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B. J. Leggett
B. J. Leggett, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Nathalia Wright
Ruth Dink

Accepted for the Council:

L. Evans Beth
Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

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A NEW LOOK AT THE POETRY OF BEING: ELEMENTS
OF NIETZSCHE AND CASSIRER IN THE
POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

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James S. Leonard

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to develop a new approach, more satisfactory than those taken previously by critics, to understanding and defining the philosophical and aesthetic basis for Wallace Stevens' poetry. The investigation centers particularly on Stevens' later poetry, which is found by some critics to constitute a "poetry of being." Such criticism sees Stevens in his later poetry turning away from his earlier interest in the imagination in favor of an attempt to achieve a "glimpse of being." While this thesis rejects such views as ultimately unsatisfactory, it finds them a promising point of departure for a more suitable perspective on the poetry.

The study first examines the criticism of three major proponents of the notion of the "poetry of being"--J. Hillis Miller, Helen Regueiro, and Thomas J. Hines. While the analysis refutes some aspects of this body of criticism, it emphasizes those potentially constructive features which can be profitably employed in the development of a more clearly consistent view of the poetry. The discussion then turns to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche in order to bring to light a more valid and more thoroughly applicable philosophical foundation for Stevens' poetry--for his poetic presentation of the concepts of "truth" and "being." Finally, in order to provide an adequate description of the aesthetic theories underlying Stevens' work the investigation turns to the phenomenological philosophy of Ernst Cassirer.

Thus, by means of a tripartite discussion, the study proceeds from the "poetry of being," through the philosophy of Nietzsche, to the phenomenological and aesthetic theorizing of Cassirer. The examination

reveals an undeniable relation between Stevens' poetry and Nietzschean philosophy with respect to the affirmation of life--of man's "being"; and it finds in Cassirer's "theory of symbolic forms" an expression of man's creative tendency and capacity adequate as a basis for the "supreme fiction"--the philosophical keystone of Stevens' poetic endeavors. The "poetry of being" is redefined as a poetry not of disinterested observation of the truth of things but of creation of, and participation in, that truth--a "truth" of which "fiction" is a vital part.

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INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens, in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," distinguishes between the truth of philosophy and that of poetry by characterizing the former as "the official view of being" and the latter as "an unofficial view of being."¹ This distinction is interesting in two respects: first, in its recognition of two kinds of "truth," philosophical and poetic; and second, in its reference to poetry as a "view of being." The attempt to distinguish between the relative value of philosophy and poetry for discovering truth has a long history in literature of the English language, dating back at least to Sidney's The Defense of Poesy; but to separate the truth itself into two realms--philosophical and poetic--lends a notably modern twist, growing out of the decline of a belief in an absolute metaphysical reality--in the absolute truth of God. But Stevens' use of the phrase "view of being" is still more provocative, since it implies that poetry yields a sense of the world which is characteristically its own and which may not coincide with the "official view" of metaphysical philosophy.

Such possibilities are particularly intriguing when applied to Stevens' own poetry, which began in Harmonium with richly-imaged, predominantly short poems celebrating the imagination and evolved in his later volumes into a sparser, more contemplative style characterized by long and somewhat cryptic discussions of abstract questions. Such a shift in style and content leads naturally to questions as to the nature of, and reasons for, the change and to a search for the philosophical

¹Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), p. 40. Hereafter cited in the text as NA.

assumptions behind the later poetry. One, though not the only one, of the principal critical movements attempting to arrive at such determinations categorizes the poetry as a "poetry of being." This body of criticism attempts to identify a clear break between the earlier and later poetry of Stevens and to demonstrate that the focus of Stevens' interest shifted away from his early fascination with the imagination and its effect on man's perception of the world and toward a desire to achieve a view of "being," unobscured by the distortions of the imagination. A second major body of criticism takes the opposite approach to the later poetry, contending that there is, in fact, no break between the earlier and later poetry, the priority of the imagination remaining intact throughout.

This paper will deal only briefly with the second group, which is, for our purposes, the less interesting of the two. Critics in this group, arguing for the primacy of the imagination throughout Stevens' poetry, tend to link him to the Romantic tradition of both English and American literature, a connection which Stevens himself repudiates in The Necessary Angel, as we shall make clear in connection with a brief discussion of Harold Bloom's criticism in Chapter II. But more germane to our discussion here is that such a critical approach to Stevens' poetry tends toward oversimplification. There clearly is a change of style and content in the later poetry, and there is throughout the poetry not simply a celebration of the imagination but an interest in exploring the relationship between the imagination and the "objective world." A criticism which sees Stevens' poetry simply as a continuation of the Romantic tradition cannot but fail to penetrate to the intricacies of the philosophical and/or aesthetic outlook expressed in the poetry.

More promising is the body of criticism of the "poetry of being," which sees Stevens not merely as the heir to poetic tradition but as a conscious innovator and a part of the twentieth-century interest in existential thought and phenomenological investigation. Such an approach to Stevens' poetry tends to characterize him as a Realist rather than a Romantic, which also oversimplifies the question, and perhaps less accurately than the opposite view; yet in the initial assumptions of the idea of a "poetry of being"--in the attempt to link Stevens' treatment of the death of the gods to his interest in the subject/object dichotomy--lies the ground for fruitful investigation of both the later poetry and the earlier poetry as well. This paper will, on the basis of a detailed analysis of three criticisms from this group--those of J. Hillis Miller, Helen Regueiro, and Thomas J. Hines--define that ground as a point of departure for discussing the philosophical and aesthetic principles underlying Stevens' poetry.

However, in the process of examining the criticism of the "poetry of being," the contention will be developed that the proponents of such a view, while properly defining the terms of the inquiry, err in their basic assumptions and, therefore, in their application of those terms to Stevens' poetry. While they rightly center their attention around Stevens' treatment of the relationship of subject to object and attempt to see that treatment in relation to the death of the gods, all three of the critics to be considered either ultimately, in the case of Hines, or from the outset, in the case of Miller and Regueiro, misconstrue Stevens' attitude toward the death of the gods and, consequently, toward the subject/object division. As a result, they severely misinterpret the later poetry. Of the three, only Hines attempts to bring a system of

philosophical thought to bear on the poetry, applying the phenomenological procedures of Edmund Husserl to The Man With the Blue Guitar and Parts of a World, then changing to the phenomenological/existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger for examination of the later poetry.

As a result of the phenomenological approach to the poetry, Hines is able to see the subject/object relationship in a more philosophically valid perspective than either Miller or Regueiro; but in attempting to conform his criticism to the Realist bias of the "poetry of being," he abandons that perspective and falls prey to the same errors as the other critics. Furthermore, while the existential/phenomenological approach to Stevens is valid to some degree, Hines chooses, in Heidegger, the wrong phenomenologist.

After examining in Chapter I criticism relating to the "poetry of being," this paper will seek in Chapter II to show a more valid and more thoroughly applicable philosophical foundation for Stevens' poetry by examining it in the light of the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. We will attempt to find in the Nietzschean conception of the "death of God" a proper explanation for the poetic stance adopted by Stevens toward the relationship of man and world, subject and object, imagination and reality. And within that philosophical context we will illustrate the means by which art is elevated to such a degree that the "truth" of poetry is seen to be not only separate from that of philosophy but equal or superior to it.

Finally, in Chapter III, we will return to the phenomenological basis for the analysis of Stevens' poetry but will use as the source of phenomenological principles, not Heidegger, but Ernst Cassirer. Within the framework of Cassirer's philosophy, we will provide a description of

the aesthetic theories underlying Stevens' work. Cassirer's thought will be shown to be more properly applicable to the poetry than that of Heidegger because, like Nietzschean philosophy, it is based in a conception, more nearly equivalent to Stevens' own, of man's "being" in the absence of the departed gods; and, also like Nietzsche's, it finds a consequent value in art as an end in itself and not, as in Heidegger's philosophy, in its ability simply to reveal the "essence of language" or the "meaning of Being." Furthermore, Cassirer's philosophy goes beyond that of Nietzsche by providing a thorough-going discussion of the relationship of myth, language, religion, and art sufficient to form the basis for a complete aesthetic theory.

Thus, by means of a tripartite discussion we propose to proceed from the "poetry of being," through the philosophy of Nietzsche, to the phenomenological and aesthetic theorizing of Cassirer. The emphasis of the investigation will be not on proving influence or even, primarily, on demonstrating affinity, but rather on an improved understanding of the poetry itself. By this means we hope to redefine and expand the idea of the "poetry of being" by providing a more thorough and consistent articulation of the theoretical basis for Stevens' poetry and a more adequate description of the movement from the earlier to the later poetry.

CHAPTER I

THE POETRY OF BEING

Although the writings of Wallace Stevens--both poetry and prose--deal extensively with the imagination and theories of the imagination, there has appeared within the body of Stevens criticism a group of writings which take as a point of departure the idea that Stevens in his later poetry somehow rejected the imagination and turned increasingly to an interest in "things in themselves"--in the perception and experience of objective reality. Either he is seen as rejecting the imagination entirely as an invalid means of perceiving the world and man's existence in the world, or he is found to abandon all interest in the imagination as an end in itself and to view it only as a means for achieving a clearer view of the objective world. The group of writings which present this interpretation characterize the later poetry as a "poetry of being."

The phrase "poetry of being" was popularized by J. Hillis Miller in his essay "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being,"¹ and has since been generally adopted by critics who share the idea of a shift in attitude and emphasis in Stevens' later poetry toward an overarching interest in the experience of the objective world. The timing of the supposed shift varies from the contention of Thomas J. Hines, in The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens,² that it began as early as Parts of a World, to

¹J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens 'Poetry of Being,' in The Act of the Mind, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965). Hereafter cited as "Poetry of Being."

²Thomas J. Hines, The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Lewisburg Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1976).

Miller's own perception that it may have been as late as The Rock. Neither is there agreement on the precise nature of the change. Rather, each critic, embracing the concept of the "poetry of being," tends to impute to Stevens a particular theory of poetry and/or a particular philosophical affinity which is manifested in his later poetry and which moves him away from the sustained interplay of imagination and reality and toward an overcoming of the subject/object dichotomy. This chapter will consider in detail the critical treatment of Stevens' later poetry by three of these critics--Miller, Hines, and Helen Requeiro.³ While these three are by no means the only Stevens critics who propound the idea of a "poetry of being," they are taken as representative because of the original nature, comprehensiveness, and influence of their studies. Each of the three warrants separate treatment due to the distinct nature of the poetic or philosophical theory which he or she sees embodied in Stevens' poetry.

For Miller, the appearance of the "poetry of being" is by no means a sudden shift in interest which occurs toward the end of Stevens' poetic career; rather it is the outcome of his meditations on a subject prominent in his poetry from the time of the publication of "Sunday Morning" in 1915--that is, the death of the gods. In regard to Stevens' assertion in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" that "The death of one god is the death of all,"⁴ Miller says that the gods "reveal themselves

³Helen Requeiro, The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976).

⁴Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 381. Hereafter cited in the text as CP.

to be fictions, aesthetic projections of man's gratuitous values. Having seen the gods of one culture disappear, man can never again believe in any god."⁵ As a result of the death of the gods, man's entire perception of existence in the world is changed; and Miller sees the change and its consequences as Stevens' central philosophical concern:

This evaporation of the gods, leaving a barren man in a barren land, is the basis of all Stevens' thought and poetry. The death of the gods coincides with a radical transformation in the way man sees the world. What had been a warm home takes on a look of hardness and emptiness, like the walls, floors, and bannisters of a vacant house. Instead of being intimately possessed by man, things appear to close within themselves. They become mute, static presences. . . .⁶

This cold, barren picture of man left alone in a world with no transcendent dimension is seen by Miller as the backdrop for Stevens' contemplative poetry and the source of his interest in the subject/object dichotomy. The disappearance of the gods is depicted as an "impoverishing of the world,"⁷ and in the wake of that disappearance man's entire perspective is changed:

After the death of the gods and the discovery of nothingness [articulated, according to Miller, in "The Snow Man" (CP, 10)], Stevens is left in a world made of two elements: subject and object, mind and matter, imagination and reality.⁸

Miller thus explains Stevens' interest in exploring the interaction of imagination and reality, an interest which is manifested even as early as Harmonium in such poems as "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (CP, 98), "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (CP, 92), and "Anecdote of the

⁵ "Poetry of Being," p. 144.

⁶ "Poetry of Being," p. 145.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Jar" (CP, 76). Moreover, Miller finds the dichotomy of imagination and reality to be for Stevens not only an epistemological problem but an existential dilemma, since neither of the two is adequate in itself.

"Imagination is the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world with which imagination carries on its endless intercourse."⁹

If the one is empty of substance while the other is barren of meaning, then it is reasonable to conclude, as Miller does, that "Stevens' problem is to reconcile the two."¹⁰

Within this philosophical framework, established in Harmonium and Ideas of Order, Miller sees Stevens gradually developing the "poetry of being." In the absence of transcendence, man is alienated from his world. In philosophical terms this means that subject is separated from object; in aesthetic terms it means that imagination is divided from reality. Only in their reunion can existence be made whole again and man have a true experience of "being," and Miller finds in the later poetry of Stevens an ultimately successful attempt to achieve that reunion poetically and, thus, to give a "glimpse of being."¹¹

The attempt begins, in Miller's view, with the realization that "After the disappearance of the gods the poet finds himself in a place where opposites are simultaneously true."¹² In order to escape from a meaningless oscillation between opposite extremes, "Stevens must find a way to write poetry which will possess simultaneously both extremes."¹³

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Poetry of Being," p. 157.

¹² "Poetry of Being," p. 146.

¹³ Ibid.

Thus, beginning with The Man With the Blue Guitar, Stevens turns to a new mode of poetry: "The finished unity of his early poems, which makes them seem like elaborately wrought pieces of jewelry, is gradually replaced by poems which are open-ended improvisations."¹⁴ The new mode, with its disjointed format, reflects the fragmented nature of modern man's existence: "Life for Stevens is a series of states of consciousness with neither start nor finish. If the poem is to be true to life it must be a constant flowing of images which come as they come, and are not distorted by the logical mind in its eagerness for order."¹⁵ Miller sees the statement of this point of view in "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man": "One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths, / One's tootings at the weddings of the soul / Occur as they occur" (CP, 222). As examples of the new mode, he points to "The Man With the Blue Guitar," "Esthétique du Mal," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." In fact, he sees all the poems of the later period as a "single poem." "This poem is a long series of provisional pools of imagery, each drawn toward a goal which can never be named directly or embodied in any poem."¹⁶

The "goal which can never be named directly" is, of course, the true experience of "being"; and while it cannot be truly "embodied in any poem," Miller feels that Stevens finds a way to capture it fleetingly in his poetry and that "The elaboration of such a mode of poetry is

¹⁴ "Poetry of Being," pp. 146-147.

