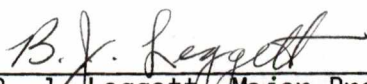
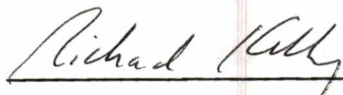


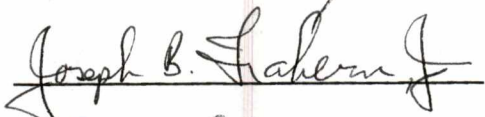
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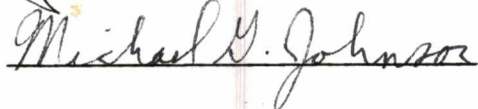
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B. J. Leggett, Major Professor

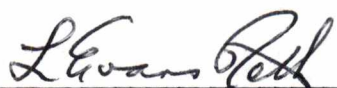
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WALLACE STEVENS AND THE IDEA OF LANGUAGE

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Susan Leigh Baughn

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ABSTRACT

Wallace Stevens wrote poetry about the act of writing poetry. At the heart of the problematic of Stevens' poetry on poetry lies language as a decreative and re-creative force which expresses the relationship between the imagination and reality. In poetry, Stevens wanted to "recreate" a language which could render changing, chaotic reality in all its complexity and disclose a wholeness in experience which ordinary awareness does not warrant--to re-create what the religious philosopher Mircea Eliade has called the "mythical style of life." This study examines Stevens' prose to establish the decreative and re-creative theory of language and metaphor and to analyze the poems about poetry to discover how Stevens used language as metaphor and theme.

Language is an arbitrary, humanly created sign system which is not isomorphic with the world. Yet Stevens desired a language for what he called "cosmic poetry" to balance reality with imagination. In saying "Words are everything else in the world," Stevens suggested that, as the arbitrator between imagination, which is part of us, and reality, which is separate, unknowable, and violent, language is all we have. But because language is an isomorphic system, it cannot mirror reality thoroughly or completely, but tends to fix reality, just as definitions tend to fix abstractions. The solution is Stevens' re-created secret language of poetry. He searched for ways to structure language so that it reflected the structure and order of the world, or he wrote poetry about structuring language to balance reality with imagination.

Ironically, the making of poetry becomes a destructive act because it attempts to tear down with words man's categorization of reality as it is usually expressed in words. For Stevens, the conceptual view of reality creates an order which does not exist in reality and which, consequently, must be destroyed. His poetry, therefore, is aimed at making his readers "connoisseurs of chaos." Interested in a poetry that defies man to categorize reality simply, Stevens attempted to create a discontinuity with categorization so that readers could see the world in a fresh way.

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CHAPTER 1

WALLACE STEVENS AND THE IDEA OF LANGUAGE

In his essay "Interpreting Stevens: An Essay on Poetry and Thinking," Joseph Riddel suggests a connection between the poetic theories and practice of Wallace Stevens and the deconstructive philosophy of Jacques Derrida and others, a philosophy which proceeds by bringing into question the language by which all previous philosophical systems were built, "thus introducing the problematic of a 'discourse on discourse.'"¹ This Riddel connects with Stevens' idea in his essay "The Relation between Poetry and Painting" that "modern reality is a reality of decreation," that is, "making pass from the created to the uncreated."² Riddel explains:

In both his poetry and prose, Stevens is engaged in the "act" of decreation, one dimension of which is the turning back of language and in certain instances a familiar or even banal concept, back upon itself, by way of pursuing some origin at the heart of utterance--or to put it in the terms of one of his poems, to seek the unspoken word of the "central poem" that is at once proved and disproved (and thus displaced) by "lesser poems." In short, Stevens seems to sense a presence at the origin, a discoverable presence, but every penetration to that presence only reveals that the place is a fiction, an interpretation, and thus not an ultimate or supreme or central poem but only another lesser poem.³

¹Joseph Riddel, "Interpreting Stevens: An Essay on Poetry and Thinking," Boundary 2, 1 (1972), 84.

²Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel (New York: Vintage, 1951), p. 174. Hereinafter referred to parenthetically in the text as "NA."

³Riddel, p. 85.

It is my contention that this "problematic of a 'discourse on discourse'" can be translated to the case of Stevens as a similar problematic of a poetry on poetry, at the heart of which is Stevens' conception of the nature of language itself.

Essentially, the question of the nature of language is at the base of the imagination/reality construct which has plagued Stevens' critics for so long: can one get at reality through language? Or is language an extension of the imagination, without connection to reality? These are the questions that prompt a poet to write poetry on poetry. As in the philosophy of Derrida, traditional assumptions about the nature of language are discounted by Stevens, and traditional language is used in a novel way to explore the possibilities that poetry affords the poet.

A helpful source in approaching the question of language in Stevens is Gerald Bruns' study Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language. Briefly, Bruns argues that there are two dominant and opposing attitudes toward language at work in modern poetry: the hermetic view--"the idea of the 'pure expressiveness' of literary speech, in which a writer's use of language deviates sufficiently from the structures of ordinary discourse to displace or arrest the function of signification"--and the orphic view--"the idea of poetic speech as the ground of all signification--as an expressive movement which 'objectifies' a world for man."⁴ Bruns emphasizes that both

⁴Gerald L. Bruns, Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 1. Hereinafter referred to parenthetically in the text as "Bruns."

views "assert the primacy of language," the hermetic by "transforming language from a medium for thought and feeling into a power of pure formation, in which words take on value as realities in their own right and not simply as signifiers in a structure of meaning" and the orphic by seeking its "transcendence not in isolation but in relation to the world of natural things" (Bruns, pp. 2-3). All modern poets are variations on the relationship and interplay between these two extremes.

Two Biblical myths are evoked in the discussion of these polarities: the story of Adam naming the creatures of the earth and the story of the tower of Babel. From Adam's act of naming, at least as it was interpreted by Hegel, we get the "dissociation of word and thing": "The first act by which Adam made himself master of the animals was to impose a name on them; that is, he annihilated them in their existence as beings" (Bruns, p. 191). Yet in doing so Adam placed man out of a world of the senses completely and into a world of meaning by establishing a "mediating or ideal presence--the word" (Bruns, p. 191). Accordingly, the Babel story extends the fall from paradise in that "the fall of the word . . . is its dissociation from the world and its isolation among other words in a 'space left vacant' by the world's disappearance" (Bruns, p. 190). The Babel story, in other words, not only suggests the development of various languages, but it also suggests the isolation of man trapped in dissociated words. Thus, the hermetic view of language would tend to see Adam's fall from paradise as a fortunate fall because it allowed man to express abstractions and give them a value of their own. Furthermore, the

hermetic view would find fortune in the consequences of Babel since language could now be treated as a "thing" with its own substances. Likewise, the orphic view would react positively to both mythic developments, but for different reasons. Adam's fall is fortunate because it allowed man to make meaning of the world of the senses. The Babel story is fortuitous because it permitted the creation of a literary language which is capable of conjuring up the world again--not the world of things, but the world of being. To explain, Bruns quotes Maurice Blanchot:

"Language . . . perceives that it owes its meaning, not to what exists, but to its recoil before existence". . . . What Blanchot means is that to speak and yet to say nothing is a way of allowing language to maintain the plenum; and this is to say that a literary use of language, as it approaches the condition of negative discourse--a discourse which disrupts or reverses the act of signification--is a way of holding the world in being against the annihilation that takes place in man's ordinary utterances. Understood in this way, the poet does indeed become a kind of Orpheus, a poet of the earth whose song shields the world against the void into which ordinary speech seeks to cast it (Bruns, p. 201).

Thus, the distinction between poetic discourse and ordinary speech is that poetic discourse is a refusal to "name"; it does not take away the individuality of things in the world because it refuses to categorize.

With the hermetic view of language, Bruns identifies the structuralists; with the orphic, he identifies the phenomenologists. And with the phenomenologists--Husserl and Heidegger--he identifies Wallace Stevens. Other critics, too, have made the same "orphic" classification for Stevens. But still others have made the opposite judgment, identifying Stevens with the hermetic view. If we examine

some of the variations in critical assessments of Stevens in relation to language, based on Bruns' distinction between hermetic and orphic, I believe we will establish a basis from which to analyze the idea of language in Stevens' prose theories and poetry on poetry.

Basically, those critics who support the hermetic view identify Stevens ultimately with the primacy of the imagination--"Words are everything else in the world"⁵--while those who support the orphic view identify him ultimately with the primacy of reality--"Poetry is the statement of a relation between man and the world" (OP, p. 174). Certainly, each school of critics allows for ambiguities and paradoxes which are present in Stevens' poetry. Yet in their treatments of Stevens, all of the following commentators in some way touch on the way the idea of language is relevant to the relationship between imagination and reality, but none explores the full extent to which Stevens' poetry is dependent on the idea and the metaphor of language itself.

Two critics who ultimately identify Stevens' poetry with the hermetic mode are Frank Lentricchia, in The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens, and Alan Perlis, in Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes. Lentricchia's view is based on the non-romantic notion that there is no transcendent world for Stevens: thus, "the function of poetry

⁵Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 172. Hereinafter referred to parenthetically in the text as "OP."

must not be confused with the cognitive perception of truth."⁶ In suggesting that the imagination is not concerned with truth, Lentricchia interprets Stevens' theories of poetry to be similar to formalist theory:

The poem itself becomes not an opening or transparency of form, but a context of language within which image and metaphor, diction and tone, exert reciprocal pressures that create ironies, the ambiguities, the multiple meanings that characterize the best of Stevens' poems.⁷

Lentricchia does not deny that the poems develop from the imagination's encounters with reality. But it is the substance of the language of the poem which is ultimately important, not its relationship with reality: "The poem is order, a dike holding back the waters of chaos. But the order of the poem exists only as the aesthetic interrelations of language and does not prophecy ultimate ontological order."⁸

For Perlis, too, reality is the starting point in Stevens, but imagination reigns over it: "Stevens as poet stalks about the world until he confines it to an imaginative center. His language is the stalking."⁹ Based on the idea that Stevens views the world

⁶Frank Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 124.

⁷Ibid., p. 131.

⁸Ibid., p. 90.

⁹Alan Perlis, Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 16.

as continual flux, Perlis' thesis asserts that the "magical poet" transforms his perceptions of the world to change and order its "shapes."¹⁰ That Perlis should be placed in the hermetic camp in his treatment of Stevens is clear from the following statement:

The motive for such a combination is Stevens' use of language, which at once provides the poet the opportunity to circle about objects and bend their shapes to a variety of perspectives and to proclaim that the circling, while it "gets at" an imaginative conception of the world, fails to define the world beyond the realm of imagination itself.¹¹

Moreover, Perlis suggests that to Stevens the words are "more real than the world itself."¹² The actions of Orpheus are not imitated by Stevens, according to Perlis' interpretation.

On the opposite end of the spectrum in its approach to Stevens is Joseph Riddel's early work on his poetry. In a piece about Stevens' connections with Whitman, Riddel suggests that Stevens' essays and poetry abound in metaphors reflecting "an elemental vision by which one can once more like the old Adam possess the world in naming it," certainly an orphic interpretation.¹³ Also, Riddel's longer work The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens acknowledges a development in

¹⁰Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 29.

¹³Joseph Riddel, "Whitman and Stevens: Functions of 'Literatus,'" in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 41.

Stevens' attitude toward language from the early to the late poetry. The early poetry is poetry which names the world; it is the poetry of singular sensation relating man to the world. But Riddel sees at the end of the volume Parts of a World a change in Stevens' poetry from that of perception to "poetry of the act of the mind."¹⁴ Poetry becomes "the act of getting at the central, not of the world but of the self."¹⁵ And one gets at the self through words: "For Stevens, the self is Logos, and the poet's words, though ideal, are of the world. Life and its reality are 'vagabond in metaphor.'"¹⁶ Finally, Riddel sees in the very abstract late poems of The Auroras of Autumn poems that are "over-committed: not to being poems, but to seeing how far the mind can go through language to apprehend a reality beyond language."¹⁷ For example, in "The Poem as Icon," "the icon or poem is the ultimate symbol for the marriage of mind and reality, self and world."¹⁸ Thus, Riddel places Stevens in the orphic mode, in his early poetry by strictly naming the world and in his later poetry by uniting self and world through the abstract language of his poetry.

Two other critics who view Stevens as an orphic poet do so by identifying him with phenomenologist tenets. Bruns, in a short

¹⁴Joseph Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 162.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 178.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 249.

section of his book on modern poetry, identifies Heidegger's concept of being with Orpheus' power "to summon things into his presence" through what Heidegger labels "authentic speech"--"the speech of the poet" (Bruns, p. 206). For Bruns, Stevens' connection to this phenomenological view of language is clear:

Poetry, we may say, is the space of the world made articulate by human language; or, again, poetry is human language made real by its articulation within the world. Both propositions are true, but true only in relation to each other. For Stevens, that is to say, man's world is predicated upon a mutual dependency of word and being; or, better, it is predicated upon a dialogue, in which the identity of poetry and reality

"make music seem
To be a nature, a place in which itself
Is that which produces everything else"
(Bruns, p. 230).

In this same line of reasoning, Thomas Hines has covered extensively the parallels between the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger and the poetry and theories of Stevens, including ideas about language. Hines explains:

When Stevens writes that "a poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" and continues this line of thought by concluding that "poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words," he is expressing an idea of the function of poetic language and its relation to Being that is very similar to Heidegger's concept of the essence of poetry.¹⁹

Thus, the "new logos" is the poet's word, which reveals the "nature of Being."²⁰ Yet the relationship between word and the world of

¹⁹Thomas J. Hines, The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 155.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 163.

Being is not so simple as the previous passage seems to suggest. Both Heidegger and Stevens acknowledge the fact that even poetic language is not always totally "authentic," and even at its "most authentic 'level,'" language is "ambivalent, since it both reveals and conceals the truth of Being."²¹ The value of poetic language is in its density and its decreative function: "Because poetry evokes various levels of meaning and suggests preconceptual awareness, it proposes modes of expression that are available to neither philosophical discourse nor ordinary language."²² It is capable of attuning man to Being, giving him "a new sense of the ordinary things of his immediate world."²³

Hines' thesis most likely developed out of an earlier study of Stevens by J. Hillis Miller in his Poets of Reality, a study which, like Riddel's, attempts to trace the stages of the poet's development, touching on Stevens' ideas about language. Miller suggests that Stevens' later poetry is the poetry of being: "Words are the vortex of the whirlpool where imagination and reality merge, for 'words of the world are the life of the world.'"²⁴ Yet prior to this final statement, Miller traces Stevens' shifting attitude toward language through the Collected Poems. There is a continuum in Stevens' poetry, according to Miller, the desire to embrace

²¹Ibid., p. 241.

²²Ibid., p. 239.

²³J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1965), p. 276.

²⁴Ibid., p. 237.

reality through words: Stevens is essentially an orphic poet. Ironically, Miller points to a Russian Formalist technique as the primary way Stevens attempts throughout his career to reach reality: "Making it strange," the concept of *ostranenie* set forth by Shklovsky, who by separating poetry from any relationship with reality tried to make literary criticism a science.²⁵ According to Miller, Stevens' poetry reaches reality by sometimes changing it to a new reality through metaphor. At the same time he sometimes rejects metaphor for reality without imagination. The poet then de-creates reality through abstraction as it is understood by Miller in the section "It Must Be Abstract" of Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction. To abstract is to see the object in the "idea" of it, the word idea meaning "direct sense image."²⁶ Thus, like Gerald Bruns and Thomas Hines, Miller connects Stevens' act of decreation with Husserl's phenomenology: when decreation is "successful imagination and reality become one, and for a moment the world is seen as it appeared to Adam before he began naming it."²⁷

However, Miller sees the process of decreation going a step further in Stevens' use of language; the poet attempts "to make language itself substance."²⁸ Miller explains:

Words . . . seem the strongest evidence of man's curse of solitude, his inability to reach "not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands" (OP, 238). . . . Only if

²⁵Ibid., p. 249.

²⁶Ibid., p. 248.

²⁷Ibid., p. 249.

²⁸Ibid., p. 251.

words could somehow be brought to participate directly in what they name would they cease to separate man from the real.²⁹

Thus, Miller points to Stevens' nonsense syllables, his sounds, to suggest that Stevens attempts to drain all "referential meaning out of words" so that "they will become the thing they represent" or "that only the sound and appearance of words will remain" to make reality exist in the words themselves.³⁰ Here Stevens approaches becoming the hermetic poet. But Miller suggests that Stevens rejects this use of language because the poet realizes that even the words as substance in and of themselves are products of the imagination. With this realization comes the implementation of an open-ended language and form which are the result of Stevens' final attempts to get at the "thing itself." The poetry of ordered metaphors, which occupied his earlier verse, is replaced by disorder in language, a disruption which, as Miller says, is "the attempt to catch in words this 'moving chaos that never ends' (OP, 50)."³¹ The final orphic poetry is Stevens' poetry of being for Miller, too.

Critics who connect Stevens to Romanticism echo Miller's assessment of Stevens' paradoxical view of language in its striving to end the split between man and external reality. Helen Regueiro suggests that Stevens, like Wordsworth and Yeats, follows a pattern of withdrawal from reality into the imagination and, through a

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., p. 252.

³¹Ibid., p. 271.

recognition of the isolation caused by that withdrawal, a movement back to reality.³² This movement seems to classify Stevens as an orphic poet. Stevens' poetry "attempts to return to 'the plain sense of things' through the very language, the very self-consciousness that separates it from that world."³³ Finally, in the effort to connect Stevens to the "humanizing" function of the "romantic imagination," George Bornstein also seems to characterize Stevens as an orphic poet. Like Miller, Bornstein points to Stevens' concept of the world as movement, as process. Noting the danger of codifying reality in metaphor, Bornstein also emphasizes Stevens' attempts at decreation through language. And again, the poetry's "provisionality," caused by Stevens' view of the world as motion, is explored in regards to language:

Combined with his views on change and cyclicity, Stevens' distrust of language demanded provisionality as the only viable poetic strategy. The true purpose of his endless conditionals, interrogatives, and syntactic legerdemain is to remind us continually that his poetic fictions are only fictions and to prevent them from fixing what must never be fixed.³⁴

The reason the fictions must never fix reality is that they must mirror man's relationship to reality, his humanity, so the poet

³²Helen Regueiro, The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 10.

³³Ibid., p. 12.

³⁴George Bornstein, Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 190.

is again Orpheus, showing in poetry man's connection to the world.

All of these critics touch on what seems to me to be a major aspect of Stevens' poetry--the ambivalence of language in expressing the changing relationship between imagination and reality. Certainly Helen Vendler and Marie Borroff have analyzed adequately both the rhetorical devices and words used in creating that "provisionality" to which Bornstein refers. But there has been no complete systematic exploration either of Stevens' use of the metaphor of language in his poetry or of Stevens' theories about language and metaphor in his prose. To reach an understanding of Stevens, we must examine "the the"--the idea of language in the context of whole poems and essays.

When we do examine Stevens' ideas about language in this way, we will see that the psychological, aesthetic, and mythological concerns at the base of Stevens' ideas about poetry come together in his complex use of the language metaphor in his poetry. In a sense, poetry takes the place of religion for Stevens after what he calls the "dissolution of the gods," so that despite the lack of any transcendent order in Stevens' poetry, the language of poetry is the language of religion sans gods. In their place Stevens sets fictions, man's constructs which are accepted for what they are--fictions--unlike the gods, which were also man's constructs but were not acknowledged as such.

In Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries, the religious philosopher Mircea Eliade attempts to explain what has taken the place of religious (or mythological) experience in the modern world. This

explanation sheds light on Stevens' ideas about language, metaphor, and poetry, and in some ways parallels Stevens' own thoughts on these subjects. For Eliade, mythological behavior involves a "periodic re-entry into Time primordial."³⁵ Modern man, having experienced Stevens' "dissolution of the gods," is in various ways, according to Eliade,

endeavouring to liberate himself from his "history" and to live in a qualitatively different temporal rhythm. And in doing so he is returning, without being aware of it, to the mythical style of life.³⁶

Poetry is one of his methods of returning. The point is that Stevens, aware of the death of the gods, is also aware of what he is doing in poetry. This is evident throughout his essays on poetry. He is consciously acting out "mythological behavior" to "help people to live their lives" (NA, p. 29).

To explain the relationship between the language of poetry and mythological behavior further, Eliade says that the poetic creation

implies the abolition of time--of the history concentrated in language--and tends toward the recovery of the paradisiac, primordial situation; of the days when one could create spontaneously, when the past did not exist because there was no consciousness of time, no memory of temporal duration. It is said, moreover, in our own days, that for a great poet the past does not exist: the poet discovers the world as though he were present at the cosmogonic moment contemporaneous with the first day of Creation. From a certain

³⁵ Mircea Eliade, Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 34.

³⁶ Ibid.

point of view, we may say that every great poet is remaking the world, for he is trying to see it as if there were no Time and no History.³⁷

Thus, we see the connection between this "remaking the world" and Stevens' decreation of the world. Not only does Stevens "remake" the world in poetry like other great poets tend to do, but he also consciously and actively tries to decreate the past--History--in his poetry, as Riddel says, "by way of pursuing some origin at the heart of utterance."³⁸ Again Eliade's analysis of poetry as mythological behavior is helpful: "All poetry is an effort to re-create the language, in other words to abolish current language, that of everyday, and to invent a new, private, and personal speech, in the last analysis secret."³⁹ This statement sounds very much like the hermetic view of the poet and his use of language. But for Eliade, the "new, private, and personal speech" does not disengage man from reality; rather, it acts as myth has acted in the past to connect man with "Time primordial," a concept similar to the phenomenological concept of Being.

With the use of language to abolish Time and History comes the action of seeing a world "strangely like that of the 'primitive'" man.⁴⁰ And again, we can see a connection with Stevens' poetry. For Stevens, decreation implies a movement to the primitive so that there

³⁷Ibid., p. 36.

³⁸Riddel, "Interpreting Stevens," p. 84.

³⁹Eliade, p. 34.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 36.

is a recurring emphasis on, and almost an idealization of, things primitive in Stevens' poetry, particularly on the ritualistic use of language by primitive man. I suggest that this emphasis is due to Stevens' consciousness of poetry as mythological behavior.

At the heart of the problematic of Stevens' poetry on poetry lies language as a decreative and re-creative force. Stevens writes poetry about the act of writing poetry, which is the act of creating fictions through language. And the act of creating fictions in language is a mythological act, in Eliade's terms. If any modern poet can be accused of writing poetry in language that is "private, personal speech, in the last analysis secret," it is Stevens. Yet I hope to show that this use of language evolves from Stevens' conception of the poet ultimately as Orpheus, connecting man with the world through words. This study, therefore, will attempt to accomplish the following: first of all, I will examine Stevens' essays to establish possible theories of language and metaphor and to connect Eliade's ideas about mythological behavior to these theories more closely and thoroughly. From that point, I will move to the analysis of poems about poetry from the early to late works to trace the development of the metaphor and theme of language in Stevens' poetry. Finally, I will analyze the use of metaphor itself in Stevens' poetry to see to what extent Stevens' theories about language and poetry are put to use in his creation of metaphor from the early to late works. The end result will be, I hope, an understanding of the mythic, psychological, and aesthetic concerns in

Stevens as they evolve through his discussions about the nature of poetry in the prose and his use of language as a vehicle for those ideas, as a metaphor, and as a theme in the poetry.

CHAPTER 2

LANGUAGE AND STEVENS' PROSE THEORIES

If the question of the nature of language is at the base of Stevens' poetry about poetry, it would be appropriate to look to Stevens' prose theories about poetry for some indication of his attitudes toward language as it relates to poetry. Stevens' prose writings, however, are not stable, and it is therefore impossible to examine them as one would examine the more logical critical theories of a professional critic like Cleanth Brooks.¹ Stevens' prose is developed neither linearly nor dialectically but according to what has been called the stile coupe by Morris Croll in his study of seventeenth century prose writings:

Logically they do not move. At the end they are saying exactly what they were at the beginning. Their advance is wholly in the direction of a more vivid imaginative realization: a metaphor revolves, as it were, displaying its different facets.²

Likewise, Stevens' essays are usually divided into disconnected sections which explore a particular question from different angles, relying heavily on metaphor and particular examples to examine the question at hand. For this reason Harold Bloom has called them

¹See Lisa M. Steinman, "A Dithering of Presences: Style and Language in Stevens' Essays," Contemporary Literature, 21 (1980), 100-17, for a discussion of Stevens' prose style.

²Morris Croll, "The Baroque Style in Prose," in Seventeenth-

"prose-poems."³ In fact, most of the essays in The Necessary Angel "were written to be spoken and this affects their character" (NA, p. vii). Stevens' prose theories are also not stable in that his ideas are inconsistent from essay to essay. Stevens was aware of his own inconsistency and commented on its significance several times in letters. He explains:

As for my theories of literature, people so often suppose that one has a set of such theories, even with a thumb index. One has a theory for each poem.⁴ I dare say that in the long run, they all fit together.⁴

More specifically, Stevens rejects consistency for the possibility of growth: "I don't have any ideas that are permanently fixed. My conception of what I think a poet should be and do changes, and I hope, constantly grows" (L, p. 289). Stevens believes, "Definitions are relative. The notions of absolutes is relative."⁵ So, to look to Stevens' prose for a definite theory of poetry or language is to look in vain. Nevertheless, to look to Stevens' prose for the various "facets" of a prism which together--though illusive, sometimes

Century Prose and Poetry, eds. Alexander M. Witherspoon and Frank J. Warnke (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), p. 1071.

³Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 173.

⁴Holly Stevens, ed., Letters of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 320. Hereinafter referred to parenthetically in the text as "L."

⁵See Louis Martz, "Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation," The Yale Review, 47 (1958), 517-36.

contradictory, never absolute--make up his poetic theories can be illuminating. As Stevens says, "Things are because of interrelations or interactions" (OP, p. 163). Thus, it is our delicate task to examine the prose writings for interconnections among the various facets of Stevens' prisms to find the interrelations among language, poetry, and experience.

Wallace Stevens' poetic theories, as they are expressed in The Necessary Angel, his Letters, and Opus Posthumous, are centered upon four main currents of thought which are dependent on Stevens' ideas about language: the relationship between poetry and philosophy, the psychological function of poetry, the spiritual force of poetry, and the relationship between the imagination and reality. However, one aspect of Stevens' theories must be clarified before an analysis of these four currents can be pursued: the differentiation between poetry and the language of poetry. Sometimes for Stevens, poetry is not just the words on a page but is "a poetic conception, however expressed," so that many times when he uses the word poetry he is referring to any idea, or feeling, or emotion that is a subject for any kind of art. He continues the explanation: "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" (OP, p. 163). This "obvious" idea is obviously quite confusing. In separating the "poem of the idea" from the "poem of the words" (OP, p. 184), Stevens is able to talk about poetry as an abstract force rather than as an object, a tendency on his part which is very strong. Language in this way becomes secondary to poetry. In fact, in the Adagia there are

twenty or so statements which describe poetry, mainly as some sort of force, including the statement that "poetry is the sum of its attributes" (OP, p. 166). Here is a sampling:

Poetry is--not personal.

--a means of redemption.

--a form of melancholia.

--a sense.

--irrational.

--an effort of a dissatisfied man to find satisfaction through words, occasionally of the dissatisfied thinker to find satisfaction through his emotions.

--a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death.

--itself a search for happiness.

--a search for the inexplicable.

--a pheasant disappearing in the brush.

--a health.

--a cure of the mind.

--a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right.

--a renovation of experience.

--often a revelation of the elements of appearance (OP, pp. 157-82).

If poetry is indeed the "sum of its attributes" for Stevens, these Adagia describe rather than define it. In fact, in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens states bluntly that "there is no definition of poetry," but there are "impressions, approximations" (NA, p. 44). The Adagia list is perhaps one of Stevens' prisms: not limiting poetry to words, it shows Stevens' conceptions of the importance, the power, the strength of poetry. It is alive, active, as is indicated by Stevens' use of action words in these "impressions" and "approximations": effort, interactions, purging, search, cure, response, revelation, renovation. Thus, Stevens' aim in writing a poem seems to be to use language which will adequately express the

power of the "poetic conception." Language is the vehicle for the conception.

At other times, however, Stevens identifies poetry with language: "Above everything else, poetry is words" (NA, p. 32). What is more, Stevens identifies words with thoughts and with sounds so that the idea of prelingual "poetic conception" disappears and ideas and the sound of language merge in poetry. Referring to Croce's assertion that "language is perpetual creation," Stevens concludes: "Poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words" (NA, p. 33). This dualistic view of poetry both as language fundamentally --"Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language" (OP, p. 174)--and as separated from language--"The thing said must be the poem not the language used in saying it" (OP, p. 165)--forms the essential paradox in Stevens' poetic theories which will be explored fully here.

Conceiving of poetry as "mythological behavior" helps to explain the paradox. As in myth, language and idea merge in poetry to recreate the world. So, poetry can be "secret" language, as Eliade calls it--language without meaning in which sound is important--used ritualistically as a celebration of the imagination. As Stevens says, "A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not" (OP, p. 177). Or poetry can be an expression of a new meaning--"The exquisite environment of fact. The final poem will be the poem of fact in the language of fact. But it will be the poem of fact not realized before" (OP, p. 164). Either way, the language of poetry is orphic; it creates or expresses connections with the world.

Whether poetry is language or prelingual conception, Stevens' general view of poetry is as an aesthetic ordering of the world--an ordering which makes life liveable amidst what he calls the "pressure of reality" (NA, p. 16). Holding poetry and its role in such high esteem, Stevens exerted a great amount of effort in the defense of poetry throughout various essays and lectures. He even went so far as to spend a large part of his later life in trying to establish a chair for the study of poetic theory at Harvard. In a letter to Delmore Schwartz dated April 26, 1948, Stevens explains:

It seems that poetic order is potentially as significant as philosophic order. Accordingly, it is natural to project the idea of a theory of poetry that would be pretty much the same thing as a theory of the world based on a co-ordination of the poetic aspects of the world. Such an idea completely changes the significance of poetry. It does what poetry itself does, that is to say, it leads to a fresh conception of the world. The sense of latent significance exists. Many sensitive readers of poetry, without being mystics or romantics or metaphysicians, feel that there probably is available in reality something accessible through a theory of poetry which would make a profound difference in our sense of the world (L, p. 590).

Certainly this passage has the tone of a classic defense of poetry, and of poetic theory. In this context poetry is more than just language, just as philosophy is more than just language. It is a way of ordering the world.

Stevens enlarges upon the power of poetry by comparing and contrasting it with philosophy in two essays--"The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" and "A Collect of Philosophy." And his probings into the relationship of poetry and philosophy reveal Stevens' attitudes toward language. The main point of Stevens' comparison in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" is that

poetry may be superior to philosophy. His reasoning is as follows: philosophy is the "official view of being." Poetry is the "unofficial view of being." Both try to get at truth. Philosophy attempts to find truth through reason. Poetry tries to find truth through imagination. Poetry is therefore "at least the equal of philosophy" (NA, pp. 41-2). The end of the philosopher is despair. (I suppose Stevens is referring to the idea that since the ultimate truth cannot be arrived at rationally--reason is never satisfied--the philosopher despairs). But the end of the poet is fulfillment because the poet finds a sanction for life in poetry that satisfies the imagination, if only for a brief moment. Therefore, poetry may be the superior of philosophy (NA, p. 43). Of course this "deductive" reasoning works only if we accept the premise that the poet finds a sanction for life through imagination--a premise which, of course, is not provable through logical reasoning. Implicit in this argument is a fundamental differentiation between the language of logic and the language of poetry. Without the confines of rationality and linear progression, poetic language offers a means of expressing a fuller view of life.

"A Collect of Philosophy" explores the relationship between poetry and philosophy in a similar manner, but with a different conclusion. Both poetry and philosophy, explains Stevens, are part of the "general will to order" in that they involve the mind's probing for what he calls "integrations." But, the uses and ends of these integrations are different for each one. In general, the philosopher tries to "discover" the world for the sake of discovery through

"thought"; the poet tries to celebrate the world for the sake of some effect or quality it has through "imagination." So, as to the question of supremacy, Stevens says that neither is supreme: the supreme would be a combination of the two, reason and imagination. But Stevens also suggests in this essay that philosophers are not bound to reason just as poets are not limited to the imagination. Indeed, Stevens speculates about the possibility of a "supreme poetry of thought" which would be a combination of philosophy and poetry. It would be "cosmic poetry" as it searches out integrations through reason and imagination:

It is cosmic poetry because it makes us realize in the same way in which an escape from all our limitations would make us realize that we are creatures, not of a part, which is our everyday limitation, but of a whole for which, for the most part, we as yet have no language (OP, p. 189).

Aware of the separateness between the language of philosophy or rational thought and the language of poetry, Stevens yearns for a new kind of language which encompasses both of man's faculties--reason and imagination. It is this concern with having an awareness of a "whole for which, for the most part, we as yet have no language" that connects Stevens with phenomenological philosophy and the meditative mode. When Stevens speculates about a "supreme poetry of thought," he is suggesting a poetry of mythological import--in the sense of Eliade's conception of the "mythical style of life." Poetry can free us of our limitations by giving us a "periodic re-entry into Time primordial."⁶ While Stevens contemplates the possibility

⁶Eliade, p. 36.

of this "cosmic poetry," in my view he is also trying to create it. Perhaps this is why some critics call him a philosophical poet and some call him a meditative poet, even a mystic. Because he is trying to create a language which expresses a "whole" not ordinarily perceivable or expressible, his poetry is extraordinarily difficult. What the "whole" is will be established later in this study. Based on the idea that poetry and philosophy can be combined, it creates new possibilities for poetic language.

But what necessitates this quest for the whole and its expression in a new kind of language? For Stevens, this quest is a psychological imperative: because of the ways of the world, our "everyday limitation" must be escaped through poetry. Generally, in critical studies of Stevens little attention has been paid to Stevens' acute sensitivity to the life around him, particularly political events.⁷ In spite of this awareness, it is evident throughout Stevens' writings that he gave no social or political function to poetry. As Litz has pointed out, Stevens reacted strongly against the Marxist criticism of the 1930's by rejecting any pragmatic role for poetry. Rather, for Stevens poetry served a psychological, aesthetic, and spiritual purpose which held an intrinsic value. In various cryptic remarks such as this one, "His [the poet's] role, in short, is to help people live their lives," Stevens

⁷See A. Walton Litz, "Wallace Stevens' Defense of Poetry: La poesie pure, the New Romantic, and the Pressure of Reality," in Romantic and Modern Revaluations of Literary Tradition, ed. George Bornstein (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), pp. 111-131, for a discussion of Stevens' reactions to the political situation of the 1930's.

expresses such a belief (NA, p. 29). Yet there must be a reason that people need help living their lives. "Our everyday limitation" is what Stevens perceives in the world that creates the necessity for poetry--it is the nature of our lives in reality.

Stevens says, "Reality is things as they are"--"not the external scene but the life that is lived in it" (NA, p. 25). It is the "pressure of reality" that creates the need for the poet "to help people live their lives": "the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA, p. 20). Thus, it is the psychological effects of events in the world throughout history which have molded the course of poetry. We can get an idea of what reality is for Stevens from various descriptions of it in his prose. He develops the subject extensively in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and in "The Irrational Element in Poetry." In "The Noble Rider" he explains:

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 (NA, p. 17).

He continues:

The way we live and the way we work alike cast us out on reality. If fifty private houses were to be built in New York this year, it would be a phenomenon. We no longer live in homes but in housing projects and this is so whether the project is literally a project of a club, a dormitory, a camp or an apartment in River House. It is not only that there are more of us and that we are actually close together. 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 (NA, p. 18).

Moreover,

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, an energy. The time must be coming when, as they leave the factories, they will be passed through an air-chamber or a bar to revive them for riot and reading (NA, p. 19).

Certainly, these are familiar insights into the nature of the modern world--the loss of traditional family life, the dominance of the city, the dehumanization of the worker.

But for Stevens, these are the "normal" aspects of reality--not the "pressure" to which poetry is a response. In the same essay Stevens speaks of World War II and its overwhelming circumstances--the pressure of

a new world so uncertain that one did not know anything whatever of its nature, and does not know now, and could not tell And for more than ten years, the consciousness of the world has concentrated on events which have made ordinary movement of life seem to be the movement of people in the intervals of a storm The war is only a part of a war-like whole. It is not possible to look backward and to see that the same thing was true in the past (NA, pp. 21-2).

For Stevens the poet of his time is unique in history because of the extraordinary developments in mass communication. The bombarding of the masses with language about world events has a tremendous effect on the poet:

The Napoleonic era is regarded as having had little or no effect on the poets and the novelists who lived in it. But Coleridge and Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen did not have to put up with Napoleon and Marx and Europe, Asia and Africa all at one time. It seems possible to say that they knew of the events of their day as much as

we know of the bombings in the interior of China and not at all as we know of the bombings of Toronto or Montreal (NA, p. 21).

Stevens concludes:

We are confronting, therefore, a set of events, not only beyond our power to tranquilize them in the mind, beyond our power to reduce them and metamorphose them, but events that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real, and events that involve the concepts and sanctions that are the order of our lives and may involve our very lives (NA, p. 22).

This concern with the war shows Stevens to be a poet and theorist very much aware of a relationship between culture, society, and politics on the one hand and the imagination and poetry on the other: "The pressure of reality is, I think, the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual" (NA, p. 23). Thus, we can see that Stevens offers a psychological explanation of the poet's character and the function of poetry. Stevens views his own era as terrifying. In "The Irrational Element in Poetry" this attitude is expressed in even more powerful rhetoric:

We are preoccupied with events, even when we do not observe them closely. We have a sense of upheaval. We feel threatened. We look from an uncertain present toward a more uncertain future. One feels the desire to collect oneself against all this in poetry as well as in politics (OP, p. 225).

Poetry is order for the mind confronted with that "ever-enlarging incoherence" that is reality.

Specifically, Stevens claims that the "pressure of reality" affects the language of poetry, too. In "The Noble Rider" he discusses Bateson's idea of a dialectical movement between connotation

and denotation in language as being determined by the reality of an age. Two conflicting trends are possible: an asceticism "tending to kill language by stripping words of all associations" and a hedonism "tending to kill language by dissipating . . . sense in a multiplicity of associations" (NA, p. 13). The tendency toward the connotative is identified with the imagination while the denotative is identified with reality. Stevens suggests that the connotative trend exists in his day, but that it "cannot continue against the pressure of reality" (NA, p. 16). The love of words and their connotative powers might be viewed as a psychological reaction to the intense reality of Stevens' day. Connotations allow connections to be made among things and ideas in the world and therefore help order the chaotic world in words.

