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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Lisa June Wilson entitled "The Magnificent Cause of Being: The Function of the Imagination in Wallace Stevens' Poetry." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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THE MAGNIFICENT CAUSE OF BEING: THE FUNCTION OF THE IMAGINATION IN WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to show how Wallace Stevens' interpretation of the imagination's function changed from his early poems to his later poems. Critics have agreed that an understanding of the imagination is vital to a clear view of the poems as individual works as well as a progressive whole, but there has been constant disagreement over the exact function of the imagination. While one interpretation saw the imagination as a transforming power able to approach reality through resemblance, still another recognized an imagination which required annihilation in order to approach reality more closely.

Neither theory is adequate. This study describes instead progression in the imagination's function throughout the poems. In the early poems the imagination is the faculty that makes man aware, through contrast, of the unpleasant characteristics of reality: flux, terror and mutability. Since these qualities make traditional beliefs invalid in the modern world, a new faith that would reconcile the unpleasantness of reality with the transforming power of the imagination is needed. Stevens' quest is essentially a search for belief in the imagination. He uses images of sun, moon, water and music in the early poems to symbolize a reconciliation that would allow belief, but, like Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C,"

he sees each image fail at bringing about a permanent merging of the two forces.

With "The Man With the Blue Guitar" Stevens begins to set forth propositions for the development of the concept of a fiction to take the place of traditional faith. Such a fiction would effect a reconciliation using the imagination as a force with powers equal to those of reality. The imagination can make the world comfortable by combatting the qualities of flux, terror and mutability that make reality unbearable.

"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthetique du Mal" are representative of Stevens' later poems since they elaborate on the development of a fiction by giving four explicit requirements: a fiction must change, be abstract, give pleasure and encompass evil. Belief in a supreme fiction fills the need caused by the absence of religious faith and makes the real world a tolerable place for man.

The imagination is a key concept in understanding Wallace Stevens' poems, and study of its development helps to make clearer Stevens' progress as a poet as well as the relationships between his poems. When the imagination's interaction with reality is clarified, it can be seen that Stevens' poetry is the record of his quest for a habitable world.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is agreement among critics that the imagination and its function are key concepts in gaining an understanding of Wallace Stevens' poems, both as individual works and as a collection of poetic effort. It is easy to recognize a dichotomy in Stevens' poems between the external world of real objects and the internal world of personal perception. Frank Doggett points to Stevens' concern with "the nature of the self within him as it conceives the world from moment to moment."[1] The external world and the antitheses contained in it require a response from Stevens; the imagination is the acting force that must mediate between the poet and his environment. Since the imagination's action revolves around the poet's perceptions, poetry becomes an "act of the mind," a seeking for words to convey perceptions of reality. Joseph Riddell says that

> it was Stevens' faith that by being true to himself, by exercising his own imagination upon the world (whether external or internal) he could manifest the possibilities of every mind. . . .[2]

J. Hillis Miller, who emphasizes Stevens' conception of

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[1]Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 13.

[2]Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 2.

the world as an empty, valueless place,[3] explains that "imagination is the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world with which imagination carries on its endless intercourse."[4] Stevens' problem is to reconcile the two.

Stevens does seem to believe that such a reconciliation is possible; his poetry constitutes a continuous searching for a way to make it happen. He states that "the imagination is the next greatest power to faith" and that "the world about us would be desolate except for the world

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[3]J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," in The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, ed. J. Hillis Miller and Roy Harvey Pearce (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 143-62. Stevens' attitude toward belief, an important aspect of this study, arises out of this conception. Miller discusses the absence of belief in Stevens' poetry by describing "the evaporation of the gods" which left "a barren man in a barren land." The order that was present when the gods were disappeared with them and left a reality characterized by chaos. This fracture of order also left a world divided in two: subject is separated from object; imagination is sundered from reality. Stevens describes the situation in Opus Posthumous:

> To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. . . . It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that they left no momentoes behind, no thrones, no mystic rings, no texts either of the soil or of the soul. It was as if they had never inhabited the earth. There was no crying out for their return. [OP, 206-207]

Stevens' quest is for a source of belief to take the place of the vanished gods.

[4]Ibid., p. 145.

within us."[5] He tries, through the action of the imagination, to make the world of reality a tolerable, livable place for man--as if a clear perception of reality could allow an acceptance of its qualities. As Ronald Sukenick says,

> Though we exist in reality we are bound by the mind, and thus it is not the nature of reality that matters so much as our sense of it, the sense of it that the imagination gives us.[6]

It is necessary, then, to understand the relationship between the poet and his world through careful study of the imagination's function throughout the poetry.

Stevens' own attitude toward the function of the poetic imagination, however, is ambiguous; he never gives a clear-cut statement of what he interprets it to be. In "Imagination as Value" he defines the imagination as "the power of the mind over the possibilities of things . . ."[7] and describes it by saying that "it is an activity like seeing things or hearing things or any other sensory activity."[8] It is clear, then, that the use of the imagination is for him an activity that occurs constantly and unconsciously. He goes on to explain that "to think of it

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[5]Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 177, 169.

[6]Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 28.

[7]Stevens, p. 136.

[8]Ibid., p. 145.

[the imagination] as part of life is to realize the extent of artifice. We live in the mind."[9] Poetry is, for Stevens, the verbal record of his mind's activity.

