WALLACE STEVENS

WALLACE STEVENS: AN APPROACH TO THE LANGUAGE OF HARMONIUM

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INTRODUCTION

> What did its first critics find to commend in this book [Harmonium] ? In Josephson's review, it was "a mathematical, a metaphysical quality . . . which is entertaining in the highest sense." In Wilson's notice, the poet's mastery of a style, his "curious, ironic imagination, "his percipiency, and distinguished fancy. In Van Doren's, his delicately enunciated melody, his clipped cleanliness of line, his general excellence." Louis Untermeyer . . . granted Stevens "a certain sonority," "verbal elegance," "some splendid phrases," "exotically splashed lines," and "witty precisions." "There can be no two opinions as to the uniqueness of poetic expression in Wallace Stevens," said The Boston Evening Transcript; it praised his "pure felicity of expression," his "judicious use of onomatopoetic methods," his restraint, the "opulence of his poetry, "A living roundness of diction, a sharp and nervous selection proceeding from rich reservoirs of imagination," and above all its musical quality, "a full bell-like tone, a resonance that hangs in the air."[1]

These critical judgements, occasioned by the appearance of Harmonium in 1923, are more or less a reiteration of what had been said ever since Stevens' first appearance in the little magazines some nine years earlier. The object of most attention was obviously the singular Stevens style, and in particular, the language, since this appeared to lie nearest to the surface and so seemed most accessible as well as most distinctive. Encountering such poetry as:

> The lacquered loges huddled there
> Mumbled zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay.

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[1] Hi Simons, "Vicissitudes of Reputation, 1914-1940", Harvard Advocate, CXXVII (December, 1940), 36.

The moonlight
Fubbed the girandoles.[2]

the coterie of Stevens' readers responded with delight -- or irritation at what they felt was mere verbal sleight-of-hand. Those who merely indulged themselves in Stevens' poetry praised him for his gorgeousness but were generally at a loss to define this further or to relate it significantly to a theory of poetry.

A typical, well-intentioned review of this kind appeared in Poetry I923-4. After declaring with incredible confidence that last lines have no significance in a poem such as "The Comedian as the Letter C", the reviewer describes her reading of this poem:

> . . . already one has looked back a dozen times, read and re-read passages, always at a headlong pace, catching up with oneself again, stumbling ahead breathless with eagerness, laughter, delight; and to come to the end means merely that one will turn back to this passage or that, which teased with a glimpse into something that demands to be more clearly comprehended before one is done with it! After all, there is a lot one never quite "gets". . . .
> . . . . . .
> To attain certain effects he keeps wild adjectives in cages, from which they featly leap upon the startled noun and elope with it. This is very stimulating to the reader.[3]

There is no doubt about the enjoyment or the admiration but both lack qualification of a sort that would illuminate the poetry. There is recognition of "something that demands to be more clearly comprehended" but for the most part the response is to the surface

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[2]Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (London, I959), p. II. This volume will hereafter be cited as CP.

[3]Marjorie Allen Seiffert, "The Intellectual Tropics", Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, XXIII (I923-24), I54-I60.

of the poem alone. With the exception of such perceptive critics as Marianne Moore, the admirers of Stevens' early poetry tended towards this ill-defined response and consequently were as unjust to Stevens as his detractors were. The situation is summed up by R.P.Blackmur:"Mr. Stevens has a bad reputation among those who dislike the finicky, and a high one, unfortunately, among those who value the ornamental sounds of words but who see no purpose in developing sound from sense."[4]

While Winters called him the greatest living American poet there were a considerable number of critics who castigated Stevens on the grounds that he indulged in exoticism and aestheticism for their own sake, and that his way with words, while sometimes momentarily amusing or entertaining, led more often to obscurity. In other words, these critics were guilty of a fallacy of interpretation similar to that of some of Stevens' admirers, in that they were aware of the impact of the diction but not of its significance in relation to the whole body of poetry and to Stevens' personal ideology.

"Poetry is a poetic conception, however expressed. A poem is poetry expressed in words. But in a poem there is a poetry of words. Obviously a poem may consist of several poetries."[5]

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[4]R.P.Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens", in his Language as Gesture (London, 1954), p. 221.

[5]Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, ed. S.F.Morse, (New York, 1957), p.163. This volume will hereafter be cited as OP.

Stevens' poems are not just poems about jars in Tennesee; they are poems about poetry. The medium is at least as important as the content, and the medium, of course, is language. Stevens' language is the manifestation of a sensibility, his style is an affirmation of self; the poem is "a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains."[6] The making of a style is, as Yeats claimed, the making of a self. In view of this it would seem profitable to examine Stevens' style beyond its surface glitter, to attempt to discover why Stevens chooses the words he does, and their relation to the other poetries of the poem.

In this thesis I wish to examine Stevens' varying uses of language in the poetry of Harmonium. The study of language cannot be neatly confined, especially in poetry such as this where rhetoric, for instance, is at one point the subject and at another the means of expression, where nonsense belies its own name at the same time as it delights in being nonsense. In view of the range of uses and effects of language in the hands of a poet like Stevens, it is as well to make clear some of the basic functions of language in the hands of any poet:

> We may say that the duty of the poet, as poet, is only indirectly to his people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve. In expressing what other people feel he is also changing the feeling by making it more conscious; he is making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves. But he is not merely a more conscious person than the others; he is also individually different from other people, and from other poets

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[6]Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel, Vintage Books (New York, 1965), p. 171. This volume will hereafter be cited as NA.

> too, and can make his readers share consciously in new feelings which they had not experienced before . . .
> . . . . . .
> You must not imagine me to be saying that the language which we speak is determined exclusively by our poets. The structure of culture is much more complex than that. Indeed it will equally be true that the quality of our poetry is dependent upon the way in which the people use their language: for a poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him. If it is improving he will profit; if it is deteriorating, he must make the best of it. Poetry can to some extent preserve, and even restore, the beauty of a language; it can and should also help it to develop, to be just as subtle and precise in the more complicated conditions and for the changing purposes of modern life, as it was in and for a simpler age. But poetry, like every other single element in that mysterious social personality which we call our "culture," must be dependent upon a great many circumstances which are beyond its control.[7]

Eliot submits, then, that the direct duty of the poet is towards language; he also allows the close relation between the language and the culture, and so between the poet and the culture. But in claiming that the poet's duty to language is more direct than the poet's duty towards the people he is perhaps making an artificial and rather misleading distinction. The poet selects the language he uses from the body of diction available to him; selection implies the preference of one thing over another and therefore the poet, through his chosen language, is transmitting certain values. And where values are concerned the people -- and the culture -- are also concerned. "Poetry is . . . a means whereby, through the imaginative use of language, we may be made

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[7]T.S.Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry", On Poetry and Poets (New York, 1957), pp. 9, 12-13. For a discussion of this view see also R.H.Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (New Jersey, 1961), pp. 10-15 passim.

aware of the values of a culture as they have (and have not) made possible the communal life of the individuals of whom it is composed."[8] This is not to say that the poet writes with a definite moral purpose -- "Ethics are no more a part of poetry than they are of painting"(OP I63) -- but rather that he cannot help but reveal in his poetry a certain system of values. The perceptive poet is aware of this: "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 that they give" (OP I59).

A study of Stevens' language, then, involves a study of his personal ideology and its relation to contemporary culture as well as a study of the aesthetic aspects of diction. My intention, therefore, is first of all to examine something of the cultural climate in which Stevens' early poems were written and to discover, from the poetry and the prose, Stevens' reaction to this environment and, as a corollary of this, his attitude towards poetry. I then wish to look at the poems in Harmonium in an attempt to define the different uses of language. Certain general principles should emerge from this and I shall go on to demonstrate these more particularly by analysis of what is possibly the most important poem in Harmonium, "The Comedian as the Letter C".

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[8] Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (New Jersey, I96I), p. I2.

The reason for my choice of topic is, I hope, clear. It has become something of a critical commonplace to say that Stevens' themes change little from the early poetry to the later; it would seem, therefore, that one of the most profitable ways to trace Stevens' development is by examination of his changing style rather than his subject, though ultimately it is difficult to separate the two. But primarily the reason for my choice of topic is a desire to read Stevens' poems properly. "The thing said must be the poem not the language used in saying it. At its best the poem consists of both elements"(OP 165). Though one wishes to understand "the thing said", the language is obviously very important. It seems to me that a good many critics have fractured Stevens' poems in the reading, have separated the language from the poem, and have responded to this language at a very superficial level. With the notable exception of R.P.Blackmur, few have attempted to fully understand the diction in a poetry that is virtually the world as word. "It is not every day that the world arranges itself in a poem" (OP 165). An examination of the language of the poem may help towards an understanding of the world of the poem.

THE IVORY TOWER AND THE PUBLIC DUMP

> Not only does any given diction vary according to genre (i.e. according to the effect the poet wishes to produce) and according to tone, but one scheme or structure of diction will vary from another, because of the different cultures from which they spring . . . . It seems as if the poet's choice of diction is determined in part, at any rate, by the structure and prevailing ideologies of his society. If this is so, then the only diction which can be right for a modern poet is the sort of diction which his own society throws out, that is to say, the diction we have already seen coming out of changes in fashion.[1]

In his essay, "Ulysses"(1923), Eliot writes of "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[2] It is this panorama which is mirrored in the fragmented world of "The Waste Land"; and the world of the waste land is that which confronts the modern poet. The problems that confronted Eliot are basically the same as those which confronted Stevens, or indeed any man of sensibility living in modern, democratic America. The difference lies in the differing responses made by the two poets, in the very distinct "solutions" they offered to the modern dilemma.

Before attempting to establish the effect of a particular culture on a poet's diction, it is necessary to discover the effect of that culture on the poet's personal ideology. In other words,

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[1] Donald Davie, Purity of Diction in English Verse (London, 1952), pp. 9-10.

[2] T.S.Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth", in M.Schorer, J. Miles, and G.Mackenzie, eds., Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgement (New York, 1948), pp. 269-71.

it is necessary to define, to a certain extent, the culture itself, and the problems it raises for the poet. Wallace Stevens does something of both in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words". The passage is worth quoting at length since it articulates Stevens' awareness of several important aspects of contemporary culture:

> The spirit of negation has been so active, so confident and so intolerant that the commonplaces about the romantic provoke us to wonder if our salvation, if the way out, is not the romantic. All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence. This is accompanied by an absence of any authority except force, operative or imminent. What has been called the disparagement of reason is an instance of the absence of authority . . . .
> The enormous influence of education in giving everyone a little learning, and in giving large groups considerably more: something of history, something of philosophy, something of literature; the expansion of the middle class with its common preference for realistic satisfactions; the penetration of the masses of people by the ideas of liberal thinkers, even when that penetration is indirect, as by the reporting of the reasons why people oppose the ideas they oppose, -- these are normal aspects of everyday life. The way we live and the way we work alike cast us out on reality. . . . We are close together in every way. We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo, and so on. There is no distance. We are intimate with people we have never seen and, unhappily, they are intimate with us. . . . The way we work is a good deal more difficult for the imagination than the highly civilized revolution that is occurring in respect to work indicates. . . . As for the workers, it is enough to say that the word has grown to be literary. They have become, at their work, in the face of the machines, something approximating an abstraction (NA I7-I9).

In order to extract a coherent body of "doctrine" from Stevens' prose writings, it is necessary to painstakingly follow the course of an idea through a series of not wholly consistent treatments. Taking as a starting point the passage above, one

discovers a number of such "ideas" with which Stevens was preoccupied. The first concerns the defense of the romantic in an unromantic age; the second concerns the nature of that age, in that it is characterized by the absence of authority, and, if not directly alien towards the imagination, it is hardly sympathetic. In such an age the identity of the self is threatened. These are the basic points arising from this passage, but if these are the problems most directly stated there are others as severe though implicit -- the "absence of authority", for instance, implies problems of belief and commitment. In addition to such primary considerations, the above passage also indicates certain attitudes that are revealing in a personal as well as an artistic light. For instance, there is -- as there is, significantly, in Yeats and Eliot -- an implied distaste for the middle class, or at least for their aspirations. I propose to look further at the most important of these points, beginning with what seems to me the most important of all -- the "spirit of negation" and the accompanying "absence of authority."

When the myths and the gods are gone there is no framework of belief, no transcendent authority; no longer are the words "in the script," instead the mind must find "what will suffice" (CP 239). The society in which Stevens lived -- indeed, present-day society -- was a sceptical one; it had lost the traditional beliefs and required something to take their place. The response to this need came, as usual where there is no priest, from the artist, or more particularly for the purposes of this paper, from the poet.

As might be expected, there was no uniformity in proffered solutions. Yeats received A Vision as his own personal authority, claimed unity of being as the "solution" to be strived for. Eliot saw the way to salvation of self through negation of self; this fragmented world is transcended through history and myth, which are themselves eventually transcended, and so one reaches God's word. In fact, it seems that Eliot does not offer a cure for the ills of the culture so much as a way of opting out of the situation. As Roy Harvey Pearce points out, Eliot was not the first poet to discover a correlation between the deficiency of American life and the deficiency of American poetry, but he was the first who found himself unable to "conceive of anything immanent in that life which might remedy the deficiency."[3] Stevens, on the other hand, turns to man himself, not for transcendence but for definition and limitation for once man's powers were defined they could be fully realized. In Stevens we have, to a certain degree, an example of de Tocqueville's poet in a democracy: "Scepticism . . . draws the imagination of poets back to earth, and confines them to the real and visible world." And a little later he adds: "I am persuaded that in the end democracy diverts the imagination from all that is external to man, and fixes it on man alone."[4]

It was Stevens' confidence in the creative ability of man,

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[3]Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry, p. 305.

[4]Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. H.S.Commager, The World's Classics (London, 1961), pp. 341-42.

that is, in the imagination, that provided him with the basis for a theory of poetry and a theory of life. Deprived of the authority of the gods he turned to the authority of poetry and imagination and saw quite clearly their role and his own: "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. . . . It is . . . a spiritual role" (OP 206). Though one should not ignore the doubt and violence to be found in Harmonium -- for instance, in "Domination of Black" (CP 8) -- it is the confident, and often comic, celebration of the imaginative perception that establishes authority. And this confidence is, as I hope to show, exhibited very much by means of the diction.