If Stevens presents poetry as a psychological fortifier against the reality of his day, he equally presents it as a spiritual force. Basically, the spiritual role of poetry and the poet is centered on Stevens' notion of the "dissolution of the gods." Modern reality is an "age of disbelief," "a time largely humanistic" (OP, p. 206). The essay "Two or Three Ideas" explores the spiritual role of poetry in such a time. In this essay Stevens develops an allegorical explanation of the loss of religious belief centered on the annihilation of the "ancient and foreign gods" (OP, p. 207). The essence of his allegory is that modern reality is without a superhuman force that is believable. Religion is no longer valid. (We see evidence of this stance throughout Stevens' letters, too.) He describes the loss:

It was their [the gods'] annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness. What was most extraordinary is that they left no mementoes behind, no thrones, no mystic rings, no texts either of soil or of the soul. It was as if they had never inhabited the earth. There was no crying out for their return. They were not forgotten because they had been a part of the glory of the earth. At the same time, no man ever muttered a petition in his heart for the restoration of those unreal shapes. There was always in every man the increasingly human self, which instead of remaining the observer, the nonparticipant, the delinquent, became constantly more and more all there was or so it seemed; and whether it was so or merely seemed so still left it for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms (OP, p. 207).

With the death of the gods comes a new reality, one in which man turns inward for life's sanctions instead of outward to any gods or God. Poetry must offer that sanction, according to Stevens. Yet he is not suggesting that the poet "turn evangelist," since the poet "shares the disbelief of his time" (OP, p. 213). Rather, poetry is a "revelation of reality" without gods (OP, p. 213). In the "revelation of reality" Stevens is referring to the aesthetic ordering of experience by which the poet helps men live their lives. Poetry reveals in the "indifferent experience of life" its "unique experience," which prior to the dissolution of the gods had been attributed to the realm of the spiritual beyond the here and now (OP, p. 213).

In his acceptance speech for a medal from the Poetry Society of America in 1951, Stevens develops an image of the "genius of poetry" to express the "position of poetry in the world today," an image which brings to mind Eliade's notion of poetic language. Stevens says:

There is no doubt that poetry does in fact exist for the thoughtful young man in Basel or the votary in Naples. The Marxian, and for that matter a good many other people, think of it in terms of its social impact. In one direction it moves toward the ultimate things of pure poetry; in the other it speaks to great numbers of people of themselves, making extraordinary texts and memorable music out of what they feel and know. In both cases it makes itself manifest in a kind of speech that comes from secrecy. Its position is always an inner position, never certain, never fixed. It is to be found beneath the poet's word and deep within the reader's eye in those chambers in which the genius of poetry sits alone with her candle in a moving solitude (OP, p. 243).

Like Eliade, Stevens conceives of a poetic language which is secret, yet which in its secrecy gives a sense of wholeness to experience. It is a "revelation of reality."

One other aspect of Stevens' modern reality which must be examined before we can draw conclusions about his conceptions of the poetic act and language is his understanding of the structure of reality in light of modern scientific theories. In a 1940 letter to Hi Simons, Stevens tells about the development of his view of "things" of the world:

When I was a boy I used to think things progressed by contrasts, that there was a law of contrasts. But this was building the world out of blocks. Afterward I came to think more of the energizing that comes from mere interplay, interaction. Thus, the various faculties of the mind co-exist and interact, and there is as much delight in this mere co-existence as a man and a woman find in each other's company. This is rather a crude illustration, but it makes the point. Cross-reflections, modifications, counterbalances, complements, giving and taking are il-limitable. They make things interdependent, and their interdependence sustains them and gives them pleasure (L, p. 368).

Stevens' familiarity with the philosophy of science and theoretical physics perhaps influences this view of the structure of reality.

Although he never approaches the subject of science directly, there is quite a bit of evidence in his prose that he was familiar with various modern scientific concepts. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Stevens refers to Bergson's notion about perception of a stable object and to the Cambridge philosopher Joad's comments on Bergson's view. Stevens quotes Joad: "'Philosophy has long dismissed the notion of substance and modern physics has endorsed the dismissal'" (NA, p. 25). Later in the same essay Stevens uses an analogy from physics to describe nobility as a force (like a wave) rather than the substance it is composed of (NA, p. 35). And in "A Collect of Philosophy" Stevens uses Whitehead's Science and the Modern World to make a point about poetic ideas (OP, p. 192).

Most importantly, in "A Collect of Philosophy" Stevens refers to one of the major figures in modern theoretical physics, Planck, as the modern man: the "willingness to believe beyond belief was what had made him modern and was always certain to keep him so" (OP, p. 202).⁸ As Andre George explains, Planck's examination of the theory of causality forced him to view cause-effect relationships not as absolute truth but as a "working hypothesis" (OP, p. 202). Time and space are anthropomorphic conceptions. They exist only because man organizes experience in relation to them. For Stevens, this revelation of Planck's is related to the condition of all men in modern reality. Planck's scientific "working hypotheses" are

⁸See Judith McDaniel, "Wallace Stevens and the Scientific Imagination," Contemporary Literature, 15 (1974), 221-37, for an examination of scientific influence on the poetry.

similar to vital poetic fictions: we know they are fictions, but we believe in them anyway, at least for a time. This belief in fictions with the awareness of their being fictions is what makes confidence the important key word for contemporary man. Stevens quotes Jean Paulhan: "la confiance que le poète fait naturellement--/ et nous invite à faire-au monde" (OP, p. 199). Stevens explains:

When we look over the shoulder of Jean Paulhan, in Paris, while he writes of "la confiance . . . au monde" and stop to consider what a happy phrase that is, we wonder whether we shall have the courage to repeat it, until we understand that there is no alternative. So many words other than confidence might have been used--words of understanding, words of reconciliation, of enchantment, even of forgetfulness. But none of them would have penetrated to our needs more surely than the word confidence (OP, p. 200).

Confidence is the only word which can express this poetic conception adequately. In a world where nothing is certain, to rely on a "working hypothesis" knowing it is only a hypothesis or to believe in a vital fiction knowing it is only a fiction is to have confidence. It is all modern man can do.

Still, the modern poet Stevens holds the traditional view that art creates order. For Stevens, in a world where modern physics has shown that causality is just a "working hypothesis," where space and time are only human conceptions, where atoms can be viewed as both waves and discrete objects in another "working hypothesis," where nuclear war is possible, order must be built on this reality. If "poetry is to a large extent an art of perception" (OP, p. 191), and if poetry's task is to create a new order which has reality as its base, then the aesthetic order of modern poetry must reflect the complexity of the world, the seeming chaos of reality, at the same time

that it orders that reality. Perception, then, becomes one essential element in the poetic act. Aesthetic ordering, which is the process of the imagination, works simultaneously on at least two levels: it creates new resemblances, new order, new perceptions at the same time that it breaks down existing conceptions of reality to mirror the ever-changing interconnectedness of modern reality.

Stevens is, in fact, fascinated with the idea of perception. Clearly, the problem of ordering a chaotic reality through language, a problem which runs throughout his poetry and prose, is directly related to the question of perception and conception. For Stevens, what he calls the "traditional view of sensory perception"--the principle that we see the world only after the perceptual process is over--is a "poetic idea." In "A Collect of Philosophy" he expands this idea:

Here is an idea, not the result of poetic thinking and entirely without poetic intention, which instantly changes the face of the world. . . . The material world, for all the assurances of the eye, has become immaterial. It has become an image in the mind. The solid earth disappears and the whole atmosphere is subtilized not by the arrival of some venerable beam of light from an almost hypothetical star but by a breach of reality. What we see is not the external world but an image of it and hence an internal world (OP, pp. 190-1).

The problem presented by this idea about perceptual process is that of the relationship between imagination and reality and of the expression of that relationship in language. It points to the never-ending struggle between the two. In the same essay Stevens complicates his notion of perceptual processes even further by quoting a passage from A. N. Whitehead's Science and the Modern World, "The Romantic

Reaction" chapter, which deals with the response of the Romantic poets to the scientific theory of a mechanistic universe. The quotation is Whitehead's explanation of his own theory of perception:

My theory involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times, for every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location.⁹ Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world.

Stevens responds to this idea:

These words are pretty obviously words from a level where everything is poetic, as if the statement that every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location produced in the imagination a universal iridescence, a dithering of presences and, say, a complex of differences (OP, p. 192).

Though these ideas about perception are examined in the context of the essay to show how poetic and philosophic ideas are related, it is obvious that Stevens incorporates these notions into his own poetic theory and world view. They reinforce his belief in the constantly changing interconnectedness of things, and they influence his ever shifting view of the relationship between the imagination and reality. They prompt him to say that poetry is the "art of perception."

It is through the imagination that perception is manifested as "art" in poetry. The imagination is a force which the poet-artist possesses innately. But like reality, Stevens' imagination is

⁹Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 133, as quoted in OP, p. 192.

conceived complexly with various aspects and qualities of its own. In the tradition of Coleridge, Stevens envisions the imagination as the means by which the poet perceives poetry in the world. As Stevens explains in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,"

poetic truth is an agreement with reality, brought about by the imagination of a man disposed to be strongly influenced by his imagination, which he believes, for a time, to be true, expressed in terms of his emotions or, since it is less of a restriction to say so, in terms of his own personality (NA, p. 54).

What Stevens means by the vague phrase "agreement with reality" can only be guessed at. But an educated guess is that it is that aesthetic order which Stevens discusses elsewhere, at times in almost mystical terms.

"The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" is an attempt to establish the importance of the imagination, or specifically, what Stevens refers to as a "characteristic of the imagination"--nobility--the imagination's "alter ego," its "symbol" (NA, p. 7). This essay is perhaps where Stevens initiates his development of the conception of the imagination in these mystical terms. It is here that Stevens suggests that the poet gives to life its "supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (NA, p. 31). Those "fictions," which Freud wanted to be stripped away so that man could face reality without illusion (at least in Stevens' interpretation of Freud's The Future of an Illusion) are for Stevens those poetic sanctions for living that are most important to give life its "savor," after the death of the gods, man's previously created fictions. The characteristic of the imagination which makes the "fictions" valid is nobility,

about which Stevens finds it quite difficult to express anything definite. He does say that nobility is the "peculiarity" that "the imagination gives to everything it touches" (NA, p. 33), and that it expresses our "spiritual height and depth" (NA, p. 34). But, as is quite often the case, Stevens avoids definition:

If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, and changes. To fix it is to put an end to it (NA, p. 34).

Again we see the influence of the modern scientific view of the world as motion, change. He concludes (once more in terms analogous to those of modern physics):

But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same (NA, pp. 35-6).

Stevens ends his explanation and his essay by identifying nobility and the imagination with the ability of "pressing back against the pressure of reality" so that the imagination takes on both spiritual and psychological significance. Perhaps the best definition (or approximation) of the imagination in this context is found in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," where Stevens regards it as "a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains" (NA, p. 171).

In the 1948 essay "Imagination as Value," Stevens tries to develop further the prominence and importance of the imagination by analyzing its function in life as well as "its operation in or in relation to works of art" (NA, p. 146). Operating in life, the

imagination is responsible for political developments and "social form." Particularly, Stevens cites communism as a fiction created by the imagination after the death of the gods--it is a "grubby faith" that offers an "earthly paradise" (NA, p. 143). Then, by contrasting the imagination's working as "metaphysics" in life with the imagination's working in the arts, Stevens contrasts the values of the two different "kinds" of imaginations: the values in relation to life are "ethical and moral" while the value of the imagination in "arts and letters" is "aesthetic"--an "intrinsic," "intuitional" value which "cannot be justified" (NA, p. 149). Again, the imagination is connected with emotion rather than reason. The aesthetic ordering which it performs is intuitional, beyond reason; it is "the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos" (NA, p. 153). Thus, because of the power of the imagination, poetry is the art of perceiving order in a chaotic world, according to Stevens' aesthetic theories.

However, there is a complication in Stevens' theories which is left to be dealt with--the relationship between the imagination and reality as it is expressed in language. It is not too difficult to analyze separately what Stevens says about the imagination and what he says about reality. But most of what he says about each involves the other. In fact, in trying to establish Stevens' attitudes toward these two "forces," I have been deliberately avoiding the interaction of the two so that I could establish a group of basic characteristics to use in discussing what Stevens refers to as his "reality-imagination complex" (L, p. 792). Many critics of Stevens have spent

a great deal of time and energy (mainly through examination of his poetry as poetic theory) trying to figure out which aspect of that complex Stevens finally or most closely allies himself to. This is not my concern. Rather, by examining what his attitudes toward the complex are, I will show how the complex fits clearly into Stevens' modern view of the world--its interconnectedness, its flux--and how the complex creates his ambiguous attitude toward language.

For Stevens the relationship between the imagination and reality is not dialectical in the strict sense of the word: it can never be resolved. That is the joy of it. The two have a complementary relationship without which life would be boring. Again, we turn to modern scientific theories for an explanation. There is in atomic physics a theory of complementarity which is analogous to the kind of relationship that Stevens posits between the imagination and reality. Physicists have discovered that the characteristic actions of atoms cannot be explained by perceiving atoms from one point of view only. Certain characteristics can be comprehended only by treating atoms as discrete units. Other characteristics can be comprehended only by perceiving atoms as waves. Atoms cannot be perceived as both discrete units and waves at the same time, yet both explanations are equally valid. Neither is the whole truth.¹⁰ Reality with a little r is objective reality--that is, things as they really happen, things as they are. Like the perceiver of atoms, the

¹⁰Niels Bohr, Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958), p. 27.

poet is never able to experience pure reality directly or completely, but he does believe it exists and can at least approach it through his perceptual processes. For Stevens, imagination is the subjective, creative force active in the individual perceiver. Absolute fact, or reality with a capital R, includes all of the imagination and all of reality. It is experience, both subjective and objective, imaginative and real. As Stevens asserts in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," "It is no doubt true that absolute fact includes everything that the imagination includes. This is our intimidating thesis" (NA, pp. 60-1). The two--imagination and reality--complement each other to give a complexity to Reality. They are interdependent, just as the wave and unit theories of atoms are. This is why Stevens can write a poem in which a pineapple becomes many things yet still remains a pineapple. The visions are complementary.

It is rather unusual to explain a literary theory in terms of modern physics. Yet the theory of complementarity has received attention in the past in similar contexts. In Science and the Common Understanding the renowned physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer explains:

Indeed, an understanding of the complementary nature of conscious life and its physical interpretation appears to me a lasting element in human understanding and a proper formulation of the historic view called psycho-physical parallelism. For within conscious life, and its relations with the description of the physical world, there are again many examples. There is the relation between the cognitive and the affective sides of our lives, between knowledge or analysis and emotion or feeling. There is the relation between the aesthetic and the heroic, between feeling and that precursor and definer of action, the ethical commitment; there is the classical relation between the analysis of one's self, the determination of one's motives and

purposes, and that freedom of choice, that freedom of decision and action, which are complementary to it.¹¹

Also, in Shakespeare and the Common Understanding, Norman Rabkin bases his approach to Shakespeare's vision on the theory of complementarity.

Rabkin suggests:

Most of us, I dare say, are drawn to poetry because in it as in nothing else we are enabled to re-experience in such a way as to come to understand it, the unresolvable complexity of life as life presents itself to the fullest human consciousness. . . . [The aesthetic presentation of the world as complementary] provides a writer with the basis of a mimesis which appeals to the common understanding because it recalls the unresolvable tensions that are the fundamental conditions of human life. It is a mode of awareness, an option for a certain and essential kind of openness to human experience.¹²

Certainly this is what Stevens has in mind in his conception of the interconnectedness of things.

This particular approach to literature is especially applicable to Stevens because, unlike pre-atomic Shakespeare, Stevens himself was aware of the concept of complementarity--in physics and in his poetry. If Stevens read Charles Mauron's Aesthetics and Psychology closely (and he must have as his copy is covered in margin notes¹³), he observed Mauron making the connection between the idea of

¹¹J. Robert Oppenheimer, Science and the Common Understanding (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 26.

¹²Norman Rabkin, Shakespeare and the Common Understanding (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 26.

¹³J. M. Edelstein, "The Poet as Reader: Wallace Stevens and His Books," Book Collector, 23 (1974), 53-68.

complementarity in physics and complementarity in aesthetic taste.¹⁴

And when explaining the concept of nobility in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens reveals his view of the relationship between the imagination and reality:

In its ultimate extention, the truths about which we have been insane with lead us to look beyond the truth to something in which the imagination will be the dominant complement. It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential (NA, p. 33).

Thus, Stevens' goal in poetry is to find a language which can express "the unresolvable complexity of life as life presents itself to the fullest human consciousness." His complementary theory of reality and imagination allows for his constant shifting of perspectives in his poems; each perspective, whether starkly grasping at bare reality, as do many of his later poems, or playfully inventing imaginative constructs as do some of his others, is valid. It is dangerous to look to an individual poem or group of poems for a specific theoretical stance because together all create a complexity which points to the variety of experience that humanity shares through art and life. What Stevens sometimes calls the "war" between imagination and reality is actually the lifeblood of his poetry; he admits that to resolve the battle is to annihilate his poetry. The interplay is essential:

[The poet] will find that it is not a choice of one over the other and not a decision that divides them, but

¹⁴Charles Mauron, Aesthetics and Psychology, trans. Roger Fry and Katherine John (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1935), p. 11.

something subtler, a recognition that here, too, as between these poles, the universal interdependence exists, and hence his choice and his decision must be that they are equal and inseparable (NA, p. 24).

The difficulty which this complementary view presents is obvious. Language, as the expression of the relationship between imagination and reality, must do the impossible: Stevens wants to "re-create," as Eliade puts it, a language which can render changing, chaotic reality in all its complexity and at the same time disclose a wholeness in experience which ordinary awareness does not warrant--to re-create the "mythical style of life." Language is an arbitrary, humanly created sign system. No language or sign system is "isomorphic with the world, or can be. No sign system has the same structure as the world."¹⁵ Yet Stevens desires a language for "cosmic poetry" which can balance reality with imagination. When he says, "Words are everything else in the world" (OP, p. 180), Stevens is suggesting that, as the arbitrator between imagination, which is a part of us, and reality, which is separate, unknowable, and violent, language is all we have. But because language is an isomorphic system, it cannot mirror reality thoroughly or completely. In fact, it tends to fix reality, just as definitions tend to fix abstractions. The solution is Stevens' re-created, secret language. He searches for ways to structure language so that it seems to reflect the structure of the world while at the same time it orders the world, or he writes poetry about structuring language to balance reality with imagination.

¹⁵Morse Peckham, Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1965), p. 91.

Ironically, the making of poetry becomes a destructive act because it attempts to tear down with words man's categorization of reality as it is usually expressed in words. Not only does Stevens desire to destroy what he calls "old fictions"--religious and philosophical beliefs which are no longer valid--but he also desires to destroy "old fictions" from one minute to the next--the categories by which man perceives objects in reality without seeing them freshly each time he looks at them. Man's ability to categorize objects and ideas is, of course, what makes him an intelligent being. One can see an apple, and though it may not be exactly like any other apple one has ever seen, one categorizes it as an apple. However, for Stevens this categorization, this conceptual view of reality, creates an order which does not exist in reality and which, consequently, must be destroyed. His poetry, therefore, is aimed at making his readers "connoisseurs of chaos." Stevens recognizes the strength of man's "rage for order"; but, interested in a poetry that defies man to categorize reality simply, Stevens attempts to create a discontinuity with categorization in his poetry so that readers will see the world in a new way. In other words, through categorization language creates order that does not exist in reality. Thus, it separates man from reality, and the world becomes a mirror of the mind, a stage on which we are actors: we have an artificial existence. Stevens wants to give back to the world a proper balance between imagination and reality. Paradoxically, language reconnects man to the world in poetry.