Yet his understanding of the imagination seems to change with his maturity as a poet. He states, "The imagination changes as the mind changes,"[10] implying that he himself saw a development taking place throughout the years of his writing. He seems to believe that the imagination can be developed and sharpened when its use is intensified. He says, "When we speak of the life of the imagination, we do not mean man's life as it is affected by his imagination but the life of the faculty itself."[11] The development of his ability to record his imagination's action on reality can be readily seen through a chronological examination of his poetry, for he defined poetry as "a process of the personality of the poet."[12]

Since he is chiefly concerned with the exchanges made between the perceiver and the world, Stevens came to regard the imagination as a kind of transforming force. He remarked,

> The way a poet feels when he is writing, or after he has written, a poem that completely accomplishes his purpose is evidence of the personal nature of his activity. To describe it by exaggerating it, he shares the transformation, not to say apotheosis, accomplished by the poem. . . . Anyone who has read

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[9] Ibid., p. 140.

[10] Ibid., p. 151.

[11] Ibid., p. 154.

[12] Ibid., p. 156.

> a long poem day after day . . . knows how the poem comes to possess the reader and how it naturalizes him in his own imagination and liberates him there.[13]

The writing of poetry was, for Stevens, an intensely personal event; his collected works reflect his struggle to train his imagination to make exchanges occur within the poems for both himself and his readers.

Two recent critics who have explored the function of the imagination in Stevens' works and developed opposing theses are Alan Perlis and Helen Regueiro. Perlis, in Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes, sees the imagination as a transformer of reality. According to his study, language is Stevens' way to circle around objects in an attempt to confine them. However, since the object world is in a state of constant flux, language gives an illusion of the world's natural process but cannot overcome or stop it. This paradox, according to Perlis, is at the heart of Stevens' poems: the poet is compelled to make imaginative transformations, yet they do not bring him closer to "the thing itself," the real object. Stevens' poetry is successful, though, in that it "briefly arrests the flow of time to observe the transformations that come of resemblance."[14] Even though changes take place constantly, the intellect can delight in the opportunity for

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[13]Ibid., pp. 49-50.

[14]Alan Perlis, Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell Press, 1976), p. 17.

imaginings; when the poet's mind and nature meet, the possibility for transformations is limitless. Perlis describes his theory of the imagination's function in Stevens' poetry thus:

> The object perceived is raw clay. In the poet's mind, however, it is "bisqued," embellished, and thereby changed by those elements of its surroundings which he connects with it. The world becomes, as it were, an infinite variety of glaze elements, from which the poet mixes the particular concoctions that meet his imagination's satisfaction. As he applies his chosen concoction to the raw clay, the clay assumes a transformed and distinctive quality unlike anything that exists in reality itself, but that resides comfortably and naturally in the domain of the imagination. Every object in the world, then, is a potential analogue for every other object. The poetical mind discovers the analogues and gives them a voice, which is the articulate imagination.[15]

Asking why a poet engages in such "play," Perlis concludes that the elusive nature of the world requires it. Since poetry cannot reproduce elements from the object world, it must be content with transforming them and can even delight in such imaginative power. Perlis declares that "the poet's failure is cause for celebration."[16]

On the other hand, Helen Regueiro in The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens sees no evidence of such a celebration of the imagination in Stevens' poems. Instead, she declares that he believes in the imagination only after he has doubted it: "Only by denying the imagination its capacity for totality can he make it an

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[15] Ibid., p. 23.

[16] Ibid., p. 84.

instrument of the particular and perhaps chaotic richness of existence."[17] She sees a withdrawal from reality in Stevens' early poems as well as an "affirmation of the imagination as the great transforming and humanizing power."[18] Without an active imagination man becomes a snowman, according to Regueiro's reading of the early poems. The imagination, like the jar placed in Tennessee in "Anecdote of the Jar," imposes order on a reality that is chaotic and meaningless. She also notices that, even in the earliest poems, there is a degree of tension as the poet reaches the realization that image can never touch object; the imagination seems to fail at creating a comfortable world for the poet to live in. Since the imagination transforms the object into something other than what it is (being unable to reproduce it exactly), it becomes a hindrance in the search for a way to describe things as they are.

At this point the similarities between Perlis and Regueiro end. For Regueiro, Stevens must somehow make the imagination turn "its transforming and in that measure destructive power not against reality but against itself."[19] Stevens then does not attempt to name reality itself;

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[17]Helen Regueiro, The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 147.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., p. 148.

instead his efforts seek the metaphors that describe the inability of the imagination to reproduce reality. Regueiro describes this process:

> By making the imagination turn against itself, the natural object is envisioned in the poem but placed outside the realm of the poem, so that the intentional structure which would normally deny the possibility of experience becomes itself the instrument of reconciliation with the outside world.[20]

Since (as Perlis also emphasizes) experience is elusive in its temporality--is becomes was too quickly to describe--Stevens writes "a poetry of failure; inevitably so, because it speaks of a moment or an object that must be experienced or perceived as an absence. . . ."[21] But, Regueiro claims, there is a kind of success in this failure

> because in its [the imagination's] rejection of itself it ceases being an end and becomes an instrument of experience, reaching the "being" of the object in a transforming moment of awareness.[22]

When the imagination ceases its effort to transform reality into meaning, it instead transforms itself; there occurs then "an acceptance of an imagination that has consciously turned against itself."[23] The imagination can now, according to Regueiro, approach objects without the compulsion to explain their meaning. She finds in Stevens' later poetry "a poetic consciousness simultaneously destroyed and transcended by consciousness itself."[24] She

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[20] Ibid., p. 149.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., p. 210.