In Stevens' poetry we find positive, felt landscapes instead of Eliot's grey alleys; it is not a question of what is or is not "true" but of the presence or absence of belief. Deprived of other authority Stevens turns to his own imagination, and to imaginative use of language so that the authority for his poems is the poems themselves: "Natives of poverty, children of malheur,/ The gaiety of language is our seigneur" (CP 322). Though, as with responses to other aspects of the poetry, the response here was not clearly defined, there were some at least who immediately recognized this quality in Stevens: "We did not fail to exclaim excitedly over the emergence of a new poet who spoke as having authority. But it was a phenomenon for which we could not quite make

out the forward drift and destination, nor the antecedent history."[5]

The "forward drift and destination" does not become absolutely clear until one reaches "The Rock", for the whole of Stevens' work really comprises one grand poem.[6] It is, however, possible to establish to some degree the drift of Harmonium in terms of the Stevens aesthetic. The basis of this aesthetic is belief in the power of the imagination, of the mind: "It the mind is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems . . . to have something to do with our self- preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives" (NA 36). In the Stevens creed, where "God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry" (OP I67), the imagination has the vitalizing force of the Holy Ghost, but with the important qualification that this force does not come from any transcendent source but is within every man.

Stevens' statements on the imagination have been compared to those made by Coleridge and other "romantics"; much has been said of the debt he owes to Santayana, and others, in his formulation of theories. It is true that there are definite points of

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[5]John Crowe Ransom, "The Planetary Poet", Kenyon Review, XXVI (Winter, I964), 234.

[6]The original projected title for Harmonium was "The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae"; his Collected Poems was at one time to be called "The Whole of Harmonium".

comparison between Coleridge's writings on the imagination and Stevens' but Stevens does not by any means simply reproduce the Romantic theory. Coleridge distinguished between the "primary" imagination and the "secondary". The primary act of imagination is performed by every man when he "perceives" the ordinary, physical world, for in fact he half perceives the world and half creates it. The act of the imagination at the secondary level is performed in the writing of poetry and is of the same kind as the primary in its operation, though differing in intensity. This parallels Stevens' view that every man is a poet in that every man is -- potentially, at least --a man of imagination. The poet, as we usually employ the term, is one who exercises his imaginative powers of perception more intensely and more self-consciously than others; this he does in order to "help people live their lives", that is, to make them aware of the common denominator of mind/imagination in men. In poetry -- or at any rate, in Stevens' poetry -- the community is able to partake of the individual experience and so perhaps come to realize the nature of their own individual perception. Stevens' imagination, then, has something in common with Coleridge's but there are important differences, the most important being Stevens' denial of the Romantic poet's feeling that his imagination may be part of some larger imagination. Stevens, in fact, repudiates the transcendental and presents a theory of the imagination that is essentially humanistic.

Stevens did consider himself a romantic poet but within the

terms of his own definition. In a review of Marianne Moore's Selected Poems he differentiates between the romantic in the pejorative sense which "merely connotes obsolescence" (and which he elsewhere refers to as a "failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling"(NA 138).) and the romantic in its other sense, "meaning always the living and at the same time the imaginative, the youthful, the delicate and a variety of things. . . . ." (OP 251) In this latter sense the romantic "constitutes the vital element in poetry. It is absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet. Unless one is that, one is not a poet at all. . . . It means, now-a-days, an uncommon intelligence. It means in a time like our own of violent feelings, equally violent feelings and the most skilful expression of the genuine" (OP 251-2).

Stevens' definition of the romantic, therefore, is a virtual equation of the romantic with the imagination, or rather the imagination in a vital engagement with reality. It is yet another instance of Stevens' seeing things in terms of his two greatest preoccupations -- imagination and reality. It is a definition that allows him to class Eliot, for instance, as a romantic poet because he "incessantly revives the past and creates the future" (OP 252). It is a definition that allows him to class all good poets as romantics in varying degrees.

Stevens is a romantic poet because he is concerned with the vital workings of imagination upon reality. One thinks, often pejoratively, of a romantic poet as one who lives in an ivory

tower of the imagination, detached from reality. But that is the obsolete definition as far as Stevens is concerned; for him there can be no such complete detachment: "He the romantic happens to be one who still dwells in an ivory tower, but who insists that life would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider's Catsup, Ivory Soap and Chevrolet Cars; he is the hermit who dwells alone with the sun and moon, but insists on taking a rotten newspaper" (OP 256). He is one who uses the imagination not as a complete refuge from reality but as a means to view it.

I have already indicated Stevens' habit of viewing most things in terms of the imagination and reality. Though professedly wary of definitions, he has written at length on the nature of the imagination and its relation to reality. In his essay, "Imagination as Value" (NA 133), Stevens states that one must distinguish between "the imagination as metaphysics and as a power of the mind over external objects, that is to say, reality" (NA 136). Quoting from Cassirer's An Essay on Man, he explains the first as coming from a sense of the transcendental wherein: "The true poem is not the work of the individual artist; it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself."[7] Referring to the second type of imagination he further defines

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[7] E. Cassirer, An Essay on Man, quoted by Stevens, The Necessary Angel, p. 136.

"external objects" as works of art -- the sculptures of Michelangelo, British public buildings, the Jesuit church at Lucerne -- "where one might so easily pass from the real to the visionary without consciousness of change"(NA 137). The second is, as Riddel points out, "the work of the artist every day, or even of the self every conscious moment."[8]

Stevens, of course, eschews the transcendental aspect of the first; the reference to "working of the universe" he treats as the irrelevant romantic which must be cleansed from the imagination since it serves only to emasculate it (NA 138). The imagination as metaphysics is the imagination of life but the imagination as a power of mind over external objects is the imagination of art. The value of the two is different: "In life what is important is the truth as it is, while in arts and letters what is important is the truth as we see it" (NA 147). Stevens allows that the operation of imagination in life, that is, the imagination as metaphysics, is more significant than its operation in arts and letters. He also points out that the former is much more varied than the latter: ". . . when we think of the permeation of a man's life by the imagination, we must not think of it as a life permeated by a single thing but by a class of things" (NA 144). Such a multiplicity of functions as served by the imagination in life -- for instance, Stevens cites costume as an example of "imaginative life as social form" (NA 146) -- makes it

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[8] J.N.Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge, 1965), p.30

difficult to define precisely the value of this imagination. In arts and letters, on the other hand, its value is aesthetic.

Stevens goes on to say that insofar as we can delineate these two spheres of imagination at all we can talk about the values relative to each, and so, of the excursion of values beyond their spheres. Thus the ethical or moral values usually thought of in relation to life are sometimes applied to arts and letters, as, for instance, by the Victorians. A corollary of this type of "excursion of values" is the fact that "there can be lives in which the value of the imagination is the same as its value in arts and letters", the example given being the life of the philosopher, Santayana (NA I48). When the poet tries to define the intrinsic, intuitional value of the poetic imagination he does so, in part, by identifying it with the imagination that permeates our lives. Thus, though Stevens claimed earlier that the value of the imagination in arts and letters is aesthetic, it must carry with it some of the values of the imagination in life. The poet is man as well as artist and "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" (OP I59).

The difficulties Stevens has in defining the imagination -- poetic or otherwise -- are inherent in the concept itself; " . . . the imagination changes as the mind changes" (NA I5I) so that there are many different types of imagination within the class of

imagination. For instance, Stevens differentiates between imaginations engaged by different ideologies just as he differentiates between Dutch, Hindu, Japanese and Chinese imaginations (NA 143). "The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things; but if this constitutes a certain single characteristic, it is the source not of a certain single value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things" (NA 136).

Stevens is, however, emphatic and clear on certain characteristics of the imagination. When Stevens speaks simply of "the imagination" he is referring to the imagination as it permeates life and this is his subject rather than merely "poetic" imagination, though any strong distinction between the two seems artificial: "Literature is the better part of life. To this it seems inevitably necessary to add, provided life is the better part of literature" (OP 158). Imagination here is very much akin to Coleridge's "primary" imagination, as I have mentioned -- half perceptive, half creative -- with the difference that in Stevens the greatest stress is on perception: ". . . the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos" (NA 153). He further defines the imagination as "the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man" (NA 150).

In other words, when we perceive imaginatively it is as if we could see, in Platonic terms, the ideal forms of things instead

of the apparently disconnected multiplicity of objects in the "real" world. This kind of perception, and a prompting of others to the same, is basic in Stevens' poetry. He attempts to do what Ezra Pound was said to have done in his poem, "Heather" : "A Russian correspondent, after having called it a symbolist poem, and having been convinced that it was not symbolism, said slowly: 'I see, you wish to give people new eyes, not to make them see some new particular thing.'."[9] This point has particular direct relevance to the poetry with which I shall deal in my next chapter. For the moment it is sufficient to stress that the value of imaginative perception is the strongest single factor in Stevens' writing and his personal response to his age. Instead of simply mirroring the fragments he offered the clue to unity, the way to see order in chaos: "What I desire to stress is that there is a unity rooted in the individuality of objects and discovered in a different way from the apprehension of rational connections" (OP 237). Hart Crane once wrote of "The Waste Land": "It was good, of course, but so damned dead."[10] It was "dead" because Eliot could not see anything within that land itself of possible redemptive value whereas Stevens recognized the power of the imagination.

It is possible that such a view might be labelled as escapist and as ignoring "reality". One should realize, however,

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[9]Ezra Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska (London, 1916), p. 98.

[10]Hart Crane, The Letters of Hart Crane: 1916-1932, ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), p. 105.

that had Stevens ever "escaped" there would be no poetry, for it is the constant struggle to achieve the right relation between imagination and reality that is the subject and motivating force of his poetry. Nevertheless, Stevens did admit to being an escapist but again only within the terms of his own definition, and again it is a definition formulated in terms of the imagination and reality. In his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (NA 3), Stevens notes certain observations made by Charles Mauron preparatory to his own comments on escapism. These observations are:

> . . . that the artist transforms us into epicures; that he has to discover the possible work of art in the real world, then to extract it, when he does not himself compose it entirely; that he is un amoureux perpetuel of the world that he contemplates and thereby enriches; that art sets out to express the human soul; and finally that everything like a firm grasp of reality is eliminated from the aesthetic field. With these aphorisms in mind, how is it possible to condemn escapism? The poetic process is psychologically an escapist process. The chatter about escapism is, to my way of thinking, merely common cant. My own remarks about resisting or evading the pressure of reality mean escapism, if analyzed. Escapism has a pejorative sense which it cannot be supposed that I include in the sense in which I use the word. The pejorative sense applies where the poet is not attached to reality, where the imagination does not adhere to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental. . . . the poet . . . creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and . . . he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (NA 30-31)

The poet, then, must both resist the pressure of reality and also ensure that his imagination adheres to reality. "Reality is things as they are... ... not that external scene but the life that is lived in it" (NA 25). The pressure of reality is "the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the

exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA 20). The poet must be aware of reality but not overwhelmed by it; his poetry should consist of a co-equal interdependence of imagination and reality. This he achieves by abstracting reality into his imagination for reality, like divinity in "Sunday Morning" (CP 66), must live within oneself. This reality is a true and heightened reality and is the one the poet is constantly trying ot discover. It is the "poetry of the central", "the supreme fiction" to which Stevens is continually working. It is what he refers to as "the second theory of poetry" which "relates to the imagination as a power within him [the poet] to have such insights into reality as will make it possible for him to be sufficient as a poet in the very centre of consciousness. This results . . . in a central poetry" (NA II5). Contrasting this with the "first theory of poetry" wherein the poet feels his imagination to be part of a larger, more potent imagination which he must try to reach, where the poet is a mystic progressing from one mysticism to another, Stevens defines the "adherents of the central" as also mystics to begin with -- "But all their desire and all their ambition is to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization" (NA II6). Again and again in Stevens one comes back to the point that what matters is not man's relationship with some vague transcendental being, but rather the poet's relationship with his world and his central position in it. The poet's concern is to explore and know this world, for when he can define his relation towards it he can define

himself. Poetry is a means of exploration, a way towards definition; like religion, it has to "mediate for us a reality not ourselves" (OP 238).

In his concern with the self Stevens is quite definitely in an American tradition, what Roy Harvey Pearce calls the Adamic tradition as opposed to the mythic with Eliot given as an example of the latter. Pearce defines the new Adamic protagonist -- "new" because he is re-affirming the poetics of the Emersonian tradition -- as one who is "no longer much concerned about who made him and to what end. His abiding concern is with what he can make, his own creations -- as at once objects and acts: in epistemological language, as subjects. No longer . . . does he work with an assurance that there is ultimately some transcendental rationale for his compulsion to egocentrism; if there is a transcendent reality, he can conceive of it only in his own image and know it only as his own creation."[II] The self is brought to the fore in several ways, not only by the belief in the "redemptive" value of man's imagination but by the extraordinary self-consciousness of the poet and by the individuality of style.

In attending to the question of self Stevens is attending to a problem basic in his time. He does not generally concern himself, in his poetry, with the surface issues of predominantly social problems such as the depression but with the deeply rooted

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[II]Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry, p. 377.

problem of identity. Referring to man in this "modern" situation, Frederick Hoffman writes:

> . . . man had consciously to attend to the task of providing from within himself surrogate guarantors of his own continuity. If he could believe in nothing but himself as the experiencer of himself, he has either to solve the problem of his own continuance or to risk the menace of his ceasing to continue. This "dreadful responsibility" involved him in related questions: as to the degree and quality of experienced moments; the power of the mind to image these moments; the possibility that they, or some of them, served powerfully as signs of an improvised universality in experience; and the relationship of experience to memory, of time-saturated instants to unconscious reserves of the past. Dominating over the matter of these questions was the all-inclusive one of self-identity. One had to make a substance from an insubstantial flux of sensation in time; which is another way of saying that man had to will transcendence, though he apparently did not need to will either a metaphor or a myth to sustain transcendence in history. He might simply say: I exist in terms of the experience of existing and I will that this experience continue from moment to moment, in which case, the problem of continuity persists from moment to moment and excites the consciousness into an extraordinary alertness to the needs of identity.[12]

The "surrogate guarantor" of continuity which Stevens found within himself and which he believed held true for others was the imagination. He makes a substance from "an insubstantial flux of sensation" by taking that flux into himself and transforming it into the rhythms and forms of his own sensibility. This is achieved by the operation of the imagination; imagination encompasses reality; the self is married to its world and so becomes continuous with its flow of events. Identity and duration of self come from the discoverable relationship of self with a vital, not static world.