¹⁵ "Poetry of Being," p. 147.

¹⁶ "Poetry of Being," p. 149.

Stevens' chief contribution to literature."¹⁷ The possibility for such achievement lies in a cycle of imaginative creation and the opposing process of "decreation," or return "to unadorned reality."¹⁸ "In this rhythmic alternation lies our only hope to possess reality. Each moment is born in newness and freedom, with no connections to the past."¹⁹ Thus, for Stevens, the "refusal of the past gives him a possession of the present moment in all its instantaneous vitality."²⁰ Through the cycle of decreation and imaginative recreation in Stevens' poetic method, Miller sees a means of isolating the present moment in order to experience its essence without having to contend with the distortions of an interlocking, or otherwise interrelated, past. And he contends that Stevens exploits this technique by moving in his poetry so rapidly from one extreme to the other that the oscillation at last

becomes a blur in which opposites are touched simultaneously, as alternating current produces a steady beam of light, and the cycle of decreating and imagining, hopelessly false if the poet goes through it at leisure, becomes true at last to things as they are.²¹

The rapid motion, in other words, at last becomes the equivalent of a static state; and in that poetically constructed stasis the truth of "being" is momentarily revealed. Stevens poetry becomes "a poetry of flickering mobility, a poetry in which each phrase moves so rapidly it has beginning and ending at once."²²

¹⁷"Poetry of Being," p. 146.

¹⁸"Poetry of Being," p. 150

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹"Poetry of Being," p. 151.

²²"Poetry of Being," p. 153.

The outcome, then, of Stevens' ponderings on imagination and reality and his poetical manipulation of the two is, at last, a union. Miller defines "Stevens' ultimate position" as "a resolution of imagination and reality in a theory of the identity of poetry and life, and the development of a theory of flickering mobility to sustain this identity."²³ At this point a third element comes into play--the element of "nothingness." According to Miller, "as the tension between imagination and reality diminishes there is an unperceived emptying out of both until, at the moment they touch, . . . the poet finds himself face to face with a universal nothing."²⁴ However, "the nothing is not nothing. It is. It is being. Being is the universal power, visible nowhere in itself, and yet visible everywhere in all things."²⁵ Thus, in "nothingness" Stevens finds "being," the elusive goal of his long poetic search. Miller sees the concept of "nothingness," like those of "imagination and reality" and "the death of the gods," as originating in Harmonium and persisting throughout Stevens' poetic career. In reference to "The Snow Man" (CP, 9), he says: "Only the snow man, the man who is 'nothing himself' is free of the imagination's fictions and can behold 'nothing that is not there and the nothing that is'."²⁶ Stevens himself, through his poetry, ultimately becomes the "snow man" and succeeds in creating "the evanescent glimpse of being."²⁷

²³"Poetry of Being," p. 155.

²⁴"Poetry of Being," p. 157.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶"Poetry of Being," p. 155.

²⁷"Poetry of Being," p. 157.

Miller's essay is an important attempt to find a comprehensive pattern which will "explain" Stevens' later poetry. It is particularly significant in this regard for its effort to link together Stevens' interest in the death of the gods and his continuing treatment of the interaction between imagination and reality, and it constitutes a highly imaginative attempt to use the resulting connection as a means of defining Stevens' attitude toward "being," a term which occurs rather frequently in his later poetry (although, as Miller points out,²⁸ not in his prose). However, the essay also presents some large and very disturbing problems germane to the present study.

The first, and most basic, problem lies in Miller's illogical assertion that the duality of man and world, subject and object, imagination and reality grows out of the death of the gods. There is, indeed, a valid relationship between the two, but the relationship is precisely opposite to that supposed by Miller. The separation of subject from object grows out of a reasoning process which seeks to define the transcendent and, thus, objectifies it, as in the case of the personalized God of Christianity. When the transcendent dimension is objectified--given a reality separate from man himself--then man becomes alienated from transcendence; he is divested of a portion of his nature--his own overreaching transcendence--and is, consequently, unable to perceive the world as a unity; he comes to regard himself in objective terms rather than as a part of a universal transcendence. Stevens clearly refers to this process of rational objectification in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" when he says:

²⁸"Poetry of Being," pp. 159-160.

. . . . Adam
 In Eden was the father of Descartes
 And Eve made air the mirror of herself,
 Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves
 In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;
 And in the earth itself they found a green--

The inhabitants of a very varnished green. (CP, 383)

These lines clearly describe (even making reference to Descartes, the great philosopher of rationalism and dualism) the positing of an objective transcendent dimension as "a second earth," while "in the earth itself they found a green," the color which Stevens most frequently uses to symbolize unordered reality. The death of the gods for Stevens constitutes the opposite process--the dissolution of the separately embodied transcendent dimension and the reuniting of man and world, movingly described in "Sunday Morning":

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
 The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
 Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
 The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
 A part of labor and a part of pain,
 And next in glory to enduring love,
 Not this dividing and indifferent blue. (CP, 68)

The same attitude is evident in "The Latest Freed Man," which describes the new awareness, the new feeling of union with the world for the man who has escaped from the traditional religious dogmas-- "the old descriptions of the world":

Tired of the old descriptions of the world,
 The latest freed man rose and sat
 On the edge of his bed. He said,

"I suppose there is
 A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just
 Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,
 Which is enough. . . . (CP, 204)

Miller's mistaken idea about the consequences of the death of the gods also leads him to a second and related error--the assumption

that Stevens is troubled about that occurrence. From the positive tone of the passages just quoted from "Sunday Morning" and "The Latest Freed Man," it is clear that here, too, the opposite is true. He not only is not troubled about the death of the gods but, in fact, sees in it the possibility for a richer experience of life. If in the closing lines of "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" Stevens is taken to mean by the term "ignorant" the absence of doctrine or dogma,²⁹ then the lines present themselves as a statement of this richer possibility:

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

In regard to the disappearance of the gods, Stevens says in "Two or Three Ideas," "It was as if they had never inhabited the earth. There was no crying out for their return" (CP, 207). To this Miller responds that, "There was no crying out for their return because we knew that they would never come back. They would never come back because they had never been there at all."³⁰ He, thus, misses the point of Stevens' remark, the point being not that "they had never been there at all" but that we did not want them to come back. Stevens continues in the passage:

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 non-participant,

²⁹Cf. "The Women at Night"--"metaphysical blindness gained/ The blindness in which seeing would be false": Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), pp. 94-95. Hereafter cited in the text as OP.

³⁰"Poetry of Being," p. 145.

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 for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms (OP, 207).

Again in this passage the death of the gods is seen not as the source of the subject/object duality but as its resolution. Man, in the absence of the gods, becomes "the increasingly human self"; "the observer, the non-participant, the delinquent" now finds himself with the possibility "to resolve life and the world in his own terms."

The view of the death of the gods which Miller imposes on Stevens is, in fact, the view which he paints as the milieu of a group of late nineteenth-century writers (DeQuincey, Browning, Arnold, Hopkins, and Emily Brontë) in his book, The Disappearance of the Gods. The absence of God from the world for them, he says, "does not mean blank atheism, the 'God is dead' of Nietzsche as it is often interpreted. God still lives, but, as Holderlin said, he lives 'above our heads, up there in a different world.'"³¹ They live, in other words, in a world in which duality and alienation remain--a world of skepticism in which the presence of God is still devoutly desired but not realized. But contrary to Miller's description, Stevens does affirm the world of the Nietzschean "God is dead," in which belief in God is no longer a possibility and his return is not desired. Nietzsche says in Thus Spoke Zarathustra: "we have no wish whatever to enter into the kingdom of heaven: we have become men--so we want the earth"³²--just as "The Latest Freed Man" wants "the moment's rain and sea, /The moment's sun" (CP, 204).

³¹J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of the Gods (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1963), p. 1.

³²Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in The Portable Nietzsche, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), p. 428. Hereafter cited as Zarathustra. (Emphasis in the passage is Nietzsche's.)

Neither is it correct to say, as Miller does, that "the 'God is dead' of Nietzsche" is "blank atheism." As Martin Heidegger points out with reference to Nietzsche's pronouncement that "God is dead": "The speech of the madman says specifically that the word 'God is dead' has nothing in common with the opinions of those who are merely standing about and talking confusedly, who 'do not believe in God.'"³³ Rather, Heidegger says: "The pronouncement 'God is dead' means: The supra-sensory world is without effective power. It bestows life. Metaphysics, i.e., for Nietzsche Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end."³⁴ In The Gay Science, the madman cries, "'I seek God! I seek God!'"³⁵ But Nietzsche neither seeks nor wishes for the return of the Christian God or any similar manifestation of objectified transcendence within the Western tradition of Platonism. What he seeks is to posit a transcendence based in the human will, just as Stevens wants to posit a "supreme fiction" based in the human imagination.

The final major difficulty in Miller's analysis is in his failure to take into account Stevens' idea of the "supreme fiction" and, more generally, his failure to understand the positive sense of the word "fiction" in Stevens' usage. This problem, to some degree, grows out of the others. Because he assumes that Stevens is disturbed by the death

³³Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, ed. and trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 63.

³⁴Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," p. 61.

³⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 181. Hereafter cited as Gay Science.

of the gods, which he associates with the origin of the subject/object duality, he also must assume that Stevens wants to overcome the subject/object duality--that he wants to get at "things as they are" without the intervention of imaginative constructs. He associates the gods in a negative sense with fictionality: "The gods reveal themselves to be fictions, aesthetic projections of man's gratuitous values"³⁶--the obvious implication being that the gods are not just imaginative constructs but embodiments of falsehood. In this light, the goal of the "poetry of being" becomes the achievement of a "nothingness" in which man can escape from such falsehoods: "'Only the snow man, the man who is 'nothing himself,' is free of the imagination's fictions and can behold 'nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.'"³⁷ In "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," Miller limits himself to Stevens' negative usage of the word "fiction," while the concept of the "supreme fiction" is conspicuously absent; but in "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" he speaks of the terms more specifically and at greater length:

Since all referentiality in language is a fiction, the aboriginal trope or turning away from the abyss, the blind spot, the referentiality of language is its fall, its unconquerable penchant toward fiction. All words are initially catachreses. The distinction between literal and figurative is an alogical deduction of bifurcation from that primal misnaming. The fiction of the literal or proper is therefore the supreme fiction.³⁸

If such an interpretation of the idea of the "supreme fiction" is correct, then "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is rendered utterly

³⁶"Poetry of Being," p. 144.

³⁷"Poetry of Being," p. 155.

³⁸J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," The Georgia Review, 30 (Spring 1976), 29.

meaningless. Why have notes toward a falsehood? And why must it change, be abstract, and give pleasure? Is Stevens instructing his readers in the art of lying? But, of course, Miller's interpretation is not correct. The term "fiction" for Stevens does not indicate falsehood but rather a product of the constructive imagination. In fact, he frequently uses it to indicate a poetic truth, as in "The Rock": "The fiction of the leaves is the icon/Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness,/And the icon is the man" (CP, 526). And it is obviously in this sense that the word is used in "supreme fiction," a phrase which Stevens coined apparently as a word-play on "supreme being" and which he uses humorously in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and more seriously in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" to designate the poetical equivalent of the metaphysical "god." Nor is the truth of "fiction" in any way inferior to any other type of truth. On the contrary, it is the word "truth" itself which finds negative connotation in Stevens poetry, as in "On the Road Home" and "The Latest Freed Man." As for the "supreme fiction," one need only consult an autobiographical note which Stevens prepared late in his career to accompany one of his publications and which J. M. Edelstein quotes in "The Poet as Reader: Wallace Stevens and His Books": "'The author's work suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment. In the creation of any such fiction, poetry would have a vital significance.'"³⁹

Regueiro, like Miller, finds in Stevens a distrust and ultimate rejection of the imagination's "fictions." She sees such artificial

³⁹J. M. Edelstein, "The Poet as Reader: Wallace Stevens and His Books," Book Collector, 23 (Spring 1974), 55.

constructions as drawing the poet away from a true experience of reality.

In regard to the "rage for order" in such early poems as "The Idea of Order at Key West," she says:

He seeks to cleanse reality of its chaos by imaginatively recreating it. Yet to experience reality and to give meaning and order to reality are two different and opposing acts, and the poems that seek this creation of order are ultimately anecdotes, preludes, asides, extracts, notes, prologues, nuances, metaphors that turn against the symbol that creates it.⁴⁰

The "rage for order" she sees as "not assuaged,"⁴¹ the process of ordering reality through the imagination being found unsatisfactory.

"Stevens begins with a belief in the power of the imagination to transform a chaotic reality into a habitable world, yet he doubts the capacity of the imagination to impose reality, to name things in their essence without destroying them in opacity."⁴²

The choice, then, in Regueiro's view, is a choice between imagination and reality. She assumes, as Miller does, that the principal object of Stevens' poetry is a valid experience of reality through an overcoming of the subject/object duality. But, while for Miller the reality to be experienced through the "poetry of being" is the reality of "being," a reality which he sees as including, at least to some degree, the imagination, the reality which Regueiro sees as the goal of this poetry is "the thing itself" unobscured by imaginative constructs:

The only way the imagination may ultimately experience reality is by turning its transforming and in that measure destructive

⁴⁰Regueiro, p. 165. It is interesting to note that in this sweeping judgment she brushes aside such poems as "Anecdote of the Jar," "Asides on the Oboe," Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," and, of course, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

⁴¹Regueiro, p. 166.

⁴²Regueiro, p. 168.

power not against reality but against itself. Thus Stevens begins to seek the metaphor that murders metaphor, the image that does not attempt to name reality but instead to speak of its own incapacity to reach the "ding an sich."⁴³

Thus, the experience of reality--Miller's "evanescent glimpse of being"--is to be achieved by a sort of self-immolation in which the imagination destroys itself for the sake of an unobscured view of "things as they are."

