stevens' poetry. The paradox of the first idea's being inconceivable nevertheless functions as an immanently numinous site of poetic departure for Stevens. The numinosity of the first idea resides precisely in its ineffability. The first idea is ineffable because it is not, in fact, an idea at all. It is, rather, a process of reduction and detachment, which I will have more to say about shortly. This is why, over the course of ten cantos, we as participant epebes in our reading of 'It Must Be Abstract', are never told what the first idea is. We are given instructions of what must be done in order to arrive at the first idea ('Begin, epebe, by perceiving the idea' etc.); psychological motivations for wanting to seek it out ('It is the celestial ennui of apartments/ That sends us back to the first idea, the quick / Of this invention', 'It satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning' (330)); told that it inheres within '*The poem*' ('The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea . . .' (330)); presented with second-order abstractions that supposedly follow from its unstated premise ('It must be visible or invisible, / Invisible or visible or both: / A seeing and unseeing in the eye.' (333)); informed of possessors, non-possessors, and antagonists of the first idea ('It feels good as it is without the giant, / A thinker of the first idea.' (333), 'The first idea was not our own.' (331), 'These are the heroic children whom time breeds / Against the first idea' (332)); elliptical statements that are effectively tautological ('The first idea is an

imagined thing.' (334)); before the final three cantos pass on to an investigation of 'major man' (334-36), whom, it is to be presumed, is a fictive progeny of the first idea.

The closest we come to positive content of the first idea are respectively seasonal (It is desire at the end of winter, when // It observes the effortless weather turning blue / And sees the myosotis on its bush.' (330) and meteorological ('The weather and the giant of the weather, / Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air: / An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.' (333) in their provenance. In the first case desire is categorically not an idea, so we can discount that immediately. The second case proves more promising, especially if we corroborate it with evidence from elsewhere: 'Well, the gods grow out of the weather. / The people grow out of the weather; / The gods grow out of the people.' (191). This additional evidence appears to support the idea that the weather is somehow an anterior progenitive force in the world, which would seem befitting of a first idea. Moreover, if we return to the original quote, the quasi-mythological 'giant of the weather', by way of paratactic apposition, is metaphorised as 'An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought'. 'An abstraction blooded' is arguably, on the one hand, a figuration of the instantiation of the first idea, as though the first idea is contingent upon the union of mind and body. On the other, to say that the giant of the weather is an abstraction blooded is to say that it is the reification of the concept of a giant of the weather, an abstraction given incarnated form, not unlike 'a body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves' (105) in reference to the sea in 'The Idea of Order at Key West', or the bodiless serpent of the aurora borealis in 'Auroras of Autumn', which is figured as 'form gulping after formlessness, / Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances / And the serpent body flashing without the skin.' (355).⁹⁹ Another

⁹⁹ There is a sense in which the sea and the northern lights are more stably identifiable entities or phenomena than the weather. The weather is whatever the atmospheric conditions govern at a given time anywhere in the world, and is decidedly more localized in terms of a human being's perception and evaluation of it. A person in

felicity about the first idea being the weather is that it is in keeping with Stevens' reiterations of environmental determinism that we had touched on in the preceding chapter. My previous assertion that the first idea is not an idea but a process notwithstanding, there remains a crucial problem with settling for this solution. This problem is posed by what I would argue is the crucial canto in this entire section, namely the fourth:

The first idea was not our own. Adam

In Eden was the father of Descartes

And Eve made air the mirror of herself,

Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves

In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;

And in the earth itself they found a green-

The inhabitants of a very varnished green.

But the first idea was not to shape the clouds

In imitation. The clouds preceded us

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.

There was a myth before the myth began,

Alaska and a person in Scotland will probably point at exactly the same things, or at least parts thereof, and say 'that is the sea' or 'those are the northern lights', but their geographical perspective will undoubtedly produce entirely different characterizations of the weather: 'It is dismally wet and grey' says the Glaswegian on Tuesday, while at the same time the woman from Anchorage is enjoying the brilliance of the clustered stars above a crisp, clear, windless sky, and proclaiming its magnificence. The weather, in short, is whatever is climatically around at the time, and is more difficult to point to than either the sea or the northern lights (pointing to the weather would probably involve waving ones arms around in frantic circular motions while declaiming 'This is the weather!'). I think the ubiquitous vagaries of the weather are precisely what attracts Stevens to it as a poetic figure and phenomenal source. Bloom, among several others, recognises that 'for Stevens the prime *materia poetica* is the weather' (Bloom, 1977, 186). Nonetheless, the type of metaphorical figuration involved in the examples of the sea and the aurora borealis, quoted above, is the embodiment of the respective metaphor's tenors in bodiless vehicles, much like the implied figure of bleeding the weather in the form of a giant. A little intellectual fidgeting is admittedly required to think of a giant merely as a concept.