Through this paradox in Stevens' poetic theories, language is essential as a decreative and re-creative force. In "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," Stevens refers to Simone Weil's conception of decreation--"making pass from the created to the un-created"--as opposed to destruction--"making pass from the created to nothingness" (NA, pp. 174-5). Stevens alludes to this idea in discussing modern reality as a reality of decreation, "in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers" (NA, p. 175). A decreated reality is one stripped of old fictions. The decreative power of language is that which makes old conceptions, old orders of the mind, seem trite. It is the disorienting force which demands that we see the world anew. The categorization of reality that exists in order for us to function in ordinary life establishes an order which does not exist in reality and which, therefore, must be decreated. A new categorization is then expressed through re-created language.

At the center of this re-created language for Stevens is the concept of resemblance, metaphor, analogy, or metamorphosis. The "universal interdependence" between imagination and reality exists in poetry through metaphor, or metamorphosis, according to Stevens. The imagination, through the art of perception, discovers the resemblance inherent in the structure of reality. Two essays--"Three Academic Pieces" and "Effects of Analogy"--study this "activity of resemblance" (NA, p. 77). To Stevens the quest for resemblances between things in reality is an innate human urge: finding resemblance is naturally pleasurable. He points to Narcissus as an

example of that principle (NA, p. 80). The poet finds new resemblances between otherwise dissimilar things and expresses the analogy, mainly in metaphor. Stevens says that this "metamorphosis" in poetry "touches the sense of reality," "enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it" (NA, p. 77). Essentially, Stevens' theory of metaphor as the key element in poetry is that through resemblance, new orders are created and old ones are broken down, the result being pleasure.

Perhaps an examination of Charles Mauron's similar theory about resemblances (a probable influence on Stevens), will help explain Stevens' theory of metaphor more clearly. Mauron is concerned mainly with the psychological process of the artist active in creating his work and what Mauron believes to be the similar process of the perceiver perceiving the finished work of art. In this process, the artist gives up the "utilitarian organization of reality" so that he can "create a fresh organization for the pure delight of his intelligence."¹⁶ The relinquishing of the "utilitarian organization of reality"--the everyday conceptual processes which enable us to get on with our ordinary lives--is possible because for Mauron art is "a pause from living," a time for lack of thought about the future.¹⁷ Resemblance is the basis for order in everyday life and in art:

In active life the intellect looks for resemblance because it wishes to foresee efficiently; in art this aim disappears, but the intellect still looks for analogies--that is its

¹⁶Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 66.

function--and now, it seems, for the pure pleasure of discovering them.¹⁸

Mauron concludes by suggesting guidelines for artistic resemblances:

Suppose the world is really, for the artist's logical faculty--and the work of art, for the spectator's--a kind of Paradise of Discovery. What, then, will be the kind of resemblance they will think interesting?

1. The artist will avoid formulating his ideas abstractly. He will place the concrete elements of the analogy side by side, and let the spectator make the discovery, as he did (less easily, it is true).
2. He will avoid analogies already known.
3. He will delight, on the contrary, in resemblances buried in the complexity of the real, those that are felt and divined rather than perceived distinctly.
4. The systematic linking up of resemblances will not seem to him absolutely necessary--for the interest, for him, lies in tasting the spiritual atmosphere rather than in reaching definite conclusions. It is enough that the work should convey an impression, even though vague, of a reality richer in unforeseen correspondences than the ordinary world.¹⁹

Stevens takes this last suggestion further to emphasize how the resemblance intensifies reality. The vagueness or, as Stevens calls it, "ambiguity" created through resemblance brings with it "increased realization," which is "pleasurable" (NA, p. 79). If the ambiguity is pleasurable, it is so because it reveals again the "complexity of the real" which is forgotten in the everyday organization of reality. Order in ordinary conceptual processes, in the everyday language of getting on, tends to simplify reality; aesthetic order tends to complicate reality through metamorphosis to reveal the chaos which is, for Stevens, true to reality. Thus, the perceptual process is at the heart of the poetic act through the creation of metaphor.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 104.

It is here that reality and the imagination interact, that order and chaos co-exist, that the "poetry of the idea" and the "poetry of words" correspond.

Thus, for Stevens language is the connecting force between the imagination and reality. It is essential, but paradoxically it is at its best as poetry when it disappears, according to Stevens:

There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel: a rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verballity (NA, p. 188).

The "cosmic poem" is one in which the language is so appropriate to the poetic conception that the words do not call attention to themselves merely as words. This is what Stevens means when he says that "the style of a poem and the poem itself are one" (OP, p. 202). There can exist poetic language which is not necessarily poetry. Stevens gives examples of this in "A Collect of Philosophy" when he discusses philosophers who use poetic language. There can also be poetic conceptions which are not expressible in words, as Stevens suggests in his discussion of Planck as the modern man. In the successful poem, however, the language merges with the analogy expressed to enhance it.

Taken together, the prism of Stevens' poetic theories does give us some indication of how Stevens fits poetry, reality, and the imagination together in a scheme. The power and limits of language influence the capability of poetry to balance the two complementary forces. Stevens asserts that poetry is words; he also contends that poetry is some sort of prelingual conception

or idea and that language can express that idea fully only when it loses its "verbality." Language that is poetic, therefore, is special language--secret, a re-created language, an ambiguous language. When this language is adequate to the poetic idea, it merges with that idea in a poem and creates a "wholeness" which reveals reality in its complexity and gives "sanction" to life. These are the conclusions which can be drawn from Stevens' prose theories. When we look at the poetry itself, we will see how these ideas about language become a part of the poetry as theme, image, metaphor, and form.

CHAPTER 3

LANGUAGE AND STEVENS' POETRY--HARMONIUM THROUGH PARTS OF A WORLD

Because of the self-conscious and self-referential qualities of much of Stevens' poetry, many critics have chosen to view it more as a continuous philosophical discourse on the nature of imagination and reality than as poetry. Because self-consciousness and self-referentiality tend to call attention to the action of poetry coming into being, of the poem struggling to become a poem, it is perhaps easier for the critic to find the "poetry of the idea" by separating seemingly philosophical statements from the context of whole poems than it is for the critic to see the merging of idea and words to make a whole, a "cosmic" poem. This problem is due in part to Stevens' failure to create that "whole" in all poems. More to the point, however, critics like J. Hillis Miller in his Poets of Reality, Frank Doggett in Stevens' Poetry of Thought, and Thomas Hines in The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens have been infatuated with Stevens' extremely seductive epistemological propositions that are found within poems, some of which are taken directly from the Adagia, letters, and other prose.

I do not deny that Stevens held some philosophical concerns, nor that these concerns play a major role in his poetry. His prose is evidence of those tendencies, and his desire to write a "cosmic" poetry uniting philosophy and literature is proof that he addressed basic epistemological questions in poetry. Yet, as interesting as it

may be, the practice of constructing a philosophical or even an aesthetic system out of lines from Stevens' poetry is futile; furthermore, it does not do justice to the poems as poems. In looking to the prose for theories of poetry and attitudes toward language as it is used in poetry, I have tried to show what Stevens wished poetic language to do, what role he wanted poetry to play in culture, and what complexities are involved in his conceptions about the relationship among reality, language, and the imagination. The answers given are his only answers to the basic philosophical questions of existence. He constructed no system. Likewise, by tracing Stevens' use of language as theme, image, and metaphor through selected poems which are self-conscious, self-referential poems about poetry, I hope to show how the "poetry of the idea" and the "poetry of words" co-exist and interact to create Stevens' myriad impressions of existence.

Of course, it is not a novelty for a poet to refer self-consciously to his language in his poetry. When trying to express some strong emotion, particularly love or grief, poets have frequently written about the inadequacy of words to express their emotions. For example, this theme recurs in Sidney's sonnet sequence, Astrophel and Stella. In fact, the first sonnet in that sequence expresses just such an idea:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe:
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow

Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburned brain.
 But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
 Invention, Nature's child, fled stepdame study's blows;
 And others' feet still seemed but stranger in my way.
 Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite:
 "Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write!"¹

Likewise, Tennyson expresses the same kind of frustration with the language in trying to express his grief at his friend's untimely death in In Memoriam, poem five:

I sometimes hold it half a sin
 To put in words the grief I feel;
 For words, like Nature, half reveal
 And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
 A use in measured language lies,
 The sad mechanic exercise,
 Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,
 Like coarsest clothes against the cold,
 But that large grief which these enfold
 Is given in outline and no more.²

But in using language as a theme or as image, Stevens does more than call into question the adequacy of language in expressing his subject. Rather, the language image or idea is central to Stevens' poetry about poetry. Many times language is his subject.

There are several ways that the idea of language is used to express the unique qualities of poetry in Stevens' poems. First of

¹Sir Philip Sidney, Astrophel and Stella, in Sixteenth Century English Poetry and Prose, eds. Paul Delany, Jeffrey Ford, and Robert W. Hanning (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 243.

²Alfred Lord Tennyson, In Memoriam, in Poetry of the Victorian Period, eds. Jerome Hamilton Buckley and George Benjamin Woods (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1966), p. 58.

all, when the language image appears in a poem, the language of the poem becomes even more complex and ambiguous than it would be without the image: the "poetry of the idea" as well as the "poetry of words" involves language. Therefore, language is more than the medium for the poetic expression; it is the phenomenon that is being explored in the poetic expression. For this reason, before examining Stevens' poetry I want to reiterate the characteristics of specifically poetic language.

Since Plato there has been a traditional view that poetic language is somehow different from the "standard" language of rational, logical inquiry. Twentieth-century literary theory abounds with the idea that poetic language is linked with "plurisignificance, connotation, and poetic truth" as opposed to "monosignificance, denotation, and scientific truth" of language used in rational thought.³ I. A. Richards, Philip Wheelwright, William Empson, F. R. Leavis, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and others, as well as the formalists Jan Mukarovoky and Victor Shklovsky, have all in some way explored this idea, generally agreeing that poetic language is superior to scientific language in expressing the nuances and complexities of reality. Here the general premise is that poetic language is ordinary language that has been manipulated to become a "higher" form--ambiguous, ironic, calling attention to itself. An opposing view, Heidegger's idea about language, inverts this premise: "Poetry is

³Josephine Miles, "More Semantics of Poetry," in Essays on the Language of Literature, eds. Seymour Chatman and Samuel R. Levin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), p. 264.

never merely a higher mode (melos) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer."⁴ Either way of viewing poetry sets poetic language up as an extraordinary and vital medium for communication.

And there is deconstructive theory, which itself seems to be full of contradictions. In Chapter 1 of this study I referred to Joseph Riddel's comparison of Stevens' act of decreation with deconstructive philosophy. I suggested then that the comparison can be carried further than Riddel takes it. It would be wise here to show how deconstruction views language and how that view compares with the traditional views and Stevens' in particular. As a philosophical system, "deconstruction uses analytic reason . . . against the very forms of rational thought which appear to govern its own tactics."⁵ Similarly, as an aesthetic and imaginative system, Stevens' poetry uses associative, intuitive thought against the forms of imaginative thought which appear to govern its own tactics. In other words, in its literary applications, deconstruction uses seemingly rational structured prose (the traditional language of criticism) to show how any system of criticism, any method, is based on an illusion that the system is real. And deconstruction relishes

⁴Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 208.

⁵Christopher Norris, "Deconstruction and the Limits of Sense," Essays in Criticism, XXX, 4 (October, 1980), 286.

the idea that its "system," too, is a fiction. Essential to deconstruction as a critical technique is the structuralist idea that "language--like all cultural products--depends on a system of articulated differences wherein no single term has meaning in and of itself."⁶ Relativity, with no chance of the existence of an ultimate truth in thought or a "master-code" in language, creates a never ceasing instability in language and in thought. To deconstruct is to use a system to deny the verity of systems. Likewise, Stevens uses poetry to deny the truth of poetry--and not just the poetry of the past, worn-out fictions, but his own poetry as well; Stevens rejoices in the fact of fiction. Norris's explanation of the implications of deconstruction helps to clarify this point:

On the one hand it represents literary language as a fabric of illusory attempts-at-meaning, rhetorically disguising its own vacuity but ceaselessly undone by these very figurations of disguise. On the other it seems to claim for literature a canny self-knowledge or demystifying power which would place it above the more chronic delusions of philosophy and truth-seeking discourse. Deconstruction is caught between the warring poles of Western critical tradition: the platonic indictment of poetry as a language of practised deception, and the Sidneian defence of poetic "feigning" as a kind of savingly self-conscious illusion. It oddly embraces both positions and reverses their polemical thrust. Poetry (especially poetic metaphor) is privileged exactly in so far as it exposes the defeat of a language hopelessly aimed at plenitude of meaning and truth-to-experience. Yet this very defect, if one reads it aright, figures the redemption of language through a consciousness of its own obliquities and detours.⁷

Thus, poetic language is still opposed to "ordinary" language, but

⁶Ibid., p. 285.

⁷Ibid., p. 287.

for different reasons than are suggested by previous critical or philosophical system builders.

In comparing Stevens' poetry with deconstructive processes, I am not suggesting that Stevens was in any way theorizing similarly to Derrida or De Man or Hartman twenty years before they became proponents for deconstruction. I only offer the idea that Stevens' varying attitudes toward language and poetry are enlightened by the concepts of deconstruction. In fact, the phrase "obliquities and detours" characterizes Stevens' poetic canon perhaps better than any other single description. This is to say that Stevens deliberately wrote a poetic canon without a center. Just as to search for an epistemological system in Stevens' poetry and prose is to search in vain, to search for a final metaphor, a supreme fiction, that epitomizes the relationship among imagination, reality, and language is a futile quest. The title of the long poem Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction reveals the openendedness of that search. A study of Stevens' poetry about poetry shows the redeeming qualities of that openendedness--an endless variety of linguistic power and defeat.

Equally important to the understanding of Stevens' poetry about poetry is a huge contrast between decreation and deconstructive philosophy as it has been applied to literary criticism. At least in my view, a deconstructionalist reading of a particular work of literature is criticism which brings to the work the critic's conceptions gathered from past experience with life and literature and forces them on the work. For instance, Harold Bloom, with what he calls his "preternatural verbal memory," readily admits to the

primacy of the reader; in a text without boundaries the conceptions the reader brings to the text directly affect the reader's perception of the text.⁸ The emphasis in Stevens' decreative process is different. Though there is no center, no absolute truth, in poetry for Stevens, when the work is strong enough, it decreates the reader's conceptions and forces new perceptions on the reader, just as in many of his poems the persona experiences something which decreates his own conceptions. Thus, for Stevens the text of a poem is a separate reality which has a power of its own. The text may be unstable, but that instability is a force which acts on the reader, not vice versa. Thus, the language of poetry decreates previous systems, previous conceptions, previous language, and even itself to make way for new perceptions, conceptions, systems and language rather than to deny the possibility of their existence. Stevens is not a cheerful nihilist; he rejoices in man's ability to create rather than destroy. Decreation is the means, not the end of poetic creation. As an orphic poet, Stevens uses "obliquities and detours" to reveal alternative, relative truths-of-the-moment. The pursuit of what Riddel calls "some origin at the heart of utterance" is the fictive reason to continue trying out new poetic strategies. As George Steiner says,

The poem, taking the word in its fullest sense, is neither a contingent nor a marginal phenomenon of language. A poem

⁸Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," in Deconstruction and Criticism (New York: Continuum, 1979), p. 8.

concentrates, it deploys with least regard to the routine or conventional transparency, those energies of covertness and of invention which are the crux of human speech.⁹

For Stevens, it is poetry which remains as revelation since the gods have disappeared. To view the individual poems as truths-of-the-moment is to see them as examples of what Eliade calls partaking in the "mythical style of life." It is the creation of that mythical behavior which results from the de-creative process. Language as an image, metaphor, or idea is central to that process.

When specific poems which include the use of language as image or metaphor are analyzed, there are several principal trends which can be observed. In the chronological development of Stevens' canon, we will see alternative and complementary views of language as a de-creative and re-creative power, as the ambiguous mediator between the imagination and reality, as the expression of the process of words losing their "verbality," as the private pulse of mythical behavior, and as a foil to the prelingual conception--that "origin at the heart of utterance" which is so illusive for Stevens. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the ways the idea of language functions in Stevens' poetry, but it is a beginning from which to proceed with the examination of the "obliquities and detours" in the poems themselves.

The method I have chosen for analyzing Stevens' poetry about poetry is rather old-fashioned compared to the deconstructionalist

⁹George Steiner, After Babel (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 233.

criticism prevalent today. To show how Stevens' decreative process works and how the idea of language functions in the poems not as philosophical tenet but as image, theme, or metaphor, my method relies on close reading of individual poems, not on deconstruction of them. As much as possible, the poems will be examined chronologically. While the selection of poems for analysis may seem somewhat arbitrary, I have tried to select those which most clearly and thoroughly reveal Stevens' tendency to use the idea of language as a way of exploring the power of poetry.

From Harmonium to The Rock, Stevens' poetry changes greatly in its tone, its use of imagery, its texture. While the early poetry seems somewhat frivolous, the later poetry seems somber. While the early poems are mostly regarded as having an overabundance of sensual imagery, the later poetry seems stark. What is constant is the concern with the relationship between imagination and reality, the decreative process that takes place before the re-creative process, and the self-conscious concern with language as it tries to embody that relationship between imagination and reality and that process of decreation.

In Stevens' first volume Harmonium, the first poem to use the language image is the seemingly frivolous "The Plot Against the Giant."¹⁰ The three female speakers--"First Girl," "Second Girl," and "Third Girl"--successively express the ways in which they plan to ward off the looming giant. He is a threat to the girls in that he

¹⁰Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace

is "whetting his hacker"; he is large and uncivilized, a "yokel" (one thinks of "Jack and the Beanstalk"). Yet the mood of the poem is not one of terror, but playfulness. In their plot, the girls plan to "run before him" in a teasing, flirtatious fashion. Each girl sets forth a defense which relies on one of the senses, and the predictions of how the giant will react become more severe with each defense, the final being the defense of language. The scene is set by the First Girl:

When this yokel comes maundering,
Whetting his hacker,
I shall run before him,
Diffusing the civilest odors
Out of geraniums and unsmelled flowers.
It will check him.

The word maunder means not only to wander slowly and idly but also to grumble or speak indistinctly or disconnectedly, a characteristic which will be contrasted by the Third Girl's mode of speech. In this stanza it is the sense of smell that the girl uses as her defense--"civilest odors" are the weapons used against the rude, uncivilized, grumbling giant. Her prediction is that the odors will "check" him--the least forceful of the parallel predictions of the other girls.

The boast of the Second Girl is a bit stronger than the previous one:

I shall run before him,
Arching cloths besprinkled with colors
As small as fish eggs.
The threads
Will abash him.

Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 6. Hereinafter referred to parenthetically in the text as "CP."

Here the appeal is visual; the artistry of the finely woven, colorful fabric is the defense against the barbarian which will "abash him." The hierarchy of weapons is clear: the first comes from nature, the second from human craftsmanship, and the third, the most sophisticated and powerful of all, is language:

Oh, la . . . le pauvre!
 I shall run before him,
 With a curious puffing.
 He will bend his ear then.
 I shall whisper
 Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals.
 It will undo him.