[24] Ibid., p. 213.

explains further that "as creation and decreation become simultaneous, and in fact a single act, Stevens' poetry becomes the rite of passage into a world that lies beyond its reach."[25] The imagination cannot, then, inhabit the world of reality. It can experience reality only when it drowns itself in the richness of being. As Regueiro puts it,

> The poetic imagination is silencing itself before it can speak, placing reality in a realm into which it cannot transgress. . . . The poem that recognizes its intentionality, its imaginative enclosure, becomes a pathway into the realm of being.[26]

This is, however, a pathway that finds being at the cost of destroying itself; Regueiro makes this claim:

> The poem, originating in the mind, destroys itself in the consciousness of its intentionality. And in that destruction it becomes, paradoxically, the poem in the act of finding - finding and experiencing a reality outside of itself.[27]

In opposition to Regueiro, Perlis sees the inability of the imagination to re-create reality as a cause for celebration in that it allows the poet to exercise his imaginative power to create resemblance and transformations. Regueiro sees this same inability as a source of frustration and futility of purpose; the poet must destroy the imagination in its conventional function in order to achieve a sense of self-satisfaction in the poetic act.

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., p. 216.

[27] Ibid.

Although they both contain information necessary to an understanding of Stevens' poems, Perlis' and Regueiro's works represent two poles of critical opinion on the concept of the imagination implicit in Stevens' poetry. Perlis sees little development in Stevens' understanding of the imagination's action. While Regueiro observes a development from the early poems to the later, she does not attribute it to Stevens' increasing ability to use his imaginative capabilities. Instead, she describes a mysterious necessity to destroy the imagination and to turn its creative power against itself. By coming to two very different conclusions, Perlis and Regueiro emphasize the disturbing fact that no one has found a way to explain adequately how Stevens' imagination acts in his poems. While all Stevens' readers affirm its importance, no single critic can satisfactorily explain the imagination's function in terms of the poems as a collected work.

There seems to occur, throughout the spectrum of Stevens' poems, a change not in the imagination itself, but in his ability to control its activity. In his early years as a poet, Stevens uses the imagination as a contrasting agent with which he characterizes the real world. An examination of Harmonium reveals a world in which flux, terror, and mutability reign; these characteristics precipitate an absence of belief in traditional religion. Man feels helpless in a world he cannot control; he himself is

subject to the mutability he sees around him. The imagination is the faculty that makes him aware of his predicament. In an attempt to reconcile the frightening qualities of the real world with the consoling power of the imagination, images of sun, moon, water, and music are discussed and discarded as they fail to bring about a merging of the two forces that act on man. In "The Man With the Blue Guitar" Stevens begins to propound the theory of a fiction, which refers to the combination of reality and perception that, through its expression in poetry, replaces traditional faith in God by mediating between reality and the imagination.

The requirements of such a fiction are elaborated in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthetique du Mal." A fiction, or modern faith, must be based on the characteristics of the world, since heaven is no longer a conception. It must change, be abstract, give pleasure and encompass evil. Instead of rejecting these qualities, man must accept them. By combining the imagination with reality, a reconciliation that allows man to rid himself of his dismay can be created.

Through close examination of several poems from the early and late periods, this study will attempt to reveal the imagination's movement throughout those poems, and will show first of all how Stevens effects this reconciliation. His development of the concept of a fiction

reveals his growing ability to create relationships between the external world of reality and the internal world of the mind. As he interacts with the external world more, his ability to use his imagination as a mediating force increases. His poetry gradually becomes his attempt to make the world a comfortable place through belief in fiction, even though it remains a world characterized by flux and antithesis.

Secondly, this study will show how a recognition of this development can lead to a better understanding of the poems as a collective work. J. Hillis Miller says this of the later poems:

> He can move so fast from one season to another that all the extreme postures of the spirit are present in a single moment. If he can do this he will never pause long enough at any extreme for it to freeze into dead fixity, and he will appease at last his longing to have both the imagination and reality at once.[28]

Through a look at the imagination's ability to act on reality, it can be seen that Stevens' poetry records the progress of his creation of a more habitable world.

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[28]Miller, p. 151.

CHAPTER II

TIME WILL NOT RELENT

Stevens' early poems, those before "The Man With the Blue Guitar" (1937), are descriptive in many ways; primarily, however, they convey to the reader Stevens' perception of the world of reality. These poems stress the need for a comfortable world in which man can live by balancing the forces of reality and imagination. Through contrast of the two, the poet reveals reality as a place in which the imagination is needed. The real world is always in flux, and understanding of it is therefore elusive. There is an element of terror in its incomprehensibility as well as in its constant movement toward death. The imagination is needed to give relief for this situation. The early poems, which explore these characteristics, are concerned with revealing the world of reality as a preparation for the kind of belief Stevens begins to describe in "The Man With the Blue Guitar." Since traditional religious beliefs are invalid in a world in which the gods have disappeared (see footnote 3, Chapter I), Stevens seeks a new, modern faith that will include the imagination's power. While the later poems attempt exact formulas for modern faith, the early poems offer an understanding of reality that is prefatory to belief.

The world, as Wallace Stevens sees it, is always in flux. This characteristic, which both gives the world life and brings about death, is usually pictured by the poet through resemblance: reality cannot be precisely described since it constantly changes. By giving descriptions of what reality is like, and by contrasting it with its opposite, the imagination, Stevens tries to create a mood in the reader that will lead to a perception of the same world the poet perceives. This chapter and the next will discuss selected poems of Harmonium as insights into Stevens' world-view and will treat "The Man With the Blue Guitar" as a transition piece beginning the later poems.

Reality, according to Stevens, is elusive. It cannot be trapped by language; it is even incomprehensible most of the time. "Six Significant Landscapes," written in 1916, while not one of Stevens' most skillful poems, does show how indirect description can create a mood in the reader that is similar to the poet's own attitude. Locating the first section in China, Stevens emphasizes the similarity between his poem and Oriental verse, particularly the haiku form, in which description is used in a similar way. The first segment shows resemblances between three things: the blue and white larkspur, an old man's beard, and a pine tree. All three things move in the wind. The poet concludes by saying, "Thus water flows over reeds," giving yet a fourth resemblance. With subtle innuendo

Stevens makes the point that reality or time is constantly moving and is compelled by an incomprehensible force (like wind or water) that affects man (the beard) as well as nature (the pine tree).