In "The Man With the Blue Guitar" Regueiro finds both evidence of Stevens' rejection of the imagination and a philosophical grounding for his stance:

In the beginning of the poem Stevens suggests that the world is "flat" and "bare," and that the imagination has to create its own world and fill the heavens emptied by the death of the gods. But the world thus created is not valid for the self that has created it, and Stevens rejects the transformations of the guitar because they cannot approximate the world he does not wish to reject.⁴⁴

Again the central problem for Stevens is perceived to be the result of the death of the gods. Furthermore, his attempts to create new gods through the imagination prove unsuccessful and must ultimately be abandoned. Regueiro quotes from "The Well Dressed Man With a Beard": "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never" (CP, 247); and she interprets the passage to mean that the mind is "[u]nable to inhabit a reality it has not created, and equally unable to believe in a world it has created out of itself."⁴⁵ Thus, Regueiro once again agrees with Miller as she concludes that Stevens finds both "imagination" and "reality" to be inadequate. However, the "bare, flat" reality of "The Man With the Blue

⁴³Regueiro, p. 148.

⁴⁴Regueiro, p. 168.

⁴⁵Regueiro, p. 169.

Guitar" is, in Regueiro's view, not the only possible view of reality. Such an appearance is only the superficial aspect of "things as they are," and a purer view which reveals something of the truth of reality must still be seen as the object of Stevens' poetic quest.

The difficulty which Regueiro sees in using the poetic process to arrive at an adequate experience of "being" lies in the use of metaphor, which by its very nature must distort the reality it tries to describe--"to express things, to light the obscure world of reality, the metaphor must usurp the 'thingness' of the object, casting it into a shape that is not its own."⁴⁶ In order to illuminate reality, it must change it, become a "fiction" in the derogatory sense of "falsehood." When objective reality is treated in a poem,

. . . It is this or that
And it is not.

By metaphor you paint
A thing. . . . (CP, 219)

Thus, according to Regueiro, "Through the metaphor the object is posed into 'this' or 'that'--always into something that violates its 'thingness.'"⁴⁷ Even in the act of perception itself there is distortion of reality: "The eye in Stevens creates a landscape of the mind and shares the mind's inability to penetrate the natural world. There is always a film of consciousness that turns reality into a mental landscape."⁴⁸ Thus, Stevens is faced with the task of finding his way to reality by means of the very processes of perception and creation which are the

⁴⁶Regueiro, p. 180.

⁴⁷Regueiro, p. 183.

⁴⁸Regueiro, p. 189.

sources of distortion and of alienation from the world: "Only if he seeks to experience rather than capture, to perceive immaculately what he cannot re-create, can the alien place become 'home.'"⁴⁹ And consciously mediated perception becomes linked with the departed gods: "The transcendent and the conceptual. . . deny the immediate aspects of reality."⁵⁰

If Stevens is to overcome the dilemma posed by the subject/object split, Regueiro proposes that he must achieve the "coincidence" of "poetic creation" with "creation of reality,"⁵¹ and this can be done, in her view, only through "the deliberate undercutting of image and metaphor. . . [which] gives back to sensory perception its revelatory value."⁵² Through such a process, she finds, Stevens is able in his later poetry to achieve the desired "reconciliation" of subject and object:

Reconciliation comes only as the imagination is denied, only as the consciousness of temporality gives way to the present. With increasing frequency Stevens begins to doubt, in his later poetry, the capacity of the imagination to bring forth the "profounder reconciling" of consciousness and reality.⁵³

Citing "The Plain Sense of Things" as "an acceptance of an imagination that has consciously turned against itself,"⁵⁴ Regueiro finds that in

⁴⁹Regueiro, p. 190.

⁵⁰Regueiro, p. 194.

⁵¹Regueiro, p. 178.

⁵²Regueiro, p. 204.

⁵³Regueiro, p. 207.

⁵⁴Regueiro, p. 210.

the later poetry the imagination "rejects its own projections and diver-
sions from reality and turns inward to reveal its incapacity to validly
create and inhabit the world."⁵⁵

But the admission of the imagination's "incapacity" for Stevens
is not a note of resignation. It is, rather, that basis upon which he
develops what Regueiro sees as his "poetry of being"; for, "If conscious-
ness and imagination are the alienating entities that separate the poet
from the natural world, the imaginative act that undercuts its own valid-
ity brings the poem into contact with natural time."⁵⁶ By accepting its
own invalidity, the imagination prepares the way for its withdrawal to
permit the experience of unobscured reality which Stevens has been seek-
ing. Thus, the stage is set for the event itself--the "glimpse of being,"
described by Regueiro as follows:

Consciousness has been transformed by paradoxically moving to
annihilate itself. And the poem has touched the unimaginable
reality by undercutting the creative act that generated it.
As creation and decreation become simultaneous, and in fact a
single act, Stevens' poetry becomes the rite of passage to a
world that lies beyond its reach.⁵⁷

As "creation and decreation" converge, Regueiro's theory obviously con-
verges again with that of Miller. Both find at the center of the poem
an emptiness, referred to by Miller as "nothingness" and by Regueiro as
a "core of silence"; and in this central void the pure experience of
reality--"the evanescent glimpse of being"--occurs. But for Regueiro,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Regueiro, p. 211.

⁵⁷ Regueiro, p. 213.

the withdrawal of the imagination at the crucial moment replaces Miller's "rapid oscillation" between subject and object.

Regueiro finds the embodiment of the method she attributes to Stevens in "Of Mere Being":

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

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

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

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fine-fangled feathers dangle down. (OP, 117-118)

In her discussion of the poem Regueiro says:

In positing a world beyond the enclosed space and terming it "foreign," the imagination undercuts its own space, its own enclosure, and moves out into space it cannot reach. Remoteness becomes proximity. . . .The decor dissolves into the space it has both posited and negated, and the absence in the poem makes possible the dawning of reality. . . .The poetic imagination is silencing itself before it can speak, placing reality in a realm into which it cannot transgress.

There is thus a core of silence in the poem, a refusal to image, order, or transform the natural world. The poetic imagination cannot inhabit reality. But it can experience reality by thrusting the poem into the silence of mere being.⁵⁸

Regueiro's scenario for the experience of "being" in Stevens' later poetry, in some ways quite similar to that of Miller, is also subject to some of the same criticism as Miller's. For example, her assumption, growing out of her perception of the death of the gods, that Stevens is striving in his poetry to overcome the subject/object duality

⁵⁸Regueiro, pp. 215-16.

can be questioned on the ground that the destruction of the idea of objective transcendence is, in philosophical terms, a reunion of man and world. She seems, on the one hand, to be aware of the philosophical implications of the death of the gods when she says: "An abstract god dwelling in heaven desacralizes natural reality by making a withdrawal from the universe and an ascension into the invisible the prerequisites for human fulfillment."⁵⁹ But, on the other hand, she finds, in their absence, that the mind is again "[u]nable to inhabit a reality it has not created, and equally unable to believe in a world it has created out of itself."⁶⁰ But it is not necessary to repeat, with respect to Regueiro's position, the same arguments which have already been advanced against that of Miller. The more important issue regarding Regueiro's view consists rather in her strong insistence on Stevens' denial of the imagination in his later poetry. Her stance in this matter can perhaps be best evaluated by analyzing references she makes to three poems-- "Metaphor as Degeneration," "Crude Foyer," and "Of Mere Being."

She does not really discuss "Metaphor as Degeneration"--she only refers to the title. Yet the idea that Stevens regards metaphor "as degeneration" is central to her theory. She says: "Instead of finding in metaphor a generation of reality, the poet sees 'metaphor as degeneration' (CP, 444), always altering the object and undermining the possible experience."⁶¹ Stevens says in the poem:

⁵⁹Regueiro, p. 195.

⁶⁰Cf. note 45.

⁶¹Regueiro, p. 179.

It is certain that the river

Is not Swatara. The swarthy water
That flows round the earth and through the skies,
Twisting among the universal spaces,

Is not Swatara. It is being.
That is the flock-flecked river, the water,
The blown sheen--or is it air?

How, then, is metaphor degeneration,
When Swatara becomes this undulant river
And the river becomes the landless, waterless ocean? (CP, 444)

Regueiro's failure to grasp the magnificent irony of the rhetorical question which concludes this passage casts serious doubt upon her contention that in Stevens' poetry metaphor is "degeneration." Clearly, the point of the poem is that, if an ordinary river like the Swatara can, through metaphor, become the river of being, "That flows round the earth and through the skies," then metaphor is decidedly not degeneration, but enhancement. Stevens says in his essay, "Three Academic Pieces," written in roughly the same period of his career:

Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance . . . Its singularity is that in the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it. If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two dissimilar things have in common. It makes it brilliant. (NA, 77)

If the basis of metaphor is a reinforcing resemblance, how, then is metaphor degeneration?

In her discussion of "Crude Foyer," Regueiro says: "In rejecting metaphor Stevens begins to seek an experience that cannot be imagined, a simplicity beyond all the 'intricate evasions' of structure."⁶² The poem begins:

⁶²Regueiro, p. 187.

Thought is false happiness: the idea
 That merely by thinking one can,
 Or may, penetrate, not may,
 But can, that one is sure to be able-- (CP, 305)

She says of this passage that "Even though the foyer is to be found, 'at the end of thought,' it is still placed 'in a landscape of the mind.'" The poet will have to find a foyer not only 'at the end of thought' but also 'at the end of the mind,' one which will deny the validity of mental constructs."⁶³ The movement in her analysis from "thought" to "mental constructs" exemplifies a crucial distortion in her theorizing--the tendency to treat all mental processes as equivalent. In this and other instances she takes the anti-rational stance of Stevens and generalizes it to include thought, mind, consciousness, and imagination, thus falsely presenting his anti-rationalism as a proof of rejection of the imagination. Stevens' rejection of "thought" in "Crude Foyer," as evidenced by the exaggerated formality of the first stanza, is clearly a rejection of the "philosophical truth" of logic and Cartesian rationalism which he correctly associates with dualism. It is not the "poetic truth" of the imagination. In "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," he says: "poetic truth is an agreement with reality" (NA, 54). Furthermore: "The philosopher proves that the philosopher exists. The poet merely enjoys existence" (NA, 56). "Crude Foyer" ends with the lines: "We are ignorant men incapable / Of the least, minor, vital metaphor, content, / At last, there, when it turns out to be here." Thus, Stevens' desire for immediate experience is shown to be not a rejection of the imagination, of which "we" are found to be "incapable," but of the

⁶³Regueiro, p. 188.

metaphysical "otherness" which alienates man from the world, as described in "The Souls of Women at Night," where the women walk.

In these stations, in which nothing has been lost,
Sight least, but metaphysical blindness gained,

The blindness in which seeing would be false,
A fantastic irruption.... (OP, 94-95)

The "metaphysical blindness" is not, as Regueiro says, a blindness to "conscious perception"⁶⁴ but specifically to the rational, logical thought associated with metaphysics.

But the example on which her argument most firmly rests is "Of Mere Being"--"It is perhaps 'Of Mere Being'. . . that comes closest to the unmediated experience. Here the poem seems to stretch itself ineffably to the point of breakage in an attempt to 'poematize' the mere being it cannot reach."⁶⁵ Here the key lines are "at the end of the mind,/ Beyond the last thought" and "You know then that it is not the reason/ That makes us happy or unhappy" (OP 117-18). Again Regueiro would have us believe that (to paraphrase Stevens) the rejection of one conscious process is the rejection of all. But here, again, the words "mind," "thought," and "reason" clearly refer to rational processes and do not, in any sense, encompass the imagination. What is removed from the poem is the discursiveness which marks much of Stevens' later poetry. If "being" is represented, it is represented through the process of supremely conscious symbolization, emphasizing the interaction between imagination and reality and not in any way rejecting the imagination in favor of a view of unobscured reality. The poem, in fact, resembles

⁶⁴Regueiro, p. 189.

⁶⁵Regueiro, p. 213.

more than anything else the brilliant imagery and tight unity of the poems of Harmonium--"The finished unity. . . which makes them seem like elaborately wrought pieces of jewelry."⁶⁶ Far from rejecting the imagination at the end of his poetic career, Stevens rejects the discursiveness of the later poetry in favor of a return to the highly imaginative style of his earlier work.

The scenario which Hines follows in The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens is not strikingly different from those of Miller and Regueiro, but it does include two major innovations: (1) It attempts to establish a philosophical basis for the "poetry of being" by making a connection to Husserl and Heidegger; and (2) It abandons, at least to a limited degree, the assumption that Stevens' goal from the outset is the overcoming of the subject/object duality. The link to Husserl and Heidegger, however, is not such a long step for Hines as it might at first seem. Miller says, in "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being,"

Being is the universal power, visible nowhere in itself, and yet visible everywhere in all things. It is what all things share through the fact that they are. Being is not a thing like other things, and therefore can appear to man only as nothing, yet it is what all things participate in if they are to exist at all. All Stevens' later poetry has as its goal the releasing of the evanescent glimpse of being which is as close as man can come to a possession of the ground of things.⁶⁷

Such philosophical terminology (or jargon) immediately brings to mind Heidegger and his major work, Being and Time. Furthermore, Richard A. Macksey, in the same volume of essays as Miller, links Stevens to

⁶⁶"Poetry of Being," p. 146.

⁶⁷"Poetry of Being," p. 157.

Husserl's "bracketing" process⁶⁸ and says that "Heidegger, like Stevens, sees in the rediscovery of poiesis the possibility for modern man, in the darkest night of his tradition, to restore the dimension of the Heilige."⁶⁹ Nonetheless, it is Hines who brings the ideas together in a comprehensive, book-length examination and attempts to work out the full implications of both the "poetry of being" and the philosophical connections to Husserl and Heidegger.

Like Miller and Regueiro, Hines assumes that the ultimate goal for Stevens is to achieve a valid experience of "being,"⁷⁰ which he sees as "the ground or source of both the mind and world. It is that by virtue of which the things that exist are present."⁷¹ However, unlike Miller and Regueiro, he does not see the subject/object duality as arising for Stevens out of the death of the gods. Rather he sees it as the result of a conscious rejection of the style, tone, and language of Harmonium⁷² and the search for a new understanding of what poetry could be--a search leading in Ideas of Order and The Man With the Blue Guitar to a process resembling the reductions of Husserl.

⁶⁸Richard A. Macksey, "The Climates of Wallace Stevens," in The Act of the Mind, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 192.

⁶⁹Macksey, p. 222n.

⁷⁰Hines capitalizes the word "Being," in keeping with standard practice for reference to Heidegger's special use of the word; but for the sake of consistency, I will continue to use the lower-case form except when referring to the term in the specifically Heideggerian sense.