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[12] F.J.Hoffman, The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination (New Jersey, 1964), p. 347.

The constancy discovered is the constancy of the imagination as process.

> . . . . . .
> 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.(CP67)

"Transcendence" and "ultimate things" are, for Stevens, to be found in the self and are discoverable by the workings of the imagination upon reality. He realizes that the pleasures of time and change are dependent upon time and change -- not on a concept of eternity -- and so does not try to negate them. He does not ignore the problem of mortality but sees it as heightening one's awareness of the present.

These views are articulated mainly in Stevens' later writings and they represent his most fully worked-out theory of poetry, and incidentally justify the stress he placed upon poetry as an integral part of our lives. I feel it is necessary to be aware of Stevens' theories, even when it is mainly the early poetry that is under review -- I can see no particular virtue in ignoring the value of hindsight -- but in order to clarify the perspective on the early poems there are one or two qualifications that should be made with reference to what has already been said. One relates to "the poets of the imagination" and "the poets of the central"; the latter is what Stevens finally adheres to and while I believe "the poetry of the central" is at least in view at times in Harmonium, it

must be admitted that in his early poetry Stevens conceives of opposition between imagination and reality as often, if not more, as he conceives of them existing in co-equal interdependence. That is, his imagination tends at times not to adhere to reality; indeed, he flaunts it as arrogantly and sometimes as ridiculously as Crispin. There still remain, however, a considerable number of poems where the sole authority of imagination is questioned, for instance, in "To the One of the Fictive Music" (CP 87).

The second point concerns the self and its world. I have said that what Stevens seeks is a marriage of the self and its world. This does apply to the early poetry in that one of Stevens primary concerns is to define the relation between the self and its world, but the stress is rather more on the individual than on the relationship (and in the early poetry, too, it is the individual rather than man), corresponding to the early inbalance towards imagination rather than reality. The self is not always clearly defined in Harmonium. There is a good deal of doubt and hesitation, more than perhaps is first apparent. Sometimes the self contains the world, sometimes it contains him. Such doubt seems natural in the first stages of defining a personal philosophy and a personal poetic. Stevens, like Yeats, was continually making a self in his poetry; that this self changes in some ways between Harmonium and "The Rock" is hardly surprising. But there is no total volte-face. In the beginning he perceives the world in a peculiarly individual way by means of the imagination; this peculiarly individual percep-

tion -- manifest in a distinctly individual style -- defines a peculiarly individual self. This is a limited function of the imagination but an important one; the discovery of this function has to be made before one can go on to discover, as Stevens did in his later work, that "the imagination becomes a part of total consciousness, operative not only in the discovery of novelty, but in realizing one's identity within the flow of ordinary events."[13]

Harmonium is the first step towards the discovery of identity and as such exhibits certain qualities which permeate Stevens' whole work as well as some that are outgrown. For instance, the extraordinary self-consciousness we find in this volume persists through successive volumes. It is by no means peculiar to Stevens, indeed it seems rapidly to be developing into a genre of modern poetry, but Stevens does seem to display it more than most, both as style and subject. In this characteristic he is very much in the idiom of his time so that his work is scarcely as "detached" as some would have it. He sees no necessity to write solely about the public dump in order to demonstrate his concern with reality; the reality with which he is concerned must be an integral part of self. When asked: "Are you sympathetic to the current tendency toward what may be called 'literary nationalism' -- a renewed emphasis, largely uncritical on the specifically 'American' elements in our culture?" Stevens gave a reply indicative of his poetic stance generally: "I don't believe in factitious Americanism. An American

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[13]Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 29.

has to be an American because there is nothing else for him to be and also. I hope, because it would not matter if there was. Even so, I believe in forgetting about it except as a quality, a savour."[14] Stevens is, most definitely, a poet of his time and of his country; his poems do not tell one this, they are it. Some people have been only too ready to ignore the personal ideology which informs these poems, or have recognized only Stevens' allegiance to the imagination, when it is, in fact, essential to recognize his awareness of reality and of the problems of his age.

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[14] Wallace Stevens, quoted by J.J.Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements (Carbondale, 1964), pp. 15-16.

THE LANGUAGE OF HARMONIUM

Style as Self

> In the midst of the continual movement which agitates a democratic community the tie which unites one generation to another is relaxed or broken . . . . It is not only confidence in this or that man which is destroyed, but the taste for trusting the ipse dixit of any man whatsoever. Every one shuts himself up in his own breast, and affects from that point to judge the world.[1]

The poet reveals himself and his judgement of the world, to a certain extent at least, in his style. As I said earlier, a unique style manifests a unique perception which in turn defines a unique self. A corollary of this is the point that "Stylistic values are a fairly clear indication of self-evaluation."[2] The self -- and therefore personal values -- is realized and affirmed in style. I stress this point because it seems to me that the most fruitful approach to Stevens' complexity of language is to be made in these terms. It is by no means an approach that fits only Stevens; for instance, the joy and delight in uniqueness of self that one finds in the widely divergent works of Cummings and Traherne is expressed largely through the style rather than any "interior" concepts. Obviously this quality of style is not limited

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[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. H.S.Commager (London, 1961), p. 296.

[2] F.J.Hoffman, The Mortal No (New Jersey, 1964), p.361.

to poetry. One need only look at one of the most famous modern exponents of a personal style to verify that: "Hemingway's style is . . . a direct consequence of an experience with violence, which shocked him out of all love of elaborate rhetoric. The deliberate underplaying of significance, the avoidance of what he called 'spiritual faking', his nominalistic concern for experiential minima, are all a product of his felt need to improvise in terms of direct exposure to the 'thing seen' and 'what changes after that'. . . . This style may be defined as the exposition of reality without either ceremonial or philosophical mitigation."[3] The reaction may not always be as directly mirrored in the style as it is in Hemingway's but there must always be some degree of correlation between how a man sees and judges and how he speaks. I am aware that such a statement is virtually a truism but the fact remains that few people have tried to examine Stevens' style from this point of view, or if they have it has generally been in a superficial and undiscriminating way (with the notable exceptions of Marianne Moore and R.P.Blackmur), ignoring the range of Stevens' style as well as its relation to personal values. A good many people have, it is true, set about defining those values but have not often examined their expression in the style, as opposed to the content of the poems.

The reference made above to Hemingway's style is not

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[3]Hoffman, The Mortal No, p. 361.

purely gratuitous. I quote Hoffman's definition to give some idea of specific relations between personal environment and style and also to emphasize the fact that the pressures and voids of the modern environment caused many men of sensibility to search for the terms of man's relationship to his world. The definitions of "reality" vary, there are different opinions as to what is -- if there is -- "the substance in us that prevails" (CP I3) but the motivation is basically the same.

In Harmonium -- remembering the earlier qualification concerning "poets of the imagination" and "adherents of the central"-- the supreme value posited by Stevens and manifest in his style is the value of the imagination, or more precisely, imaginative perception. The transmission of such a value is, as far as Stevens is concerned, one of the chief aims of a poet:

> What is there about a book of first poems that immediately interests us? For one thing, it is possible that we are going to become aware that the people in the world, and the objects in it, and the world as a whole, are not absolute things, but, on the contrary, are the phenomena of perception. In short, it is possible that a new poet is that special person at our elbow with his special, even extraordinary perception . . . . Since the perception of life is life itself, a book containing the first poems of a poet new to us has a natural and intense attraction. (CP 266-7)

"The perception of life is life itself" therefore what we get in poetry, if we are lucky, is life itself, and the imagination acting upon reality is a life-force. Reading a poem that reveals this imaginative perception one experiences that act of perception; there is a sort of transference whereby "The poet seems to confer his identity on the reader" (OP I58). Witness, for instance, the exper-

ience contained in (and in the reading of) a poem like "Tattoo":

> The light is like a spider.
> 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. (CP 81)

The experience in the poem itself is of perception, or more particularly, the tactile experience of light involved in the act of seeing. Usually we conceive of light only as a means of allowing us to perceive objects when in fact we have to experience the impact of light itself before we can do this.

In describing -- or almost reproducing -- this experience in the poem, Stevens first compares the light, in simple statement, to a spider. This image is expanded in terms of the spidery patterns of light on water and on snow -- notice the precision of "edges" of the snow, the angles of drifts, perhaps, or even the edges of the crystals themselves that catch the light. The crawling movement of the light is in keeping with the spider image but it is also under the auspices of the title. Titles, with Stevens, are an integral part of the poem and here the title, both by its meaning and by its onomatopoeic effect, suggests the prickling, tracing effect of light on the lids and on the retina.

The spider image -- always with the undercurrent of the tattoo -- is continued in the mention of webs; when one closes one's eyes after looking at light one sees such a pattern. Then, simply by qualifying "webs" with "two" the progression is made to the next stanza and the two eyes. The webs become the finely-etched, text-book tissue that binds the eyeball to the socket, so that by the third stanza the webs are complete and the light envelops eyes, snow, water. The pattern has been traced in the poem itself; one is reminded of those diagrams that show how we perceive, with finely-drawn lines between the observer's eye and the object. The effect is of a very definite relation between observer and observed; by virtue of perception we are involved in the world -- or it is involved in us.

This poem fully exhibits the value of imaginative perception; the poet discovers an experience that is in itself extraordinary. He does not show anything that was not already there, he simply reveals. Because the extraordinary quality is inherent in the experience he does not over-burden the subject with grandiose terms but achieves his effect rather by understatement. "By attempting not to set up a tone the tone of truth is secured for statements literally false. Fairy tales and Mother Goose use the same language."[4]

R.P.Blackmur has also pointed out that "the strong sensual

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[4]R.P.Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens", in his Language as Gesture (London, 1954), p. 232.

quality of the poem is defined without the use of a single sensual word",[5] but omits to say how it is defined. I would agree that there are no strongly sensual words in the poem but would maintain that "crawls", especially when repeated almost successively, has a certain sensual quality, as does "spreads". But mainly the sensual quality is, I think, achieved syntactically. There is a slow -- sensually slow -- progression coming out of the first, static end-stopped line. The second line, also end-stopped, introduces a slowly active verb; this verb (always with a preposition, so that movement or progression is stressed) is then repeated in a slightly longer line, and repeated again in a line that is not brought to an end until, with the introduction of "spreads", the movement initiated by "crawls" stops, literally and syntactically, in the two webs. The sensuousness continues in the slow movement and also, after that first stanza if not before, we are experiencing what the poet experienced and it needs only the slightest suggestion of what is happening -- "The webs of your eyes/Are fastened to the flesh and bones of you" -- to make us provide the complementary sensual reaction.

This poem is, if only in miniature, an example of Stevens' intent "To live in the world but outside existing conceptions of it" (OP 164). He brings nothing to that world that is not already there but rather sees it through new eyes and is therefore able to give in his poetry a sense of the vividness of life. A corollary

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[5]Blackmur, Language as Gesture, p. 232.

of this value of imaginative perception is the value of newness: "Newness (not novelty) may be the highest individual value in poetry. Even in the meretricious sense of newness a new poetry has value" (OP 177). This embraces not only a new way of seeing things but also a new mode of expression. An aspect of the "newness of vision is the perception of relations between apparently unrelated objects -- in fact, the unifying faculty of the imagination: "A man and a woman/Are one./A man and a woman and a blackbird/Are one" (CP 93).

The newness of expression involves the "writing [of] an existing language as if it were their the good poets' own invention."[6] Several poets have, of course, tried to achieve this, some being more extreme than others. A notable example is E.E.Cummings who has achieved a considerable amount of success but who, I feel, fails in the final analysis because his invention often becomes too private. Roy Harvey Pearce offers this analysis of Cummings' technique:

> More and more Cummings has come to refine his technique by trying literally to rescue language from the discursive, analytic abstractness that threatens to deaden it. . . . He has not so much tried to give life to words but to their grammatical-syntactical context: to give life not to the substance of a sentence but to its structure. Thus he has wrenched words out of their regular grammatical and syntactical functions, more closely to make them the means of expressing the vital functions of the men and women whose experience they are to body forth.[7]

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[6]R.P.Blackmur, Language as Gesture, p. 221.

[7]R.H.Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (New Jersey, 1961), p. 363.

Cummings achieves originality perhaps, but it is limited and not always comprehensible since really it has no referent except himself. Though Stevens has been accused, with some justification, of obscurity and though ultimately the authority for his poems lies within the poems themselves, yet his language is "accessible" to us since he is scrupulously faithful to the dictionary meanings of words. He re-vitalizes language by just this fidelity and by the different combinations of words used in their precise meaning:

> . . . when each word has definite character the combinations cannot avoid uniqueness. . . . Though the combination of words is unique it is read, if the reader knows his words either by usage or dictionary, with a shock like that of recognition. The recognition is not limited, however, to what was already known in the words; there is a perception of something previously unknown, something new which is a result of the combination of the words, something which is literally an access of knowledge. Upon the poet's skill in combining words as much as upon his private feelings, depends the importance or the value of the knowledge.[8]

In much of Cummings' writing one has the impression that not only is there little common ground through which the reader can come to the knowledge in the poem but that there is little knowledge, only private feelings which are sometimes communicated by the rhythms. In some of his less extreme poems the humour and satire are successfully communicated to a certain degree but too often his novelty lacks discipline -- a lack of adherence to reality, perhaps -- so that one finds in some of his poems only a surface. Stevens,

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[8] R.P.Blackmur, Language as Gesture, p.222.

in "Adagia", noted these words of Cummings': "Bringing out the music of the eccentric sounds of words is no different in principle from bringing out their form and eccentricities", and made this comment of his own: "language as the material of poetry not its mere medium or instrument" (OP 171). Stevens himself uses language in this way but for him the poetry of words is only one of the poetries of the poem while for Cummings it comes close to being the only, or at least primary, poetry. Stevens uses language imaginatively to re-form the world, not only language. As far as he is concerned "Novelty must be inspired" (OP 238) and not merely exist for its own sake; the "something said" and the way of saying it are both important. "The form derives its significance from the whole. Form has no significance except in relation to the reality that is being revealed" (OP 237) -- a revelation of reality achieved by the saying of something in a special way.