The second of the six landscapes is by far the smoothest and most skillful of the group. Night in this section resembles a woman's arm. Personified as female, night is both "obscure" and "fragrant and supple," giving emphasis to the living, moving characteristics of this reality. The next lines, which describe a pool that shines "Like a bracelet/ shaken in a dance," also show that reality is moving; its elusiveness is emphasized by the word "concealed."

In the third section the speaker makes an identification with the constancy of the sun and the sea, but then realizes and resents his own mutability: "Nevertheless, I dislike/ The way the ants crawl/ In and out of my shadow." The inevitable movement of reality toward change and death is implied.

The fourth poem in "Six Significant Landscapes" gives an early description of dreams and imagination in relation to the moon. When the poet's dream neared the moon, it was enlivened with "yellow light" and was touched with color from its feet (red) to its hair (blue). This kind of coloring from the imagination is different from that of reality and is more like the stars that add to the

dream qualities mentioned. The poem's discussion of a dream has a certain magic in it that makes it more appealing than the previous descriptions of reality.

The next poem in the series gives further emphasis to this concept. Portions of reality mentioned--"the knives of the lamp-posts," "the chisels of the long streets," "the mallets of the domes/ And high towers"--show that the everyday building of a real world is inferior to "what one star can carve" or to the imaginative structuring of the stars, which, as in the poem before, represents the power of the imagination to build beyond reality.

The last landscape satirically comments on the inability of the rationalist to see anything outside his domain--to understand the working of the imagination symbolized by "the ellipse of the half-moon." If such a person were to look at things differently from the normal, commonplace way of looking, that person's perception would have to undergo a change: "Rationalists would wear sombreros."

Together, these six short poems comprise one of Stevens' earliest comments on the nature of reality. It can be seen that

1. reality is constantly moving (as the wind, the water, or a dance move);
2. the dream world is different from and often more appealing than the world of real objects;
3. the dream world, or imaginative realm, is difficult for the average man to perceive or achieve.

"Nomad Exquisite," a poem dated 1919, also describes the elusiveness of reality as the poet struggles to capture what he perceives. Set in Florida, this poem makes its comparison through the use of the word as: The poet must allow his responses to surface as the dew "Brings forth/ The big-finned palm/ And green vine angering for life"; a struggle is implied through the word "angering." The second stanza speaks of the immensity of the growth in Florida with "all these green sides/ And gold sides of green sides." The dew brings forth these responses from nature as well as the response from the poet described in the next stanza. The poet perceives this abundancy in nature and feels a similar struggle in himself to fling out "Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames," representing the vitality and variety of possible response.

Another poem that deals with the variety of response to reality is "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," dating from 1917. While the thirteen statements do not follow any certain order, they all represent responses to and interpretations of a blackbird, although the meaning of the blackbird is different in each section.[1] The blackbird acts in ways similar to the imagination. Sukenick points out this quality:

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[1]Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 71.

> It [the blackbird] does not have a constant signification but it has a constant function: to act as a focus that brings out qualities in what is put in relation with it.[2]

The poem, then, gives thirteen possible responses of the imagination to the external world.

In the first segment the blackbird acts, as Sukenick points out, much like the jar in Tennessee: the eye of the blackbird is the focal point that orders the landscape of snowy mountains.[3] The second segment speaks of "three minds" and "three blackbirds," signifying three kinds of imaginative perception.[4] Part III speaks of the encompassing action of autumn through the use of the word "whirled." The quality of movement in reality is emphasized; by describing the seasonal process as a windy pantomime and the blackbird as a small whirling part, Stevens points to the flux of the real world.

Part IV seems to refer to the unity of parts of reality and to the imagination's mysterious part in that oneness.[5] If a man and a woman are united in their human transcience, then the blackbird, as a part of the same world, must share that unity.

In the fifth section, Stevens makes a comparison of inflection/innuendo with the sound of a blackbird's whistle. The poet does not choose between either--he says

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[2]Ibid., p. 72.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., p. 73.

instead that "I do not know which to prefer," implying that both choices are equal. Sukenick puts it this way: "Esthetic satisfaction may be found equally in statement and implication."[6] There is appreciation for the blackbird's whistle as well as for the absence of sound after it has stopped.

The sixth part of the poem emphasizes, as in Part IV, the mysterious, ominous element of the imagination. Icicles and "barbaric" glass are affected by the blackbird's shadow that crosses to and fro. The use of the shadow, rather than the blackbird itself, suggests a kind of shapeless threat that is emphasized by its description as an "indecipherable cause."[7] This section provides a good contrast with the section before in that the tone is mysterious rather than complacent and creates a more clearly defined effect on the reader.

Part VII addresses the thin men of Haddam, which Stevens identifies as a town in Connecticut.[8] A contrast is presented between the golden birds and the blackbirds, referring to the exotic and mundane.[9] Stevens makes a judgment here, contrasting to his attitude in section V. He seems to chide the men of Haddam for their exotic dreams, pointing instead to the ordinary birds as a source for wonder.

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., p. 74.

[9] Ibid.