The Third Girl's French exclamation at the opening of the stanza is an example of those "heavenly labials" to be whispered to the giant. Her attention-getting device--"a curious puffing"--suggests not only the oddness of her approach but also the nature of the language of her "heavenly labials" since curious suggests "precisely accurate" (an archaic sense of the word) as well as strange. The whispering of precisely accurate language is a motif that recurs in several of Stevens' poems and later takes on greater significance. That this language will "undo" the giant is what is important here. The verb undo suggests several alternative actions: to release, to upset, to seduce, and "to make of no effect as if not done." The act of undoing is decreative because it destroys and releases at the same time. Knowing how the idea of decreation will be developed in Stevens' poetry, I suggest that "The Plot Against the Giant" can be read as an embodiment of the decreative act. Certainly, the aesthetic value in all three girls' defenses is what is powerful against the giant, but it is language that wields the most power. Without

disregarding the poem's playfulness and the strong sexual and sensual undertones in that playfulness, "The Plot Against the Giant" shows the power of words not only through the evocative language of the poem but also through the role played by the language image in the poem.

"Le Monocle De Mon Oncle" is another exploration of the power of language, yet of its limits as well. As Litz explains,

The title, a copybook phrase from the French schoolroom, sets the witty and slightly pedantic tone of the poem. The collision of words, the transformation of "monocle" into "mon oncle" by a slight realignment, tells us that the play of language will be as much the subject as the play of personality.¹¹

Indeed, the "clashed edges of two words that kill" (CP, p. 13) is a phrase that is essential to the form as well as to the emotion expressed in the poem. As in "The Plot Against the Giant," Stevens presents language as a weapon, in this poem in stronger, war-like terms. In addition, the poem proceeds in a series of "clashed edges," juxtapositions and contrasts which fight one another and finally point to the inadequacy of words to express the theoretical relationship of man to his world, particularly to express the idea of love. Specifically, the poem shows a man at middle-age trying to "celebrate/ The faith of forty," in other words trying to come to terms with changes in life and love through language. In this way, "Le Monocle De Mon Oncle" is a poem about finding the fitting language--the right images, metaphors, tone, and style--to express the contrast between youth and middle-age, innocence and experience,

¹¹A. Walton Litz, Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 83.

prelapsarian naivete and fallen sophistication. Unlike Dylan Thomas or W. B. Yeats, Stevens is not raging against growing old; rather, he is decreating youth and love so he might redefine love and life as it is experienced when one is forty. The redefinition turns out not to be a simplistic or dogmatic definition at all, but a realization of the complexity of life and love; an optimistic, enduring desire to continue searching for the definition; and, most importantly, the attainment of a new, less abstract viewpoint, or monocle, from which to view the world--one from which one notices "That fluttering things have so distinct a shade"--or, as Sukenick says, one which "comes down to a gratifying, sensuous experience of reality, an agreement with life rather than an idea about it."¹² The final clash--the contest between the abstract and the concrete--shows the concrete victorious. Language as description of the natural world, the language of perception, takes the place of the language of the de-created conception.

An early example of Stevens' concern with the orphic function of language is "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night" (CP, p. 85). But as a dramatic monologue, it works on a more complex level than some of the later poems, which in their understated way try to re-create the world. Moving from the mundane to the sublime in a few short stanzas, the poem exemplifies the poetic process of which Stevens speaks in his essay "Effects of Analogy": "a rhetoric in which the

¹²Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 27.

feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verballity" (NA, p. 118).

The poem begins with a complaint from the speaker to his lover. He is bored and lets his lover know this with biting sarcasm:

I had as lief be embraced by the porter at the hotel
As to get no more from the moonlight
Than your moist hand.

Aching for romance, he desires the intense experience of the atmosphere. And it is language which can make the atmosphere--the moonlight--real for him, language which expresses with rightness the feeling of the night:

Be the voice of night and Florida in my ear.
Use dusky words and dusky images.
Darken your speech.

That the language must lose its verballity, that it must be perfectly appropriate to the situation, is clear from the following two stanzas. The words must be so right that they seem to come from the speaker's imagination rather than from his companion:

Speak, even, as if I did not hear you speaking,
But spoke for you perfectly in my thoughts,
Conceiving words,

As the night conceives the sea-sounds in silence,
And out of their droning sibilants makes
A serenade.

Comparing the act of language with the "serenade" of the sea emphasizes the speaker's desire for the natural to be made aesthetic. As the sounds of the sea become a serenade in the imagination because of their "rightness," the language chosen must be right. And that language is poetry. It creates the dusky, moonlit Florida night.

Finally, the speaker does for himself what he has demanded that his companion do. He tells her what to say to create the night:

Say, puerile, that the buzzards crouch on the ridge-pole
And sleep with one eye watching the stars fall
Below Key West.

Say that the palms are clear in a total blue,
Are clear and are obscure, that it is night;
That the moon shines.

- With this ending, the idea of words becomes the focus of the poem. In fact, in reading the poem we experience, second-hand, a poem coming into being. Stevens shows us a situation in which the need for poetry arises and fulfills that need. This dramatic monologue is certainly innovative in revealing how and why language is transformed into poetry.

It is only appropriate that Harmonium end with another reference to language. "To the Roaring Wind" shows Stevens at his most language-oriented. "It is a world of words to the end of it," he claims in the Adagia. For Stevens, here and elsewhere, the world seems to be words. Thus, he personifies the wind; he anticipates meaning in the noise of nature. He anthropomorphizes the world:

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocalissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it (CP, p. 113).

Yet as usual in Stevens' poetry, the meaning is only anticipated, not realized. That the wind can speak is a dream. The power of the roaring wind is something other than language. That man can imagine the wind speaking shows the power of the imagination.

In Stevens' second volume, Ideas of Order, the poems about poetry are examples more of the creation of order than of the de-creative process. That the condition of man's existence necessitates poetry's existence as an ordering phenomenon is a theme central to these poems. For the speakers and characters in these poems (and I think Stevens would hope for the readers of these poems), an aesthetic, even spiritual satisfaction results from the ordering experience. While ordinary experience, what Mauron calls the "utilitarian organization of reality," is decreed as the aesthetic order is created, the emphasis is on the results of the ordering process.

"Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" combines musical imagery with language imagery to express the atmosphere in a time without a sufficient aesthetic order. Here the need for a vital poetry is shown as the spiritual demand of a whole culture. The first two stanzas describe the situation in which the waltz, an image for the old aesthetic order, does not answer the needs of the people. It is only "motionless sound"; it "is no longer a mode of desire, a mode/ Of revealing desire and is empty of shadows" (CP, p. 121). The second pair of stanzas suggest that the waltz has never sufficed for some: for Hoon, who some critics have suggested is Stevens' persona for himself,

Who found all form and order in solitude,
For whom the shapes were never the figures of men.
Now, for him, his forms have vanished.

Like "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night," "Some Friends From Pascagoula" is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker asks for speech to give aesthetic order to experience through a description of that experience. And like the speaker in the earlier poem, the speaker here describes what he is asking his friends, Cotton and Sly, to describe. Stevens' poetic method is to use imperatives to make a poem in which a persona commands other people to make a poem, in this case a description of the eagle swooping down. As a result, what the reader is left with is the actual poem, which is a series of commands, and the imaginative possibility of another poem, which is the poem as it would be spoken by Cotton and Sly. One might connect the speaker's desire for the description with a desire for the "mythical style of life" because it is clear that the speaker has heard the description before, perhaps many times, and desires to enter that mode of existence by listening to the description again. It is a ritualistic act.

The first stanza, along with the title, sets up the situation. The speaker asks two black Mississippians to describe the eagle and in the process begins his own description. More explicit instructions about the description are given in the second stanza. Here, how the description should be told is made clear. The way the words should sound and the kind of imagery desired are suggested:

Describe with deepened voice
And noble imagery
His slow-falling round
Down to the fishy sea (CP, p. 126).

The imagery of the speaker might itself be called noble, but the stanza suggests that the imagery of Cotton and Sly would be different, perhaps more noble.

After an interjection about the fittingness of the eagle's flight to its audience--"Here was a sovereign sight/ Fit for a kinky clan"--the speaker continues his commands, using more and more noble imagery in the process; one wonders how the description he gives might differ from that of Cotton and Sly, who must speak in the rich cadences of southern Mississippi black dialect:

Tell me again of the point
At which the flight began,

Say how his heavy wings,
Spread on the sun-bronzed air,
Turned tip and tip away,
Down to the sand, the glare

Of the pine trees edging the sand,
Dropping in the sovereign rings
Out of his fiery lair.
Speak of the dazzling wings.

Certainly, the description of the eagle by the speaker is an enjoyable aesthetic ordering experience itself. But because of the way language is used in the poem, it is more: implicit in it is the possibility of another, even more pleasing description of the eagle. In asking for a poem, the speaker makes a poem. In describing the sound of the language and imagery to be used, the speaker indicates the values he places on poetic language. And in revealing that he has heard the description before, the speaker shows the use of language to be ritualistic and to be a way of making a natural phenomenon take on aesthetic, perhaps even spiritual, significance.

Another example of the poem as an ordering process is "The Idea of Order at Key West," which focuses on the idea of language to contrast the human with the nonhuman and which suggests that language is closely connected with the spiritual aspect of man's nature. This poem has been the subject of much critical controversy, with interpretations ranging from the poem as an embodiment of the idea of order¹³ to the poem as an ironic presentation of the solipsistic imagination.¹⁴ I call the poem an example of an artistic ordering process because I do not believe that it can be viewed as the ideal idea of order; rather, it is an ingenious, and I might add magnificent, presentation of a "double" aesthetic-spiritual experience. What is double about the poem is the effect that the woman's song has on the speaker and the possibility that the speaker's "song," or poem, might have a similar effect on the reader.

In the first three stanzas, the inhuman sea is contrasted with the human voice of the woman who is being observed by the speaker and his companions. The sea is "Like a body wholly body" without mind or voice (CP, p. 128). Its cry is separate from the woman's song, not "medleyed sound," not part of a duet, because the "veritable ocean," though like the woman a "maker" of sound, is not a conscious "maker." What has been romanticized as the "ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea" the speaker presents in its simple reality: "merely a

¹³Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens, p. 119.

¹⁴Lentricchia, p. 185.

place by which she walked to sing." In contrast, that what the woman "sang was uttered word by word" connects her song and her very being with the spirit, "for she was the maker of the song she sang."

Language and the woman's ability to create a song out of it distinguish the woman from the sea; unlike the sea, which has been traditionally connected with the spirit, she is a spiritual being, and the listeners are aware of this difference:

Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang.

Litz has pointed out that Stevens' use of the word maker in referring to the woman is like that of Sir Philip Sidney in his Apology for Poetry.¹⁵ Indeed, in that sense it is apt that the listeners seek the spirit of the maker. As Sidney says, "The poet only bringeth his own stuff, and doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh for a conceit."¹⁶ The spirit is the stuff that poetry is made of. Thus, the listeners seek the source of the song, the spirit behind the words.

In the fourth stanza the speaker creates a hypothetical situation and negates that situation to emphasize the contrast between the song and the "voice" of the natural world. The speaker suggests that the voice might be simply the sound of the sea or sky. But the "speech" of the sea is "sound alone." The song

¹⁵Litz, p. 193.

¹⁶As quoted by Litz, p. 193.

was more than that,
 More even than her voice, and ours among
 The meaningless plunging of water and the wind,
 Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
 On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
 of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made
 The sky acutest at its vanishing.
 She measured to the hour its solitude.
 She was the single artificer of the world
 In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea
 Whatever self it had, became the self
 That was her song, for she was the maker.

The song was "more than that" because "what she sang was uttered word by word." Like Orpheus, the woman creates a world of words that are more than the sounds of the sea, more than the sounds of her voice, more than the sounds of the listeners' voices, because the words--language--give order to the world, the chaos of the sea. It is this contrast between language and mere sound that is rudimentary to the idea of order. The world is ordered through words about the world.

The poem concludes with the famous incantation to Ramon Fernandez, the name of a philosopher of whom Stevens denied knowledge (he claimed to have chosen the name arbitrarily as a common Latin name). First, Ramon is asked why the aftermath of the song is so powerful, why the song has such an impact on its listeners:

tell why the glassy lights,
 The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
 As the night descended, tilting in the air,
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

The descriptions of the ordering effect of the song is itself enchanting. If only for a moment, the world has, because of the maker's words, become gorgeously ordered and intense. Here is a shift from ordinary life to what Mauron calls "a pause from living,"

perhaps even an entry into what Eliade calls the "mythical style of life." An ordinary view has taken on extraordinary significance. It is fitting that the "glassy lights" of the fishing boats rather than the natural reflected light of the moon seem to create the ordered "zones" and "poles" in the sea. Man creates his own order to connect himself with, and make himself at home in the world.

Finally, the exclamatory remarks in the last stanza seem to answer the question "why" that had been addressed to Ramon. Language seems to be the answer:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

What is transmitted to the listener is the maker's "rage" to create order through words about the natural world--the sea--about the possibility of a spiritual world--"fragrant portals, dimly-starred"--and about man and his connections with the world. Thus, the listener, too, experiences a moment of order. The last line of the poem is significant: it connects that order, the language of poetry, with spiritual insight--"ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." Perhaps Ramon is pale because he represents that "ghostly" insight. The poem suggests that because it is the source of his ordering instinct, his "rage for order," man's spirituality is his triumph and language is the mode of expressing that spirituality. And the double aesthetic-spiritual experience of the poem leaves the reader with the possibility that when he turns away from the page of poetry, he, too, will experience "arranging, deepening, enchanting."

Stevens' next volume, The Man with the Blue Guitar, contains the title poem and a few other short poems. Though clearly this volume is concerned explicitly with the nature of poetry and the connections between imagination, reality, and language, surprisingly few of the poems confront the idea of language directly. Instead, as the title suggests, music is the main source of imagery for exploring the nature of poetry. One of the thirty-three poems that comprise the long series whose title is the title of the volume does seem worthy of comment in the context of this study:

XXII

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and

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

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

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

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

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse (CP, pp. 176-7).

The "absence in reality" brings to mind language's ability to facilitate man's tendency to categorize and conceptualize reality out of "being." "Things as they are" is the expression of a pure, prelingual perception of reality. The question "But are these separate?" reveals Stevens' changing attitude toward the relationship between reality and imagination. In concluding with "the universal intercourse," the

poem suggests that poetic conception, language filtered through the imagination, must have its sources in perceptions of reality.

Two major attitudes toward language are explored in the poems of Stevens' next volume, Parts of a World, which is more abstract than those volumes of poetry written before. To extrapolate those attitudes from the poetry, one might take the lines from "Variations on a Summer Day," XIV, for one attitude:

Words add to the senses. The words for the
dazzle
Of mica, the dithering of grass,
The Arachne integument of dead trees,
Are the eye grown larger, more intense (CP, p. 234).

The opposing tendency is articulated in lines from "Yellow Afternoon": "The odor/ Of earth penetrates more deeply than any word" (CP, p. 237). Many of the poems about poetry in this volume are, at least to me, less successful as poems than those examined previously because they seem to be thinly disguised theoretical tracts rather than examples of theories in action as those in Ideas of Order are.

In one theoretical poem, "The Poems of Our Climate," Stevens reveals the reason for the necessity of language in an imperfect world. He first establishes a description of a decreaded world, a simple scene in which the psyche is made uncomplicated by its surroundings. The first stanza sets the stage, at the same time suggesting that the decreaded scene will not suffice:

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.
Pink and white carnations--one desires
So much more than that. The day itself

Is simplified: a bowl of white,
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
With nothing more than the carnations there
(CP, p. 193).

That this "world of white" is not enough shows man's desire and need for more than a world of sensory perception: "Still one would want more, one would need more,/ More than a world of white and snowy scents." The decreed world is inadequate to provide man's happiness.

The last stanza reveals the essential paradox of man's existence, a paradox which embraces language as the means by which man is made happy:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.
The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

Ironically, when man finds some semblance of perfection--the decreed "world of white"--his "never-resting mind" wants to return to the world of conceptions, even worn-out ones, to the world of language. After the disappearance of the gods, perfection is not possible, not even desirable though sometimes man thinks it is. Man's passion for existence in the imperfect paradise is articulated through his imperfect language. This is the delight of "flawed words and stubborn sounds"; this is poetry.

Another poem which seems to say "words add to the senses" is "Add This to Rhetoric," which contrasts the ordering and arranging power of language and other arts with the natural growth of nature.

The use of the word pose seems at first to suggest that the artificiality of arrangement in speech or painting or music is unfavorable. In the first stanza the speaker is addressing an artist, it seems:

It is posed and it is posed.
 But in nature it merely grows.
 Stones pose in the falling night,
 And beggars dropping to sleep,
 They pose themselves and their rags.
 Shucks . . . lavender moonlight falls.
 The building pose in the sky
 And, as you paint, the clouds,
 Grisaille, impearled, profound,
 Pfft. . . . In the way you speak
 You arrange, the thing is posed,
 What in nature merely grows (CP, p. 198).

The interjections shucks and pfft seem to indicate that the speaker is having trouble articulating his idea, perhaps because in trying to speak about "what in nature merely grows," just by the fact of articulation, he poses that idea, too. Then he does find a way to express the idea, a technique that will be used again in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction:

To-morrow when the sun,
 For all your images,
 Comes up as the sun, bull fire,
 Your images will have left
 No shadows of themselves.

Names given to the sun, metaphors used to describe it (bull fire is an example), have no lasting power over the natural object, the sun.

However, in the last thirteen lines of the poem, the mocking attitude toward the image-maker is turned around. The pose exists and is necessary to make sense of the world. The pose is not empty form; it is the result of the imposition of meaning. After the

speaker describes a painting to illustrate an artistic "pose," he reveals this connection between form and content, between language and meaning:

The sense creates the pose.
In this it moves and speaks.
This is the figure and not
An evading metaphor.

Add this. It is to add.

If the pose is created out of man's attempt to make sense of "what in nature merely grows," then it is the pose that gives vitality to nature. The artist's goal is to add that sense. Again the poet is Orpheus, connecting man with nature through words, through "poses."

In contrast, expressing the idea from "Yellow Afternoon" that "The odor/ Of earth penetrates more deeply than any word" is "On the Road Home," a rejection of language and of the creation of conceptions through language for a purely sensory perception of the world. Here the form of the poem is the speaker's rehashing of a conversation with some unnamed "you" and what the speaker remembers as the effects of that conversation. The dialogue is a rejection of any central truth or absolute word; it seems to be a rejection of what Riddel refers to as the "origin at the heart of utterance" in favor of a world in which there are no origins, no absolutes. The articulation of that negation has the same effect as the creation of metaphor and description has had in other Stevens poems. As words are used to reject words as a way to the truth, the world comes alive in silence:

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
 And longest, the night was roundest,
 The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
 Closest and strongest (CP, p. 204).

The world is created in the rejection of words; ironically, it is necessary to use words to reject words. Thus, the poet is still Orpheus. His articulation of ideas brings about the superlative sense of experience in that silent moment.

Something of a companion piece to "On the Road Home," "The Latest Freed Man" is another rejection of language for the non-lingual poetic experience. And like the previous one, this poem progresses through a speaker's utterance about his rejection of the truth to a description of how things are the moments after "description" is rejected, "description" being the truth, the doctrines, the old names of things of the world. The freed man is the man who has willingly and willfully decreed the world. He is who Stevens will call in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction the "ignorant" man--not one who has never known about the world but one who wills away the old conceptions, or descriptions, of the world.

To show this willfulness of the freed man, Stevens uses the image of the ox:

To be without a description of to be,
 For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,
 To have the ant of the self changed to an ox
 With its organic boomings, to be changed
 From a doctor into an ox, before standing up
 (CP, p. 205).

The freed man is an ox because he has to be "strong as an ox," to use the old cliché, to reject the old descriptions and because he becomes mute like an ox in order to be "without description," to be open to

pure sensory experience. The freed man is the observer, the perceiver, surrounded by a new, nameless reality:

It was the importance of the trees outdoors,
 The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much
 That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked.
 It was everything being more real, himself
 At the center of reality, seeing it.
 It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,
 The blue of the rug, the portrait of Vidal,
Qui fait fi des jolieses banales, the chairs.