I shall say more of Stevens' special way with words later in this chapter. So far I have been concerned to show some of the values revealed through style: the value of the self unique in its particular perception, the value of imagination as expressive of the flowing vitality of the world, the value of newness. These, and others, are the functions of a poetry that tries to give back to the world "The imagination that we spurned and crave" (CP 88).

Before going on to the more particular aspects of style, it would perhaps be as well, after claiming style as an affirmation of self, to make some brief comment on Stevens' impersonality. The

description of Stevens' poetry as impersonal has been applied mainly to his later writing but there are many who think it equally apparent in Harmonium. This charge has not been levelled because the poems lack a voice -- almost every poem in Harmonium is spoken by "I" or some singular persona as opposed to the later "third person" poems -- but rather because the voice seems to lack emotion. This is a result of Stevens' view of reality and of his self-awareness. For Stevens, man's most essentially human characteristic, that is, the characteristic which defines the self most certainly, is his mind, his imagination. Imagination, especially in art, has the power of insight into a special kind of reality and it is this kind of insight, not emotion, which for Stevens lies at the centre of aesthetic experience (see OP 238). The presentation of this reality is likely to arouse emotions but does not itself consist of or depend upon them. So that while Stevens' poetry may appear impersonal at times because it is not clothed with the tones of emotion that we usually consider most indicative of the human, it is really intensely personal simply because it depends upon -- and often isolates -- that quality in man which defines the individual.

This quality of imagination sometimes appears to be presented very objectively, so heightening the impression of "impersonality". This is the result of Stevens' self-consciousness. One is aware in many of the poems not simply of a poet perceiving but of a poet watching himself perceive, studying his own act of mind. This is because his greatest concern is with poetry (in Stevens'

non-literary sense of the word), with the establishment of the proper relation between imagination and reality. The process of observing oneself, in any man of intelligence and sensibility, is bound to lead to self-examination and, in self-defence, to a certain amount of irony and detachment. This happens especially when one comes to doubt, as Stevens does at times in Harmonium, the power of one's own creed, when the celebration of the imagination seems perhaps, as it does at times in Crispin, so much pompous bombast.

But if one still doubts that most of the poems in Harmonium are, in their way, intensely personal and self-affirmative one need only compare them with Stevens' poems written when he was an undergraduate at Harvard. These poems are generally, as Joseph Riddel has pointed out, written in a public rather than a personal style.[9] Though Robert Buttel has discovered some connections between the Harvard writings (especially in the themes and personae of the short stories) and the poetry which appeared some fourteen years later,[10] there seems little in this early poetry that gives indication of the later personal style.

For the most part the Harvard poems seem indistinguishable from any other second rate poetry of the nineties, the diction used is depressingly conventional. This is apparent in "Vita Mea",

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[9] J.N.Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge, 1965), p.54.

[10] Robert Buttel, "Wallace Stevens at Harvard: Some Origins of his Theme and Style", in R.H.Pearce and J.H.Miller, eds., The Act of Mind (Baltimore, 1965), pp. 29-57.

for instance, the second of Stevens' poems to appear in the Harvard Advocate (December I2th, I898) :

> With fear I trembled in the House of Life,
> Hast'ning from door to door, from room to room,
> Seeking a way from that impenetrable gloom
> Against whose walls my strength lay weak from strife,
> All dark! All dark! And what sweet wind was rife
> With earth, or sun, or star, or new sun's bloom,
> Lay sick and dead within that place of doom,
> Where I went raving like the winter's wife.
>
> "In vain, in vain," with bitter lips I cried;
> "In vain, in vain," along the hallways died
> And sank in silences away. Oppressed
> I wept. Lo! through those tears the window-bars
> Shone bright, where Faith and Hope like long-sought stars
> First gleamed upon that prison of unrest.[II]

With the possible exception of the simile at the end of the first stanza, the whole poem is sentimental, melodramatic and singularly unoriginal. It seems as if Stevens here is reacting "poetically" -- in the pejorative, not Stevensian, sense -- rather than personally and honestly. It is perhaps unfair to consider these poems at all, especially in view of Stevens' comment to Samuel French Morse: "Some of one's early things give one the creeps" (quoted OP xvii), but from such a consideration arise two interesting points. One is that at this time Stevens' tone is not the later one of affirmation but rather the acceptance of Emerson's "Despair".[I2] Secondly, such a consideration prompts speculation concerning the evolution of a style during those next fourteen years,

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[II] Quoted by Buttel, "Wallace Stevens at Harvard", p.32.

[I2] J.N.Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p.55.

of which, unfortunately, we know so little.

Imagism

During his fourteen-year "silent" period Stevens must have been affected by several influences and more and more critics are devoting more and more time to pinpointing every one of them. Verlaine, Laforgue, Mallarme have all been cited as influences upon his style; he has been classed as Romantic poet, metaphysical poet, "pure" poet -- even Shakespearean. There is no doubt that some, at least, of these points are pertinent but I am unable to examine them here for several reasons. Other than the purely practical considerations of time, space and knowledge, it is a very difficult thing to chart with any authority, direct relations between the style of one poet and another, especially in a poet of Stevens' range and complexity. Like Yeats -- like any great poet -- he is more likely to select and adapt material from any given source rather than absorb it unrefined by his own sensibility.

While avoiding largely the question of influences, I think it worthwhile, however, to make some comment on Stevens' debt to the Imagists since this seems to me one of the most important influences on the early poetry. The basic tenets of Imagism, the precise definition of the Image, rapidly became distorted by many practitioners and critics into something essentially allied to the visual or pictorial sense so that it is as well to reiterate the original definition of the tenets of the Imagiste faith as they were published in March, 1913:

I. Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective.

2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.[I3]

The image itself was defined as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."[I4]

Stevens' direct comments upon Imagism are varied: "Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognise this" (OP I6I) -- it did not allow for the poet's selection and ordering within the arrangement of things as they are. Elsewhere he says: "Imagism . . . is not something superficial. It obeys an instinct. Moreover, imagism is an ancient phase of poetry. It is something permanent" (OP 258). Stevens was obviously sympathetic with what he saw as an attempt to "delineate the images of reality" (OP 258) and would incline towards the imaginatively accurate perception which for him reflected accurate thought. The affinities with music would also attract him for he saw music as virtually the equivalent of poetry. Where he goes beyond the limitation of the Imagistes -- and they themselves eventually went in this direction too -- is in his refusal of the static image. Desiring, as he did, to embody in his style the flowing and metamorphic vitality of

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[I3]Ezra Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska (London, I9I6), p. 96.

[I4]Ibid., p. 99.

life he would obviously find such a concept restrictive.

The way he develops his own brand of Imagism is apparent in his poem "The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician" (CP 62):

> It comes about that the drifting of these curtains
> Is full of long motions; as the ponderous
> Deflations of distance; or as clouds
> Inseparable from their afternoons;
> Or the changing of light, the dropping
> Of the silence, wide sleep and solitude
> Of night, in which all motion
> Is beyond us, as the firmament,
> Up-rising and down-falling, bares
> The last largeness, bold to see.

The static image has become the flowing process of metaphors of the mind acting upon things. The initial image of drifting curtains metamorphosizes into the motions of clouds and ultimately into the recognition of the constant motion of the universe. In order to achieve the necessary fluidity of expression Stevens rejects another aspect of Imagism -- he uses more words than the Imagistes would allow as strictly necessary. But having set the image in motion, Stevens does need all the words he uses in this poem in order to achieve the "long motions". The poem itself is one long sentence, an organic whole with one image engendered upon another; even the words "as the", "or as", and "or" preceding the different images in themselves help to suggest the drifting motion whereas isolated images would simply suggest a static object in view.

Stevens does display the Imagiste tendency to present rather than resolve but rarely does he present us simply with the object. In fact, Stevens' images are never really objective because they are always "flicked by feeling" and ultimately what he is in-

terested in is not so much the object as the mind in the act of perceiving it. This is admirably demonstrated in what has been called one of his most strongly Imagistic poems, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (CP 98). This is a five-section poem of the poet contemplating the endless variation of seas off Tehuantepec. Each section presents the mood, in the mind, of five different aspects of the sea. The actual visual appearance of the various seascapes is suggested but what is important is the mental landscape. Again there is a basic initial image, but it shifts and dissolves through the different sections. Pound captured an instant of an "intellectual and emotional complex" in "The apparition of these faces in the crowd:/Petals, on a wet, black bough" and said of it: "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective."[15] In "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" Stevens extends this approach to embrace the shifting complexity of moods stimulated by the sight of the object. Pound pared his emotion down to the bone and fixed it in an image; Stevens explores the endless variations. Thus the "chocolate and umbrellas" of each second stanza are at one point "rosy chocolate/And gilt umbrellas" shifting to "chop-house chocolate/And sham umbrellas", "porcelain chocolate/And pied umbrellas", "musky chocolate/And frail umbrellas", "Chinese chocolate/And large umbrellas". Similarly the shades of green and the qualification of the ocean

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[15] Ibid., p. 103.

change from section to section as do the phrases to describe the imagination, on which such changes depend. An intricate pattern of repetition and variation is built up by the skilful use of words; there is constancy in the articles and in the process of the imagination, variation in the qualification of these.

Joseph Riddel gives an admirable analysis of this poem in terms of the workings of the imagination,[16] but Blackmur, in his refusal of literal analysis, seems to me to come closest to defining the effect of the poem when he says it exhibits "that use of language where tone and atmosphere are very nearly equivalent to substance and meaning themselves. . . . The burden of the poem is the colour and tone of the whole. It is as near a tone-poem, in the musical sense, as language can come."[17] Blackmur later goes on to say: "Here we have words used as a tone of feeling to secure the discursive evanescence of appearances; words bringing the senses into the mind which they created; the establishment of interior experience by the construction of its tone in words."[18] It is by his precise handling of language that Stevens manages to construct the tone of experience -- and the changes of tone. An example of the latter can be found in the second section of "Peter Quince at

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[16] Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, pp. 44-6.

[17] Blackmur, Language as Gesture, p.230.

[18] Ibid., pp. 231-2.

the Clavier" (CP 89) which ends with these stanzas:

> She walked upon the grass,
> Still quavering.
> The winds were like her maids,
> On timid feet,
> Fetching her woven scarves,
> Yet wavering.
>
> A breath upon her hand
> Muted the night.
> She turned --
> A cymbal crashed,
> And roaring horns.

The intrusion of the elders and of their attitude is accomplished perfectly in terms of the language and its suggestions -- one tone is shattered by another. Stevens shares with the Imagistes the skill of suggestion and association in language, but while the basic affinities between some of his work and Imagiste writings are obvious, so too is the degree to which Stevens passed beyond Imagiste restrictions.

Vocabulary

Stevens' vocabulary has caused a considerable amount of difficulty and delight, especially the vocabulary employed in Harmonium. The superficial impression one receives from many of these early poems is of a language elegant and rarefied. At the time when Stevens' first book of poems appeared there was a good deal of interest in a "New" American poetry full of the muscular vernacular. An audience enthusing about this movement might be rather overwhelmed by the profusion of words such as: cabildo, palmettoes, palankeens, fiscs, barouche, gurrituck, funest, gelatines and jupes -- to say nothing of the smattering of French words and phrases. But as

I mentioned earlier, such words are used in a manner precisely faithful to their dictionary definitions and it is for these precise meanings that Stevens uses them -- not for pretentious effects. He is using the existing language but in a new way so renewing language and the world expressed in language.

It seems to me that in using words precisely but in new and unusual combinations Stevens is following, in one way, his own theory concerning imagination and reality. In his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" he writes:

> A variation between the sound of words in one age and the sound of words in another age is an instance of the pressure of reality. Take the statement by Bateson that a language, considered semantically, evolves through a series of conflicts between the denotative and the connotative forces in words; between an ascetism tending to kill language by stripping words of all association and a hedonism tending to kill language by dissipating their sense in a multiplicity of associations. These conflicts are nothing more than changes in the relation between the imagination and reality. (NA I3)

Remembering that ultimately the relation that Stevens sought between imagination and reality was one of co-equal interdependence, it seems feasible to suppose that one of his aims in his own use of language was to try to achieve this. That is, by using words precisely he avoids the vague multiplicity of connotations and yet by using words in new combinations he achieves new connotations, connotations that express his personal, "new" perception. The comparative rarity of some of the words employed further ensures that the reader brings to the poem no connotations other than those arising within the poem itself.

An example of this use of words can be found in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (CP 64) in the phrase "concupiscent curds". The curds are, on one level at least, the ice-cream of the title; the title and the poem lead to one interpretation of the theme as being "the only thing worth bothering about is the life of the moment". Concupiscence means eager or vehement desire, often in a sexual sense, and interestingly is the term used theologically to mean "a desire for the things of the world". So in the phrase "concupiscent curds" we have the crux of the poem; the association of a desire for the world (which was usually a good thing as far as Stevens was concerned) with an essence of ephemeral pleasure -- ice-cream. The word "concupiscent", by virtue of sound, length and meaning seems to have more "stature" than "curds" so that the juxtaposition of the two words elevates the ice-cream into the position of importance which it must hold in this poem. The relation between two words which one would not usually think of relating is strengthened aurally and visually by simple use of alliteration and assonance. The physicality, the sensuousness of "concupiscent" which by association extends the connotation of "curds" is evident too in the mention of the muscular one and the dawdling wenches, the latter also picking up the suggestion of the kitchen-setting (again the emphasis is on the "every day") from curds.