The eighth section, like IV and VI, speaks of the imagination's mysterious role. The blackbird, or the imagination, is involved in a strange way with the poet's knowledge of language,[10] suggesting perhaps the intuitive quality of the imagination; the ninth part shows again that the blackbird is a point of reference in a particular area. The green light in section X seems to refer to reality. The blackbirds could create an image so sharp that it would effect even the "bawds of euphony," or as Sukenick suggests, those who evade reality in poetry.[11]

Connecticut is again the setting for section XI. In this case blackbirds point out the contrast between the natural and the artificial.[12] Part XII emphasizes the concept of flux again in that it equates the movement of a river with the blackbird's flight and implies that both are compelled to move. The final part creates a picture and says that a blackbird, or the imagination, is a presence that affects all of nature.[13] The thirteen varying perceptions illustrate the imagination's liberality in ordering the flux of reality. The elusive nature of the world requires this variety of response; thirteen seems to be a number randomly chosen, which implies that even more interpretations are possible. The richness of experience that comes from constant flux allows the imagination to

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[10] Ibid., p. 75.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., p. 76.

[13] Ibid.

order what it perceives, but is frightening and mysterious in its overwhelming variety.

A similar characteristic of reality is its element of terror. A very early poem, "Domination of Black," brings out this element of fear. The persona of the poem is in a room by a fire, which emphasizes the enclosed quality with the fire as a focal point.[14] The light cast about by the fire is similar to the turning of leaves in the wind. The persona remembers the color of "heavy hemlocks" that is associated with another powerful memory--that of the cry of peacocks. The persona then realizes that the colors in the peacock's tail are like the colors of leaves and thus like the colors in the fire. All these resemblances sweep over the room of his imagination. The cry of the peacocks which is heard again in memory becomes central in the mounting tension: it is a cry <u>against</u> something. The terror increases as the images become "loud"; the persona looks out his window and recognizes another resemblance: the planets also turn just as the colors and leaves do. The night is heavy like the hemlocks, and the persona is afraid and almost overcome by his memory of the peacock's cry. Related to flux, these overwhelming resemblances make him acutely conscious of his own place in a rapidly moving world.

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[14]Helen Regueiro, <u>The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens</u> (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 150.

An aspect related to flux and terror is Stevens' concept that man cannot escape reality's progression toward death. "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" illustrates this concept. The poem begins with a description of the world as indifferent and routine-like. The persona feels this indifference acutely because he is helpless to rebel against it: he is "too dumbly in [his] being pent." He suggests that "Perhaps, if summer ever came to rest"--if the flux could be stopped or even slowed--man's position in reality might be more comfortable. But, as the conclusion states, mortality is inescapable: "But time will not relent."

This futility comes across again in "Another Weeping Woman," a poem that is a verbal picture similar to Picasso's painting. The poet commands the woman to pour out her unhappiness but reminds her that "grieving will not sweeten" or lessen her sorrow; he implies that grief even intensifies unhappiness when he states that "It is in the water of tears/ Its black blooms rise." The imagination seems to be that which causes the recognition of her unhappiness. As the "magnificent cause of being," the presence of the imagination is a reality that brings a realization of hopelessness. The woman is left with grief that pierces her like the pain of her own imminent death. Her tears cannot eliminate her sorrow or her mortality.

An early poem, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" sums up

the concept of death as inevitable. The persona of the poem, a middle-aged man, discusses the possibilities and failures of love at his age, suggesting that time and flux affect love more than most aspects of reality. As he progresses toward death, he meditates on the mutability of love. In the first stanza of the poem the uncle is mocking a woman who seems to be about his age. They have argued ("the clashed edges of two words") and he is left reflecting about their relationship. When he speaks of "the radiant bubble that she was," he recalls her younger beauty. He wishes that the memory of her as she was would not affect him--"I wish that I might be a thinking stone."[15] This reflection in turn makes him contemplate his own state of age.

The images of spring in the next stanza emphasize the taking away of another year. The you he addresses in the last two lines must refer to the woman, who seems to be mentally unaffected by the passage of time. He discusses the temporal through images of hairstyles (stanza III),[16] apples and skulls (stanza IV) and states that intensity of feeling is proportional to age: "The measure/ of the intensity of love/ Is measure, also, of the verve of earth." Stanza VI discusses the indistinct quality of love after youth has gone and continues to speak of love's bloom and

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[15] Sukenick, p. 41.

[16] Ibid., p. 42.

fade with images that could be interpreted as sexual.

Stanza VII shows "an image of possible heavenly dispensation [as] contrasted with an image of undeniable, earthly reality."[17] The good of heaven is denied, however, in favor of the here-and-now of earthly love.[18] The implication is that love should be accepted and enjoyed for the earthly pleasure it can give. Stanza VIII elaborates on qualities all loves have in common: they all go through the same cycles of change.

Stanzas IX and X celebrate middle-aged love and reject sentimentality (the "fops of fancy") and romanticism.[19] The final stanzas reconcile the "fact of aging and the psychological necessity of affirming love."[20] The uncle must recognize his mortality and accept his changing needs as parts of life that are inescapable. Since reality changes, man and his capacity for love change. Although he is often uncomfortable when he recognizes this change, he is powerless to prevent it.

These poems are representative of Stevens' early rendering of his perception of reality. Once the world is understood, a need for a belief to overcome the qualities of flux, terror and mutability becomes necessary. In the early poems, this necessity for belief is introduced; the

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[17] Ibid., p. 43.

[18] Ibid., p. 44.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., p. 45.

later poems propose a solution for need in the form of a Supreme Fiction. The use of the images of sun, moon, sea and music in the early poems that follow provide an introduction to the concept of the fiction.