Venerable and articulate and complete.

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

We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues
The air is not a mirror but bare board,
Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

And comic color of the rose, in which
Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips
Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them.

(331-32)

This canto is Stevens' decreation of Genesis. The knockdown is delivered in the first sentence: 'The first idea was not our own.' Neither Adam, the first namer and logocentric ancestor of Descartes, nor narcissistic Eve, are the possessors of the first idea. Eden is merely earth reflected back upon itself, and in that ironic reflection the green is amusingly 'very varnished'. The clouds, synecdoches for the weather, tellingly enough, preceded us. Most importantly, though, 'There was a muddy centre before we breathed. / There was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete.' The earth, as Stevens wishes to persuade us, was a complete myth unto itself before we breathed and fashioned our own genetic myths. And then we have, in the fifth tercet, possibly the most alienating lines in Stevens' *oeuvre*. This is Stevens' bluntest pronouncement on the division between humans and the nonhuman world. Not even the sun blazoning the days can relieve the hardness of the world's recalcitrance. Thus

we find ourselves in a theatre resembling the world, the stage of which is empty of our reflections, and we are reduced to its scholarly mimes, adding the detritus of our meanings to the abysmal instruments of that give them the most diminutive voice. This is Stevens at his kenotic bleakest. Perhaps the only close rival elsewhere in the poetry is the conclusion of 'The American Sublime':

And the sublime comes down

To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,

The empty spirit

In vacant space.

What wine does one drink?

What bread does one eat?

(107)

Curiously, both of these examples turn upon the despair of the *numen abest*. Without God and his attendant myths the spirit is empty, space vacant, and we do not even know what to eat or drink because the sacraments have been denied. Decreating the story of Genesis leaves us estranged players in a strange land. These are quite anomalous pieces in Stevens' *oeuvre*, particularly for a poet who usually celebrates shaking off the musty garb of ancient doctrines in an otherwise companionable world. In saying that, there is nothing in the premise of immanent numinosity that presupposes the ineffable world, the articulate myth complete in itself, shares our concerns for belonging. It is the human listener who hears misery in the sound of windblown leaves, the snow man hears the nothing that is.

In spite of the apparent bleakness of these two examples, they do give us a clearer idea, I think, of what Stevens means by the first idea. As I have said, the first idea is not an idea at all but a process of reduction and detachment. What I mean by this, and I think these foregoing examples provide excellent illustrations of what this process involves, is simply a reimagining of the world without any human or divine intervention. It is obviously impossible to do this, as any reimagining of the world is already an intervention. Nonetheless, it is, as an ascetic and meditative aesthetic praxis—of which Bevis would certainly approve—a useful method for stripping away preconceptions and assumptions about the world, in an *attempt* to perceive it in a new, or at least qualitatively different, light. And again, this is why Stevens merely posits the paradoxical notion of a first idea which supersedes conceivability. The fruits of the notion are the poems themselves. Rhetorically, tropes on kenotic emptiness, silence and darkness, on the one hand, and plerotic superlatives on the other, abstract and occlude both the extent and limit of positive conception and physically available experience. They motion toward a transcendence within immanence.¹⁰⁰ And this is what Stevens' poems perform, repeatedly, as the closing section of this chapter will seek to demonstrate.

*

Stevens positioned at close of his 1923 publication of *Harmonium* a small poem called 'To the Roaring Wind'. It takes the form of an apostrophic address:

¹⁰⁰ Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, for instance, argues that Rilke and Stevens are 'two of the most widely invoked poets in the phenomenological tradition' (Gosetti-Ferencei, Summer 2010, 275), and are responsible for reorienting transcendence from a vertical to a horizontal projection, 'a crossing of horizons between perception and imagination or imagination and reality' (Ibid).

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocalissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it.