⁷¹Hines, p. 20n.

⁷²Hines, pp. 29-20.

According to Hines, "Husserl contended that the initial assumptions of realism were naively based on a kind of unquestioning acceptance of the natural world"⁷³--a contention for which he finds an analogue⁷⁴ in Section XXVIII of "The Man With the Blue Guitar": "I am a native in this world/ And think in it as a native thinks" (CP, 180). In addition, Hines says, "For Husserl, the idea of a rational or logical order within the mind of each observer was a fiction that took as much for granted as the assumptions of the later German idealists."⁷⁵ Consequently, for Husserl, "What was needed was a way to see things without cognitive distortions."⁷⁶ Thus, the stage is set for the reductions which constitute Husserl's phenomenological method. "The basis," says Hines, "of Husserl's phenomenological method was that all consciousness was intentional."⁷⁷ Taking intentionality as the starting point, Hines identifies the two reductive steps as follows: (1) "The whole of reality must be reduced to a field of possibility within which separate objects are perceived"⁷⁸; and (2) "[O]ne places oneself in the 'transcendental sphere' where he can perceive things as they are in themselves without distortion or preconception."⁷⁹ Thus, Husserl, rather than overcoming the subject/

⁷³Hines, p. 32.

⁷⁴Hines, p. 81.

⁷⁵Hines, p. 32.

⁷⁶Hines, p. 33.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Hines, p. 34.

⁷⁹Ibid.

object duality, posits it through the two-step process of the phenomenological and transcendental reductions.

In Ideas of Order and The Man With the Blue Guitar, Hines sees a reductive process similar to that of Husserl:

As Stevens accomplishes these steps of rejection (a process that is analogous to Husserl's original intuition), reduction (a process that is similar to Husserl's demand for perception without preconceptions), and decreation (which is similar to Husserl's demand for a minimal level of interaction between perceiver and the object of perception), he proceeds toward an apprehension of reality that is similar to Husserl's goal of the 'essence of the thing itself.'⁸⁰

Hines, thus, suggests that at this point Stevens, like Husserl, does not merely accept the subject/object duality but actually insists on it in his reductive process. But this affinity is, in Hines's view, only temporary. He finds that the Husserlian phenomenological theory helps to explain Stevens' steps toward a poetry of "perception"; but after The Man With the Blue Guitar, he sees Stevens turning his interest from the Husserlian idea of a "conceptual essence" to the possibility of a "non-conceptual essence" which has affinities to the investigations of Heidegger:

As Stevens rejects the division between mind and world, he also finds that the clear perceptions that were available through the process of reduction that he had developed in Ideas of Order and The Man With the Blue Guitar were inadequate for his aesthetic purposes.⁸¹

He finds Stevens returning in Parts of a World to the first stage of Husserl's process--the "natural attitude" in which the distinction between subject and object is not perceived: "As long as the poet assumed, like Husserl, the notion that consciousness is inescapably different

⁸⁰Hines, p. 36.

⁸¹Hines, pp. 26-27.

from the object of consciousness, the attempts to resolve this dualism ended in an unresolvable conflict."⁸² He, thus, rejects Husserl and the subject/object duality and turns instead to "the world of Martin Heidegger's Dasein, where existence is described as always given in a world where the self and the world are unified."⁸³ Stevens' investigations are still to be phenomenological; but, beginning with Parts of a World, they become Heideggerian instead of Husserlian.

The movement from Husserlian affinity to Heideggerian affinity is a movement from "perception of being" to "disclosure of being" and, as such, is similar to the shift in emphasis in Stevens' poetry identified by both Miller and Regueiro as occurring at about the time of The Man With the Blue Guitar and Parts of a World. The imagination has carried Stevens to the limit of possibility of the reductive process by paralleling the "eidetic reduction," the final reductive step for Husserl, contemplating the object, as in "The Glass of Water" (CP, 197), and, thus, giving the object various possible meanings, just as in the "eidetic reduction" the subject contemplates the object and finds in it all possible objects.⁸⁴ But the multiplicity of meanings still leaves man alienated from his world and thus separate from the "disclosure of being." It is only as he moves closer to Dasein (there-being) and In-der-Welt-sein⁸⁵ that Stevens is able to achieve a unity of self and world which can yield the desired disclosure. At this point, then,

⁸²Hines, p. 114

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Hines, pp. 96-97.

⁸⁵Hines, pp. 116-17.

Hines's scenario dovetails with that of Miller and Regueiro as he, too, finds that the ultimate problem for Stevens is the overcoming of the subject/object duality, and the origin of the problem becomes, in a sense, a moot question.

Hines reads "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" as Stevens' effort to articulate an aesthetic of "being" as the goal of poetry, and he sees in the later poems an attempt to achieve that goal-- to afford a revelation of "being." According to Hines, "the supreme fiction, for Stevens, was the poetry of Being"⁸⁶; and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is seen as the blueprint for a poetic which will achieve the "disclosure of being." Thus, the "poetry of being" must be abstract as the "first idea" is abstract: "This intuitive grasp or original perception Stevens calls the 'first idea,' but the word idea is not used in its Platonic sense, for it more closely approximates Heidegger's phenomenological disclosure of Being than a Platonic ideational or eidetic essence."⁸⁷ It must change as the experience of "being" changes: "The relation of the poetry of Being and time is demonstrated both in terms of the 'change' that is imperative for any poetry that is written to express a sense of a constantly changing subject and in terms of the empirical observation of 'change' in the world."⁸⁸ And it must give the pleasure which comes with the "disclosure of being": "The pleasure comes. . . 'from access to being,' which begins a kind of aesthetic of pleasure in much the same way that Stevens' 'Esthétique du Mal' describes a peculiarly existential

⁸⁶Hines, p. 141.

⁸⁷Hines, p. 146.

⁸⁸Hines, p. 179.

'aperçu' of pain."⁸⁹ In this last regard, Hines finds Stevens' poetic investigations of "being" to be superior to the philosophical investigations of Heidegger:

For Heidegger, the only pleasure, or rather the source of pleasure, is access to Being, but this access is always a potential, placed in the future. The possibility of fulfilled Being for Dasein is death. The difference, then, between the philosophy of Being and the poetry of Being is best defined by Stevens' fiction of fulfilled Being, which is neither available nor important to philosophy.⁹⁰

As Hines attempts to apply his theory to specific poems, the difficulties of the theory become readily apparent--essentially the theory has no specific application. The parallel which he draws between Stevens and Husserl has some value in that it introduces the idea of a conscious posing of the subject/object duality. However, with Hines's turn to a treatment of Heidegger, the comparison to Stevens becomes more and more contrived. At the heart of his difficulty in this regard seems to be a failure to grasp Heidegger's "ontological difference"--the difference between "Being" and "beings." Heidegger says in Being and Time: "The Being of entities 'is' not itself an entity."⁹¹ And in What Is Called Thinking he traces the etymology of "being" in order to reinterpret the term in a verbal sense which distinguishes it from "beings."⁹² Yet Hines finds in the "first idea" of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" a

⁸⁹Hines, p. 195.

⁹⁰Hines, p. 213.

⁹¹Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 26.

⁹²Martin Heidegger, What Is Called Thinking?, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 214.

representation of "Being" as a primordial entity:

The phenomenological reduction that permits the poet to perceive the object "in the idea of it" (to envision the Being of the sun as it is) is also a function of the imagination.
 . . . The original intuition of the "first idea" is the basis for each new creation of the Being of the sun. ⁹³

In such an identification of "Being," it is obvious that the verbal sense has been lost. And, still more important, Hines's contention that the "supreme fiction" is "Being" gives it a clear identity and is on this count, as well, incompatible with Heidegger's verbal sense of "Being."

Furthermore, the idea of a "fiction" is itself at odds with Heidegger's idea of "Being." Walter Biemel says in his essay "Poetry and Language in Heidegger" that, for Heidegger, "The essence of poetry . . . is establishing the truth, the articulated clearing in which Being comes to pass."⁹⁴ Heidegger himself says in "The Origin of the Work of Art": "All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry."⁹⁵ And in regard to poetry itself, he says: "Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is."⁹⁶ For Heidegger, then, poetry is a process by which the truth is seen. The "truth" of Heidegger is not the religious "truth" which Stevens specifically rejects, but it is clearly a self-existent, non-positing truth. Such a stance is clearly not reconcilable with Stevens'

⁹³Hines, p. 149.

⁹⁴Walter Biemel, "Poetry and Language in Heidegger," in On Heidegger and Language, ed. Joseph J. Kockelmans (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 78.

⁹⁵Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, and Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 72. Emphasis is Heidegger's.

⁹⁶Heidegger, Poetry, Language, and Thought, p. 78.

self-appraisal: "The author's work suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment."⁹⁷ Nor is it, in any sense, compatible with Stevens' view expressed in "On the Road Home":

It was when I said,
 "There is no such thing as the truth,"
 That the grapes seemed fatter.
 The fox ran out of his hole. (CP, 203)

And, in contrast to Heidegger's definition of poetry as "the saying of the unconcealedness of what is," Stevens says of the nature of poetry: "It is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (NA, 27), while of the "imaginative man" he finds that his pleasure is "the pleasure of powers that create truth" (NA, 58) [emphasis is mine].

It is on this issue of created truth versus the truth of "what is" that Stevens and Heidegger diverge to such a wide degree as to make the idea of affinity indefensible. Heidegger's interest lies in the quest for an "authentic" understanding of "Being" by which he indicates simply an understanding of the truth of "what is"-- of both Dasein's "Being" and the meaning of "Being" in general. He says in Being and Time:

Dasein, as constituted by disclosedness, is essentially in the truth. Disclosedness is a kind of Being which is essential to Dasein. "There is" truth only in so far as Dasein is and so long as Dasein is. . . . Because the kind of being that is essential to truth is of the character of Dasein, all truth is relative to Dasein's Being. Does this relativity signify that all truth is "subjective"? If one interprets "subjective" as "left to the subject's discretion," then it certainly does not. For uncovering. . . takes asserting out of the province of "subjective discretion" and brings the uncovering Dasein face to face with the entities themselves.⁹⁸

⁹⁷Cf. note 39. The emphasis is mine.

⁹⁸Heidegger, Being and Time, pp. 269-70. Emphasis is Heidegger's.

Moreover, he says that "it is essential to Dasein that along with the disclosedness of its world it has been disclosed to itself, so that it always understands itself."⁹⁹ As Michael Gelven points out in A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time," "We are investigating, not the meaning of any particular thing--not even the human thing--but what it means to be. . . . (We must remember that we are asking about the meaning of Being, not after Being itself.)"¹⁰⁰-- thus recalling Stevens' assertion that "The philosopher proves that the philosopher exists. The poet merely enjoys existence" (NA, 56).

"Authenticity," for Heidegger, is that which gives a sense that Dasein is always in relation to "Being," and, as such, it is a "disclosure of being." But such disclosure does not bring about, as Hines asserts in his discussion of "The Latest Freed Man,"¹⁰¹ a movement from enchainment to freedom. "Authenticity" is primarily an understanding of something about human nature, not a "sense of freedom" or an "experience of being." For Heidegger art reveals something of what the world means for man and, therefore, something of the meaning of man's existence. In this context the poet experiences, rather than a sense of freedom and beauty, the weight of language as a moral responsibility. "Language Speaks,"¹⁰² says Heidegger--"only speech allows man to be the

⁹⁹Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 317. Emphasis on Heidegger's.

¹⁰⁰Michael Gelven, A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time" (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 24. Emphasis is Gelven's.

¹⁰¹Hines, pp. 118-22.

¹⁰²Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, p. 190. Emphasis is Heidegger's.

living being he is as a man. It is as one who speaks that man is--man."¹⁰³
 As the one who uses language, the poet names and protects "Being"--
 "language is the house of Being"¹⁰⁴; "man speaks in that he responds to
 language."¹⁰⁵

Hines's analysis of Stevens' poetry is generally sound for individual poems, but his attempt to apply Heideggerian ideas and terminology in his analyses produces confusion rather than further clarification. For example, he asserts: (1) that the "it" of "Description without Place," Section VI (CP, 344-45), is "Being"¹⁰⁶ rather than the obvious reading of "description"; (2) that the "it" of "Auroras of Autumn," Section VIII (CP, 418), is "Being"¹⁰⁷ rather than the obvious reading of "innocence"; and (3) that "the poem" of "A Primitive Like an Orb" (CP, 440-43) is "Being."¹⁰⁸ Of "The Rock," he says: "The rock is Being. It is. . . 'The gray particular of man's life,'"¹⁰⁹ thus, again betraying his failure to comprehend Heidegger's verbal sense of the term "Being."¹¹⁰ But his most ludicrous effort to apply Heideggerian terminology to Stevens' poetry comes in his analysis of the line, "Being there

¹⁰³Heidegger, Poetry, Language, and Thought, p. 189.

¹⁰⁴Heidegger, Poetry, Language, and Thought, p. 132.

¹⁰⁵Heidegger, Poetry, Language, and Thought, p. 210.

¹⁰⁶Hines, p. 157.

¹⁰⁷Hines, p. 251.

¹⁰⁸Hines, pp. 271-72.

¹⁰⁹Hines, p. 270.

¹¹⁰"The Being of entities 'is' not itself an entity." Cf. note 91.

is being in a place," from "The Countryman" (CP, 429), in his reference to it as "a line that would sound like pure Heidegger if translated into German (for example, Dasein ist in-der-Welt-Sein)."¹¹¹ Such a literal transposition of Heidegger's technical terminology converts the line not into "pure Heidegger" but pure gibberish.¹¹² From such examples it becomes clear that Hines's effort to forge a connection between Stevens and Heidegger constitutes an imposition of thought external to the poetry and is not a true and essential affinity between the two.

Hines's approach to Stevens by way of Husserl and Heidegger ultimately fails to bring us any closer to an understanding of the "poetry of being." His suggestion of an affinity between Stevens and Husserl is potentially useful in its introduction of the idea of a philosophical bracketing of reality in favor of a consciously affirmed subject/object duality. He, however, later negates the value of this idea by claiming that Stevens' emerging affinity with Heidegger returns the poetry to the equivalent of Husserl's "natural standpoint"--the starting point of the Husserlian reductive process (see Figure 1--Husserl and Heidegger). Furthermore, he is mistaken in his opinion that "Being," for Heidegger, effects a unity of man and the world. As the illustration indicates, Heidegger in his early investigations (Being and Time) sees Dasein, the "Being-in-the-world," as the one who perceives the "Being" of entities; thus, "Being" is itself not the source of unity but the focus of "authentic" understanding. In his later work, on the other hand, he insists that "language speaks" and thus becomes a middle

¹¹¹Hines, p. 254.