CRANES CREST

CHAPTER III

A FLUCTUATING BETWEEN SUN AND MOON

Once an understanding of reality is gained, a reader of Stevens can begin to see the relationship between reality and the imagination. All the qualities of reality that he portrays in the early poems (flux, elusiveness, terror, mutability) create a tension with the imagination that poetry tries to explain and relieve. Similar to Crispin's dilemma in "The Comedian as the Letter C" the poet's objective is to reconcile these forces and make a world in which tensions are minimized. The implication is that old beliefs are invalid: the poet must, in a sense, create a new system of belief in which such a reconciliation occurs. Stevens' images become most clear as they function to achieve this balance.

Although Stevens employs many images throughout his poetry, it seems that four images--those of sun, moon, sea and music--are most prominent. These four are helpful in gaining an understanding of Stevens' description of the world and in recognizing the development in his use of the imagination. Seeking to unite the dualities of man as well as to fuse idea and image, Stevens uses the opposites sun and moon as frequent images referring to the forces of reality and imagination, images of the sea as that part of nature which elicits a response from the imagination, and

images of music as the medium from which a temporary balance between forces can be achieved.

Kessler has pointed out that the sun and moon, while they have rather inconsistent meanings throughout the poetry, are creative forces; the sun is most often a masculine, virile force while the moon is often more feminine and weaker. Both forces are favored in separate poems; yet as Kessler asserts, qualities of both sun and moon are necessary in a perception of "things as they are."[1] To live only in the moon is to live completely in a fiction and to avoid a direct confrontation with reality; the sun possesses a power of renewal, a kind of psychic energy that represents a force Stevens would call the god within man.[2] A balance of these forces is the goal sought throughout the later poems. Music is often pictured as the force that achieves this balance. "The Man With the Blue Guitar" represents a kind of turning point in the poetry in that it begins a series of porposals showing how balance might be brought about. Music is the tool with which chaos can be fought: the guitar orders the poet's feelings that otherwise would be "as chaotic as the monster 'reality'."[3] As a metaphor for all art, music is the force that often

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[1]Edward Kessler, Images of Wallace Stevens (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972), p. 55.

[2]Ibid., p. 62.

[3]Ibid., p. 95.

allows a fusion, however temporary, of reality and imagination.

Since belief in a traditional religion is impossible in the world of reality, another source for faith must be found. Stevens' early poems often look alternately at the sun and the moon as such sources. "Sunday Morning," a poem that deals particularly with the out-dated tradition of Christianity, emphasizes the sun. One of Stevens' earliest and most widely-acclaimed poems, "Sunday Morning" presents a female persona who, with a narrator, contemplates the place of religion in a secular world. The woman must deal with her doubts as well as with her needs. When she "feels the dark/ Encroachment of that old catastrophe," she thinks about her own feelings toward religion. Stevens intersperses the comments of the narrator/poet with these thoughts, asking "why should she give her bounty to the dead?" An explanation of this question follows.

Divinity that comes "Only in silent shadows and in dreams" is useless. The narrator suggests that divinity could more easily be found in things of the world: the sun, or in "any balm or beauty of the earth." Divinity can be seen as embodied by the woman herself, since she is part of the world. Humans deal with emotions, pleasures and pains; they are divine in that they are the forces that give us life.

The narrator points out that humans are next on a

scale of divinity since Jove's blood mingled with that of humans until the most recent God, Christ, was both human and divine. If the cycle is completed, man as a god is the logical result. Such an event would bring heaven closer and make it more realistic.

The woman, however, notes a need within herself for "some imperishable bliss," something that goes beyond human or earthly experience. The narrator answers this request by explaining that "Death is the mother of beauty"; change is what makes humans know they are alive. It is ironic that change and subsequent death end life and give life at the same time, and this is the woman's conflict. If there were no change, as in paradise, humans would grow bored and would not experience the vitality and intensity of mutable life. Life that ends in death is preferable to insipid sameness.

The narrator next proposes the sun as a kind of god, a "savage source" with which man can identify. The chant of praise to this god is one of "boisterous devotion," praises of the earth. The woman realizes that the tomb in Palestine was the grave of Christ, not "the porch of spirits lingering." The world is an old system of night and day; the things of nature we know are more permanent than any myth or belief. Life in the natural world goes on, berries ripen, and pigeons sink to their dark deaths--but with wings extended as if in joy. Humans should learn

this same dependency on the sun or on the reality of change and develop an acceptance of the fact of death while enjoying life to its fullest. The sun, then, is a key to the realization of the real wonders of the world of earth as opposed to the abstract concepts of an intangible religion. There is an implied hope that emphasis on the sun and its attractive qualities will minimize the discomfort reality causes, but like the persona who still desires an "imperishable bliss," man ultimately seeks faith in something other than the finite world.

The moon is similarly dealt with in several poems. "Evening Without Angels" speaks of the moon in relationship with the sun. Stevens states that "we are men of sun . . ./ Men that repeat antiquest sounds of air" since the wind, which is air, always circles man with his own speech. This identifies man with the sun and wind, or with the realm of reality. The final stanza looks to the moon as a contrasting force. Evening is when a shift in mood occurs. Making an analogy to music, Stevens states that the coming of evening and the moon causes a measure to skip a beat and shift to a minor key. This emphasizes a marked difference in day (sun) and night (moon); night brings a sense of mystery in its difference. The poet states then that "Bare night is best," since it is the time that "the voice that is in us [the imagination] makes a true response." The implication is that while we are creatures of reality,

living and breathing in the sun, we have a need for night with the power of renewal found in the moon, or imagination. The moon elicits a response; Stevens states that the voice of the imagination "rises up" when "we stand gazing at the rounded moon." This poem thus discusses the need for the forces of night (imagination) as well as day (sun).