(77)

Cook provides a helpful gloss on the Latin epithet: ‘the superlative form, in the masculine singular vocative case, of the Lat. adjective *vocalis*, “that utters a voice, sounding, vocal, singing,” also in a rare poetic use, “causing or inspiring speech or song”’ (Cook, 2007, 86). Thus, the addressor bestows the title of greatest speaker on the wind. The syllable it seeks in the distances of sleep is not disclosed. In another poem from *Harmonium*, ‘Domination of Black’, leaves turning in the wind are commingled with the cry of the peacocks and the turning mind of the speaker sitting at night by a fire. The domination of black is attributed to the ‘color of the heavy hemlocks’ (7), which is in turn compared to the oncoming night ‘striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks’ (7). The poem follows the development of a fugue in which each of the above elements are played off one another contrapuntally to the point whereby it is difficult to distinguish what or who is turning where. It is a poem that tropes on turning, the root of trope, and is highly successful at accomplishing the perceptual vertigo it seeks to develop. These two poems and ‘The Snow Man’ establish early in Stevens’ career a topos of images and tropes that he would revisit often. The basic elements of this topos comprise wind, leaves, paradoxical figures of extra-linguistic utterance, and, more often than not, occur in the kenosis of autumn or winter.

In ‘Farewell to Florida’, the leading poem in Stevens’ second collection, the valedictory speaker leaving Key West by ship, looks grimly forward to his homecoming:

'My north is leafless and lies in wintry slime / Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds.' (98). This poem is effectively a dramatization of the riddance of plerotic summer, here imaged as decadent, to return to the sharpness of the cold: 'The palms were hot / As if I lived in ashen ground, as if / The leaves in which the wind kept up its sound / From my North of cold whistled in a sepulchral South,' (97). 'On the Way to the Bus', a late uncollected poem, expresses, somewhat contrary to expectation, a plerotic fulfilment in winter:

A light snow, like frost, has fallen during the night.

Gloomily, the journalist confronts

Transparent man in a translated world,

In which he feeds on a new known,

In a season, a climate of morning, of elucidation,

A refreshment of cold air, cold breath,

A perception of cold breath, more revealing than

A perception of sleep, more powerful

Than a power of sleep, a clearness emerging

From cold, slightly irised, slightly bedazzled,

But a perfection emerging from a new known,

An understanding beyond journalism,

A way of pronouncing the word inside of one's tongue

Under the wintry trees of the terrace.

Journalism, mere reportage, is ironized as the fluency of poetic description. The journalist, a stand-in for the poet of description, confronts a revision of the glass man from 'Asides on the Oboe'. This confrontation enables him to see the translated world transparently. The journalist sublimates from the winter's elucidation 'a perfection emerging from a new known'. The understanding beyond journalism, that is to say, beyond description, is this perfection emerging from a new known, a trope inverting the first idea from original seeing to the revelation of futurity. The word *inside* of one's tongue is obviously unpronounceable. This poem, as we so often find in Stevens, sends us back to the limits of expressing that which can only be experienced. The sense of the poem is clear enough: standing outside on a winter morning is bracing. Stevens takes this basic experiential premise and synaesthetises it into a clarification of mind, which, as the logic of the poem goes, is next in line to revelation. A revelation, nonetheless, that can only be pronounced inside, not with, the tongue.

In 'Postcard from the Volcano', an apocalyptic poem imagining the children of a future generation 'picking up our bones', the misery in the sound of the leaves from 'The Snow Man' is outdone: 'The spring clouds blow / Above the shuttered mansion-house, / Beyond our gate and the windy sky // Cries out a literate despair.' (129). The wind speaks, here as in 'The Snow Man', an emotional language to the human listener. The entreaty to the roaring wind to speak the syllable it seeks is, in both of these cases, extra-linguistic. In 'Continual Conversation with a Silent Man' it is a proliferation of meaning that provides interpretive difficulties: '...and the wind, / Of many meanings in the leaves, // Brought down to one below the eaves, [...] // It is not a voice that is under the eaves. / It is not speech, the sound we hear // In this conversation, but the sound /

Of things and their motion: the other man, / A turquoise monster moving round.' (312-13). Who or what is the turquoise monster? Why is the conversation with this silent man continual? Is this monster the reeling leaves imbued with the colour from 'the turquoise hen and sky'? (312). These questions are unanswerable, and the leaves' many meanings will impart no more information than the sound of their motion. In 'The Motive for Metaphor': 'The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves / And repeats words without meaning.' (257). This is a flat negation of both verbal and emotional communication, an unintelligible blank. In 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' the leaves merely resemble thought: 'And leaves whirling in the gutters, whirlings / Around and away, resembling the presence of thought, / Resembling the presences of thought, 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.' (404). This passage reprises the concessions Stevens' had made in 'Description Without Place', and, accordingly, the self, the town, and the weather speak in unison the thought that they resemble. 'The Region November', one of Stevens' last poems, expands upon the unintelligibility of the wind as a critical rebuke to the anthropocentric desire to seek a human tongue in nature:

It is hard to hear the north wind again,
And to watch the treetops, as they sway.