This is not by any means the only aspect of Stevens' vocabulary and its uses though it accounts for an important part of it. His use of foreign, and sometimes dialect words is also notable.

Stevens himself once wrote: "I have never been able to see why what is called Anglo-Saxon should have the right to higgle and haggle all over the page, contesting the right of other words. If a poem seems to require a hierophantic phrase, the phrase should pass. This is a way of saying that one of the consequences of the ordination of style is not to limit it, but to enlarge it, not to impoverish it but to enrich and liberate it" (OP 205). The question of particularly hierophantic phrases is perhaps more pertinent in relation to some of Stevens' "nonsense" passages, but certainly there are a good many poems which seem to require phrases other than Anglo-Saxon. For instance, in "The Plot Against The Giant" (CP 6), the phrase "Oh, la . . . le pauvre!" is exactly right to present the flirtatious condescension of these subtle and delicate girls who plot against the lumbering giant. The English: "Oh, the poor man!" would be ludicrously suggestive of the maternal and middle-aged.

The beginning of "The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP 27) also employs "required" phrases in these lines:

> . . . . . As such, the Socrates
> Of snails, musician of pears, principium
> And lex. Sed quaeritur: is this same wig
> Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,
> Preceptor to the sea? . . . . . .

The Latin words with their associations with the formal, the regal, and the legal admirably provide the right degree of pomposity for the figure of Crispin; the regalia of the words provides the necessary contrast with the meagreness of the domain. Here Stevens is doing what he does in several other poems, taking advantage of the

existing connotations of words and standing them on their heads. In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (CP 59), for instance, he does just this with the various church-architectural and Christian terms. (He uses the structure of old myths -- including Christian -- in a similar way sometimes; he revives them by applying them to his own ends, making them adhere to reality and so become viable for this age, or mocking them.)

Perhaps one of the most striking uses of French words occurs in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (CP 98), where the imagination is described in each section by means of French phrases: "C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme" or "C'était ma foi, la nonchalance divine". Stevens once remarked that "French and English constitute a single language" (CP 178). By this I take it that he meant one should be able to move freely from one to the other, not that they are identical in effect. The use of French in this poem is the use of labials in a world of labials; the fluid surface of the poem demands a continued fluidity which the French phrases provide. They suggest murmured endearments with a hint of the strange and the romantic, all of which qualities are appropriate to the imagination.

Harry Levin once wrote of Stevens: "Apparently he can absorb the extremes of patois and archaism without the slightest effort. Imperturbably he ranges so far afield that he finally leaves us not with a strange collection of curiosities, but with a quizzically familiar point of view."[19] The point of view seems familiar

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[19] H. Levin, "Statement", Harvard Advocate, CXXVII (December, 1940), p. 30.

because the range of Stevens' language accomodates the range and diversity -- or at least a good deal of it -- of the world he contemplates. His use of dialect is not always detectable but one suspects that some words, or rather expressions, that appear to be nonsense or neologisms or both are in fact local expressions. Enck quotes from Stevens' letters to Renato Poggioli where Stevens explains the source of these stanzas from "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CP I78):

> He held the world upon his nose
> And this-a-way he gave a fling.
>
> His robes and symbols, ai-yi-yi--
> And that-a-way he twirled the thing.

Stevens' comment is: "This-a-way and that-a-way and ai-yi-yi are colloquialisms, at least in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, for that matter. People think of ai-yi-yi as Spanish but it is equally Pennsylvania Dutch. . . . A man who is master of the world balances it on his nose this way and that way and the spectators cry ai-yi-yi."[20] As Enck points out, the knowledge of whether the expression is Spanish or Pennsylvania Dutch does not really affect one's understanding of the poem but it does indicate the ease with which Stevens cam move around within language as well as his perceptiveness in noting local usage. Though the specific example noted comes from a poem written later than Harmonium, it seems possible that a similar use of dialect may be found in the earlier volume, though

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[20]Wallace Stevens, quoted by J.J.Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements (Carbondale, I964), p. I3.

difficult to pinpoint without Stevens' own verifiaction. For instance, in the poem "Banal Sojourn" (CP 62) there occur the interjection "Pardie!" and the word "grackles". The former is obviously a corruption of "Par Dieu!" and is defined by the dictionary as archaic (examples of usage are given from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries). Similarly "grackles" meaning a bird of the jackdaw genus is also listed as archaic but it seems to me that both terms might well be instances of local usage (compare NA 100 -- the use of the accepted local abbreviation for "Muscovy Duck"). However, what is ultimately important is not particular examples but rather Stevens' ability to use such words without placing any strain upon the context; the words chosen generally appear to be the most fitting in every way. "Grackles", for instance, whether archaism or dialect, is suggestive of the sound made by these birds, especially when one considers the whole line: "The grackles crack their throats of bone in the smooth air".

Stevens uses a good many archaisms, but usually not those considered -- pejoratively -- as "poetic" archaisms; these abound in his undergraduate verse, which lisps with "doth" and "o'er" and heavy-handed use of words like "visage". His use of archaisms in Harmonium is not so obvious as this nor does it have the same effect. Poets who self-consciously use "poetic diction" present in their style a weak pastiche of current poetic vogues, or very often, the vogues of a generation earlier. One finds this happening in many of Yeats' earliest poems, for instance. But a poet who devel-

ops his own style will choose his own words and use them so that they have the ring of no other poet.

The archaisms which Stevens employs are not obviously archaisms because they are not generally words with which we are very familiar; they are not, in other words, poetic cliches. (though he is sometimes deliberately "poetically" archaic, as in "One eats one pate, even of salt, quotha" where the archaism serves to emphasize Crispin's pomposity). Stevens takes hold of the word in its original precise meaning and places it within his own context, so making it new. In the first stanza of "The Jack-Rabbit" (CP 50), for instance, there occur three words defined by the dictionary as archaic:

> In the morning,
> The jack-rabbit sang to the Arkansaw.
> He carolled in caracoles
> On the feat sandbars.

One of the meanings of "carolled" is to dance in a ring to the accompaniment of song; a "caracole" (from the Italian verb for "to wheel about") is a half-turn or wheel to the right or left executed by a horseman; "feat" is an adjective meaning neat, fitting, suitable, or when applied to movement, dextrous or graceful. These three words come together in very simple sentence and stanzaic form to describe the actions of the jack-rabbit and this is precisely what they do, both literally and suggestively. The exuberance of the leaping animal suggested by "sang" is picked up in the next line by "carolled" which, including the notion of both singing and dancing brings one more specifically to the movement of the

animal which is in turn more defined by "caracoles". "Feat", while probably referring to the formation of the sand-bars, also reflects back to the dextrous movement of the hare. (Incidentally, this single stanza offers a condensation of the observed movement described at greater length in "Earthy Anecdote": CP 3.)

The objection to all this, of course, is that such an explanation seems to imply that the poem cannot be understood or enjoyed without the help of a dictionary or at least a certain amount of recondite knowledge. To a certain extent this is true, though I do not consider it a valid objection if all that is being queried is the poet's refusal to sacrifice meaning and effect to the lowest common denominator of his audience. People have come to accept the "difficulties" of Eliot and yet many are unwilling to put a similar degree of effort into reading Stevens, even though the latter does in fact provide most of the answers to his poems within the poems themselves rather than in footnotes.

In the example quoted above, for instance, although a knowledge of the precise meanings of the words can help towards a full response to the poem it does not by any means define the only response. The word "carolled" -- archaism or not -- is known to most people, even without the help the present context gives; "caracoles" is obviously chosen as much for its visual and aural aptness in conjunction with "carolled" as for its more specific meaning. No knowledge of such specific meaning is necessary to tell, from the whole stanza, that the animal is happy and is showing this by

exuberant movement. In other words, though as a general rule Stevens is very precise in his use of words, the reader need not always go to the same lengths because the atmosphere and tone that Stevens sets up in the poem generally provide the necessary definition. He, himself, once advised against examining single words too closely. Enck quotes Stevens' reply to a critic who, analysing "Sea Surface Full of Clouds", concluded that: "'Flotillas' suggests a 'fleet of flowers', an image which a child's fancy would evoke. Another, the naval, use of the word is in this instance irrelevant and distracting." When this critic asked Stevens what value should be given to this connotation, Stevens replied: "You are in much too close focus. As I use the word it means merely floating things."[2I]

The much-mentioned sensual and exotic aspects of the Harmonium vocabulary are, to a considerable degree, derived from the "out-of-focus" aspect of the words rather than from an actual overplus of concrete or sensual words. Certainly Stevens does use concrete terms, does make much use of words such as "bloom", "fruit", "leaves" and describes often in terms of colours, especially green. But such words are not so preponderant in his vocabulary as one might imply from the concreteness of felt life apparent in Harmonium. This concreteness derives on one hand from the largeness of the vocabulary itself which signifies a literal wealth, and on the other from Stevens' power to suggest more than is defined by specific words. It is again a question of the skilful combination

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[2I] Wallace Stevens to John Pauker, quoted by Enck, Wallace Stevens, p. I4.

of words whereby one word picks up connotations from another so the whole phrase suggests something more -- and perhaps something different -- from the individual words viewed in too close focus.

This is evident, for instance, in the first stanza of "Sunday Morning" (CP 66):

> Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
> Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
> And the green freedom of a cockatoo
> Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
> The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
> She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
> Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
> As a calm darkens among water-lights.
> The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
> Seem things in some procession of the dead,
> Winding across wide water, without sound.
> The day is like wide water, without sound,
> Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
> Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
> Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

This stanza presents, in embryo, the crux of the argument of the poem as a whole, the vitality of the life of the world and of the present as superior to the myths that centre upon death and regard worldly pleasures as inferior. One would expect, therefore, that the woman in her actual temporal setting would be described in concrete and vivid terms to contrast with the dark and empty "spirituality". And at first glance this is what appears to be happening; but on looking more closely one sees that though there are the brilliant splashes of colour, there are also abstract words. Such words -- "complacencies", "freedom" -- are made concrete only by the reader maintaining a certain distance from the passage, by letting one word act upon another and simply receiving the total effect whereby the abstractions are given concrete force.

A good deal of Stevens' skill in achieving this total effect is syntactical. Syntactical relationships embody perceptual relationships and so indicate to a certain extent the way the individual poet "re-groups" what he observes. Here, of course, one passes into the subject of metaphor but a syntactical skill is an important basis for skill in creating metaphors. Stevens' syntax needs to be the subject of greater study than I can give it here; the economy of the first five lines of "Sunday Morning" is remarkable and indicates a highly-developed technique that is at work below the surface of most of his poems.

In the above example one is aware of the particular referents of the words, and so of their literal meaning, parallel to one's awareness of the emotive content. There are poems, however, where the two levels of language do not have equal weight, where sometimes they do not even go in the same direction. To put it another way, the poetry of the words is sometimes more important than the "meaning" of the poem and at its best comes closest to expressing, in Stevens' terminology, the essential poetry. This is particularly apparent in the "nonsense" poetry which I shall discuss later but it is also, it seems to me, a factor which gives many of the poems in Harmonium the vital physical quality though, as I have said, there may be few so-called sensuous words in the poem. In "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" it is achieved by the subtle and intricate elaboration of certain images, and particularly of colours, so that while one has difficulty in isolating particular sensuous words the total impression is of an atmosphere of mind

made tangible. In "The Snow Man" (CP 9) a similar process occurs so that the whole of that apparently abstract last line -- "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" -- becomes the almost concrete expression of both a state of mind and a barren landscape; the effect is always cumulative, the poem sets its own focus.

The range of Stevens' vocabulary is obviously considerable; if his own society or his own tongue cannot provide him with the words he needs he, like Pound, Eliot, and others, takes it from elsewhere. He does not simply take the word but rather makes it his own because it is the only way to express what he has discovered through his imagination, so it becomes part of the discovery itself: "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" (NA 32). Words play a major part in bringing the inarticulate to expression; they are a way to truth: "Poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words" (NA 33). But it may be argued that at times words may obscure rather than reveal, and in fact the poet, as Davie points out, holds both attitudes in that: "He grasps the paradox of poetic composition, its way of surrendering and conquering all at once."[22] That is to say, the poet both lets the words lead him and also controls their direction. Stevens' submission to his words may at first appear excessive until one realizes the superb control he exercises in tone, in syntax, in the choice of words, always aware, for instance, of the amount of abstraction or concreteness the context can bear.

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[22] D.Davie, Articulate Energy (London, 1955), p. 141.

Rhetoric and Nonsense

As I mentioned earlier, rhetoric is for Stevens often both a subject and a style. A perfect example of the two together occurs in the ninth stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (CP 16):

> In verses wild with motion, full of din,
> Loudened by cries, by clashes, quick and sure
> As the deadly thought of men accomplishing
> Their curious fates in war, come, celebrate
> The faith of forty, ward of Cupido.
> Most venerable heart, the lustiest conceit
> Is not too lusty for your broadening.
> I quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything
> For the music and manner of the paladins
> To make oblation fit. Where shall I find
> Bravura adequate to this great hymn?

Here rhetoric both exhibits and defines itself as "verses wild with motion, full of din". These first few lines echo the earlier exemplum of rhetoric given at the beginning of the poem:

> "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
> O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
> There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."

and significantly following from this are the lines: "And so I mocked her in magnificent measure./Or was it that I mocked myself alone?". Stevens' use of rhetoric is more often than not ironic, though this is not its sole function. It allows him to show the balloon of pomposity and prick it at the same time. It is, in fact, a measure of his self-awareness and perhaps of doubt. While for the most part he is exuberantly egotistical in celebrating man's wonderful imaginative faculty this very faculty reveals to him his limitations and calls itself into doubt. Since he thinks of himself primarily as a poet, it is the poetic self that is indulged

and mocked in rhetoric, just as Crispin is. The poet's limitations are manifest in rhetoric, according to Stevens, because while he is trying to bring to modern poetry that element which it so conspicuously lacks, namely nobility, yet "The nobility of rhetoric . . . is a lifeless nobility" (NA 35). This is because nobility, like belief, has to be expressed in a form viable for our age and rhetoric is no longer that form because it does not adhere to the real. Once it did, and Stevens quotes Socrates as an example of rhetoric as "the eloquent expression of that which is precisely true" (OP 285). Perhaps rhetoric is sometimes an attempt on Stevens' part to revive that nobility though he must simultaneously mock it -- and his own poetic aspirations -- because it is bound to fail.