The process through which the freed man goes can be associated with the phenomenological process of "Being," as Thomas Hines has pointed out:

Each thing is energized by a force that does nothing other than cause it to stand out as it is. The things seen are all ordinary: the color of the rug, a portrait of a French friend (who apparently had had fun of ordinary things), and finally some chairs. Yet each of these things becomes vital as the free man realizes the similarity between his "Being without description" and their Being as they are disclosed to him. The sense of presence unites man and his world within the field of Being.¹⁷

But it seems to me that the essence of the poem is the idea of being without language, that is, without doctrine or description and thus without metaphor. To write a poem about being without language and liking it is rather odd. Stevens' poem is able to express in words what he calls a "poetic conception" or raw perceptions. Two of the Adagia might enlighten the poem: "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" (OP, p. 163). "Poetry has to be something more than

¹⁷Hines, p. 122.

a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature. Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are essential" (OP, p. 164). "The Latest Freed Man" introduces a man experiencing essential perceptions and rejecting artificial conception--decreating his world to experience a moment of nonlingual intensity. Language as classifier and metaphor is rejected so that things of the world can be seen and experienced in their individuality and uniqueness. Of course, language is the vehicle for its own rejection. Thus, the poetry of words expresses the poetic conception of "being without description." The poet, even in his expression of the possibility of the moment without language, remains committed to language. He is Orpheus: he uses words to express that nonlingual moment when "It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself." Perhaps the reader experiences something like this "being without description" as he reads the description of that moment. Certainly this poem itself decreates language and metaphor through language and metaphor. Here is the essential paradox of Stevens' attitude toward language as it is expressed in his poetry.

The language image is used again in "Of Modern Poetry," in which Stevens develops a view of the relationship among the poet, language, and the poet's audience. In order to disclose ostensibly what "modern" poetry should do, Stevens develops an elaborate theater metaphor, the idea of a "new stage" as a new kind of poetry which "will suffice" in the modern world. Ronald Sukenick offers an insightful explanation of that metaphor:

In that stage, in that art, poetry must be like an actor whose impulse to act can never be satisfied; here, however, the act is that of the mind as it continually meditates the words which are exact expressions of the mind, words which have the right sound to the "ear of the mind," and which compose, therefore, apt modern poetry. The "invisible audience" of contemporaries should, in fact, find such poetry so apt that it will seem, in listening to it, that it is listening to itself. In creating through his expression the perfect expression of his audience, the poet unites their feelings with his and the feelings of both become identical.¹⁸

Language is the medium through which a perfect balance between poet and poem and poem and audience is achieved:

The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sound passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise (CP, p. 240).

That "sound passing through sudden rightnesses" occurs at the moment of merging among poet, poem, and audience. It is language, for whatever reason, which satisfies the mind fully and over which the mind has no power to deconstruct. In offering possible subjects for such a poem--a modern poem--the ending suggests that the subject matter itself must be aesthetically pleasing, "of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman/ Combing," perhaps to imply that this satisfaction of the mind results from a merging also of the poetry of the idea and the poetry of words.

"The Search for Sound Free from Motion" echoes certain motifs and ideas in "The Idea of Order at Key West." The "word" gives the person addressed in the poem, the "you" of the poem, power to create

¹⁸Sukenick, p. 107.

a balance in the world. There is again a merging of world, language, and speaker. In the first stanza the unity exists among the noises of the day:

All afternoon the gramophone
 Parl-parled the West-Indian weather.
 The zebra leaves, the sea
 And it all spoke together (CP, p. 268).

Later the merging is emphasized through a metamorphosis of gramophone into gramaphoon as the weather becomes a "hurricane," or typhoon. Reality is manipulated through this metamorphosis. The sound of the song on the "gramaphoon" seems to create the weather: "The world as word."

Thus, it is the "you" of the poem who has power over the world through language: "But you, you used the word,/ Your self its honor." In the last stanza an equilibrium is created. Through its ambiguous and suggestive ending, this poem somehow at least seems to synthesize the two opposing attitudes toward language as uniting or separating man and the world. It suggests that "you" dominate the world through language, but only if that language is the "vital words" of the world, only if "The world as word" is inverted to "The word as world," only if the words are adequate to express the "many-stanzaed sea":

The world lives as you live,
 Speaks as you speak, a creature that
 Repeats its vital words, yet balances
 The syllable of a syllable.

In the balance of the last line, the poem shows the balance between man and reality in language.

It is fitting that this balance should conclude the analysis of the earlier Stevens' poetry. As has been shown, Stevens is

relentless in his engaging the human imagination and reality in battle, and the idea of language is a plucky soldier in that war. These poems about poetry, some of which have been neglected by many critics of Stevens, show that the balance can only be temporary and that as long as the poet writes, the war will continue. I choose to stop at this equilibrium point because with the next volume and the long poem Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction begins a more abstract kind of poetry in which the idea of language is developed more complexly as the war rages on.

CHAPTER 4

LANGUAGE AND THE LATER POEMS

In the later volumes of Stevens' poetry--Transport to Summer, The Auroras of Autumn, and The Rock--the problematic of a "poetry on poetry" becomes more complex because many of the poems deal overtly with the philosophical and theoretical concerns of the poet. Instead of using images and metaphors for the poet and his relationship to the imagination and reality as he does so effectively in poems like "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens many times confronts these concerns directly. Thus the words poem, poetry, metaphor, word, idea, meaning, and being appear again and again in these late poems. It is the poetry in these volumes out of which J. Hillis Miller extracted separate lines to develop his concept of Stevens' "poetry of being" and with which Thomas Hines constructed his extended parallel of Stevens "poetry of being" with phenomenological philosophy. Indeed, the epistemological statements in these poems are seductive; they tend to entice critics into ignoring poems as aesthetic wholes to search for a philosophical doctrine in the canon. Certainly many of these late poems are blatantly philosophical and consequently very difficult to approach from a traditional critical viewpoint, which scrutinizes poems for irony, ambiguity, juxtaposition of images, and paradoxical structure. Yet however philosophical these poems may be, they can be viewed as individual wholes. And since many are openly concerned with the nature of poetry, a study of the language image

and theme in these poems reveals a continuity of concern with the battle between the imagination and reality, between conception and perception, and again Stevens proves that the life of poetry is composed of inconsistencies and varying points of view. For example, in several poems, Stevens again vacillates between describing poetry as words and defining it as prelingual ideas. He also attempts to characterize poetic language. And, of course, in these late poems Stevens is interested in establishing the qualities of the "cosmic" poetry which he believes is possible. Finally, in the poetry of his old age, Stevens celebrates the power of poetic language to unite man with the world.

In Transport to Summer several of these varying points of view are explored as Stevens presents some of his best theoretical poems about poetry. Here Stevens creates his specialized use of the word description to characterize the poetic process, and he develops the idea of the "supreme fiction" to describe that "origin at the heart of utterance" with which Riddel is concerned.

The first of these attitudes toward language is developed in "Certain Phenomena of Sound" (CP, pp. 286-7). In one of the Adagia Stevens says, "The feeling or the insight is that which quickens the words, not the other way round" (OP, p. 172). Characteristically, Stevens voices the opposite notion in this poem, in which words are sounds "producing the things that are spoken." The three sections of the poem are connected only by their common interest in the power of sounds as the poem progresses from considerations of inhuman sounds to considerations of human speech and the sound of proper names.

The first section is a description of a summer Sunday at the house of "old John Rocket." While lack of motion and emptiness are the main characteristics of the situation, the stillness is deceiving: "a spider spins in the left shoe under the bed." The only sound is the "Sunday song" of the locust. Significantly, the locust's beating of its wings is not a sign that it is in pain, nor is the beating a result of the insect's thinking. Rather, this Sunday song is a result of natural process, of the "calendar." The sound reveals that the summer season is progressing naturally. Thus, it is a soothing sound: "old John Rocket dozes on his pillow./ It is safe to sleep to a sound that time brings back." In this world of insect sound, one is at peace because rather than some unnatural occurrence, it is time that has caused the familiar sound to return.

In the second part of the poem, the sound of language is identified with nature and the natural process of growth and creation. Taking the form of a parable--a retelling of the prodigal son story--the poem creates an exotic atmosphere of mangos and Moselle, in which language seems to produce what the narrative is about, as if the reality of the events depends entirely on the words used to describe the events. In the "thickest shade of the garden" the Redwood Roamer's story mingles with the "slick sonata" being played at the house. The music becomes a place, and the Roamer's voice is part of the place in a series of metamorphoses: The sound

makes music seem
To be a nature, a place in which itself

Is that which produces everything else, in which
The Roamer is a voice taller than the redwoods,

Engaged in the most prolific narrative,
A sound producing the things that are spoken.

In the transformation, the Roamer becomes his own voice, and the voice produces the substance of his tale. Rather than presenting the poet as maker, as he does in "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens gives the creative force to the voice itself, as if language has the power to create reality.

The third section enlarges upon that theme. In an imaginative moment, looking into the "interior of a parasol," Semiramide, the speaker of the poem, has a vision of Eulalia:

I beheld you walking, white,
Gold-shined by sun, perceiving as I saw
That of that light Eulalia was the name.
Then I, Semiramide, dark-syllabled,
Contrasting our two names, considered speech.
You were created of your name, the word
Is that of which you were the personage.
There is no life except in the word of it.
I write Semiramide and in the script
I am and have a being and play a part.
You are that white Eulalia of the name.

Here is perhaps Stevens' most radical orphic statement on the relationship among language, the imagination, and reality: "There is no life except in the word of it." Language gives existence; people's names create the roles they play.

Another poem in Transport to Summer, "The Creation of Sound" (CP, p. 310-11), seems to be specifically concerned with poetic language. More than any poem previously discussed, this one is a thinly disguised exposition of Stevens' theoretical views on the sound of poetry. The image of the poet "X" is developed as a contrast to the true poet, whose poems are "of the second part of life."

X is criticized for being "an obstruction, a man/ Too exactly himself." Evidently, his poetic language is too contrived for the speaker's taste. The criticism of X's poetry is overt:

Tell X that speech is not dirty silence
Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.
It is more than an imitation for the ear.

He lacks this venerable complication.
His poems are not of the second part of life.
They do not make the visible a little hard

To see nor, reverberating, eke out the mind
On peculiar horns, themselves eked out
By the spontaneous particulars of sound.

The objection to X's poetry seems to be based on Charles Mauron's ideas about the artistic reorganization of reality for aesthetic pleasure.¹ The poet must be obscure--"every artist creates his own idiom."² The decreation of everyday reality--"the visible"--is missing from X's poetry. So, X's poetry serves as a contrast to poetry which expresses "ourselves": his poetry does not have the desired effect on the audience, that of creating an aesthetic experience which demands that the listener reorganize "the visible"; nor does his poetic language sound right. It is too clear, perhaps too prosaic and stilted.

The poem ends with an image suggesting what poetic language should be: "We say ourselves in syllables that rise/ From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak." This brings to mind a part of Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction:

¹Mauron, p. 59.

²Ibid., p. 60.

It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks.
 He tries by a peculiar speech to speak
 The peculiar potency of the general,
 To compound the imagination's Latin with
 The lingua franca et jocundissima (CP, p. 397).

Unlike X, whose poetry is too much a clear statement of his own understanding to be generalized, the poet strives for a delicate combination of "dirty" speech and beautiful sound that expresses in a particular way some commonly held experience.

Another ostensibly theoretical poem is "Description Without Place" (CP, pp. 339-46). Thomas Hines has suggested what the theory expressed is:

Heidegger's statement that "poetry is the establishing of Being by means of the word" provides a way of explaining Stevens's compressed theory. The poet's language (the word) established what otherwise would remain unintelligible and thus unknown.³

Rather than Heidegger's conception of Being, the word I would use to describe the theory, which must be viewed as a tentative theory, is becoming. The poem expresses the idea of "seeming" as interaction among the imagination, reality, and language, in which things become other than themselves through words.

The first part of this seven section poem uses the sun and the "green queen" as examples of "seeming." Things seem only in the mind of the beholder. And at first "seeming" is identified with "being," but only in the realm of possibility:

It is possible that to seem--it is to be,
 As the sun is something seeming and it is.

³Hines, pp. 163-4.

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

With the image of the "green queen" comes the idea of becoming. She changes things with her "green mind" and the "nothing of her name":

This green queen

In the seeming of the summer of her sun
By her own seeming made the summer change.

In the golden vacancy she came, and comes,
And seems to be on the saying of her name.

The queen's mind--her imagination--changes the summer. The poem suggests here that even without the intervention of language, reality is what it seems to be in the mind. Furthermore, the "saying" of the "nothing of her name" makes the queen seem to be. Language creates the queen, if only for the time her name is spoken.

In the second part of the poem, the significance of the queen is explored. She represents the conceptions accepted by a particular time, the ideas or forces of the imagination which color a particular age:

An age is a manner collected from a queen.
An age is green or red. An age believes

Or it denies.

She influences the way the people of an age view reality--the reality of the senses: "These are the actual seemings that we see,/ Hear, feel and know. We feel and know them so."

Section three expresses the possibility of a decreeted reality--"potential seemings"--things becoming new through the language of poetry. In addition to this idea of language, beyond poetic seemings is the even vaguer possibility of that cosmic

wholeness which Stevens discusses in the essay "A Collect of Philosophy":

There might be, too, a change immenser than
A poet's metaphors in which being would

Come true, a point in the fire of music where
Dazzle yields to clarity and we observe,

And observing is completing and we are content,
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind.

In these lines is expressed the idea of a completely decreeted reality where no conceptions--"secret arrangements. . . in the mind"--need exist, where pure perception of reality creates a mode of existence without desire. This is Stevens' idea of perfection--a change so immense, yet imaginable--man's becoming content. This section ends by dismissing the "seemings" of major thinkers of the past as a "Museo Olimpico." The future--what may seem and thus be possible--is what is important. Section four develops illustrations of Nietzsche and Lenin as examples of the past "seemings" of this Museo Olimpico.

The last three sections of the poem develop fully the idea of seeming as "description without place" which is intrinsically connected with the nature of language. In section five the difference between perception and description is addressed. While perception is observation of reality without the interference of conceptions in the mind,

Description is
Composed of a sight indifferent to the eye.

It is an expectation, a desire,
A palm that rises up beyond the sea,

A little different from reality:
The difference that we make in what we see

And our memorials of that difference,
Sprinklings of bright particulars from the sky.

Description is what things become as we anticipate what things
will be, or what we want them to be:

It is a wizened starlight growing young,
In which old stars are planets of morning, fresh

In the brilliantest descriptions of a new day,
Before it comes, the just anticipation

Of the appropriate creatures, jubilant,
The forms that are attentive in thin air.

Section six connects description with language, specifically
with the language of revelation. Description reconciles man with
the world by making the thing described something else:

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

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

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

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

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

Connecting the idea of description with the theological images
makes language take on religious significance.

Finally, section seven reveals the theory of description as

the idea of "becoming" through language and explains the importance of this phenomenon:

Thus the theory of description matters most.
It is the theory of the word for those

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

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

As section six expresses Elidae's idea of poetry as a kind of mythological behavior in which description adds a spiritual level to existence, section seven expresses the Orphic nature of language. Description is words, and words constantly create and re-create the world. The end of the poem emphasizes the significance of "description without place" by showing how, without language, man would be trapped in the present in "being" rather than "becoming" and "having been":

It matters, because everything we say
Of the past is description without place, a cast

Of the imagination, made in sound;
And because what we say of the future must portend,

Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be
Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening.

"Description Without Place" is about the possibilities the imagination affords man and the expression of those possibilities through language. It is an expression of man's power over the world--including past and future time--through words.

"Men Made Out of Words" (CP, pp. 355-6) is a short expression of that same theme with emphasis on the necessity of language as mythological behavior. Without words we would be "Castratos of

moon-mash"--dreamers deprived of any effective method to give order to our dreams. In this poem Stevens paints a bleak picture of man's position in the world. Man is

torn by dreams,
By the terrible incantations of defeats
And by the fear that defeats and dreams are one.

In this condition, all of us must be poets in order to survive. We all create "propositions about life" which are the "descriptions without place" expressed in the previous poem: "The whole race is a poet that writes down/ The eccentric propositions of its fate" This poem suggests that we create a mythology in poetry to give meaning to existence.

Continuing the same attitude toward language, "The House was Quiet and the World was Calm" (CP, p. 358) creates an extended series of metamorphoses in which the imagination, language, and reality co-mingle in a moment nearing perfection. Instead of centering on the act of "making" poetry, or language, as do earlier poems such as "The Idea of Order at Key West," this poem and several other later poems have as their central image the "reader." The act of reading is an aesthetic act, in which time changes according to Mauryon's and Eliade's theories of aesthetic and mythological experience. The ordinary mode of existence ceases as the reader enters the time frame of the fiction created by the book. A momentary harmony balances the world as the reader speaks the words of the book. In this poem, magically, the book seems to "take charge of" reality and of the reader:

The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book

The reader transforms into language on his reading it, and the environment responds by seeming to be the meaning of the words as they are conceived by the reader: "The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:/ The access of perfection to the page" (CP, p. 358).

The final four lines of the poem suggest an attitude toward truth as its being embodied in aesthetic experience, in the experience of reading--not that what is being read is doctrinal Truth, but that the act of being consumed by language is what give meaning and quiet and calm to the reader:

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

The tone of this poem is itself quiet and calm. One would guess that Stevens is trying to re-create the experience of reading as it is developed metaphorically in the poem by echoing that experience with sedate rhythms and simple lines.

The last poem to be considered before Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction is "The Red Fern," a short poem with an unusual form. In the first three stanzas is composed a vibrant, almost flashy series of metaphors which show how everything resembles everything else, as Stevens suggests in his essay "Three Academic Pieces." According to

Sukenick, the red fern is the sun rising.⁴ Other things seem to imitate it:

There are doubles of this fern in clouds,
Less firm than the paternal flame,
Yet drenched with its identity,
Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-notes

And mist-mites, dangling seconds, grown
Beyond relation to the parent trunk:
The dazzling, bulging, brightest core,
The furiously burning father fire . . . (CP, p. 365).

The ellipses suggest that the poet-speaker could list resemblances and metamorphoses eternally. But he stops. Instead, the poem ends with an epigrammatic statement directed toward an "infant" poet:

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

Language satisfies, but only after pure perception has decreed reality to allow one to see it anew. Unlike several of the previously discussed poems in this volume which suggest that language creates what is spoken, this poem echoes the Adagium quoted earlier. "The feeling or the insight is that which quickens the words, not the other way round" (OP, p. 172). Words are not enough unless there is a vision of reality which has prompted the words. Stevens once again proves himself to be a poet of many stances, one not satisfied with consistent thought.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction is Stevens' grand poem about poetry. In it he combines many of the myriad techniques and themes

⁴Sukenick, p. 227.

of his self-referential poetry. A three-part poem with a short prologue and epilogue, Notes is built on a series of contrasts and associations--an alogical structure typically Stevensian. The title is telling of the attitude expressed in the poem's themes and form. This is a conglomeration of "notes"--some parts are fables; some seem to be philosophical tenets with exemplifications; some are simply series of metaphors; and some seem to be more like Aristotelian syllogisms than poetry. But the casually dissimilar parts are held together by a high seriousness--a concern with the supreme fiction, which is the "cosmic poetry" of the "whole" that Stevens discusses in "A Collect of Philosophy." The word toward in the title suggests the act of becoming: this poem is not an embodiment of the supreme fiction, nor is it a definition of the supreme fiction. Rather, the poem is a quest; it tries to embody the process of achieving that cosmic wholeness which is the supreme fiction.