They sway, deeply and loudly, in an effort,
So much less than feeling, so much less than speech,

Saying and saying, the way things say
On the level of that which is not yet knowledge:

A revelation not yet intended.

It is like a critic of God, the world

And human nature, pensively seated

On the waste throne of his own wilderness.

Deeplier, deeplier, loudlier, loudlier,

The trees are swaying, swaying, swaying.

(472-73)

Feeling too is denied. The critique is levelled not only at the anthropocentric desire to fix a world in language, but also at the theocentric desire to establish ultimate meaning. It is a radical gesture from Stevens, only to be outdone by the marvellous late palinode to 'The Snow Man', 'The Course of a Particular'. But before we read that poem we will briefly look at the text that bridges the two. I am referring to section IV of 'Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas':

On an early Sunday in April, a feeble day,

He felt curious about the winter hills.

And wondered about the water in the lake.

It had been cold since December. Snow fell, first,

At New Year and, from then until April, lay

On everything. Now it had melted, leaving

The gray grass like a pallet, closely pressed;

And dirt. The wind blew in the empty place.

The winter wind blew in an empty place—

There was that difference between the and an,

The difference between himself and no man,
No man that heard a wind in an empty place.
It was time to be himself again, to see
If the place, in spite of its witheredness, was still
Within the difference. He felt curious
Whether the water was black and lashed about
Or whether the ice still covered the lake. There was still
Snow under the trees and on the northern rocks,
The dead rocks not the green rocks, the live rocks. If,
When he looked, the water ran up the air or grew white
Against the edge of the ice, the abstraction would
Be broken and winter would be broken and done,
And being would be being himself again,
Being, becoming seeing and feeling and self,
Black water breaking into reality.

(230)

It is mid-spring but winter has been long in leaving. The man ventures into the 'winter hills' after the snow has finally melted to investigate whether or not the lake is still frozen over. Stevens then revises the negations of 'The Snow Man'. On a simple play on the definite and indefinite articles the question of a or the man's existence hinges.¹⁰¹ No man echoes snow man, the dropping of the bookending letters revealing the snow man's true self. The logic of this passage suggests that 'a man' is an abstraction, or, conversely any man, which amounts to the same, but 'the man' refers to an actual person. The same

¹⁰¹ Stevens' performs a similar play on the definite article in 'The Man on the Dump': 'Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.' (186). It is, as I understand, an extreme example of Stevens' tautology. Truth is reduced to the definite article, suggesting that anything predicated by a definite article is closer to the truth than anything predicated by an indefinite article. Or, perhaps more radically, the definite article is the truth, period. I think the full stop at the end of this poem is suggestive.

applies to place. 'No man that heard a wind in an empty place' is a very blatant restatement of the earlier poem's famous crux. What is actually more arresting in this section is the man wanting to see if the place 'was still / Within the difference'. What would it mean for a place to be within the difference of the and a? The breaking of winter being equated with the breaking of the abstraction would seem to suggest that winter is abstract. It belongs on the side of 'a' as opposed to 'the'. But if when he arrives and beholds the 'Black water breaking into reality' then he would be able to be himself again. What this implies is that the man's journey into the winter hills is a kenotic descent into approximating the state of the snow man, frozen from being. Only the confirmation of the defrosted lake will free him from this abstraction.

'The Course of a Particular', as with its predecessor, is a poem of five tercets:

Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,
Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.
It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.

The leaves cry . . . One holds off and merely hears the cry.
It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.
And though one says that one is part of everything,

There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
And being part is an exertion that declines:
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.