This is possibly too negative an explanation of rhetoric for certainly the words do something. What they do is create a semblance of emotion or action. The battle images employed by Stevens in the above passage are not purely arbitrary or incidental; in rhetoric the words assault almost by sound alone and so persuasive is such a technique that for a while at least they can simulate more than they are. Harry Levin, writing on Marlowe's language, has this comment which might well apply to Stevens' rhetoric: "Marlowe contrives his own sound effects, manipulating a language which is not simply a means of communication but a substitute for representation. Magniloquence does duty for magnificence."[23] But

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[23] H.Levin, Christopher Marlowe: The Overreacher (London, 1965), p. 63. Blackmur has also compared Stevens' rhetoric to Marlowe's and Levin has, incidentally, studied the language of both.

ultimately such passages fall short, of Stevens' criteria at least. Even so, it requires a considerable skill with language to produce effective rhetoric even if it is not allowed that such an effect is valuable. Perhaps Stevens allows of such skill -- or perhaps he is merely being ironic -- when he describes rhetorical passages as "quick and sure/As the deadly thought of men accomplishing/Their curious fates in war . . ." or perhaps both attitudes are present. He allows for the sureness of touch but maintains, in a nicely ambiguous phrase, that such a touch is allied to "deadly thought".

Another use of language which tends to depend heavily on the sounds of words is nonsense. I use this term somewhat warily with reference to Stevens since he uses the technique in varying degrees in different poems and for different effects. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP 380) occurs the line: "Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation." Nonsense poetry, like the world, cannot be ordered or perceived merely by use of reason but requires and compels one to use the imagination. One effect of nonsense poetry, therefore, is to shock one into a heightened perception.

This is the effect, for instance, of the poem "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" (CP 66):

> The houses are haunted
> By white night-gowns.
> None are green,
> Or purple with green rings,
> Or green with yellow rings,
> Or yellow with blue rings.
> None of them are strange,
> With socks of lace
> And beaded ceintures.
> People are not going

To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

Just as one cannot really dissect Stevens' "serious" poems, one cannot dissect this; the effect is cumulative and depends upon the whole. This makes it difficult to define where the nonsense lies, one can only repeat that it lies in the whole, for each individual statement makes at least literal sense. Blackmur has defined the effect of the poem in this way:

> The statement about catching tigers in red weather coming after the white night-gowns and baboons and periwinkles, has a persuasive force out of all relation to the sense of the words. Literally, there is nothing alarming in the statement, and nothing ambiguous, but by so putting the statement that it appears as nonsense, infinite possibilities are made plain. The shock and virtue of nonsense is this: it compels us to scrutinize the words in such a way that we see the enormous ambiguity in the substance of every phrase, every image, every word.[24]

The statement about red tigers has such a strong persuasive force because, for one thing, it is an affirmative, declarative statement following the negative list of alternatives. It is stated as fact and has the force of such untilone does a "double-take". One is first lulled into a sort of logical acceptance by the apparent simplicity of the statements, by the almost meditative rhythm of the first half of the poem with its repetitive pattern of colours. Like Groucho Marx, like Alice in Wonderland, it depends upon the general tendency not to reflect immediately upon what is said but to accept a semblance of logic and sense. Like rhetoric, it de-

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[24]Blackmur, Language as Gesture, p. 226.

pends upon language at a surface level, taking advantage of most people's habit of not perceiving too closely, though its end is to shock us into proper perception.

It is in this latter aim that the poem's "meaning" lies. The progression from the drab white gowns to the red tigers is a progression towards heightened perception, and this should be the progress of the reader, too. Such a meaning is not explicit in the poem for nonsense poems do not yield a meaning in the ordinary way. They are to be apprehended rather than rationally comprehended and as such may provide in miniature an object lesson in how one should perceive relation in the world. Stevens appears to comment both on nonsense and on the relations to be intuitively and imaginatively perceived in the world in these lines which follow the "nonsense" stanzas of "Metaphors of a Magnifico" (CP 19):

> This is an old song
> That will not declare itself . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> That will not declare itself
> Yet is certain as meaning.

Nonsense poetry asserts, in however minor a way, the intuitive value of the imagination and as such the poetry itself has some value within the terms of Stevens' aesthetic, beyond the simple value of enjoyment.

The other major value of some of Stevens' nonsense poetry lies in its expression of exuberance and vitality. Nonsense seems to provide a natural context for the "precious characteristic" of

"gaiety in diction" (OP 178). That there may ultimately be sense behind the nonsense does not diminish the delightful effect of the poem on the nonsense level alone. Look, for instance, at the poem "Life is Motion" (CP 83):

> In Oklahoma,
> Bonnie and Josie,
> Dressed in calico,
> Danced around a stump.
> They cried,
> "Ohoyaho,
> Ohoo" . . .
> Celebrating the marriage
> Of flesh and air.

As is usual in Stevens' poetry, the title is indicative. The poem expresses the energetic delight in the changing physical world, a feeling that is similarly expressed elsewhere by "Ti-lill-lo!" (CP II) or "ki-ki-ri-ki" (CP 63). There is no rational articulation because none is necessary; these poems do not attempt to over-reach themselves but are simply expressive gestures. Sometimes, as I have said, such gestures are allied to definite sense and meaning, as in "The Ordinary Women" (CP IO), but still the bubbling sounds of the words, their rhymes and rhythms, are enjoyable in their own right. Nonsense poems are one way in which Stevens denies that "The world is ugly/And the people are sad." (CP 85)

I have dealt in this chapter with only certain aspects of Stevens' use of language but sufficient, I hope, to show the range of his aims and achievement. Pater may once have claimed that all arts constantly aspire to the condition of music but literature can never wholly achieve this. Language cannot, by its very nature, be

wholly self-referential since it has meaning built into it. One can go so far but no further; Stevens goes quite a long way in turning language upon itself, in attempting to make everything over as words, trying to use the words themselves as ideas instead of mere signs for the ideas. But this is perhaps a way of emphasizing the limitations of language and the belief that the final poem exists beyond language.

The poems of Harmonium are explorations through the range of language to find "The unity of style and the poem itself which is a unity of language and life that expresses both in a supreme sense" (OP 216). Such a unity is achieved in the best poems, in "Sunday Morning" (CP 66), "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (CP 89) and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (CP 98). It is lost at times in "The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP 27) where, perhaps because of the demands of a long poem, the poetry is occasionally an "eccentric and dissociated poetry". That is:

> . . . poetry that tries to exist or is intended to exist separately from the poem, that is to say in a style that is not identical with the poem. It never achieves anything more than a shallow mannerism, like something seen in a glass. Now, a time of disbelief is precisely a time in which the frequency of detached styles is greatest. . . . By detached, I mean the unsuccessful, the ineffective, the arbitrary, the literary, the non-umbilical, that which in its highest degree would still be words. For the style of the poem and the poem itself to be one there must be a mating and a marriage, not an arid love-song. (OP 211-212)

A failure to achieve this unity is a failure to achieve the required intensity, the right revelation of reality. Since Stevens believes in the power of words he must continually be using them as a means towards achieving this unity and must, almost by definition,

fail at times and present us with poems which, though they may please for other qualities, fall short of his own demands. In the course of Harmonium we witness the attempt to define a self, a style, and an aesthetic; Stevens has to explore before he can decide how to limit. He needs the language of Harmonium for this exploration and for the expression of his "new" vision but by the time of "The Comedian as the Letter C" he has learnt all the lesson he can from it and has outgrown this self.

"THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER C"

"Poetry is a statement of a relation between a man and the world" (OP 172).

As Stevens' first long poem and one which contains, in terms of both theme and language, many of the qualities of Harmonium as a whole, "The Comedian as the Letter C" obviously occupies a significant position in the Stevens canon. Accordingly, though the degree of significance has not been unanimously established, it has been subjected to a good many interpretations over the years. R.P.Blackmur categorizes it as "a meditation . . . of man's struggle with nature",[1] Roy Harvey Pearce sees it as "a kind of projection in biography of the development of Stevens' poetics", a description of its "protagonist's growth to artistic maturity".[2] Marianne Moore, in her review of Harmonium, refers to the poem as "expanded metaphor",[3] and Hi Simons claims it as allegory which "tells both how a representative modern poet tried to change from a romanticist to a realist and how he adapted himself to his en-

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[1] R.P.Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens", in his Language as Gesture (London, 1954), p. 243.

[2] R.H.Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (New Jersey, 1961), p. 387.

[3] M.Moore, "Well Moused, Lion", in A.Brown and R.S.Haller, eds., The Achievement of Wallace Stevens (Philadelphia and New York, 1962), p. 25.

vironment".[4] The critics differ as to the strength of the autobiographical element in the poem; some, like Winters,[5] see Crispin's predicament as being very closely allied to Stevens' own. Others take what seems to me a more valid stance in seeing the poem as autobiographical only in that "it is a generalization upon the author's experience and point of view".[6] That is to say, it is autobiographical in the sense that all poems are, "it cannot be otherwise, even though it may be totally without reference to himself" (NA 121).

Before entering the poem proper and considering some of these questions, it is worth looking briefly at Crispin's origins within Stevens' work, as well as his possible literary ancestors. His first appearance is in a short poem called "Anecdote of the Abnormal" (OP 23) written about 1919-1920 and appearing in Opus Posthumous but not in the Collected Poems. The theme of the poem is ". . . new colours make new things/And new things make old things again . . . /And so with men." The last stanza of the poem brings in Crispin:

> Crispin-valet, Crispin-saint!
> The exhausted realist beholds

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[4] H.Simons, "'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance", in A.Brown and R.S.Haller, eds., The Achievement of Wallace Stevens (Philadelphia and New York, 1962), p. 98.

[5] Y.Winters, "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress", in his In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1965), pp. 439-443.

[6] H.Simons, op. cit., p.98.

His tattered manikin arise,
Tuck in the straw,
And stalk the skies.

This is an anecdote of the activity of the imagination, which is in itself abnormal, but which has the power to perceive the normal in the abnormal, order in chaos. There are certain affinities with the later Crispin in that he too is a valet, a small, relatively insignificant creature who goes through several processes of being "made new" only to find himself left with the old unchanged essence of self. But the later Crispin, though he may be seen in one way as "exhausted realist", is not able to work miracles by means of the imagination and turn himself into a saint. Between this poem and the later is a considerable growth of scepticism concerning the power of the imagination.

Crispin also has affinities with other personae of Harmonium, in fact, in the course of his voyage he embraces the two distinct types. The one is the man who thinks, as the persona in "Tea at the Palace of Hoon (CP 65) that "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw/Or heard or felt came not but from myself." This, of course, corresponds to the opening prepostion of "The Comedian" -- "man is the intelligence of his soil." This confidence appears at first glance to be the dominant note of Harmonium, but there are significant attacks, in "Bantams in Pine-Woods" (CP 75) for instance, on the kind of arrogance that blinds one to the fact that a good deal of the self is contained in the world. "The Comedian" is the fullest exploration of this problem, the problem of

the relation between imagination and reality, and between self and the world, a theme which develops in Harmonium as a natural result of extreme self-awareness regarding the exercise of the imagination. It is, however, the imaginative perception itself that enables the self to see the shortcomings of the imagination and though one must recognize the growth of a certain amount of scepticism, I think it would be a mistake to conclude that because Stevens loses some of his early confidence in the imagination by the time of "The Comedian" he is denying the value of the imagination. Rather he comes to see, as is expressed in his later prose writings, that the true value of the imagination is to be found in its co-equal interdependence with reality. The doubt leads not to denial but to adjustment. I stress that at this point I am referring to the point of view which Stevens developed; whether Crispin's development is precisely along these same lines will be discussed later.

In referring to Crispin's ancestors within Stevens' other poems it seems to me that one might well consider another sea-traveller, the one of "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" (CP5). There are probably a number of ways in which one could interpret this poem and not all of them relevant to a discussion of "The Comedian" but there is, I think, one interpretation which is valid and which shows this poem as the embryonic version of certain themes which occur in the later poem:

> But not on a shell, she starts,
> Archaic, for the sea.
> But on the first-found weed
> She scuds the glitters,
> Noiselessly, like one more wave.

She too is discontent
And would have purple stuff upon her arms,
Tired of the salty harbors,
Eager for the brine and bellowing
Of the high interiors of the sea.

The wind speeds her,
Blowing upon her hands
And watery back.
She touches the clouds, where she goes
In the circle of her travers of the sea.

Yet this is meagre play
In the scurry and water-shine,
As her heels foam---
Not as when the goldener nude
Of a later day

Will go, like the centre of sea-green pomp,
In an intenser calm,
Scullion of fate,
Across the spick torrent, ceaselessly,
Upon her irretrievable way.

The nude of the poem is paltry -- as Crispin is miniscule; she is the undeveloped sensibility, the imagination that is not exercising itself to the full. Like Crispin, she is urged beyond the confines of her world into the large experience of the sea. She encompasses the reality of the sea but this still is not the fullest realization of the imagination; that will come when the imagination orders reality -- "The joy of meaning in design/Wrenched out of chaos . . . " ("The Sail of Ulysses": CP 100). The goldener nude is "scullion of fate" because she is behaving as she must according to her true nature.

This is, in essence, the imaginative aesthetic of the early Stevens but, again, it is qualified by scepticism by the time we reach "The Comedian". Crispin, "the credible hero" (OP 117), be-

lieves, for a while at least, that he has the power for imaginative fulfilment, that he is able to create the world of knowledge which the goldener nude will create. Denis Donoghue writes: "For Stevens, the sea is not enough, reality is not enough. He needs the words of the sea, and if he cannot have them he will settle for words and let the sea look out for itself. But the greatest poem is the words of the sea."[7] The words of the sea are the knowledge, the revelation, the order produced by the workings of the imagination upon reality. Crispin sets off, confident that he can build "loquacious cabins by the sea" but must ultimately settle for the log cabin. Again the persona who believes that he can contain the world within himself is modified by the one who is forced to recognise that a good deal of self is in the world.