¹¹²Cf. Gelven, p. 22--"da. . . must be distinguished from dort, which means 'there' in the sense of 'at the place.'"

term between man and "Being." In neither of these conceptions, early or late, is there the idea of the unmediated union of man and world described by Hines. In his effort to conjoin the two, Hines, in the final analysis, misinterprets both Heidegger's philosophy and the philosophical basis of Stevens' poetry.¹¹³

To find a relationship between man and world such as Stevens describes we must turn to that philosophical forebear whose work, perhaps even more than that of Husserl, provides the point of departure for Heidegger's philosophy--Friedrich Nietzsche. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger see the death of the gods as an opportunity to overcome the damaging separation of man and world which is a part of the western metaphysical tradition, but they diverge on the question of positing a new ground for value in the absence of the gods. Heidegger says that for Nietzsche "the empty place demands to be occupied anew and to have the god now vanished from it replaced by something else. New ideals are set up."¹¹⁴ Heidegger, however, rejects the idea of replacing the gods; he feels that, if metaphysics is to be overcome, their former place must remain empty. Of Nietzsche's work he maintains that "Value-positing has brought down and slain beneath itself--and has therefore killed as that which is for itself--all that is in itself."¹¹⁵ Nietzsche finds in the human will a proper ground for value, replacing

¹¹³This is not intended to imply that all his analyses are incorrect. At times he interprets Heidegger correctly, and at times he interprets Stevens correctly--he rarely manages to do both at the same time.

¹¹⁴Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," p. 69.

¹¹⁵Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," p. 107. Emphasis is Heidegger's.

the ground once provided by the vanished gods. But Heidegger sees in Nietzsche's "will to power" a return to metaphysics:

The value-thinking of the will to power is murderous in a most extreme sense, because it absolutely does not let Being itself take its rise, i.e., come into the vitality of its essence. Thinking in terms of values precludes in advance that Being will attain to a coming to presence in its truth.¹¹⁶

In this distinction between the two philosophers, drawn by Heidegger himself, the greater affinity of Stevens for Nietzsche is readily apparent. Stevens' concept of the "supreme fiction" is decidedly in the spirit of Nietzsche's creative "will to power" as a humanly posited replacement for the gods and is directly opposed to Heidegger's desire for a passive understanding of "Being's" "coming to presence in its truth." The idea of the "supreme fiction," the greatest stumbling block in the analyses of Miller and Regueiro, proves to be a similar obstacle for Hines's attempted Heideggerian interpretation. In the philosophy of Nietzsche, on the other hand, the perception of the death of the gods combines with the idea of positing a replacement for them in such a way as to be wholly compatible with both the poetry and the prose of Stevens. Nor is this compatibility a matter of casual interest. Miller says of Stevens that "The paradoxical appearance to man of being in the form of nothing is the true cause of the ambiguity in his poetry."¹¹⁷ But it is the contention of this paper that there is no real internal ambiguity in the poetry of the type perceived by Miller and by many other Stevens critics. The ambiguity arises, in fact, from outside the poetry as a result of the inability of readers and critics

¹¹⁶Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," p. 108.

¹¹⁷"Poetry of Being," pp. 157-58.

to see the possibility of adequately reconciling the seemingly conflicting elements of the poetry. Miller, Regueiro, and Hines all impose an elaborate theoretical construct on Stevens' poetry which neither his prose nor the poetry itself consistently supports. The following chapters will attempt, first, to show, through an examination of similarities between Nietzsche and Stevens, that Stevens' poetry and prose does exhibit a consistent, unified point of view when seen in the light of the proper philosophical possibility and, second, to move, by means of a discussion of the kinship between Ernst Cassirer and Stevens, in the direction of a more adequate definition of the aesthetic theory underlying Stevens' work than those developed by Miller, Hines, and Regueiro, or by other critics who have approached Stevens' poetry by different means.

CHAPTER II

THE DEATH OF THE GODS

Although the expression "God is dead" is most commonly associated with Nietzsche, it by no means originated with him. It can be traced, in fact, back to Martin Luther,¹ whose "God is dead" gives a dramatic pronouncement of the crucifixion of Christ. And Hegel chooses the same words to express the "loss of self":

It is consciousness of the loss of everything of significance in the certainty of the self, and of the loss even of this knowledge or certainty of self--the loss of substance as well as of self; it is the bitter pain which finds expression in the cruel words, "God is dead."²

From Hegel the concept of the death of God is taken up by his disciple, Karl Marx,³ who sees it not in the tragic sense of Luther and Hegel but as the opportunity to escape from the destructive tyranny of religion, with its other-worldly focus:

The criticism of religion disillusioned man so that he will think, act and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason; so that he will revolve about himself as his own true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself.⁴

¹Louis Dupre, Transcendent Selfhood (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), p. 13.

²Quoted by Dupre, Transcendent Selfhood, p. 1.

³The extent to which Marx's work actually grows out of Hegel's philosophy is certainly debatable, but it is safe to say that, at least early in his career, Marx considered himself a Hegelian.

⁴Karl Marx, Early Writings, ed. and trans. T. B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), p. 44.

For Marx, "atheism is a negation of God and seeks to assert by this negation the existence of man"⁵; and "[t]he more of himself man attributes to God the less he has left in himself."⁶

But it is in Nietzsche that the idea comes into its full flowering as the basis for a new philosophical perspective. He at once embraces Hegel's sense of the tragic in the death of God and also sees, far more profoundly than Marx, the dawn of an era of new possibility for man. In The Gay Science the tragic illumination of the death of God is introduced:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him--you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? . . . Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning?"⁷

But this tragic sense is transformed in the "three metamorphoses of the spirit" in Thus Spoke Zarathustra as Nietzsche describes "how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child."⁸ In the first metamorphosis, "What is difficult? asks the spirit that would bear much, and kneels down like a camel wanting to be well loaded."⁹ This first stage is the stage of the Christian who accepts the commands of God as his basis for action, but the willful acceptance of burden is overcome in the second metamorphosis: "The creation of freedom for

⁵Marx, p. 167. Emphasis is Marx's.

⁶Marx, p. 122.

⁷Gay Science, p. 181. Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

⁸Zarathustra, p. 137.

⁹Zarathustra, p. 138.

oneself and a sacred "No" even to duty--for that, my brothers, the lion is needed. To assume the right to new values--that is the most terrifying assumption for a reverent spirit that would bear much."¹⁰ And in the third metamorphosis the truly positive aspect of the rejection of other-worldly transcendence emerges in the creative act of the child:

The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred "Yes." For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred "Yes" is needed; the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been lost in the world now conquers his own world.¹¹

The tragic loss of the gods, thus, leads for Nietzsche to the ultimate affirmation of human creativity, in which "the spirit now wills his own will." At this juncture Zarathustra can proclaim: "Dead are all the gods: now we want the overman to live."¹²

It is clearly within Nietzsche's full spectrum of awareness of the implications of the death of the gods that Stevens treats the subject in his poetry and prose. In the following passage from "Two or Three Ideas," he encompasses both the tragic aspect and the humanistically affirmative one:

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. . . . It was their 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. . . . 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 non-participant, the delinquent, became

¹⁰Zarathustra, p. 139.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Zarathustra, p. 191. Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

constantly more and more all there was or so it seemed; and whether it was or merely seemed so it left for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms (OP, 206-07).

In this passage is both the "sacred 'No'" of the lion and the "sacred 'Yes'" of the child--"no" in the refusal of man to mutter "a petition in his heart for the restoration of those unreal shapes: and "yes" in the perception of a need "to resolve life and the world in his own terms."

Stevens' awareness of the historical development of the death of the gods is also evident, but in a much subtler way, in his occasional references to Lenin and communism as representative of an inferior positing of transcendence--an attempt to replace the gods with a value-system based in the will of the masses. The comparison of such a system with the Nietzschean idea of a humanly-based transcendence is implied in the direct juxtaposition of Nietzsche and Lenin in "Description without Place," in which "Nietzsche in Basel" is pictured "In a kind of total affluence" (CP, 342), while for Lenin:

The slouch of his body and his look were not
In suavest keeping. The shoes, the clothes, the hat

Suited the decadence of those silences,
In which he sat. All chariots were drowned. The swans

Moved on the buried water where they lay. (CP, 343)

And the image of slovenliness, decadence, and inadequacy is presented more explicitly in his essay "Imagination as Value":

Communism is not the measure of humanity. But I limit myself to an allusion to it as a phenomenon of the imagination. Surely the diffusion of communism exhibits imagination on its most momentous scale. . . . With the collapse of other beliefs, this grubby faith promises a practicable earthly paradise (NA, 143).

This subtle connection between the imagination and the attempt of communism to posit a transcendence to replace the departed gods helps, however, to illustrate the importance of seeing Stevens' poetry and

prose in the light of Nietzschean philosophy. Both Marx and Nietzsche, in the wake of Hegel's anguished declaration of the death of God, saw its possibility as a new ground for value; but while Marx turned to the good of the majority as the ruling principle, Nietzsche turned to the will of the individual in the self-assertion of "will to power." The "overman"--the superior individual--would create his own transcendence, just as, for Stevens, the "possible poet" would "abstract himself, and . . . withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist" (NA, 23). Nietzsche says in Thus Spoke

Zarathustra:

God is a conjecture; but I desire that your conjectures shall be limited by what is thinkable. Could you think a god? But this is what the will to truth shall mean to you: that everything be changed into what is thinkable for man, visible for man, feelable by man. You should think through your own senses to their consequences.

And what you have called the world, that shall be created only by you: your reason, your image, your will, your love shall thus be realized. And verily, for your own bliss, you lovers of knowledge.¹³

Stevens applies a similar criterion to poetic creation, insisting that "The incredible is not a part of poetic truth. . . . poetic truth is the truth of credible things: (NA, 53); and he says that "the search for the supreme truth has been a search in reality or through reality or even a search for some supremely acceptable fiction (NA, 173). The "supreme fiction" is, for Stevens, indeed a fiction, but it is grounded, just as Nietzsche's "will to power" is grounded, in the truth of the self:

¹³Zarathustra, p. 198. Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince. Consequently their interest in the imagination is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains (NA, 171).

The perception of a Nietzschean affinity in Stevens' work is by no means a new one; Stevens' continuing interest in the death of the gods makes the relation obvious. Yet the subject has rarely been discussed at any length in Stevens criticism. Perhaps the most perceptive treatment of the similarities between Stevens and Nietzsche is that of Frank Doggett, who says of the contention, "The death of one god is the death of all," in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "According to this notion, God is a pure concept that dies when faith is gone. The word-
ing and its special meaning are given general currency by Nietzsche's 'God is dead'."¹⁴ Doggett also makes the connection between Stevens' "fictions" and Nietzsche's "invented world," bringing to bear on his discussion of Stevens a strikingly relevant quotation from Nietzsche:

Indeed I am convinced that the most erroneous assumptions are precisely the most indispensable for us, that without granting the validity of the logical fiction, without measuring reality by the invented world of the unconditioned, the self-identical, man could not live. . . . ¹⁵

Doggett's concern, however, is to cover the full range of Stevens' thought and not to establish any particular affinity or, as is the

¹⁴Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 126.

¹⁵Doggett, pp. 105-06n. [Emphasis is Nietzsche's] The remainder of the sentence, not quoted by Doggett, is also germane to the present discussion: "and that a negation of this fiction. . . is equivalent to a negation of life itself" [Ellipsis in the original]--cf. H. Vaihinger, The Philosophy of "As If," trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1935), p. 354.

concern here, to see Stevens' philosophical notions in a consistent and appropriate light; consequently, he limits his discussion to a few quotations and passing references to Nietzsche. Michel Benamou, in "Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination," finds a somewhat different link between Nietzsche and Stevens:

Stevens' poetry is central in the sense that Nietzsche's poetry is central, that is, centered on the self. Its climate differs from the Symbolist descent into the dark room. It is real air, breathed on an imaginary or real mountain: a Mount Penn, or a Mount Chocorua, or a Mountain in Vermont, or even Nietzsche's Alps.¹⁶

However, Benamou's interest, like Doggett's, lies elsewhere; so he does not pursue the affinity further.

Harold Bloom, on the other hand, frequently refers to Nietzsche in The Poems of Our Climate in his discussion of Stevens as a part of the Romantic tradition.¹⁷ In this light Bloom is interested in Nietzsche principally as a conduit through which Emerson's ideas might more forcefully flow to Stevens. His remarks about Nietzsche are, thus, scattered and diluted by the discussion of Romantic influence on Stevens, an idea which is clearly refuted by Stevens' own comment on the Romantic:

. . . we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic.
 . . . it is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic. The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is to the imagination what sentimentality is to feeling. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling. The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme

¹⁶Michel Benamou, "Wallace Stevens and the Symbolic Imagination" in The Act of the Mind, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 115.

¹⁷Cf. Harold Bloom, The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).

of its achievement lies in abstraction. The achievement of the romantic, on the contrary, lies in minor wish fulfillment and it is incapable of abstraction (NA, 138-39).

Nonetheless, many of Bloom's observations regarding Nietzsche and Stevens are insightful; therefore, reference is made in the following discussion to his comments on specific poems where such comments are deemed relevant.

Stevens himself refers to Nietzsche in several letters, in one poem (CP, 342), and once in The Necessary Angel (NA, 150).¹⁸ One of these references is the well-known disclaimer contained in a letter to Henry Church, dated July 12, 1942: "About Nietzsche: I haven't read him since I was a young man. My interest in the hero, major man, the giant, has nothing to do with the Biermensch; in fact, I throw knives at the hero, etc."¹⁹ Stevens' intention here is at least partially humorous, as evidenced by his substitution of "Biermensch" (beer-man) for "Übermensch" (overman). Still, the change in tone is striking in another letter to Church, written four years later on August 6, 1946: "If you go to Switzerland and pass through Basel, take a good look at it for me. Somehow I am more and more constantly interested in Basel than in Jerusalem. Then, too, you can walk there in Nietzsche's footsteps."²⁰ This tone of almost religious adoration (emphasized by the mention of Jerusalem) brings to light his deeply empathetic feeling for

¹⁸ It is also worthy of note that Stevens had in his library a 1910 edition of Nietzsche's Thoughts Out of Season (Unzeitgemasse Betrachtungen)--cf. Milton J. Bates, "Stevens' Books at The Huntington: An Annotated Checklist," Wallace Stevens Journal, 2 (Winter, 1979), 59.