As a poem about the possible "cosmic whole," Notes is concerned with the relationship of opposites--the imagination and reality, the mind and the heart, reason and emotion or intuition, and sound and silence. Within each major section of the poem--"It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," and "It Must Give Pleasure"--as well as in the epilogue, the idea of language is involved in the quest for the supreme fiction. Many of the associations with language already made in Stevens' earlier poems appear again in Notes: The act of decreation and re-creation, metamorphosis, the anthropomorphic world, the inadequacy of language, and the power of language.

The first canto of "It Must Be Abstract" introduces the idea of decreation and gives it mythic significance. As an order to the "ephebe," the poem charges the young poet with the act of pure perception:

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it (CP, p. 380).

J. Hillis Miller has explained the use of the word idea here as meaning "'direct sense image.' To see the sun in the idea of it means just the opposite of seeing it in terms of preconceived ideas of it."⁵ Thus, the student poet is instructed to decreate the sun. Language, then, must be separated from reality in order for pure perception to occur:

Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

Here project is used as a synonym for idea; it is the pre-lingual perception of the sun, the "abstract" sun, the sun decreated. Language falsifies reality--the sun--by changing it into a conception. In naming the sun, one destroys the pure perception or abstraction. The difficulty of this pure perception is emphasized ironically by the naming of the sun with the metaphor "gold flourisher" in the same line which instructs the ephebe not to name

⁵J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens," in his Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 205.

the sun. Thus, language is presented first in a negative light in Notes.

But the next two cantos show how the language of poetry, as opposed to the language of conception, brings to reality a "candid kind"--a satisfaction that comes from "abstracting" reality from the worn-out conceptions of reality. Canto two suggests that the "first idea"--pure perception of reality--is not enough. There is "an ennui of the first idea" which creates the desire for change, and it is change which creates the desire for "strange relation." Thus, man desires an equilibrium between too much change, which would be chaos, and too much stasis, which would be ennui.

Canto three shows how poetry gives that equilibrium. This is language with cosmic power:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
From that ever-early candor to its late plural

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
The poem, through candor, brings back a power again
That gives a candid kind to everything.

We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
Inscribes a primitive atronomy

Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
And Throws his stars around the floor. By day
The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo

And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
 Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
 Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.

The examples of the Arabian, the wood-dove, and the ocean are introduced with the words we say. These are constructs of the imagination put into the language of poetry. Reality is given vitality by man's ability, with a combination of thought and feeling, to create analogies, and moreover, to express those "strange relations" in language.

This "pure power" is countered in canto four with a new perspective: man shrinks in the realization of his relationship to the world.

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

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

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

What in the last canto was revelled in as "an elixir, an excitation, a pure power" now has become "sounds like pips." Against the cosmos--the great reality separate from man--man's "cosmic" poetry is ridiculed as egoistic anthromorphizing. But the ridicule is not without compassion: it is man's realization of his separateness from the great cosmos that makes him try to connect himself to the world through words, however insignificant their sound may be from the large perspective presented here.

Canto five is a metaphoric illustration of the difference between man and the other creatures of the world shown through the poet's separateness and desire. Sound, or lack of sound and language, is the controlling image of the canto. The lion, the elephant, and the bear are all presented as effective and powerful in their environments. Their noises seem to belong to and affect their surroundings:

The lion roars at the enraging desert,
Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise,

. . . The elephant
Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares,

The glitter-goes on surfaces of tanks,
Shattering velvetest far-away. The bear,
The ponderous cinnamon, snarls in his mountain

At summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow.

In contrast, the ephebe cannot speak:

You lie

In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner
Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press
A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,

Yet voluble dumb violence.

The ephebe lacks spontaneity in voicing his power. His consciousness prevents him the luxury of natural mastery over his environment as the beasts have:

You look
Across the roofs as sigil and as ward
And in your centre mark them and are cowed

The environment overpowers the ephebe. He is separated from the "first idea"--that prelingual power--by consciousness, a

consciousness which allows him, ironically, to "lash the lion,/ Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle." Again, language, as opposed to noise, is an image for man's consciousness and thus his separateness from the world.

Though Stevens abandons the language metaphor in cantos six and seven to explore the relationship between the abstract and concrete, he returns to the idea of language in canto eight. In this section Stevens plays with Aristotelian rhetoric; he asks a question and tries to answer it with what appears to be logical deduction:

Can we compose a castle-fortress-home,
Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc,
And set the MacCullough there as major man?

The word compose suggests that this is not a question about actually changing the environment, but about creating in language a statement of the relationship between man and reality to make man feel both protected and at home in reality. The answer is a complicated one:

The first idea is an imagined thing.
The pensive giant prone in violet space
May be the MacCullough, an expedient,

Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,
Incipit and a form to speak the word
And every latent double in the word,

Beau linguist. But the MacCullough is MacCullough.
It does not follow that major man is man.
If MacCullough himself lay lounging by the sea,

Drowned in its washes, reading in the sound,
About the thinker of the first idea,
He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

Or power of the wave, or deepened speech,
Or a leaner being, moving in on him,
Of greater aptitude and apprehension,

As if the waves at last were never broken,
 As if the language suddenly, with ease,
 Said things it had laboriously spoken.

MacCullough is a "beau linguist"; he is a poet figure, not necessarily a figure for man in general or for "major man"--the abstract idea of man in all his possibilities. That the MacCullough is MacCullough and major man is not necessarily man is the play on the Aristotelian syllogism. The poet does not have to be the perfect, or abstract, man, nor is every man a poet. In the last three stanzas of this section, we are given an example of the poetic process, of the way the MacCullough can "speak the word/ And every latent double in the word." MacCullough ponders the "thinker of the first idea," that "origin at the heart of utterance" of which Riddel writes. As in the early poem "Le Monocle De Mon Oncle," the water imagery is closely connected with the image of language. It is uncertain which influences the MacCullough to experience a moment of poetic creativity. Whether it is language itself or the ocean which causes the event, it is clear that words are a central part of his experience. The moment of poetic insight is expressed in terms of language. Language, which had previously made it difficult to communicate, now becomes a facile exercise just as the waves in the sea no longer break. Thus, in "It Must Be Abstract" Stevens introduces the image of language both in its difficult, "idea" obstructing function and in its decreed and re-creative poetic function.

"It Must Change" progresses with a series of examples of the poetry of "becoming." As a characteristic of the supreme fiction, change is shown through concrete metaphorical examples of

interdependence, interaction, movement, death, and birth. Change is a necessary aspect of the supreme fiction because of the inconstancy of reality and because of the fiction's interdependence with reality. It is only in the ninth canto of this section that the idea of language is specifically presented as an element of that change.

The canto begins with a statement about how the language of poetry changes: "The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to/ the gibberish of the vulgate and back again." The movement alluded to is from the poet's esoteric language--what Eliade calls his "secret" language--to the vulgate--the language of common man--and back to the poet's "secret" language. This statement is followed by a series of questions about the nature of poetic language and the nature of the "poetry of the idea":

Does it move to and fro or is it of both
 At once? Is it a luminous flittering
 Or the concentration of a cloudy day?
 Is there a poem that never reaches words?
 And one that chaffers the time away?
 Is the poem both peculiar and general?

In typical manner Stevens' questions give two options, extremes from which to choose. In the first question, two possibilities are revealed: that there is an interaction between the two types of speech and that the poem can be both at once (a possibility allowed by the theory of complementarity). The second question involves two other possibilities, these having to do with how "loaded" with meaning the language is. The phrase "luminous flittering" suggests that poetic language is frivolous, without content or message, while

"the concentration of a cloudy day" supposes language heavily laden with connotations and ambiguity. In the third question present are both the conjecture, familiar by the "adagium" about the "poetry of words" and the "poetry of the idea," that there is a prelingual poem, and the opposing supposition that there is a poem that "chaffers" time away--one that is "chatty" perhaps with no idea behind the words at all. "Is the poem both peculiar and general?" seems to ask about the poem's meaning or value: can the poem be an eccentric creation and still be valid for a general audience?

The next statement is a realization of the ambiguous quality of poetic language and of the difficulty of "apprehending" its nature. The final two questions probe the problem of evasion, the mystery of a language which seems to be unintelligible. But evident within the questions is Stevens' attitude toward this query about sense and nonsense:

Does the poet
Evade us, as in a senseless element?

Evade, this hot, dependent orator,
The spokesman at our bluntest barriers,
Exponent by a form of speech, the speaker

Of speech only a little of the tongue?

The answer lies in the description of the poet as a "hot, dependent orator,/ The spokesman at our bluntest barriers, Exponent by a form of speech." The poet is dependent on "us"--the general--for his speech, and he is "hot" to speak for us and tear down those barriers--our false, worn-out conceptions of reality. Thus, if the poet does evade us, he has not the proper mixture of language in his poem:

It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks.
He tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general,
To compound the imagination's Latin with
The lingua franca et jocundissima.

Though Stevens does not answer all the questions presented at the beginning of this canto, he does make a statement about poetic language and its relationship to the imagination and reality. The poet uses his "peculiar" combination of metaphoric, imaginative language and common speech to express a certain general "potency"--a power or force which is shared by those men who live a life of everyday reality rather than a life of the imagination. Consequently, as the "vulgate" changes and as the imagination of the poet changes, the language of poetry, too, changes.

The final section, "It Must Give Pleasure," develops the idea of the irrational as pleasurable. By irrational, Stevens seems to mean nonreasoning, associative rather than analytical thinking, perception rather than conception, an openness to new ideas and experiences. In fact, the poem suggests that it is a rational act to open oneself to the irrational. The final canto, which culminates in the identification of the irrational with the rational in a Stevensian "pleasure principle," returns to the concept of naming that was present in the first canto of "It Must Be Abstract":

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night
How is it I find you in difference, see you there
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?

You are familiar yet an aberration.
Civil, madam, I am, but underneath
A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires

That I should name you flatly, waste no words,
 Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
 Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,

Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
 You remain the more than natural figure. You
 Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational

Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
 That's it: the more than rational distortion,
 The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
 We shall return at twilight from the lecture
 Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
 I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
 You will have stopped revolving except in a crystal.

A monologue addressed to the earth personified as "Fat girl," the canto contrasts the natural process of the world constantly becoming something new to the natural tendency of the poet, first of all, to try to capture a moment through language by naming the earth and, secondly, to see the "irrational distortion" of the earth in created metaphors--"the fiction that results from feeling." So, calling the earth "my green, my fluent mundo" is not the same as naming the earth "flatly." The first tendency is to stifle the imagination and hold on to a decreed world. The second is to use the imagination to re-create the decreed world with poetry. And it is the second that gives pleasure.

The lesson for the ephebe is over, and the epilogue is addressed to a soldier, a man of action in reality rather than a man of imagination. Because this poem was written in 1942, it has been suggested that the reality of war made an "external justification of

poetry" necessary for Stevens.⁶ So in the epilogue again we see the concept about the interdependence between imagination and reality and the power of language in the world. Unlike the actual war, the poet's war, the battle between imagination and reality, has no ending because the supreme fiction is always changing; the poet's quest is infinite, and rightly so. It is the result of the poet's quest which enables the soldier to carry on in reality:

The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,

His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,
Inevitably modulating in the blood.
And war for war, each has its gallant kind.

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

Thus, Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction ends in reference to the sound of words and their authority. Just as in "The Plot Against the Giant" sounds have great influence, so here "the sounds that stick" are the riches of the soldier--the common man who must have fictions to sustain him in war or in peace.

In the last two volumes of Stevens' poetry the "poem of life" joins the "poem of the whole" to become one of the central images of his poetry about poetry. The "poem of life" is poetry that expresses some feeling for the ordinary of reality. It is the poem of

⁶Helen Vendler, On Extended Wings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 205.

the various universe, intended
 So much just to be seen--a purpose, empty
 Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,
 Certain and ever more fresh (CP, p. 532).

In expressing the idea of the "poem of life," Stevens often uses the language image to identify the world with words.

In The Auroras of Autumn one such poem about poetry is "Large Red Man Reading." The "Large Red Man" is reading from the "great blue tabulae" and this action attracts the ghosts of the dead, who "had expected more" from life and death, holding perhaps the traditional Christian views of the afterlife:⁷

There were those that returned to hear him read
 from the poem of life,
 Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table,
 the tulips among them (CP, p. 423).

As the poem continues the ghosts are pictured as full of desire to return to the living, to feel again the ordinary experiences of reality, even the ugly aspects of being alive. Then the poem specifies what the Red Man is reading from the now "purple tabulae," purple now because in the act of reading the red man has become a part of the book and red and blue have mingled. He reads,

The outlines of being and its expressings, the
 syllables of its law:
Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic
 lines,

⁷For discussions of color symbolism in Stevens, see G. McFadden, "Probings for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens," Modern Poetry, 58 (1961), 186-93; Veena Rani Prasad, "Color-Scheme in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Indian Journal of American Studies, 5, i-ii, 1-9.

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

That the language of the "poem of life" expresses what the ghosts had lacked when they were alive suggests that, because the ghosts were busy preparing for death, they did not feel for "things as they are." They did not take time to be, to live in the present instead of the unreal future. The Red Man's language again has the power to evoke that feeling that they lacked. Thus, his reading expresses the Orphic tradition of language connecting man to his world.

"The Countryman" continues the theme of language giving "being" to man in the world. As in "Certain Phenomena of Sound," the name and the possessor of the name are perfectly matched. In this case, the Swatara River possesses the characteristics of its rather heavy, dark, hypnotic name. The identification of language with the object again creates a sense of "rightness" that characterizes poetry. The river is a place where a man can experience the presence of a certain "character" which is expressed in the word Swatara:

A countryman walks beside you.

He broods of neither cap nor cape,
 But only of your swarthy motion,
 But always of the swarthy water,
 Of which Swatara is the breathing,

The name. He does not speak beside you.
 He is there because he wants to be
 And because being there in the heavy hills
 And along the moving of the water--

Being there is being in a place,
 As of a character everywhere,
 The place of a swarthy presence moving,
 Slowly, to the look of a swarthy name (CP, pp. 428-9).

In the Orphic mode, the name seems to create the atmosphere, even the motion and look, of the river. Thus, when the countryman is there, he does not need to speak; in a sense the river "speaks" for him all that is necessary to be said in his situation, which is a meditation --almost an hypnotic trance--on the movement of the river.

With "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight" Stevens returns to another use of the idea of language, that of the pre-lingual perception and here its relation to metaphor. From the point of view expressed in this poem, language is subordinate to what is labelled "sense," the way the perceiver feels. But the first two stanzas suggest the opposite motion, that language is subordinate to external reality, that the bouquet is too powerful as itself to be metamorphosized by the poet's words. The roses are

too much as they are
 To be anything else in the sunlight of the room,
 Too much as they are to be changed by metaphor,
 To actual, things that in being real
 Make any imagining of them lesser things (CP, p. 430).

Having introduced this supposition, the poem contradicts it, saying that the reason the roses appear to be so powerfully themselves is that the perceiver feels that way about them. In other words, the nature of reality is determined by how man feels about it at any particular time, before any words are spoken:

Our sense of these things changes and they change,
 Not as in metaphor, but in our sense
 Of them. So sense exceeds all metaphor.

It exceeds the heavy changes of the light.
 It is like a flow of meanings with no speech
 And of as many meanings as of men.

We are two that use these roses as we are,
 In seeing them. This is what makes them seem
 So far beyond the rhetorician's touch.

The language image is used to express the artificiality of metaphor. In the context of this poem, metaphor and speech are irrelevant in man's relationship with the world; pre-lingual perception, which seemingly has the capacity to change constantly, quickly, and uniquely from individual to individual, makes description seem to be an unnecessary afterthought. Thus, ironically this poem implies that meaning is not created in language, but in "sense" or feeling.

In contrast, "A Primitive Like an Orb" is a celebration of the language of poetry, particularly the poetry of the "whole." Re-iterating the themes of Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, this poem acknowledges again the existence of the "essential poem at the centre of things" which is "known in lesser poems" (CP, p. 440). In the first few stanzas is Stevens' most apt description of the activity of poetry, that movement to the moment of "sudden rightness" which comes and goes all too quickly:

It is the huge, high harmony that sounds
 A little and a little, suddenly,
 By means of a separate sense. It is and it
 Is not and, therefore, is. In the instant of speech,
 The breadth of an accelerando moves,
 Captives the being, widens--and was there.

These lines describe well the movement into mythical time, as Eliade

calls it. In an instant, poetic speech enlarges man's sense of the world and makes him part of "a space grown wide."

Stanzas four through six describe the Orphic process of language connecting man with the earth. The process begins with the necessity of language expressing the "desire" and "joy" of the clairvoyant men." With this personal choice of language, the process of decreation and re-creation can occur; metamorphosis can take place:

Until the used-to earth and sky, and the tree
And cloud, the used-to tree and used-to cloud,
Lose the old uses that they made of them,
And they: these men, and earth and sky, inform
Each other by sharp informations, sharp,
Free knowledges, secreted until then,
Breaches of that which held them fast. It is
As if the central poem became the world,

VI

And the world the central poem, each one the mate
Of the other, as if summer was a spouse,
Espoused each morning, each long afternoon,
And the mate of summer: her mirror and her look,
Her only place and person, a self of her
That speaks, denouncing separate selves, both one.
The essential poem begets the others. The light
Of it is not a light apart, up-hill.

The rest of the poem describes the central poem, the "poem of the whole." After enumerating possible descriptions of this central poem, as a "vis," a "principle," a "meditation of a principle," an "inherent order," and a "repose," Stevens develops the metaphor of the giant as an "abstraction given head," a metaphor for the central poem. The giant is an image for the poetic power, the source of poetry, the force that ties individual poems together as a part of itself, the poem of the whole. Again, as an abstraction, the

giant is not exact, and as a force, the abstraction is part of constant change. The last stanza established the connection of the parts--the individual "clairvoyant men"--to the whole. Here language is one artistic outlet for the decreative and re-creative impulse, the source of which is the "primitive like an orb":

That's it. The lover writes, the believer hears,
The poet mumbles and the painter sees,
Each one, his fated eccentricity,
As a part, but part, but tenacious particle,
Of the skeleton of the ether, the total
Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods
Of color, the giant of nothingness, each one
And the giant ever changing, living in change.

The "giant of nothingness" is the decreative force; it is what allows the change which is poetry.

A less positive approach to the relationship among language, the imagination, and reality is taken in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, a long meditation on "doubleness"--the doubleness of the world, of language, and of man--which fluctuates between what Helen Vendler calls "exhaustion and despair"⁸ and the vitality of the commonplace. Although this poem engages many of the same ideas as does Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, unlike Notes, it is not trying to approach a description of the central or whole poem. Instead, An Ordinary Evening is a series of descriptions of man's relationship with reality, many of which are contradictory and thus qualify each other, as Stevens says, with "A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet" (CP, p. 465). As an idea and an image, language plays a large

⁸Vendler, p. 269.

role in several of the poem's thirty-one sections. As a double-thing, it sometimes becomes the world; it sometimes is man's spirit's power over the world; and other times it is the process, the "getting at," of reality.