The World without Imagination

Doubt as to whether Crispin can accomplish what the goldener nude will accomplish is introduced in the very first section:

> . . . . . is this same wig
> Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,
> Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea
> Created, in his day, a touch of doubt (CP 27)

The opening motto: "man is the intelligence of his soil" is expressive of a certain confidence in man's power, but the doubt is inherent in phrases such as "Socrates of snails", where the self-confidence denoted by "Socrates" is deflated and revealed as pomposity by its combination with "snails". Here Crispin is defined,

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[7] D.Donoghue, Connoisseurs of Chaos (New York, 1965), p.191.

so far as he is defined at all, by his aspirations and his environment and the two are not in accord. Crispin is discontent with such a defintion for he if aware that it is counterfeit, a masquerade, so seeks for some "true" definition of self and its right relation to the environment.

Riddel maintains that "there is no motivation for Crispin's fall into experience, no reason for his exposure to the not-me, and hence no real drama. There is only an awakening of sensibility . . . ."[8] It is true that there is an awakening of sensibility but I think Riddel is mistaken in claiming there is no motivation for Crispin's voyage. It may not be directly stated at the beginning of the poem but I believe it is implied and if there is still any doubt one need only look at these lines from the fourth section:

> These bland excursions into time to come,
> Related in romance to backward flights,
> However prodigal, however proud,
> Contained in their afflatus the reproach
> That first drove Crispin to his wandering.
> He could not be content with counterfeit,
> With masquerade of thought, with hapless words
> That must belie the racking masquerade,
> With fictive flourishes that preordained
> His passion's permit, hang of coat, degree
> Of buttons, measure of his salt. . . . (CP 39)

Crispin holds the view at first that he is master of his own environment, but the question raised is that, once having left the "snug hibernal", can he hold sway over the rest of the world? And once he leaves home he leaves a good deal of the "mythology of self". This mythology consists of the pastiche of roles in which

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[8] J.N.Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 96.

Crispin, in his romantic fancy, sees himself. At this point Stevens piles up a heap of phrases: "The lutanist of fleas, the knave, the thane,/The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak/Of China, cap of Spain. . . . " Such phrases are not meant to send the reader hunting for sources of literary allusions, though many have been suggested.[9] They rather suggest the absence of any clear-cut definition of Crispin, simply the assumption of fragments of personae.

This mythology of self, Hi Simons suggests, is "threatened with extinction in the world without imagination where he was now at large."[10] Simons seems to imply that this extinction of the mythology of self is to be guarded against whereas I would say that at this point it is what Crispin desires, even though he may be unsure of what it involves. He wants "mythology of self,/Blotched out beyond unblotching." so that he can penetrate to the real self, though as usual, his aspirations may be greater than his ability and the sight of himself reduced by the vast experience of reality to "A skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass" requires an adjustment difficult to make.

Crispin's "reduction" is ably suggested by the short phrase about the skinny sailor which follows the elaborate description of the mythology, but it is also suggested in terms of words, of Crispin's name itself. Once Crispin has been "washed away by magnitude"

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[9] See Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p.95 for a summary of the most notable suggestions.

[10] H.Simons, "The Comedian as the Letter C", p.99.

even his name has been reduced:

> What word split up in clickering syllables
> And storming under multitudinous tones
> Was name for this short-shanks in all that brunt?
> Crispin was washed away by magnitude.
> The whole of life that still remained in him
> Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear,
> Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh,
> Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust. (CP 28)

It seems to me possible that those last four lines, in answering the question of the preceding lines, contain something of an extended pun; following on from the mention of "word" and "syllables" we have the whole of Crispin reduced to one sound -- that of the sea, or his initial letter.

Crispin is overwhelmed by the "watery realist", personified here as Triton. Just as Triton is defined almost completely by the sea so that all that remains otherwise are "faint, memorial gesturings", "hallucinating horn" and "A sunken voice . . . of remembering and forgetfulness" so Crispin is dissolved into the essence of sea, into a "starker, barer self." Unable to "stem verboseness in the sea" Crispin is drenched by it and confronts it -- "the veritable ding an sich . . ./ . . . a vocable thing". Words in themselves form a theme in this poem as well as a medium; the imagination's confrontaion with reality is referred to as the forsaking of the romantic distortions, the "poem of plums", for "the strict austerity/Of one vast, subjugating, final tone."

In this first section we see the progression of Crispin from, in Simon's terms, "juvenile romantic subjectivism, through . . . a realism almost without positive content, consisting merely

in recognizing the stark realities of life . . . ."[11] What Simons does not make quite clear, however, is that the near-negative quality of this new-found realism implies Crispin's retention of certain concepts from his earlier self. He finds himself now

> In a starker, barer world, in which the sun
> Was not the sun because it never shone
> With bland complaisance on pale parasols,
> Beetled, in chapels, on the chaste bouquets. (CP 29)

In the absence of new positive concepts Crispin is forced to continue to define things in terms of the old. So although Crispin's encounter with experience, with reality, has made him "an introspective voyager" and has shattered his previous masks, he has not so much been made new as pared down -- and vestiges of his earlier phase remain.

Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan

Having encountered the bare essence of realism (apparently always equated with salt, in Stevens), Crispin now feels a need for realsim plus content. The direction of his aspirations may have changed but he still aspires. Having crossed, Columbus-like, from the old world to the new, he comes to Yucatan. Here the natives, though surrounded by magnificent barbarity, are sonneteers; that is, they follow the conventions of the romantic poets, so lately followed by Crispin who once "wrote his couplet yearly to the spring". Crispin, however, "made vivid by the sea" is "too destitute to find/ In any commonplace the sought-for aid." He falls upon the crude

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[11] Ibid., p. 98.

barbarism of this lush landscape with naive eagerness. But Crispin, though exposed to reality, does not yet know how to perceive it, nor his own relation to it:

> He was in this as other freemen are,
> Sonorous nutshells rattling inwardly.
> His violence was for aggrandizement
> And not for stupor, such as music makes
> For sleepers halfway waking. . . . . (CP 31)

Crispin in his eagerness is not aware of the consequences of his re-orientation; his consciousness is not fully awakened and the essential self still not defined. Still he seeks refuge in the workings of the imagination, in the writing of poems although these poems attempt to embrace a new aesthetic, one "tough, diverse, untamed". Though he would seek inspiration for his poetry from the exotic aspects of reality -- "The fabulous and its intrinsic verse" -- Crispin still does not have the self to measure up to his aspirations and again is overwhelmed, this time by thunderstorms. Naively joying in the lushness of the landscape and "A new reality in parrot-squawks", he suffers another "instance of elemental fate" comparable to his experience at sea. He takes refuge in the cathedral -- the embodiment of the old myths? -- retreating from reality into the imagination. But, like the sea, the thunderstorm increases his awareness and he sees it as "the span/Of force, the quintessential fact, . . . ". It is another prompting towards finding the thing in itself. Crispin has been pared down a little more, feels freer of the trappings that obscured his "true" self but, as the next section reveals, he is still not the complete realist.

The disparity between how Crispin aspires to develop -- and how he fancies himself to be developing -- and how he actually progresses is shown largely through the ironic touch achieved by subtle alternation between the tone of a detached narrator and the tone of a naive Crispin. We see most of the actual landscape in Crispin's terms, but we see Crispin observing the landscape in the narrator's terms. We see Crispin waxing lyrical on "the purple tufts, the scarlet crowns" but it is the narrator's distance and perception that sums up this lyricism in: "The affectionate emigrant found/A new reality in parrot-squawks".

I mentioned in discussion of the first section that in this poem words are a theme as well as a medium. This is naturally so since Crispin is, at least in the Stevensian sense, a poet -- that is, any man of sensiblity. He is in search of his true poetic aesthetic which is analogous to his true relationship to his environment and his discovery of self. This theme is expressed in terms of Crispin's continuous effort to find the words from his environment. So far the voice of the surroundings and the voice of Crispin have been in opposition. He was no match against the "verboseness in the sea"; the "ding an sich", when he confronted it, had "a speech belched out of hoary darks/Noway resembling his, . . .". The thunderstorm sounds for him "the note/Of Vulcan" that he wishes to make his own note and he is confident that westward he will find the phrase, the poem that marries self and world, style and poem.

That Crispin still has not become effective realist is admitted at the beginning of this section; he is still a subject for the "book of moonlight", the book of the imagination. He is still a poet

> Who, in the hubbub of his pilgrimage
> Through sweating changes, never could forget
> That wakefulness or meditating sleep,
> In which the sulky strophes willingly
> Bore up, in time, the somnolent, deep songs. (CP 33)

The concept he has of America is the concept he has retained from his early imaginative and subjective phase. Again we are given Crispin's idea of a landscape; America is described in terms of the imagination (the north, the blue polar landscape usually signifies the imagination in Stevens' poems). The description of a cold, delicate land which never comes to ripeness provides a singular contrast with luxuriant Yucatan. This, remember, is America as Crispin imagines it is going to be. Though earnestly seeking reality and attempting to deny the imagination, he slips for a moment into the pleasant indulgence that:

> Perhaps the Arctic moonlight really gave
> The liaison, the blissful liaison,
> Between himself and his environment, (CP 34)

But then he collects himself and asserts that the imagination is an evasion or at most created a very slight relation between self and environment. He recognizes that the imagination still has some hold upon him and that his voyage consists of fluctuations between imagination and reality, between subjectivity and objectivity, but, confident as ever, he feels he can deal with the seductive overtures

of the imagination, secure in the knowledge that "It was a flourishing tropic he required/For his refreshment, an abundant zone,".

Thus, with the two concepts of America -- the one an early view of the imagination, the other taken from the actual land appearing on the horizon -- he comes to Carolina. The voyage inland makes the decision for him and the "moonlight fiction" apparently disappears in

> . . . . the rancid rosin, burly smells
> Of dampened lumber, emanations blown
> From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,
> Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks
> That helped him roung his rude aesthetic out. (CP 36)

This marks a further stage in his increased perception, a perception which now prompts him towards the discovery of "the essential prose", which is, in fact, the true poetry, the heightened reality.

The double vision of Crispin and the narrator continues in this section. Crispin's eager savouring of the rankness of his surroundings, his implied feeling that he is reaching the end of his search, is placed in perspective by the gently ironic: "Curriculum for the marvelous sophomore". Crispin now embraces an aesthetic of "sinewy nakedness" and appears finally to have relinquished the pomp and regalia which decked him in the first section: "He came. The poetic hero without palms/Or jugglery, without regalia.". The mention of palms here carries not only connotations of ceremony but of Christian "myth",[12] implying that Crispin no longer needs the support given to him, for instance, by the cathedral.

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[12] This image also occurs in "The Shape of the Coroner" (OP 29): "The palms were waved/For the beau of illusions."

The Idea of a Colony

Crispin has now finally relinquished the moonlight and reverses his original premise. Now he adheres to the motto: "his soil is man's intelligence". So far Crispin has been something of a passive receiver of these various experiences; at this point he becomes "more bellicose" and positively directs himself to celebrating his new-found objective realism. "His western voyage ended and began." Crispin has reached his new-found land and begins his attempts "To make a new intelligence prevail" instead of the shadow of his previous stale intelligences. He even goes so far as to write a prologomena, setting forth principles which he would strive to apply in the founding of a colony. Upon the principle that the characteristics of a region are the proper characteristics of its inhabitants, ". . . . he/Projected a colony that should extend/To the dusk of a whistling south below the south,". In such a colony "The man in Georgia waking among pines/Should be pine-spokesman. . . .".

This theory of poetic expression had considerable vogue at the time Stevens was writing this poem and one of its foremost exponents was Stevens' friend, William Carlos Williams. In a letter to Henry Wells (12th April, 1950), Williams wrote: "The poem to me . . . is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to expression."[13]

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[13] William Carlos Williams, The Selected Letters (New York, 1957), pp. 286-287.

Crispin, however, out-Williams Williams when, like some keen promotions man, "not indifferent to smart detail", he conceives of even the melon having "apposite ritual".

But though he has foresworn the insipid imaginative fancy and the exotic reality in an attempt to get a hold of the true reality, "the essential prose", Crispin recognizes that his projections for the future are in themselves false:

> These bland excursions into time to come,
> Related in romance to backward flights,
> However prodigal, however proud,
> Contained in their afflatus the reproach
> That first drove Crispin to his wandering.
> He could not be content with counterfeit,
> With masquerade of thought, ... (CP 39)

He is a novitiate but a shrewd one and recognizes his "dreams" for what they are. The lines concerning the "monotonous babbling in our dreams" touch upon a central concern of the poem; Simons gives this interpretation of them: "There is an eternal recurrence of the same motifs in our dreams(our daydreams and projects, also) that makes them, not harbingers of higher attainment, but the inheritors of the weaknesses and limitations of the 'stale lives' hidden within us."[14] Crispin dreams his dreams, is victim of his own imagination, in spite of himself, for whatever "sweating changes" he has experienced the imagination is part of his essential self. He has tried to deny the subjective and to concentrate on the environment but recognizes his failure. So he becomes a fatalist; he still condemns the dreams that he is, at times, seduced by,

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[14]Simons, "The Comedian as the Letter C", p. 106.

and finally: "Preferring text to gloss, he humbly served/Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event." In view of Crispin's previous pretensions and aspirations one might tend to doubt the validity of his present stance, to see him as "tiptoe cozener" but the denial of this is firm, Crispin's present proclamation is "veracious page on page, exact". So Crispin relinquishes his idea for a colony. But though he is perhaps a clown, he is an aspiring clown (the narrator's judgement?); that is, whether Crispin recognizes it or not, he is still directed in part by his imagination.