"Lunar Paraphrase" also speaks of the qualities of the moon, calling it "the mother of pathos and pity." A feminine force, the moon symbolizes that which compels us to feel. Since the poem is set in the barren season of November, a bleak atmosphere is established. The moon's light moves feebly, shines on the body of Jesus and brings it "humanly near," lights the figure of Mary, and glides over the houses. The moon is the origin of pity, sorrow, and sympathy, the only emotions evoked by the images of Christianity. The power of necessary renewal in the moon is again brought out (as in "Evening Without Angels") with the description of "an earlier season of quiet/ And quieting dreams in the sleepers in darkness." In a way similar to tragedy, the moon evokes emotions and then gives a kind of catharsis--a season of quiet and sleep. This is, however, a temporary calm; there is still the need for permanent faith, an "imperishable bliss" that will reconcile reality rather than ignore it.

One of Stevens' most widely known poems is "The Comedian as the Letter C,' which Julian Symons calls "an

achievement that may be compared with The Waste Land or 'Mauberley'."[4] Crispin, the persona of the poem, strives to become a poet who can reconcile reality and the imagination. Hi Simons describes the poem as an allegory and aptly points out Crispin's progress from

> 1) juvenile romantic subjectivism . . .
>
> 2) a realism almost without positive content, consisting merely in recognizing the stark realities of life,
>
> 3) an exotic realism, in which he sought reality in radical sensuousness,
>
> 4) a kind of grandiose objectivism, in which he speculated upon starting a sort of local-color movement in poetry, but which he presently saw as romantic, and finally, through
>
> 5) a disciplined realism that resulted in his accepting his environment on its own terms, so to speak, and
>
> 6) marrying and begetting children, to
>
> 7) an indulgent fatalism and scepticism.[5]

Sukenick describes the poem as

> the history of a poet's mind. . . . The action of the narrative is a voyage and quest for knowledge which deals, like Wordsworth's poem [The Prelude] with the loss of the imagination and the conditions in which it may be revitalized.[6]

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[4]Julian Symons, " A Short View of Wallace Stevens," in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, ed. Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962), p. 118.

[5]Hi Simons, "'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Its Significance," in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 98.

[6]Ronald Sukenick, Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 47.

Although Simons does not believe Crispin's end is a happy one, it seems that he does achieve a comfortable attitude toward the world and himself. Crispin, who begins as "merest miniscule," seeks a way for the imagination to work comfortably with reality. Going through various stages, he finally gives up his aspirations and submits to the reality of normal things--a defeat in a sense, but also a fulfillment. With his nice shady home and his daughters, Crispin has found a way to live comfortably by leaving his quest and, as Nassar points out, letting his children take the place of his poems.[7] By finding happiness in everyday reality, Crispin temporarily avoids the tension caused by the imagination as it vies for power. (While this works for Crispin, we sense that it is not the solution for Stevens himself.) Crispin, whose title "C" identifies him as incomplete, does not become a "major man," but he does achieve happiness. True reconciliation is not accomplished.

The sea is also a recurring image in the early poems; although it overwhelms man, it too is proposed as a source for bringing about the reconciliation of reality and imagination. The sea causes Crispin to become "an introspective voyager"; his imagination could not evade this "ding an sich," this "vast, subjugating, final tone." Crispin recognizes his own mortality in the sea. A similar

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[7]Paul Nassar, Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1965), p. 210.

occurrence is described in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." The narrator of this impressionistic poem allows the sea to inspire his imagination, and realizes that he himself is the one who "evolved the moving blooms" that he perceives. He orders and interprets the perceptions caused by the sea.

The sea at morning elicits a response shown through description of color, chocolate, and umbreallas--exotic, unlikely things to associate with the sea. In the first stanza the ocean is like a "perplexed machine" and is described as "limpid." The narrator notices the sky and its color, and sets up a boundary of sky and sea, leaving himself in the middle. Similar perceptions occur in the other stanzas of the poem, emphasizing the variety of responses the sea can evoke. The poet responds to the ocean without real comprehension; his attempts to give order are thwarted by the sea's immensity. The most significant point is that the viewer responds to the ocean as a thing outside of human experience. As such, Stevens seems to think that the sea might function in a way similar to the sun in "Sunday Morning" by being a powerful force that is larger than man but is capable of drawing out his perceptions, causing an effect, and thus making him realize the gap between reality (the machine-like motions of the sea) and the imagination (chocolate and umbrellas). A personal, individual response is drawn forth by an external force, but such an unconscious

response is unable to form a true reconciliation with nature in this poem.

An individual's response to the sea's immensity is again treated in "The Idea of Order at Key West," one of many poems which opposes order and chaotic reality; the girl's song in this poem functions in a way similar to the blue guitar. The sea, as in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," is an incomprehensible mass, described as "fluttering/ Its empty sleeves" and "ever-hooded, tragic-gestured." The girl in the poem sings a song that transcends the overwhelming quality of the ocean and tames it temporarily. Although the girl's voice and the sea's voice reamin separate, the girl's song incorporates the sea into its own structure. The girl creates a reality separate from the sea, a world in which she herself is maker. The power of her system of order carries through to the lights of the town when she stops singing. The poet addresses Ramon Fernandez (Stevens insists that he had no particular person in mind when he chose that name)[8] and asks how order can be achieved with the lights as well as with the song, for just as the girl did, the lights "Mastered the night and portioned out the sea/ Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles/ Arranging, deepening, enchanting night." The idea of order progresses from a human source to an artificial one as the

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[8]Sukenick, p. 60.

poet observes both. Stevens implies that the overwhelming quality of the sea is such that it elicits a powerful response from humans; such power could bring about the comfortable world of reconciled opposites he seeks. If order is laid upon a meaningless chaos, reality is tamed by the powerful imagination. It seems that such a balance is temporarily achieved in the girl's song, then transferred to the lights by the observer's imagination that also responded. The poem concludes with a meditation on the concept of order. Stevens speaks of man's need to order the "words of the sea" which can be taken as a symbol of all the chaotic qualities of reality, and to order his own feelings toward himself and his origins. The idea of order is identical to the need to balance reality and imagination for achieving a habitable world in which man is not threatened with submergence in either force. While it can, at times, be achieved temporarily, Stevens is still searching for the force that will bind reality and imagination permanently.