¹⁹ Wallace Stevens, Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 409.

²⁰ Stevens, Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 532.

Nietzsche. But the matter of influence or conscious affinity is not the primary question at issue here. Rather, in seeking to gain a new perspective which places the "poetry of being" within a consistent philosophical framework, we must examine in detail, and in the light of Nietzschean philosophy, Stevens' treatment of the theme of a world without belief--beyond belief in the old gods--which was introduced in "Sunday Morning" and remained a important theme throughout Stevens' poetry.

In the eighth canto of "Sunday Morning," the narrator summarizes the picture of existence presented in the poem by saying,

We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water inescapable.

He, thus, describes a view of life in the aftermath of the decline of organized religion--the Nietzschean "death of God" dramatically asserted in The Gay Science: "Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."²¹ References to the death of the gods--some relatively explicit, some more subtle--occur in a number of Stevens' poems, appearing both as one of his most basic themes and as the point of departure for his most significant poetic concept: the idea of a "supreme fiction"--a replacement for the "Too many waltzes [which] have ended" (CP, 121). The theme is stated in strongly Nietzschean terms in "Sunday Morning" (CP, 66-70), which, appearing in 1915, was one of

²¹ Gay Science, p. 181.

Stevens' first major poems. The celebration of transient existence through the poem's sensuous descriptions of the world calls to mind Zarathustra's judgment that "so rich is joy that it thirsts for woe, for hell, for hatred, for disgrace, for the cripple, for the world--this world, oh, you know it."²²

For Nietzsche the burden of philosophy is no longer that of the ascetic of the spirit--the "camel"--who is what he is by virtue of withdrawal and self-denial. Philosophical asceticism, dutifully bent on purifying the spirit (or intelligence) of the earth-bound and anti-rational, systematically turns away from the simple starting-point of philosophical reflection--wonder at the extraordinary phenomenon of natural existence, and, particularly, of human existence. The logical and metaphysical search for absolute grounding leaves us, instead, ungrounded. Nietzschean aphorisms enliven thought, return thought to its ground. To do this, philosophy must also be poetic artistry (as it was for the Pre-Socratics)--must join Dionysian intoxication (uncritical abandonment to life) and Apollonian imagination (formal, aesthetic, and non-analytical perspective). Stevens, like Nietzsche, rejects the ungrounded and sterile truths of metaphysical rationalism in favor of the fecund perspective of poetic imagination. Resonant with affinity to Nietzsche is Stevens' answer to his rhetorical question of "Sunday Morning," canto III, "And shall the earth / Seem all the paradise that we shall know?":

The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in Glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

²²Zarathustra, p. 435.

It is understated to say that the thought conveyed in this passage is reminiscent of Zarathustra's assertion that "I love even the churches and tombs of gods once the sky gazes through their broken roofs with its pure eyes, and like grass and red poppies, I love to sit on broken churches. . . ." ²³

The radiant impact of Stevens' earthy sun--"Not as a god, but as a god might be, / Naked among them, like a savage source" (CP, 69-70)--joins Stevens with yet another Nietzschean motif. Nietzsche's geotropism is also heliotropism--affirmation of nature and life made possible by solar heat and light (unlike Plato's heliotropism, which turns toward the eternal, transcending earth and body). As Harold Bloom says, "The sun-worship of stanza VII represents a different idea of order, one that is yet to be and that relates itself to the image of Zarathustra's solar trajectory in Nietzsche." ²⁴ Bloom identifies the "god among men" as Zarathustra himself, the "prophet of the Over-Man." ²⁵

In "On the Road Home" (CP, 203-04) Stevens pictures the vividness of experience for one who has rejected the "truths" of dogma:

It was when you said,
"The idols have seen lots of poverty,
Snakes and gold and lice,
But not the truth";

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.

²³Zarathustra, pp. 340-41. Nietzsche's color imagery, green and red representing aspects of the world's reality, is notable in this passage for its similarity to Stevens' use of the same colors.

²⁴Bloom, p. 34.

²⁵*Ibid.*

When the old truths have been cast off, the speaker finds "That the grapes seemed fatter. / The fox ran out of his hole," recalling The Nietzschean judgment that: "When power becomes gracious and descends into the visible--such descent I call beauty."²⁶ A negative aspect of the same idea is presented in "Landscape with Boat" (CP, 240-41), in which the poem says of the "anti-master-man, floribund ascetic":

. . . He never supposed divine
 Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
 Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
 And that if nothing was the truth, then all
 Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.

Here is Stevens' equivalent of Zarathustra's description of the "ascetic of the spirit" in Thus Spoke Zarathustra:

With a swelled chest like one who holds in his breath,
 he stood there, the sublime one, silent, decked out
 with ugly truths, the spoil of his hunting, and
 rich in torn garments; many thorns adorned him--
 yet I saw no rose.

As yet he has not learned laughter or beauty.
 Gloomy this hunter returned from the woods of knowledge.²⁷

The outcome for Stevens, as for Nietzsche, of the rejection of such "truths" is the freedom of "The Latest Freed Man" (CP, 204-205)-- "To be without a description of to be." Nietzsche writes at the conclusion of Thus Spoke Zarathustra: "'this is my morning, my day: rise now, rise, thou great noon!' Thus spoke Zarathustra, and he left his cave, glowing and strong as a morning sun that comes out of dark mountains."²⁸ Likewise, the "latest freed man," "Tired of the old descriptions of the world" arises at six and sits on the edge of his bed. The

²⁶Zarathustra, p. 230.

²⁷Zarathustra, pp. 228-29.

²⁸Zarathustra, p. 439. Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

way "the sun came shining into his room" produces in him the experience of "the ant of the self changed into an ox. . . changed / from a doctor to an ox," and he knows "that the change and that the ox-like struggle / Come from the strength that is the strength of the sun." Thus, from an acceptance of the death of the gods and the consequent rejection of religious and moral doctrine, represented by the "doctor" (of philosophy), he finds not despair but a heightened and joyous experience of life.

The experience of freedom resulting from an acceptance of a world beyond the old idols amplifies that aspect of Nietzschean affinity in Stevens' poetry which desires affirmation of the world. This thematic strain is clearly evidenced in "The Well Dressed Man With a Beard":

"After the final no there comes a yes / And on that yes the future world depends. / No was the night. Yes is this present sun" (CP, 247). The passage echoes Zarathustra's teaching that after the "No" of the lion, "For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred "Yes" is needed." The "yes" to the world is the affirmation of life in a world without recourse to the mythos of Divinity: "no longer to bury one's head in the sand of heavenly things, but to bear it freely, an earthly head, which creates a meaning for the earth."²⁹

In "Esthétique du Mal" (CP, 313-26), affirmation takes on a different guise when it is applied by Stevens to the problem of suffering, or evil. In canto VII the persona says:

. . . The mortal no
Has its emptiness and tragic expirations.
The tragedy, however, may have begun,
Again, in the imagination's new beginning,

²⁹Zarathustra, p. 144.

In the yes of the realist spoken because he must
 Say yes, spoken because under every no
 Lay a passion for yes that has never been broken.

The "yes" of this passage is the "yes" of Zarathustra's "Have you ever said yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes to all woe;"³⁰ it is Nietzsche's "great health"--"the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often appear inhuman"--with which the "great seriousness really begins, . . . the real question mark is posed for the first time, . . . the destiny of the soul changes, the hand moves forward, the tragedy begins."³¹ It partakes also, as Bloom points out, of the celebration of "the secret wisdom of those to whom Nietzsche can say, 'The hidden Yes in you is stronger than all the Nos and Maybes that afflict you and your age like a disease.'"³²

The "inhuman" quality of Nietzsche's "great health" contrasts with the pitying god of canto III of "Esthétique du Mal." "The fault," says the speaker, "lies with an over-human god, / Who by sympathy has made himself a man" and has, thus, "gone before us in experience" of pain--"A too, too human god, self-pity's kin / And uncourageous genesis." The villification of the pitying--"human, all-too-human"--god coincides with the Nietzschean attitude toward pity expressed by Zarathustra: "Pity! Pity for the higher man!. . . that has had its time! My suffering and my pity for suffering--what does it matter? Am I concerned

³⁰Zarathustra, p. 435.

³¹Gay Science, p. 347. Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

³²Bloom, p. 229. Bloom remarks that "The Nietzschean mark is on *Esthétique du Mal* from its beginning, since the opening section participates in the heroic irony of section 283 of The Gay Science, where 'preparatory human beings' are urged to live dangerously: 'Build your houses on the slopes of Vesuvius!'"

with happiness? I am concerned with my work."³³ "If only," Stevens' persona says, "he would not pity us so much."

There is, then, at the heart of Stevens' poetic view of the world a conspicuous element which Hines describes, with reference to "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun" (CP, 248), as "the 'bright scienza. . . a gaiety that is being'."³⁴ Hines, however, mistakenly identifies this "gaiety" with Heidegger's thought, confusing the "ecstatic identities" of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (CP, 258) with the notion of "ecstasis" in Heidegger,³⁵ which does not mean "ecstasy" in the sense of joy but a "standing forth" which finds itself situated in a world and with respect to Being.³⁶ The "gaiety that is being" in Stevens' poetry is the gaiety of Zarathustra, who says, "I would believe only in a god who could dance."³⁷

The most important consequence, for Stevens' poetry, of the "gaiety" of existence in a demythologized world, in which "the grapes seemed fatter" and "the night was roundest, / The fragrance of the autumn warmest, / Closest and strongest" (CP, 203-04)--in which "the ant of the self [is] changed to an ox / . . . everything being more real" (CP, 205)--is to be found in the Nietzschean maxim, "To esteem is to create."³⁸ The heightened experience of being "without a

³³Zarathustra, p. 439. Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

³⁴Hines, p. 137. Hines is obviously unaware of the likely reference in this passage to the Italian title of The Gay Science--"la gaya scienza" (cf. Gay Science, p. 29).

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 377.

³⁷Zarathustra, p. 153.

³⁸Zarathustra, p. 171.

description of to be" (CP, 205) finds expression for Stevens in canto IV of "Description Without Place" in the form of

. . . a kind of total affluence, all first,
All final, colors subjected in revery

To an innate grandiose, an innate light,
The sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool,

Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias
In perpetual revolution, round and round. . . . (CP, 342)

The "kind of total affluence"--creative, or imaginative, fulfillment--which he finds in the "sun of Nietzsche" combines with the oblique reference to Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence"³⁹ to yield a sense of pure experience of the world and the kind of transcendent creative possibility which Stevens attempts to define in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP, 380-408)--a "fiction" which Nietzsche wholeheartedly supports: "Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life."⁴⁰ What is needed is "something that is stronger than pessimism, 'more divine' than truth: art."⁴¹

Nietzsche's "sun" in "Description Without Place" can, in some sense, be identified with "the sun" of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (being cautious, of course, not to confuse "identification" with "identity"), both "suns" serving, at least in part, to represent demythologized reality. The poem begins with an admonition to perceive

³⁹Cf. Gay Science, pp. 273-74.

⁴⁰Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 452.

⁴¹Nietzsche, The Will to Power, p. 453. Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

"The inconveivable idea of the sun"; and the potential for a true perception is seen in the acceptance of the death of the gods:

How clean the sun when seen in its idea
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images. . .

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber. (CP, 381)

The final section of the poem, titled, significantly, "It Must Give Pleasure," again relates to the idea of joy through an intensified experience of the world. Yet, the "Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night" of canto X (CP, 406-07) has been changed through the influence of the imagination: "How is it I find you in difference, see you there / In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?" In regard to the change wrought by the imagination--by the perceiver on the objects of perception--a focus solely on the Nietzschean elements of Stevens' poetry, in keeping with Nietzsche's a-theoretical attitude, proves insufficient to provide a complete explanation of the aesthetic theory conveyed by the poem. Yet, the Nietzschean elements remain essential, for the "supreme fiction" not only suggests a theory concerning the imaginative "subject" but also supports the spontaneous and inevitable relation of that "subject" to worldly reality. Like the "rock" of "Credences of summer": "It is a mountain half way green and then, / The other immeasurable half, such rock / As placid air becomes" (CP, 375). Stevens indicates this relationship through specific reference to Nietzsche in his essay "Imagination as Value":

Nietzsche walked in the Alps in the caresses of reality. We ourselves crawl out of our offices and classrooms and become alert at the opera. Or we sit listening to music as in an imagination in which we believe. If the imagination is the

faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man (NA, 150).

In this prose description Stevens himself isolates the essential quality of his accord with Nietzsche, concentrating into a single focus the "death of gods," and "sun," and the "sacred 'yes'"--the projection of "the idea of God into the idea of man."

The relation of Nietzsche and Stevens is perhaps best characterized as an artistic accord--a deep-flowing exuberance based on common perceptions of the world and the human condition. The similarity in outlook leads to a similarity of tone and content, as evidenced by some of the striking verbal echoes brought to light in this chapter and the previous one. However, despite the sharing of clearly definable philosophical ideas, the relationship between the two is essentially an emotional, and not a theoretical, one--particularly in regard to aesthetic theory. Nietzsche eulogizes art, seeing "Art as the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life, as that which is anti-Christian, anti-Buddhist, antinihilist par excellence";⁴² in fact, in his view, "We possess art lest we perish of the truth."⁴³ Yet, for all his emphasis on the importance of art, his interest in aesthetic theory, apart from the somewhat historical view of The Birth of Tragedy, is limited and does not provide an adequate approach to Stevens' aesthetic. For Stevens, on the other hand, aesthetic theory is of central importance. As poet, he must not only see the value of art but

⁴²Nietzsche, The Will to Power, p. 452.

⁴³Nietzsche, The Will to Power, p. 435. Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

understand the means for producing it. At this point the Nietzschean affinity no longer proves useful in gaining insight into Stevens' art. We must look elsewhere if we are to find a formulation which will illuminate the aesthetic theory underlying Stevens' poetry. The following chapter will attempt to demonstrate that such a formulation exists in Ernst Cassirer's "philosophy of symbolic forms" and will examine Stevens' work in the light of Cassirer's theories. By this means we will try to gain a higher level of definition than critics have previously given of the aesthetic theory which serves as the foundation for Stevens' poetry and prose.