(460)

The particular whose course is being plotted in this poem is the 'cry' of the leaves. We notice that in a poem of only fifteen lines the word is repeated nine times. We remember from our reading of 'The Region November' that the trees in that poem, although they were saying 'On the level of that which is not yet knowledge', somewhere less than feeling and speech, they nonetheless were providing a critique. The cry of the leaves in this poem is not anything else than crying. There is no misery. This is late Stevens, allowing things to be in and for themselves, without fussing over evasions, deviations, qualifications, seemings, and so on. We have seen a similar letting be in our reading of 'Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself'. In 'A Note on Moonlight', another poem from this late period, he writes: 'The one moonlight, in the simple-colored night, / Like a plain poet revolving in his mind / The sameness of his various universe, / Shines on the mere objectiveness of things.' (449). There is a noticeable change of tone and priority in these marvellous late poems. A spare equanimity in the face of numinous otherness: 'And being part is an exertion that declines'. The cry of the leaves do not transcend themselves. The final finding of the ear is the sound of the cry itself and nothing more. It is not a universal cry, no appeal is being made to gods, heroes, or humans, it is a particular self, and, finally, concerns no one at all. The gradual relinquishment of this letting be emphasised by the three commas in the final line separating 'Itself, until, at last,'.

To finish I will look at one last poem. It takes us away from the world of winter and recalls the setting of Stevens' Florida poems. It is, however, not Florida, it is, in fact, nowhere at all. The poem I have in mind is 'Of Mere Being':

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

(476-77)

Cook explains that the title of this poem puns on the double sense of 'mere': 'This is mere (bare, only) being and also mere (utter, very) being' (Cook, 1988, 312). The pun is apposite for on the bare side of the pun the syntax and imagery is spare. The scene depicted is of a cohesive and singular piece. On the utter side of the pun the poem is a projection that exceeds thought, it is beyond reality. It is, to be sure, a poem in extremis. Many critics have pointed out its similarities to Yeats' Byzantium poems, so I would only

deem it obligatory to mention what is an apt comparison. In the same vein, certain critics have wondered whether or not it is a vision of imaginary paradise, or a threshold poem *en route* to death. The bird who sings in the palm at the end of the mind is unmistakably a phoenix. Cook also points out that '[t]he Greek word for this fabulous sacred bird is also used for a date-palm' (Ibid), and thus draws the inference that the bird both sings in and is the palm. It is, to my knowledge, the only poem like it in all of Stevens' poetry, inasmuch as it is an otherworldly depiction that is neither being employed as an ironic takedown, nor is it being transposed to an immanent social imaginary. It exists in a nonhuman, paradisaic foreignness all on its own.

CONCLUSION:

WE SAY GOD AND THE IMAGINATION ARE ONE . . .

*

'The lean cats of the arches of the churches, / That's the old world. In the new all men are priests.' (229), so says the speaker in 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas'. The aim of this thesis has been to interpret Stevens' poetry in such a way that it does justice to its inherently numinous elements without doing violence to the dispossession of traditional religious belief upon which it is predicated. I have used Weber's theory of the disenchantment of the world as a framing device in which to situate the occasion of Stevens' poetry. I have not attempted to argue that Stevens' poetry is a substitute for traditional religious observance, as the two practices are and should be kept distinct. Poetry, to paraphrase Barzun, calls its reader to enjoy but not to be enjoined. That said, Stevens' poetry, as I hope to have convincingly demonstrated,

evinces many qualities that could be construed as religious in their orientation. That is why I have chosen to interpret Stevens' poetry in the context of what I have been calling immanent numinosity. The basis of my argument has been that the concept of the numinous pertains to that which is ineffably other, and therefore falls within the purview of the *mysterium*. The presence of divinity is not required to make this concept hold. One need only be a non-omniscient conscious subject. I have taken the polarities of plerotic and kenotic ritual and abstracted them in order to plot the coordinates of my rhetorical analysis of Stevens' poetry. In so doing, I have shown just how replete it is with figures of fullness, emptiness, darkness, illumination, silence, renewal, desolation, centrality and finality. Stevens is through and through a poet of utmosts and extremes. Furthermore, I would maintain that Stevens, in his ongoing engagement with the 'idea of God', and his numerous variations upon this idea, can be construed as at the very least an aesthetic, experimental theologian. I have also traced through the poetry what I have identified as a panpsychic-physiomorphic axis underpinning much of Stevens' peculiar figuration. Nowhere in my reading of the secondary literature have I found anybody else making these profitable connections.

In Stevens' poetry, early through late, the world, the earth, the cosmos, nature, are treated as ineffably other entities in and of their own right. Stevens frequent recourse to the use of logologically resecularised religious language is indicative of this orientation. As are his poems that mimic forms of devotional address or ritualised veneration. He is a poet who works on a large canvas. Also, his reiterations of the adequacy of the world, of lived immanent experience, signifies a poet thoroughly engaged to a reconciliation with the world as it is, without any reaching out for an improved hereafter or transcendent dispensation. That is why I have argued in my first chapter that Stevens' poetry can be read under the aegis of religious naturalism.