A Nice Shady Home

Crispin's awareness in his journey in search of reality was continually directed outside himself. He sought for the words of the poem directly from the environment and left "The appointed power unwielded from disdain", deliberately denying his own imaginative perception. Now he abandons his attempts at discovery of a realistic poetic aesthetic and so, according to his own limited idea of poetry, must abandon poetry itself. His grandiose aspirations diminish with his horizon:

> Crispin dwelt in the land and dwelling there
> Slid from his continent by slow recess
> To things within his actual eye, . . . (CP 40)

He comes to accept a modified realism, and one to be found close to hand:

> He first, as realist, admitted that
> Whoever hunts a matinal continent
> May, after all, stop short before a plum
> And be content and still be realist.
> The words of things entangle and confuse.
> The plum survives its poems. . . . . (CP 40-41)

Crispin finds his reality in the "surviving form" -- of himself as well as the plum. He first renounced the "poems of plums" as far back as the first section but only now does he realize that the plum itself instances reality as well as the more exotic discoveries of continental wandering.

But now that Crispin has reached this stage what sort of a conclusion is it? Should he turn his discovery into poetry, as he did with his other discoveries? Should he proclaim what must appear, in the light of his earlier aspirations, failure or at least compromise? Such poetry would be superfluous, so Crispin feels, confronted with his failure, with the accusation of the log-cabin rather than the projected "loquacious columns". He defends his compromise -- and refusal to write poetry -- by humility, by minimizing the importance of his lot among so many others. He pleads the weakness of mankind in general to do more than accept things as they are.

Has Crispin come full circle or has he progressed?

> The very man despising honest quilts
> Lies quilted to his poll in his despite.
> For realist, what is is what should be. (CP 41)

He is back with the salad-beds but now he is coming to recognize his own relationship to this environment, though he is not yet fully reconciled. In the beginning he recognized that his position was false but thought the error lay in the environment. And so he sought to change but employed his energies in the wrong direction, attempting to make the self fit the aspirations rather than trimming the aspirations to fit the self. He had an "eye most apt in

gelatines and jupes", "a barber's eye" but instead of limiting his perception to such horizons he turned his gaze on porpoises. Looking always for the real in the distant horizons but never recognizing the quality of his personal perception he always ended up with the same incongruity between self and environment; though his perception caused him to see the porpoises through a barber's eyes -- "Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world" -- he was not aware of the nature of this perception, he did not recognize himself.

Now at last, though it is not easy to accept a self so far below his aspirations, he recognizes what he is. No longer does he search frantically for the words but rather enjoys a "long soothsaying silence". He marries (a seal on the relationship between man and his environment, the union of style/self and poem?), is "magister of a single room" instead of "Socrates of snails", and gradually, rather to his surprise, he finds the daily round less irksome than he had imagined -- perhaps he had anticipated a fine martyrdom. In fact he discovers the considerable pleasures of the quotidian which "saps like the sun" and "For all it takes it gives a humped return".

And Daughters with Curls

When, in the first section, a word was sought for Crispin it was "a word split up in clickering syllables". Now Crispin's self and his position are again expressed in terms of words and sounds but of a different kind than earlier:

> Portentous enunciation, syllable
> To blessed syllable affined, and sound

> Bubbling felicity in cantilene,
> Prolific and tormenting tenderness
> Of music, as it comes to unison,
> Forgather and bell boldly Crispin's last
> Deduction. . . . . (CP 43)

Crispin in his return to "social nature" achieves a harmony, a unity of self and a right relation to his environment never achieved before. He expresses himself now not through the sort of poems he used to write but through his family and the life he lives (which may, I think, be taken as analogies for the perfectly unified poem). His children, while a source of comfort, are also constant reminders of what he is and how he is limited (they are also the sort of children one would expect from a man who is a barber and whose name comes from the Latin word for "curled"). The "marriage" between Crispin and his environment is emphasized by the fact that his children are spoken of as his "chits" (one meaning of this word is "sprout" or "shoot") and his "capacious bloom".[15] Kermode suggests that Crispin's four daughters are "the seasons, cardinal to the life of nature and his own life."[16] Their role may embrace all of these but most important they are:

> . . . four more personae, intimate
> As buffo, yet divers, four mirrors blue
> That should be silver, four accustomed seeds
> Hinting incredible hues, four selfsame lights
> That spread chromatics in hilarious dark,
> Four questioners and four sure answerers. (CP 45)

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[15] See Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 100 for the suggestion of a possible thrust at Whitman here.

[16] F. Kermode, Wallace Stevens (Edinburgh and London, 1960), p. 48.

They themselves display Crispin's curiosity and are the answers to his own questions concerning the nature of his self, for they are aspects of that self. They are also -- poems or daughters -- products of his imagination, "four mirrors blue", and as his imagination are his comfort and illumination in "hilarious dark". But they are mirrors that "should be silver"; that is, they indicate that Crispin has not yet found the ultimate revelation, has not yet fully come to the knowledge of "the universal hue", he is still at the stage of the "ephemeral blues" (CP 15). That his knowledge is not complete is also suggested by the reference to "chromatics". Elsewhere Stevens writes: "It is of our nature that we pass from the chromatic to the clear, from the unknown to the known" (OP 258). Crispin has made some progress, the dark is illuminated, but he has not come to full knowledge.

The "doctrine" that Crispin concocts from all this is what is cannot be changed and must be accepted. This is Crispin's "Disguised pronunciamento", a natural and "perfectly resolved" statement more harmonious than any of his previous poems, as if Crispin had at last found his own personal style. But if the "anecdote" does not, in fact, give this appearance, if it is false and Crispin is a "profitless /Philosopher, beginning with green brag,/Concluding fadedly", if Crispin is still perceiving life through distorting fancy, what does it matter "since/The relation comes, benignly, to its end?"

The end of this poem if full of ambiguities. For instance, the line: "So may the relation of each man be clipped" contains considerable play on words. Pearce points out the pun in "clipped" --

"'cut off' against 'yclept', 'dying' as against 'being named'".[17] Riddel suggests a pun, too, on "relation" since Crispin's own relation, his narrative, has come to an end, as well as one "relating" (synthesis) of the imagination.[18] But what is really difficult to define is the precise tone of these last lines. Is Stevens saying that a happy ending excuses all -- or that it is precisely such an attitude of easy contentment that stultifies man's imaginative faculty? What is the overall tone, aim, "diguised pronunciamento" of this poem?

The prevailing tone is, I think, one of affirmation temper- with scepticism. In this poem, and in Harmonium, Stevens has att- empted to affirm, to assert that what shall or ought to be is con- tained in is. But in the course of Harmonium he has come to recog- nize that at times there is "Domination of Black" -- Crispin's "hil- arious dark". And if he is truly to perceive reality he must all- ow for this aspect of it, and allow, too, that while the imaginat- may illuminate the dark it may not, of itself, be able to dispel it. Crispin is comedian, that is, ordinary, every-day man;[19] he makes fantastic voyage but his stature does not increase, rather he is re- duced to himself and recognition of his own limitations. And in this journey of everyman is Stevens' manifesto, to be learnt both from what Crispin did and what he did not do. The salvation of

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[17]Pearce, op. cit., p. 388.

[18]Riddel, op. cit., p. 101.

[19]Blackmur, op. cit., p.249.

lies in discovery of self and its right relation to the world. Crispin's biggest mistake was to disdain the power of the imaginative perception in attempting to make such a discovery. Stevens can finally allow for both his success and his failure for though he ultimately achieves a better relation than he began with he is still not actively and consciously applying the imagination to the discovery of reality. This is not to say definitely that he cannot go on to do so, the end of one relation may lead to the beginning of another for Crispin is, after all, an aspiring clown. He still has his imagination, still finds himself "Illuminating, from a fancy gorged/By apparition, plain and common things" and in this shows considerable improvement over his original inclinations: "Imagination applied to the whole world is vapid in comparison to imagination applied to a detail" (OP 176).

But whereas it may remain an open question as to whether Crispin can go on, Stevens can. Crispin and Stevens are by no means identical; Crispin may perhaps be seen as an aspect of Stevens, but he is an aspect which Stevens already recognizes as obsolete, a poetic style which he has outgrown or perhaps an ironic warning to himself of what could happen if he did not continue to struggle to achieve the right relation between imagination and reality. And it is as a paving the way to a new relation that Stevens in this poem gives his final display of the language and style of Harmonium.

"The Comedian" has been heavily criticized in some quarters for its language. Roy Harvey Pearce, for instance, writes: "The overplus of language -- parallels, appositions, repetitions, words

unabsorbed into the whole, the overpowering concreteness, maximally irrelevant texture -- gets in the way of the developing analysis of the poet's situation and what it is coming too."[20] I would agree that there are parts of this poem where the language cannot bear the burden of itself but would argue that such passages are rarer than many critics think, and are perhaps faulted because of their occurence rather than any intrinsic lack of worth. One of the difficulties of a long poem is always that there is time for virtues to become excessive.

The role of language in this poem is inextricably involved with the role of Crispin, and the larger subject of imagination and reality. The main objection made is to the "excess" of language, language used too much for its own sake at the expense of the "poem". If this is so then Stevens is failing in his declared aim of presenting the style and the poem as one. In order to judge how far, if at all, Stevens does fail here one needs to estimate what the poem is which must dictate the nature of the style. I have already given some indication of possible interpretations of the poem so here it is sufficient to speak in general terms.

The subject of the poem is an abstract one, the development of a sensibility -- or a poetic -- or the progress of man as an "instance of fate". But on one level, at least, the experience of this subject is concrete -- the overwhelmingly physical world to which this sensibility exposes itself. Stevens has already display-

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[20]Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry, p. 388.

ed in Harmonium his ability to combine the abstract and the concrete and here he carries it to even greater lengths so that we are aware of the assault the landscape makes on Crispin's senses and his mind. It is not that the words hide Crispin's development from us but that they do what they are meant to do, namely that the ill-defined Crispin is no match against them. It may be argued that the language should reflect the changes in Crispin but there are no radical changes in Crispin's nature. Chameleon-like in his underdeveloped sensibility he takes on the definition of his surroundings. The landscape changes and so does the texture of the images used to describe it -- compare for instance the description of lush Yucatan with the delicate images used to descibe Crispin's America. The "narratorial" comments also subtly suggest the shifts of the poem, carrying their ironic note and especially set against these, I think it possible that the passages in which Crispin/poet vociferates upon the landscape may be taken as a detached Stevens' ironic indulgence in a style he is relinquishing.

I do not agree with Blackmur's view as a judgement on the total role of language in this poem but I consider his summary of the style a perceptive definition of that aspect of it which makes the greatest impact:

> I do not know the name for the form. It is largely the form of rhetoric, language used for its own sake, persuasively to the extreme. But it has, for rhetoric, an extraordinary content of concrete experience. Mr. Stevens is a genuine poet in that he attempts constantly to transform what is felt with the senses and what is thought in the mind -- if we can still distinguish the two -- into that realm of being, which we call poetry, where what is thought is felt and what is felt has the strict point of

> thought. And I call his mode of achieving that transformation rhetorical because it is not lyric or dramatic or epic, because it does not transcend its substance, but is a reflection upon a hard surface, a shining mirror of rhetoric.[21]

Blackmur's perception concerning Stevens' use of language is the most sympathetic and illuminating criticism of it that so far exists, but even he sometimes appears to enthuse rather than elucidate or define. Much of the complexity of Stevens' poetry lies in the treatment indivisible from the theme and it seems to me that more real study should be made through the language and not in spite of it.

I have suggested certain aspects of language which are important in this particular poem and in Harmonium as a whole, but these aspexts and others need more detailed study. For a full understanding of Stevens' early language, one needs to be able to see more clearly how and why it came into being -- questions that will be easier to answer once more is known of the early years and of Stevens' particular process of composition. In his early poetry Stevens virtually creates his own language and meanings which remain for him to draw upon as he wishes, so that a detailed study of his vocabulary, the connotations he gradually creates for his words (virtually his own symbolic system in some instances), his syntax, logic, and rhetoric, would illuminate his later poetry which is in so many ways pre-ordained by the language of Harmonium. The structure of Stevens' language is analogous to the structure of his world and should be studied as such.

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[21]Blackmur, Language as Gesture, pp. 248-9.

CONCLUSION

The observations I have made in this thesis by no means constitute a study of Stevens' language. They are intended to serve as justification and preparation for such a study. Justification seems necessary in view of the astonishing neglect shown in this direction; "precosity" and "dandiness" are terms used frequently to describe a language that deserves much greater respect and attention. It seems that such a situation may not long persist since Stevens is now being "discovered" everywhere by graduate students, and a new phase of criticism appears to be beginning, heralded by Joseph Riddel's excellent study.

Compared, however, with Eliot, Pound, or even Williams, it has taken a long time for Stevens' poetry to achieve recognition and never, I think, will he become a "popular" poet. And the cause of both these judgements is, to a considerable extent, the idiom he uses. Stevens was -- and more than is generally credited -- a man of his time, but his language seemed to many to be in no current mode and to retreat from the time rather than embody it. Indeed, it was for this very reason that many of his "admirers" were drawn to it. This admiration of the right thing for the wrong reasons has done harm and injustice to Stevens' early poetry.

I have tried to indicate some of the ways in which Stevens' early language can be viewed in relation to his age and to his personal ideology for unless one allows for these in the language one

can never see that the phrase "language used for its own sake", when applied to Stevens, should not be perjorative. For, where Stevens is concerned, the language contains and is capable of so much one needs nothing but the words. He does not relegate them to the position of mere ciphers but explores fully the possibilit- of language, restoring its value in a time when "the pressure of reality" threatened the power of the imagination, when inarticulacy, or at best, jargon were imminent dangers.

That Stevens was the solitary affirmer of language and the individual perception it embodied is perhaps reflected in our mass slide into "Pop" culture, the ready-made collective experience that makes individual imaginative perception superfluous when we can share the collective cliche. We have limited ourselves to the waste land and our language has suffered accordingly, reflecting a destructive passivity. Because Stevens did not do this, because he held a positive view in a sceptical age, he was dismissed as romantic, and his poetry as superficial. His language has been dismissed or misunderstood because we have become accustomed to emasculated speech whereas Stevens was aware of and availed himself of the creative and revelatory power latent within the word itself.

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