CHAPTER III

THE POETRY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

The examination of Stevens' poetry as a "poetry of being" in the light of the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer takes as its natural point of departure Hines's attempt to relate Stevens to Husserl and Heidegger. The connection of the poetry to Husserlian phenomenology provides the basis for an explanation of Stevens' attitude toward the subject/object duality in a way far more satisfactory than those of Miller and Regueiro; and in providing such a basis, it constitutes a valuable first step toward an adequate description of the "poetry of being." However, when Hines moves from Husserl to Heidegger, he, like Macksey before him, makes a crucial wrong turn. Heidegger's concept of "being" is not Stevens', as evidenced in Chapter I. In this chapter we will attempt to:

(1) define briefly the critical differences between Heidegger's position and that of Cassirer; (2) show the importance of seeing Stevens' poetry in relation to Cassirer's rather than Heidegger's view; and (3) examine Stevens' poetry within the context of a new definition of the "poetry of being" arising from an application of Cassirer's principles.

Like Husserl, Cassirer begins with the idea that it is necessary to affirm the distinction between subject and object. He says in the Logic of the Humanities that the "separation between 'I' and 'you,' and likewise between 'I' and 'world' constitutes the goal and not the starting point of spiritual life."¹ Heidegger, too, starts from the phenomenological basis of the perception of subject/object duality, but for him

¹Ernst Cassirer, The Logic of the Humanities, trans. Clarence Smith Howe (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 188-89.

the "goal" is not the affirmation of the dichotomy but rather the use of the relation as a means to "[i]nterpret the meaning of Being,"² in terms of the ever constant ontological difference. In this emphasis upon an "objective" and monochromatic understanding, he departs from Stevens, for whom "the nature of truth changes, perhaps for no more significant reason than that philosophers live and die" (NA, 40), as well as from Cassirer, who says that "it would be a very naive sort of dogmatism to assume that there exists an absolute reality of things which is the same for all living beings. Reality is not a unique and homogeneous thing."³

To see in Heidegger's philosophy the "naive sort of dogmatism" referred to by Cassirer would be to oversimplify greatly his position. For Heidegger, "Being" is a term, an idea, or a notion which is there for man by virtue of his unique nature--that is, his ontological disposition. Man is "Dasein," the "there-Being"--the one who recognizes "Being" as such. "Being," therefore, is seen as neither an objective, material reality nor a subjective, spiritual reality. Rather, it forms a new, third term which does not really absorb the old categories of subject and object but, instead, defies them by becoming itself the object of scrutiny. His investigations of "Being" thus reveal no interest in either the imaginative capacities of man--the "fictions" of Stevens' poetry--nor in the bedrock of substantial reality of the world, but only in the "truth" of human nature--the human situation as revealed

²Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 35.

³Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 23. Hereafter cited as Essay on Man.

by the fact of the question of "Being." The fact that man calls "Being" into question, or that "Being" becomes a quest for metaphysical thinking, tells, according to Heidegger, the essential truth about man. In this withdrawal of interest from both subject and object in favor of a focus on the "Being question" and "Being" as such, there is no room for "fictions" in Stevens' sense, which reveal the world in the new and constantly changing light of poetic imagination. Rather, for Heidegger, all poetry leads back to the single and fundamental truth: that for man, no matter what the "fictions" of the age, no matter what the turn of hermeneutical interpretation, always "Dasein" is the one for whom there is a "World"--for whom there is "Being." As he says in Being and Time, "Understanding is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being. Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological."⁴

Although Heidegger, like Stevens (and Cassirer), sees truth as being based in man, his reduction yields an effect opposite to that of Stevens' productive, or creative, imagination. For Heidegger all poetic truth is finally one human truth, while for Stevens poetic truths are multifaceted forms of a world not reducible to a single vision:

You. . . You said,
 "There are many truths,
 But they are not parts of a truth."
 Then the tree, at night, began to change,

 Smoking through green and smoking blue.

 "Words are not forms of a single word.
 In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
 The world must be measured by eye [.]" (CP, 204)

⁴Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 32. Emphasis is Heidegger's.

Stevens' outlook does not defy subject and object but embraces both to form a "reality" which is always in the plural: "The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things; but if this constitutes a certain single characteristic, it is the source not of a certain single value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things" (NA, 136). Heidegger's single and ontological view would be, in Stevens' view, an "impoverishment" of the ever-fluid dynamism of imagination and world.

Cassirer, on the other hand, from his neo-Kantian perspective, sees in the creative capability of man the kind of multifaceted "possibility" described by Stevens:

The function of the concept. . . no longer appears as merely formal and analytical; it is a productive constructive function--no longer a more or less remote and pale copy of some absolute, self-subsisting reality, but a presupposition of experience and hence a condition of the possibility of its objects.⁵

In this formulation lies the basis for the creation of Stevens' "fictions," even of the "supreme fiction," as Cassirer sees man freed, as by the Nietzschean "death of God," from "absolute, self-subsisting reality" and thus enabled to create out of his own productive capacity. Cassirer indicates the difference between his own philosophical investigations and those of Heidegger by saying:

[Heidegger] spoke of the Geworfenheit of man (the being-thrown). To be thrown into the stream of time is a fundamental and unalterable feature of our human situation. We cannot emerge from this stream and we cannot change its course. We have to

⁵Ernst Cassirer, The Phenomenology of Knowledge, Vol. III of The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 315. Hereafter cited as Phenomenology of Knowledge.

accept the historical conditions of our existence. We can try to understand and to interpret them; but we cannot change them.⁶

Cassirer objects to such a view on the grounds that it loses sight of man's role as creator of his own reality and denies the productive nature of the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. As D. P. Verene points out, "What troubles Cassirer. . . is that on such views philosophy no longer is seen as an agency of human freedom."⁷ Or, in the terms of Stevens' "The Latest Freed Man," man is confined to the role of the "doctor" and not the "ox."⁸ For Cassirer man is not so much at the mercy of his situation but is capable through an act of consciousness of giving order and meaning to a meaningless world: "By a pure activity of the imagination we can. . . inject a definite content into parts of a sensuous totality that have been left empty by direct experience."⁹ Of his own philosophical endeavor compared to that of Heidegger he says further:

The philosophy of Symbolic Forms does not question [the] temporality which Heidegger discloses as the ultimate foundation of existentiality and attempts to explain in its diverse factors. But our inquiry begins beyond this sphere, at precisely the point where a transition is effected from this existential form of temporality to the form of time. It aspires to show the condition under which this form is possible, the conditions for the postulation of a "being" which goes beyond the existentiality of "being-there." In regard to time as to space, the μεταβασις (transition) from the meaning of existence to the objective meaning of "logos" constitutes its proper theme and problem."¹⁰

⁶Ernst Cassirer, The Myth of the State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. 293.

⁷D. P. Verene, "Cassirer's Concept of Symbolic Form and Creativity," Idealistic Studies, 3 (Jan. 1978), 22.

⁸Heidegger's precise notion is that man is the "shepherd of Being." Cf. Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 210.

⁹Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 426.

¹⁰Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 163n. Emphasis is Cassirer's.

Thus, the affinity to Cassirer reveals the "poetry of being" in a new light--transformed from a "decreative" attempt to view unobscured reality into a creative effort to give shape to pure "forms" of existence.

This question of creation versus "decreation" is central to the views of the major critics of the "poetry of being." Miller sees in Stevens' later poetry a cycle of creation and "decreation" in which the one builds up imaginative constructs while the other alternately tears them down; Regueiro and Hines see Stevens as opting for a "decreative" process by which such imaginative constructs are stripped away to reveal reality in its bare, essential nature. All three use the term "decreation" to indicate a process which directly opposes the creative activity of the imagination. Stevens himself, however, uses the term in quite a different way, and one quite compatible with the philosophy of Cassirer, in the essay, "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting":

Simone Weil in *La Pesanteur et La Grâce* has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created world to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created world into nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discover it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything (NA, 175).

It is clear from this passage that what Miller, Regueiro, and Hines see as "decreation" is termed "destruction" by Stevens.¹¹ Far from being the opposite of creation, it is the pinnacle of creation, the aesthetic equivalent of Husserl's eidetic reduction, moving "from the created to the uncreated"--Cassirer's "realm of pure forms," in which

¹¹Regueiro, in fact, uses the term "destruction" more or less interchangeably with "decreation," while Miller and Hines both find in Stevens' poetry a movement toward "nothingness."

Word and mythic image, which once confronted the human mind as hard realistic powers, have now cast off all reality and effectuality; they have become a light, bright ether in which the spirit can move without let or hindrance. This liberation is achieved not because the mind throws aside the sensuous forms of word and image, but in that it uses them both as organs of its own, and thereby recognizes them for what they really are: forms of its own self-revelation.¹²

As in the case of the connection between Nietzsche and Stevens, Frank Doggett is the only critic to make a reasonable approach to the relationship between Cassirer and Stevens. But while Doggett uses a quotation from Cassirer as epigraph for one of his chapters and acknowledges indebtedness to Cassirer for the theoretical background of a portion of his discussion of Stevens, he discusses the connection directly at only one point in his book, and then briefly, bringing it to bear on "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch," of which he says,

A symbolic figure in a world of art compared to a world that is "anything but sculpture" is very naturally the archetypal reclining woman, naked and nameless, or, as the title has it, "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch." Looking at reality through a universal symbol translated into the individual vision of a work of art (in Cassirer's phrase, its "peculiar way of seeing") the poem describes the visible form and attributes of the inamorata[.]¹³

He, thus, suggests the relation but does not work it out in detail.

Stevens himself does not mention Cassirer in his letters or poems but does use a quotation from Cassirer's An Essay on Man to support his argument against Romanticism in the essay "Imagination as Value" (NA, 136). Although Cassirer spent the last years of his life (1941-45)

¹²Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1953), p. 99. Hereafter cited as Language and Myth.

¹³Doggett, p. 49.

at Yale in New Haven, Connecticut, only thirty-five miles away from Stevens' home in Hartford, there is no record of direct contact between the two. Nonetheless, Stevens' library included a copy of An Essay on Man, written in English by Cassirer and published just before he died; and the copy contained two newspaper clippings concerning Cassirer and the book, one dated April 15, 1945, the day after Cassirer's death.¹⁴ But, here again, the question of influence is not central to our purpose; rather we must apply the principles of Cassirer's philosophy to Stevens' poetry in order to define a system of theoretical possibility within which the poetry can be discussed.

Stevens says of the nature of poetry, "It is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (NA, 27). In Harmonium he explores this interdependence in a number of poems, making perhaps the most thorough examination in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (CP 98-102), in which he presents five parallel descriptions of a November morning at sea near Tehuantepec. The five descriptions are not presented explicitly as five versions of the same scene nor as pictures of five different scenes. It is not the objective reality which is in question but the reality created through an interaction of imagination and its intentional object. He says in "Three Academic Pieces," "What our eyes behold may well be the text of life but one's meditations on the text and the disclosures of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality" (NA, 76). The "problem" of the poem is not to see the "truth" of objective reality but to bring imagination and reality into balance. As Cassirer says in An Essay on Man, "Like all the other symbolic forms

¹⁴Bates, p. 56.

art is not the mere reproduction of a ready-made, given reality. . . . It is not an imitation but a discovery of reality,"¹⁵ "discovery" in this case being a creative function and not merely an "understanding" of reality.

In "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" (CP, 66), Stevens represents the need for constructive imagination to give meaning and order to existence. The blank whiteness of sleeping apparel becomes, in the poem, a symbol for the absence of such imagination: "The houses are haunted / By white nightgowns." In contrast to such monotony, the narrator sees the need for "rings" of color which must be created by the imagination. Thus, the images of the poem become images of construction. Stevens mentally creates "rings" in the poem by using repetition of words ("or" and "rings") and by loading the ends of the lines with heavy accents to create a circular motion:

None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.

And the ring imagery is extended by references to "beaded ceintures," "baboons" (presumably ring-tailed), and "periwinkles" (with involuted shells). Such rings are not to be found in "The houses. . . haunted / By white nightgowns"; they must be constructed by the imagination of the persona. Thus, the colors are arranged in a progression which implies construction--the development of an imaginative edifice which is sufficient to transcend the "white" of the "nightgowns." This is accomplished through two devices: first, there is a logical progression of colors between rings and gowns, the green rings of the purple gowns

¹⁵Essay of Man, p. 138.

becoming green gowns with yellow rings and the yellow rings becoming, in turn, yellow gowns with blue rings; and, second, the compound colors are broken apart into their primary components, the green nightgowns at the beginning of the color series becoming yellow with blue rings at the end and the purple of the beginning being left incomplete by the blue rings, only to be completed by the "red weather" in the last line of the poem.

The absence of creative imagination is again the subject of "The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad" (CP, 96), as the persona finds himself unequal to the task of imparting meaning to bleak reality: "I am too dumbly in my being pent." The wind, a principal image in the poem is not an enervating source of inspiration calling man out into the unknown, but is rather the innocuous and uninteresting breath of ennui: "The wind attendant on the solstices / Blows on the shutters of the metropolises." As in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," the landscape is sterile, with no color of imagination. The wind "[s]tir[s] no poet in his sleep," just as the people of "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" do not "dream of baboons and periwinkles." The weight of meaningless experience makes summer and winter seem alike in "The malady of the quotidian," and no true experience of life seems possible.

Stevens says in "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems" that "To confront fact in its total bleakness is for any poet a completely baffling experience. Reality is not the thing but the aspect of the thing" (NA, 95). Thus, the task of the poet is to find, through the application of the imagination to the objective world, an access into the reality of "the aspect of the thing." In this vein Cassirer says, "The revelation of this inexhaustibility of the aspects of things is

one of the deepest charms of art."¹⁶ In an effort to see the aspects, Stevens adopts the technique of multiple approaches to a subject by putting short poems together to form longer ones, as in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and the longer poems of the later poetry. William Carlos Williams, in a tribute to Stevens on the occasion of his death, says that "Stevens seldom comes down to a statement of fact. It is always, 'thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird.'"¹⁷ In Cassirer's concisely philosophical terms, "It is only in the reciprocal movement between the 'representing' and the 'represented' that a knowledge of the ego and its objects, ideal as well as real, can arise. Here we feel the true pulse of consciousness, whose secret is precisely that every beat strikes a thousand connections."¹⁸

In "The Idea of Order at Key West" (CP, 128-30), appearing in Ideas of Order, Stevens continues to explore the interaction of imagination and reality, finding the imagination to be the force for satisfying the "[b]lessed rage for order." "We live in the mind," he says in "Effects of Analogy." "If we live in the mind, we live in the imagination" (NA, 140). But the life of the mind is not a detached abstraction. Here, again, Cassirer provides a philosophical elaboration: "The forms of art. . . are not empty forms. They perform a definite task in the construction and organization of human experience."¹⁹ In the poem, the woman walks by the sea:

¹⁶Essay on Man, p. 145.