Religious naturalists dispense with God, but retain what Nagel calls a religious temperament. That, I hope to have persuasively demonstrated, is an entirely befitting characterisation of Stevens' work. As Stevens' writes in 'Landscape with Boat': 'He never supposed divine / Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing / Was divine then all things were, the world itself' (221).

In the second chapter I argued that in decreating the world, that is, of stripping it down to its phenomenological basis without any recourse to divine origins, sent Stevens on a search for what he called the 'first idea'. The first idea, an impossibly elusive blank, nonetheless proved an enormously productive stimulus of rhetorical generativity. I have also examined a number of his fictive beings, which, as we have seen, are figurative experiments in states of consciousness or modes of perception unavailable to ordinary human experience. I also began and finished the chapter with an examination of a series of poems that push intelligibility to its limits.

The limit and extent of immanent numinosity in Stevens' poetry are the very things that are most germane to its representation. The first, and perhaps the most recurrent in the poetry, is paradox. Paradox is an effective means of figuring inconceivable states of affairs. We have seen, to take but one example, that in 'The Snow Man', the triple negation that concludes that poem is, ultimately, insoluble. Hence the plethora of interpretations that have grown up around such a very small poem. If you are going to write on Stevens, it is almost a rite of passage that you will sooner or later have to cut your teeth on that Gordian knot of a sentence. The second is Stevens' extensive use of superlatives. Most superlatives bear no empirical test. They are pure rhetoric. Stevens not only frequently uses superlatives, but also compounds multiple superlatives into condensed stretches of syntax. Moreover, he is not shy of neologising superlatives if it suits his rhetorical ends—delicatest, extremest, savagest, and

plentifullest, are just a few examples. A third technique, is, as Stevens says, to resist the intelligence almost successfully. The greatest contributor here is ambiguity, especially when mysterious figures, who enter the poems without explanation of what or who they are, body it forth. We recall, for instance, the turquoise monster from 'Continual Conversation with a Silent Man'. Stevens' poetry abounds with these sorts of numinous beings.

I would like to finish with a brief reading of Stevens' poem 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour'. I think it is one of the poems that best exemplifies what I have been arguing for throughout this thesis:

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one . . .

How high that highest candle lights the dark.

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

We make a dwelling in the evening air,

In which being there together is enough.

(444)

This poem elegantly weaves together Stevens' superlative rhetoric with his consolations of adequacy. The addressor of the 'we', the interior paramour, is the most difficult thing to determine about this poem. I am attracted to B. J. Legget's reading. Legget finds it 'curious that "Final Soliloquy" has so often been read as a poem about the power of the human imagination, the elevation of the self to Godlike status. As is the case with all the late poetry, the endeavour of the poem is in the opposite direction, effacing the individual imagination or mind as a mere inhabitant of a larger imagination, a "central mind.'" (Legget, Spring 2005, 171). He explains that by definition a paramour is the person beloved in a relationship, not the lover. He maintains that it follows from this that the soliloquist is the contained and not the container (Ibid, 174-76). That is to say, the soliloquist is the beloved of 'the central mind', within which he is contained. This clearly holds quite significant implications for the famous crux: 'We say God and the imagination are one . . .' For if the central mind is the embodying companion of the soliloquist, and they are both saying that God and the imagination is one, then, as Stevens' reasons in the *Adagia*: 'the thing imagined and the imaginer are one. Hence, I suppose, the imaginer is God' (914). How high that highest candle lights the dark indeed! Could this be a reconciliation, late in Stevens' life, with God the imaginer? There

is of course the matter of his alleged death-bed conversion to Catholicism.¹⁰² But this, of course, is the stuff of mere speculation. And after all, it is a poem not a confession. In the world of the poem, at least, the companionship struck between the interior paramour and the central mind, whatever the latter might be, is enough. James Merrill recites this poem for the Stevens episode of the 1988 documentary series *Voices and Visions*. After finishing his recital, his eyes lowered, he wears a brief look of astonishment, as he raises his eyes back to his interlocutor he releases a short chuckle, and says: 'Sometimes I feel about this poem the way other people feel about the 23rd Psalm' (Pitkethly dir., 1988). And that is about the gist of it.

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¹⁰² See: Janet McCann, (Spring 1984), 'A Letter from Father Hanley on Stevens' Conversion to Catholicism', *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 18:1, 3-5.

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