The first section offers another description of the decreative, re-creative process in which "a second giant kills the first--/ A recent imagining of reality" (CP, p. 465). The first few stanzas introduce the subject of the poem: the contrast and connections between the "eye's plain version" and "dilapidate/ Appearances of what appearances." In expressing the necessity of decreation, Stevens uses the language image in a negative way. Those "dilapidate appearances" are "words, lines, not meanings, not communications,/ Dark things without a double." This is the "single" language of worn-out conceptions in which words have been separated from their meanings because of their overuse. Before its decreation, the reality of New Haven is like a dead metaphor. And with its re-creation through a "recent imagining of reality," the description expressing that imagination once again communicates as a "larger poem for a larger audience."

The language image appears again in section eight, this time in all its "doubleness." To express man's "desperate" desire to connect with reality, language is both an articulate cry and its opposite:

Our breath is like a desperate element
That we must call, the origin of a mother tongue

With which to speak to her, the capable
 In the midst of foreignness, the syllable
 Of recognition, avowal, impassioned cry,

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

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

The "impassioned cry" and "its converse"--the nonverbal, spiritual immediate "talk" of the disembodied bodies--are images for the desire to be connected with the real, both the physical reality, the reality of the New Haven street, and the reality of time and change, the "health of air."

The next few sections continue with questions about the real and its doubleness and man's relation to it until section twelve established the poet's and the poem's relationship to reality:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
 Part of the res itself and not about it.
 The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was: part of the reverberation
 Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues
 Are like newspapers blown by the wind. He speaks

By sight and insight as they are. There is no
 Tomorrow for him. The wind will have passed by,
 The statues will have gone back to be things about.

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

And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
 Around and away, resembling the presence of
 thought,
 Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
 The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
 Together, said words of the world are the life of
 the world.

Language and reality merge in one of Stevens' most powerful Orphic statements. As Vendler points out, the final line gains its strength by the way the poem is constructed:

Stevens' perfect ease in passing from one piece of litter-in-motion to another removes the strain of allegory: as he remembers the obsolescence of the statue in Owl's Clover, he converts sculpture made irrelevant with time into yesterday's newspapers blowing in the gutter; the newspapers are yesterday's thoughts, and blow with the leaves; leaves are like thoughts and blow like newspapers, all reverberating, rewording, the letters and litter of the world. . . . It is this sequence--from actual leaves to actual whirlings to abstract whirlings to an abstract presence to more actual presence back to actual leaves--which enables Stevens, in the end, to group together in a single speaking voice the whole psychology, the self, the town, the weather, the litter, and to make them utter their famous epigram.⁹

It is appropriate that the human and the inhuman speak the statement together because the statement connects language explicitly with the life, the activity, of the world in both its physical and spiritual aspects.

In section fourteen, Stevens gives an example of how language is "the life of the world" in a story about "Professor Eucalyptus" of New Haven, who "seeks/ God in the object itself." Here, language arms man with the power to create divinity in the world:

It is a choice of the commodious adjective
 For what he sees, it comes in the end to that:

⁹Ibid., pp. 276-7.

The description that makes it divinity, still speech
 As it touches the point of reverberation--not grim
 Reality but reality grimly seen

And spoken in paradisa! parlance new
 And in any case never grim, the human grim
 That is part of the indifference of the eye

Indifferent to what it sees.

The key word in this description is grim: reality "grimly seen" is reality considered fiercely and described in apt language which makes it divine. In this way, words and world merge in a mythological stance. To engage in describing the world "grimly" is to take part in the mythical style of life, as it is described by Eliade.

Section twenty-nine extends the merging of life and language in poetry with another example. Language again seems to control the world. Two environments are contrasted to set up the confrontation between the inhabitants of the "land of elm trees" and the new environment of the "land of citrons." The contrast is made in reference to language:

They rolled their r's, there, in the land of the citrons.
 In the land of big mariners, the words they spoke
 Were mere brown clods, mere catching weeds of talk.

Then, the land of citrons is changed by language when the mariners from the land of elms arrive there:

When the mariners came to the land of the lemon trees,
 At last, in that blond atmosphere, bronzed hard,
 They said, "We are back once more in the land of the elm
 trees,

But folded over, turned round." It was the same,
 Except for the adjectives, an alteration
 Of words that was a change of nature, more

Than the difference that clouds make over a town.
 The countrymen were changed and each constant thing.
 Their dark-colored words had redescribed the citrons.

As in "Description Without Place" and other earlier poems, words re-create the world in more than a frivolous way; it is a "change of nature." Thus, language is seen in its most powerful image.

Finally, the poem concludes on a more tentative note about the relationship of man, words, and reality. In fact, it seems to be the illusive nature of language--its ability to be obscure, subtle, stated and restated--that allows it to merge with reality. Here the language of "becoming," or of things coming into being, is significant because the final thrust of the poem describes the reality of becoming, of change, of progress:

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

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,
 A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,
 A woman writing a note and tearing it up.

Indeed, the final stanza of the poem is perhaps Stevens' most eloquent description of the reality of becoming:

It is not in the premise that reality
 Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
 A dust, a force that traverses a shade.

Ending on this note, An Ordinary Evening in New Haven expresses the doubleness of language and reality by denying the solid, the static, and by suggesting alternate possibilities. The indefiniteness of the final stanza links the ending with the "an and yet, and yet, and yet" of the opening stanza. Between the two there is no progress made

toward the "final form," but that seems to be unimportant: it is the act of becoming that connects man, reality, and language.

In The Rock, Stevens' poetry becomes stylistically more restrained; it obtains an exquisitely understated quality which seems to reflect an old poet's acceptance of the "reality of becoming" rather than the mind's theorizing about it. Along with this restraint, the language image fades into a secondary role rather than works as a primary imagistic center in the poems. But when it is present, it still works in several of the ways explored in the earlier poetry.

In "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," words take the place of physical reality in a poet's meditation on the impetus for his having written poetry. As the poet sees one of his old poems, he thinks of his life in poetry:

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained
completion (CP, p. 512).

The poem ends with an image of the rock as the poet reflects on his poetry of "becoming." Here the "exact rock" is a place where the poet would be at home in the world; it is the place where the "wholeness" toward which Stevens strived in his poetry could exist and create peace:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they
had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

In no way does this poem suggest that the poet had at any time found that "exact rock," only that he had desired it and "edged" toward it. The language image is an image of creativity, of metamorphosis that the poet attempts out of a need to be connected with the earth-- again certainly an orphic view of the function of poetry.

Another similar use of the language image occurs in "Prologues to What Is Possible," where the sound of a "syllable" is again connected with the imaginative, creative force. The first part of the poem is a description in an extended metaphor of "an ease of mind" which seems to be the feeling one gets in the moments prior to an instance of enlightenment or intuition. The "ease of mind" is like being on a boat made of weightless stones (a transformation of the image of the rock): the rocks of reality have lost their heaviness in a voyage through the imagination. As he travels on this boat, the man becomes a part of it. He seems to have a purpose. To express this inexplicable purposefulness, Stevens uses the language image:

As he traveled alone, like a man lured on by a
syllable without any meaning,
A syllable of which he felt, with an appointed
sureness,
That it contained the meaning into which he wanted
to enter,
A meaning which, as he entered it, would shatter the
boat and leave the oarsman quiet
As at a point of central arrival, an instant moment,
much or little,
Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and
needing none (CP, p. 516).

With the metaphor of the meaningless syllable, Stevens connects this voyage to many previous searches for the supreme fiction, searches

for language which will adequately express the "point of central arrival," which would be the end of the poetry of "becoming" in a moment of perfection.

The second part of the poem brings the man out of the extended metaphorical voyage back to reality and to a consideration of the metaphor's meaning. There is a contemplation of why he would have such a vision:

What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet
 been loosed,
 Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread,
 As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly increased
 By an access of color, a new and unobserved, slight
 dithering,
 The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick, to
 which he gave
 A name and privilege over the ordinary of his common-
 place.

The answer lies in the nature of the imagination, and in the explanation which concludes the poem, reality is once again described in terms of language:

A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary,
 The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
 Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
 The way the earliest single light in the evening sky,
 in spring,
 Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding
 itself,
 The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected
 magnitudes.

The imagination--a "flick"--adds to reality to make it new just as a new word can create freshness.

The two final poems to be considered are also retrospectives about the life of the poet and his relationship with words. Both The Rock and "The Planet on the Table" espouse a poetic theory of an

humble old poet. Both are bittersweet poems of old age. In the first part of The Rock, "Seventy Years Later," Stevens seems to negate the idea of "description without place." The speaker feels cut off from his past, as if his first seventy years did not exist and he is stuck in present time. This includes alienation from his own poetry:

The sounds of the guitar

Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken
Were not and are not. It is not to be believed (CP, p. 525).

But the section does not end on such a disconnected, negative note. This alienation is associated with the impetus for creating poetry--the "green leaves" that "covered the high rock":

As if nothing contained a *métier*,
A vital assumption, an impermanence
In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired

That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,
That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned,
Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,

In a birth of sight.

Stevens decreates the past so that a "birth of sight" can occur again.

In the second section, "The Poem as Icon," Stevens echoes his statements made in the essay "Two or Three Ideas" about the function of poetry as a spiritual "cure," as he calls it in this poem. The leaves covering the rock, which we learn in the third section is the "gray particular of man's life," are associated with poetry and with man through the image of the icon:

The fiction of the leaves is the icon
 Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness,
 And the icon is the man.

The word icon continues the spiritual and religious associations of poetry. The identification of the leaves as an icon with both poetry and man suggests that it is poetry that gives man his own identity, and this section of the poem emphasizes that idea:

the poem makes meanings of the
 rock
 Of such mixed motion and such imagery
 That its barrenness becomes a thousand things

 And so exists no more. This is the cure
 Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves.
 His words are both the icon and the man.

As the images unite, poetic language becomes the icon--meaning image and spiritual object--and man. Thus, once again Stevens makes a noble defense of poetry by connecting it with the spiritual aspects of life.

"Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn," a series of imaginative transformations of the rock, ends this poem with a hymn to poetic process as it can change that "gray particular of man's life" with various perspectives in language. So, the poem, which began in the despair of disconnectedness, ends in triumph as Stevens revels in the possibilities the poet finds in the rock.

In "The Planet on the Table" the old poet becomes Ariel, the sprite in The Tempest who performed Prospero's magic; Ariel had the power to manipulate people in reality, mainly with his music. As Ariel thinks about his poems here, the world and words merge so that the "planet" on the table is Ariel's poetry:

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
 They were of a remembered time
 Or of something seen that he liked.

Other makings of the sun
 Were wast and welter
 And the ripe shrub writhed.

His self and the sun were one
 And his poems, although makings of his self,
 Were no less makings of the sun (CP, pp. 532-3).

Yet the ending of the poem suggests the inadequacy of language to express fully the nature of reality:

It was not important that they survive.
 What mattered was that they should bear
 Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
 In the poverty of their words,
 Of the planet of which they were part.

This poem must be read as Stevens' personal reflections on his own work. That interdependence between imagination, language, and reality still is the main concept which engenders life into his poetry near the end of Stevens' life. The idea that the poems might not endure the test of time seems unimportant because Stevens' concepts of changing attitudes toward nobility allow for a change in poetic preferences from generation to generation. What is important is that the relationship between the world and words remain vital.

It is appropriate, I think, that Steven ends The Rock with a poem which denies language and ideas for prelingual, pre-cognitive experience, pure perception. "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself" is a poem about knowledge which comes not from words, not even from thought, but from the sensory experience of reality, in

this case the "scrawny cry" of a bird. With this ending we see that Stevens has not given up his continual viewing of the battle between imagination and reality, as he uses the language of the poem once again to deny the primacy of imagination and language for pure experience. Thus, all the theoretical poems of the later volumes of Stevens' poetry come to this--the lone bird's cry that brings a "new knowledge of reality" (CP, p. 534).

CHAPTER 5

SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT STEVENS AND LANGUAGE

Clearly, from this study of Stevens' concern with language as language in his poetry and prose, we can conclude that Stevens was writing a new kind of poetry in which the subject of the poem was often poetry. And it is obvious, too, that the impetus to write came from the desire to find new ways to express the interconnectedness of things in the world and from the feeling that writing poetry was a spiritual act which in turn produced a spiritual activity for the reader of the poem. A man living in a time of great political, religious, and scientific upheaval, Stevens sought in poetry not necessarily answers to epistemological questions, but ways of expressing those questions which would be valid for his time. Holding poetry to such an important task, Stevens wrote poetry about poetry because he wanted to disclose to his readers this function of poetry as a defense against the "pressure of reality." For Stevens, there were myriad possibilities for poetry and thus for language. Poetry could be mere sounds or it could be pure idea; language could be the philosophical statements of great thinkers or it could be the "gibberish of the vulgate."

But in all cases Stevens attempted to achieve a concentration in language to produce the extraordinary. Poetry was an intense event--emotional, spiritual, and psychological. By using language as an image, a theme, a metaphor, Stevens discovered a novel way of

producing that concentrated language. Language about language--metalanguage--introduced into poetry about poetry made possible many new "resemblances buried in the complexity of the real."¹ "Words" as the subject of a poem or as an image in a poem were an untapped source for metaphorical expression. Following Charles Mauron's tenets for developing artistic resemblances, Stevens mined that source to produce a rich texture of poetry which sought to reveal man's unique relationship with the world, which was made possible only by his acquisition of language.

As namer of things, man both disassociates himself from and connects himself with the world. The "naming" which takes place in what Mauron calls the "active life" destroys the individuality of things by categorizing them; thus, man is dissociated from the world by the word. But the "naming" done by the poet with his "secret" language connects man with the world by making him view the world in a new, different, and pleasing way. Thus, in reading poetry, the difficult act of comprehending the new resemblances--the metaphors--contributes to the pleasure of the experience once the reader makes the inductive leap to understand the connections made. In that moment of concentration, if the poem is successful, the world is recreated for the reader just as it was recreated for the poet in the imagining and writing of the poem, though not necessarily in the same way.

¹Mauron, p. 104.

A final look at one of Stevens' last poems might clarify this point. "On the Way to the Bus," written in 1954, contrasts the "journalist" with the "transparent man" to show the manner in which naming the world in ordinary, "active" life differs from naming the world in poetic life:

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

Transparent man in a translated world,
In which he feeds on a new known,

In a season, a climate of morning, of elucidation,
A refreshment of cold air, cold breath,

A perception of cold breath, more revealing than
A perception of sleep, more powerful

Than a power of sleep, a clearness emerging,
From cold, slightly irised, slightly bedazzled,

But a perfection emerging from a new known,
An understanding beyond journalism,

A way of pronouncing the word inside of one's tongue
Under the wintry trees of the terrace (OP, p. 116).

A journalist is a professional "namer." He writes of events, both ordinary and out-of-the-ordinary, in reality. He is constantly searching for a "new known," a story. Generally, he lives a fast-paced life with little time for or interest in experiencing the poetic moment which would transport him out of ordinary existence into what Eliade calls "Time Primordial." His writing aims at clarity rather than obscurity, simplicity rather than complexity. As a reporter of the news, the journalist classifies and simplifies occurrences for his readers to understand them. Thus, in the poem the journalist is not affected by the weather--the here and now--as

the "transparent man" is. The journalist "gloomily" heads for the bus. In direct contrast, the "transparent man" has stepped out of the "utilitarian organization of reality," as Mauron calls it, to experience the morning aesthetically. The man is transparent because he has opened himself, his senses, to the environment. The world is "translated" because it has been changed with this opening from the ordinary to the aesthetic, the extraordinary, the spiritual. The "transparent man" had decreed the utilitarian world through his powers of perception.

The result of this experience is a movement toward perfection and understanding. This "cosmic" clarity is expressed with a language image. The "transparent man" obtains

An understanding beyond journalism,
A way of pronouncing the word inside of one's tongue
Under the wintry trees of the terrace.

The "new known" is the result of the perception of the moment, an instance of meditation when the language used is not spoken but is "inside of one's tongue." The journalist's way of viewing the world has serious limitations; the "transparent man" has perceptive abilities which exceed those of the journalist. He is opened to the perception of new resemblances--new metaphors--which decreate the reality of the journalist and recreate the world, resulting in comprehension of the "new known" and participation in what Eliade calls the "mythical style of life."

For Stevens, metaphor (or metamorphosis or resemblance) is the basic element of poetry. The traditional assumption that metaphor is just an embellishment of language, a poetic device, is

totally rejected by Stevens. To him, "Aristotle is a skeleton" (OP, p. 168). Metaphor is a way of discovering a "new known." It is the point at which Stevens believes imagination and reason can possibly unite in "cosmic" poetry. He explains: "Perhaps there is a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible or possibly accessible to the poet or, say, the acutest poet" (OP, p. 166). Without metaphor, there would be no difference between the understanding of the journalist and the understanding of the poet. Stevens claims, "It is only au pays de la metaphore qu'on est poete" (OP, p. 179).

Metaphor involves constant change. Thus, as the expression of resemblances, poetic language is not stable. The traditional assumption that poetry is an object, a group of words on the page, is rejected by Stevens for the more modern view that the language of poetry is a force in reality. Therefore, when Stevens incorporates language as an image or theme in a poem, he exposes poetry's instability, and its consequent vitality. For example, when imagery becomes the subject of a poem, as in "Some Friends from Pascagoula," the effect is the imaginative possibility of other poems about the eagle's descent. Or, when language is the controlling theme and extended metaphor in a poem, as in "The Search for Sound Free from Motion," the poem expresses the delicate balance, achieved by metaphor and the sound of words, between man and his environment.

Stevens does not go as far as the deconstructionists in extending the boundaries of language. But by writing poems about poetry, many of which depend on language as an image or theme, he is

extending the boundaries of metaphor, and thus of poetry, by expanding the sources from which metaphor can be drawn. For the deconstructionists, the text's instability gives the reader primacy over it. The reader brings his own meaning to the text, which is the language of the poem. For Stevens, the text's instability gives it primacy. The decreative and re-creative process that occurs through metaphor, if it is successful, acquaints the reader with a new way of regarding reality, one in which the complexity of language reveals the complexity of the world, not so the reader is overwhelmed by reality but so he can better deal with its flux in viewing it aesthetically.

Because of the difficulty of paraphrasing Stevens' complex poetic language, many critics have categorized Stevens with the hermetic view of language--"the idea of the pure expressiveness of literary speech, in which a writer's use of language deviates sufficiently from the structures of ordinary discourse to displace or arrest the function of significance" (Bruns, p. 1). However "secret" and "arresting" the language of Stevens' poetry may appear, the main thrust of this study reveals that this complexity in poetic language, particularly with the use of language as a theme and image in the poetry, is not an end in itself. In Stevens' poetry the words do "take on value as realities in their own right and not simply as signifiers in a structure of meaning" (Bruns, p. 2). Obviously, if language is the subject of a poem, Stevens wants the words of the poem to be treated as realities. But the poem also does have a subject. Its words are signifiers; since they are about language, they

signify the reality of the sound of words. So even Stevens' most difficult philosophical poems are not cut off from reality to be experienced as what has been called "pure poetry." Rather, Stevens at his most obscure holds the Orphic view of language. Magically, this secret language connects man to his world, part of which is words. Just as the world is continually becoming something new, so this poetry--with its qualified assertions, its questionings, its metamorphizing--reflects that activity. Stevens says, "The world is a force, not a presence" (OP, p. 172). As Orpheus, the poet Stevens must make poetry an equal force, a force in language.

Stevens also says, "The loss of language creates confusion or dumbness" (OP, p. 159). Without words, man is confused because he is unable to categorize the world, to name things. But more importantly, without words man is unable to deal with the complexity of the world because he does not have the material with which to recreate that complexity in the sound of language. This is Stevens' major idea about language. And it informs his poetry to give to it a self-conscious integrity and depth of texture paralleled by few poets of his time.

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