¹⁷William Carlos Williams, "Wallace Stevens," Poetry, 87 (Jan. 1956), 236.

¹⁸Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 203.

¹⁹Essay on Man, p. 167.

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. Then we,
 As we beheld her striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

For the narrator of the poem, it is clear that the "imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos" (NA, 153). Or, in the more precise terms of Cassirer: "By a pure activity of the imagination we can. . . inject a definite content into parts of a sensuous totality that have been left empty by direct experience."²⁰ Through the "activity of the imagination" the singer becomes not just the perceiver of the world but the creator of her own world--"the single artificer of the world / In which she sang."

"The Man With the Blue Guitar" is Stevens' most extended treatment in straightforward terms of the interaction of imagination and reality. The exposition of the poem revolves around the question of what constitutes "things as they are." The people say, "You have a blue guitar, / You do not play things as they are"; and the poet replies, "'Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar'" (CP, 165). Again the "meditations on the text" are seen as "a part of the structure of reality." Stevens says in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

The subject matter of poetry is not [the] "collection of solid, static objects extended in space" but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are (NA, 25).

The poet in "The Man With the Blue Guitar" must struggle against "the pressure of reality"--"the pressure of an external event or events on

²⁰Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 426.

the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA, 20) --against which his only recourse is to "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without [,]. . . the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA, 36). The poet cannot play what the people think of as "things exactly as they are" because, as Cassirer shows, "the reality of the phenomenon cannot be separated from its representative function; it ceases to be the same as soon as it signifies something different, as soon as it points to another total complex as its background."²¹ The poem can represent reality but it cannot reproduce it.

The "pressure of reality" likewise weighs on the poet in "Of Modern Poetry" (CP, 239-40), in Parts of a World, describing "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." In this case the catastrophe of war has replaced the oppressive burden of the Depression, which hung over "The Man With the Blue Guitar." Stevens says of the role of the poet: "I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs [the people's] and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives" (NA, 29). "What will suffice," then, must be a poetic imagining which is adequate to cope with the reality of the time:

It must
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.

In this poem there is clearly no conflict between Stevens' interest in

²¹Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 141.

the imagination and his concern for the human reality. The two are not opposed--contrary to the Heideggerian interpretation of the "poetry of being," which denounces the creative activity of the productive subject in favor of the concept of "Dasein" as the "shepherd of Being." In the poem the "human reality" is seen to be real only insofar as it is fulfilled, or intensified, by the imagination. What satisfies the poet and, likewise, his receptive audience is not the bleak plane of scientific or pseudo-scientific fact but rather the color of the multidimensional world infused with the life of imagination. In the following passage Cassirer expands his idea of this necessary relation between imagination and world in terms strikingly like those of "Of Modern Poetry" and Stevens' subsequent "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and, in so doing, makes explicit what is implicit in the poetry: "Even though the image may be recognized and, as it were, epistemologically exposed as a fiction, it has reality as a fiction--that is, it arises according to definite and necessary laws of the imagination--and that suffices."²²

It is only on the basis of such a concept of "fiction" and its sufficiency that "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" becomes possible. The idea that a "supreme fiction" can be created must be based in the idea not only that "fictions" can "suffice" but also that the origin of all belief is essentially metaphorical. Cassirer says that "What man really sought in the heavens was his own reflection and the order of his human universe."²³ And Stevens uses virtually identical terms to express the same idea in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "And Eve made air the

²²Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 192.

²³Essay on Man, p. 48.

mirror of herself, / of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves / In heaven as in a glass; a second earth " (CP, 383). But even as Stevens focuses on this mythical, metaphorical positing, he recognizes in it the beginnings of logical thought--theoretical knowledge--and, thus, finds in the mythical the seed of its own dissolution: "Adam / In Eden was the father of Descartes" (CP, 383). Cassirer gives full expression to this idea in his contention that "the spiritual potency, whose first concrete manifestation was myth, asserts itself. . . , and . . . within the new dimension of theoretical self-consciousness it . . . continues to act in new form, in a kind of metamorphosis."²⁴ And yet he finds:

The world views of myth and theoretical knowledge cannot coexist in the same area of thought. They are mutually exclusive: the beginning of one is equivalent to the end of the other. Once the day has dawned, once the theoretical consciousness and theoretical perception are born, no return seems possible to the world of mythical shadows.²⁵

Thus with the triumph of logical, theoretical thought in the Western world, God, like everything else, has been objectified and has inevitably perished. In view of the impossibility of a return to the old forms of myth, the artist must find new mythologies; he must create "what will suffice." Stevens says in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words": "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 as ever-enlarging incoherence" (NA, 17). In light of such inadequate and fragmented "mythologies," he finds that "one wants to elicit a sense of the imagination as something vital. In that sense

²⁴Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 79.

²⁵Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 78.

one must deal with it as metaphysics" (NA, 139); and the outcome of this "metaphysical" approach to the imagination is to be, of course, a "supreme fiction," which will be equal to the now-vanished mythology of religion. Art will, in a sense, take the place of religion in "helping people to live their lives" by finding "what will suffice." According to Cassirer, religious consciousness, being dependent for its "truth" upon the meaning of the religious image, is torn between the "sensuous existence" of its images and its continuous striving "toward a progressively purer spiritualization,"²⁶ and:

It is only the aesthetic consciousness that leaves this problem truly behind it. Since from the outset it gives itself to pure "contemplation," developing the form of vision in contrast to all forms of action, the images fashioned in this frame of consciousness gain for the first time a truly immanent significance. They confess themselves to be illusions as opposed to the empirical reality of things; but this illusion has its own truth because it possesses its own law. In the return to this law there arises a new freedom of consciousness: the image no longer reacts upon the spirit as an independent material thing but becomes for the spirit a pure expression of its own creative power.²⁷

The aesthetic consciousness, thus, proves to be superior to religious consciousness, being unfettered by the tension between symbol and symbolized, and is, therefore, free to self-consciously create a new transcendence in the form of a "supreme fiction." Thus, Stevens can say of the images created by such consciousness:

. . . these are the pictorializations of men, for whom the world exists as a world and for whom life exists as life. . . . Their words have made a world that transcends the world and a life

²⁶Ernst Cassirer, Mythical Thought, Vol. II of The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), pp. 260-61.

²⁷Cassirer, Mythical Thought, p. 261.

livable in that transcendence. It is a transcendence achieved by means of the minor effects of figuration and the major effects of the poet's sense of the world. . . . Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearance of that sense (NA, 130).

The idea of the "fiction" occurs again in "The Rock," one of Stevens' last important poems: "The fiction of the leaves is the icon / Of the poem" (CP, 526). Of the leaves he says, "These are a cure of the ground and of ourselves, / In the predicate that there is nothing else" (CP, 527). Thus, the "fiction" again is seen as that which will "suffice"--the humanly-based transcendence replacing the now-invalid religious transcendence. As "the icon," the "fiction of the leaves" is a self-conscious symbol and, as such, is capable of the "immanent significance" described by Cassirer--as in the following passage, which recalls his "true pulse of consciousness, whose secret is precisely that every beat strikes a thousand connections":

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

And so exists no more. This is the cure
Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves.
His words are both the icon and the man. (CP, 527)

Cassirer explains, in The Phenomenology of Knowledge, this integrated image of imagination/reality, the guiding thought of his philosophy as well as Stevens' poetry:

For there is no seeing and nothing visible which does not stand in some mode of spiritual vision, of ideation. A seeing and a thing-seen outside of this "sight," a "bare" sensation preceding all formation, is an empty abstraction. The "given" must always be taken in a definite aspect and so apprehended, for it is to be understood neither as secondary and conceptual nor as an

associative addition: rather, it is the simple meaning of the original intuition itself.²⁸

In another appearance of the rock as poetic symbol, Stevens in "Credences of Summer" presents the union of imagination and reality:

The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.
It rises hard from land and sea and covers them.
It is a mountain half way green and then,
The other immeasurable half, such rock
As placid air becomes.

The "truth" of the rock is, thus, composed of both the "subjective" and the "objective." Again Cassirer casts light on the relation:

Art can no more be defined as the mere expression of inward life than as a reflection of the forms of outward reality; in it, too, the crucial and characteristic factor is to be sought in how, through it, the "subjective" and "objective," pure emotion and pure form, merge with one another and so gain a new permanence and a new content.²⁹

This uniting of the two to form an adequate picture of "the truth" has been the central preoccupation for Stevens since "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" in the second edition of Harmonium; and if there is, indeed, a definable "poetry of being" in his later work, we must find it in such a union--in the creation of "pure forms" such as that of the rock in which the image, as Cassirer says, confesses itself to be an illusion and thus attains its own truth.

"Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight" (CP, 430-31), in The Auroras of Autumn, presents a still more vivid instance of the "truth" to which the imagination is not the means but an integral part of the end. Stevens recognizes such a role for the imagination when he says, in "The Noble

²⁸ Phenomenology of Knowledge, p. 134.

²⁹ Ernst Cassirer, Language, Vol. I of The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 93.

Rider and the Sound of Words," that "if the end of the philosopher [as metaphysician] is despair, the end of the poet is fulfillment, since the poet finds a sanction for life in poetry that satisfies the imagination" (NA, 43). The roses in the poem are "things that in being real / Make any imaginings of them lesser things"; they are "too much as they are to be changed by metaphor." However, the poem is by no means a rejection of metaphor, as Hines and Regueiro claim, but, in fact, an affirmation of the degree to which the imagination is a part of perceived reality and its "truth":

And yet this effect is a consequence of the way
We feel and, therefore, is not real, except
In our sense of it, our sense of the fertilist red,

Of yellow as first color and of white,
In which the sense lies still, as a man lies,
Enormous, in a completing of his truth.

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

In "yellow as the first color," Stevens returns, not in a cognitive but in a sensuous manifestation, to the "first idea" of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where "yellow" is the sun--the "first idea"--the idea of "this invented world, / The inconceivable idea of the sun" (CP, 380-81);³⁰ and in "the fertilist red" he suggests the creative power and function of the imagination, as when in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "The lion roars at the enraging desert, / Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise" (CP, 384). Thus, the bouquet of roses, suggesting a

³⁰On comparison of the first stanzas of parts I and II of "It Must Be Abstract," it becomes clear that Stevens intends that the "sun" be taken as the "first idea." "This invention" is the "idea of the sun" (part I), and the "first idea" is the "quick / Of this invention" (part II). (Hines, as will be recalled from Chapter I, misinterprets the "first idea" as "Being.")

return to these ideas, itself becomes an embodiment of the "supreme fiction." In the pun on the word "lies," Stevens underscores the "truth" of the self-confessed illusion which the roses present. As Cassirer says, "Art gives us a richer, more vivid and colorful image of reality, and a more profound insight into its formal structure"³¹--and even more to the point, "The artistic eye. . . is a constructive eye, and it is only by constructive acts that we can discover the beauty of natural things."³²

The creation of the image of self-conscious illusion can also be seen in "of Mere Being" (OP, 117-18), which Regueiro takes as the ultimate example of the imagination's self-destruction. Far from being destroyed, the imagination is present at the very surface of the poem, particularly in the overtly conscious ordering of the elements in the final lines:

The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.

The wind moves slowly in its branches.

The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

Such conscious placement, recalling the construction imagery of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch," does not withdraw the imagination from the poem but rather presents the creative act as a part of the reality described, an effect enhanced by the gaudily descriptive terminology of "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down." Cassirer says in Language and Myth that art, as a "symbolic form,"

³¹Essay on Man, p. 170.

³²Essay on Man, p. 151.

. . . produces and posits a world of its own. In these realms the spirit exhibits itself in that inwardly determined dialectic by virtue of which alone there is any reality, any organized and definite Being at all. Thus the symbolic forms are not imitations, but organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us. The question as to what reality is apart from these forms and what are its independent attributes, becomes irrelevant here.³³

In "Of Mere Being," as in "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight," the object of apprehension is created through the "dialectic" of imagination and reality; thus, as Cassirer says, there is the possibility for an "organized and definite Being." In his application of such a "dialectic" in these late poems, Stevens comes full circle, returning to the investigations of the imagination and reality in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." But his speculations of Harmonium have become the expression of a systemized theory in the later poems; consequently, poetry has, indeed, become for him "an unofficial view of being" (NA, 40).

The "poetry of being" is for Stevens, as Miller, Regueiro, and Hines contend, an exploration of the nature of things--an attempt to penetrate to the essential "truth" of "things as they are." But "truth" for Stevens is not the metaphysical truth of rational philosophy; instead it is the creative, artistic truth celebrated by Nietzsche as a means of reuniting man with his world. And, indeed, such a reunion is not seen by Stevens as possible without the creative act of man, the consciously imposed "fiction" of the poet which makes man a part of the truth and not merely a passive observer. Thus, the truth becomes not just a random manifestation of individual objects--a chaos of unordered reality--but the symbolic value of the structured image seen, accepted, and

³³Language and Myth, p. 8. Emphasis is Cassirer's.

understood as an image. The images become the symbolic forms of Cassirer; man is redefined from animal rationale to animal symbolicum.³⁴ The "poetry of being" becomes a poetry not of disinterested observation of the truth of things but of creation of, and participation in, that truth--a "truth" of which "fiction" is a vital part.

³⁴Cf. Essay on Man, p. 26.

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VITA

James Stanley Leonard was born in Bristol, Virginia on July 2, 1947. He attended elementary schools in Bristol, Tennessee and was graduated from Bristol, Tennessee High School in June 1965. In September of that year he entered The University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and in March 1969 received a Bachelor of Arts Degree with a major in English. From February 1968 until September 1978 he was employed in various capacities in the field of city planning, including four years (July 1974 to September 1978) as Planning Director of Morristown, Tennessee. In the fall of 1978 he accepted a teaching assistantship at The University of Tennessee at Knoxville and began study toward a Master's Degree.

Mr. Leonard received the Master of Arts Degree in English in December 1979. He will be employed at Clemson University on a temporary basis following graduation.