"The Man With the Blue Guitar" marks a turning point in Stevens' poetry, for with this poem he comes to explicit terms with the imagination's relationship to reality in a faithless world and begins to offer a solution to the conflict in the form of the poet's role. Most critics agree that the guitar player represents the poet, the man of imagination, while the blue guitar represents the

imagination that spawns art forms like music or poetry.

Like a tailor, the poet uses his imagination to give shape and design to things of the chaotic world. Although the imagination is part of all people,[9] each individual can give only his version of reality. He can form a "hero's head" (poem II) to represent man, but this is only interpretation, not creation. Poem IV asks if such a representation is as actual as the reality itself, but it seems that representation is influenced by feeling. Stevens says that "reality changes into the imagination"[10] so that representation is only interpretation, not "things as they are." Pure perception is useless. Stevens wants a way to bring his interpretations closer to reality, as a combination of the two would do.

The subject shifts from people to the world in poem V, and the relationship between poetry and belief is discussed. Traditional poems do not move us to faith in anything;[11] the modern secular world is a place in which faith is virtually impossible. Sukenick explains this condition by saying, "We are in need of a poetry that moves us beyond the esthetic pleasures of its music to a point where it can take the place of faith."[12] Poetry, then,

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[9] Ibid., p. 82.

[10] Holly Stevens, ed., The Letters of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 793.

[11] Sukenick, p. 84.

[12] Ibid., p. 85.

"must take the place of empty heaven and its hymns." This is the point at which Stevens begins to propose his idea of a necessary fiction, something in which a modern man with no conception of god can believe.

This fiction is elaborated on in poem VI. The imagination, instead of creating, illuminates what is around us. A fiction brought to light by the imagination can be momentarily final when it is believed in ("the thinking of art seems final").[13] But the constant flux of reality requires adjustment in belief. There is a problem, however, of too heavy a reliance on the imagination. Without real human activities ("the sun that shares our works") man becomes a mechanical beetle, a Gregor Samsa; the imagination is cold and lifeless when withdrawn from its relationship to reality. The need for a combination is again emphasized.

Poem X describes a false hero, one who is not a true man of imagination, while poem XI describes the adverse effects of environment on man:[14] if one <u>becomes</u> his environment (man as intelligence of his soul) he will be too complacent, while if the opposite happens (the soil as man's intelligence) the effect will be negative since personality will be consumed. This anticipates the later poems in which propositions are given to suggest remedies

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p. 88.

for such a situation. As Sukenick states, there may come "an era when life is nourished by reality rather than consumed by it,"[15] a time when balance can be brought about.

The need for balance is emphasized as the poet turns back to the idea of a fiction in poem XX. Belief is seen as having a "sympathetic rapport" with the ego, an "agreement with life rather than an idea."[16] The present condition, however, is one in which such belief has not yet come about--the guitar is forlorn and pale. Poem XXI emphasizes the need for a secular fiction which would manifest "one's self and the mountain's of one's land," or as Sukenick interprets it, "one of those representative abstractions by which men conceive themselves and which take the place of religious myth."[17]

Poem XXV discusses the poet who can conceive fiction as a better-than-average person, a master of the world since he is stable while the world is in constant flux (the seasons are an example). The poet is opposed to those with "fat thumbs" who, as Stevens describes, are "stupid people at the spectable of life, which they enjoy but do not understand."[18] The poet recognizes the changes in life.

Poem XXVIII describes "the discovery of a favorable secular reality" in which man can agree with reality

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[15] Ibid., p. 89.

[16] Ibid., p. 94.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Letters, p. 361.

through the imagination, which gives "a credible description of his relationship with it."[19] This poem represents such a description. Since change is a fixed pattern in reality, an ironically stable strength can be derived from it. Poem XXIX furthers this kind of thought by speculating that "the point of resolution in the search for the credible is a point of balance between possible attitudes, the spiritual and the earthy, each of which has its merits."[20]

Poem XXX is one of the most crucial in the series since it describes the evolution of a man from modern life, represented by Oxidia, who can assume the role of imaginative man. This concept of a "major man" is elaborated in the later poems and becomes a key point in Stevens' philosophy. XXXI speaks of the reality of nature versus civilization. The employer and employee described cannot have an idyllic concept of nature with "this posture of the nerves" that civilization causes.[21] Poem XXXII takes this a step forward and describes a necessity to "break through preconceptions [as of civilization] in order to perceive the unpredictable variety of reality."[22] The final poem reasserts the need for two dreams in Monday's

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[19]Sukenick, p. 98.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., p. 100.

[22]Ibid., p. 101.

civilized work world--the dream of imagination as well as of reality.[23]

Reaction to "The Man With the Blue Guitar" has been varied. Riddel calls it "an awkward poem to treat as a totality,"[24] while Merle E. Brown states that "no other of his long poems is more evidently unified in its content, style, tone, and mood."[25] Although the poems are less randomly arranged than "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," they do not occur in a particular, logical order. They do, however, have a unity of theme since they are all concerned with a kind of philosophical dualism. Brown describes it this way:

> The purpose and goal of the poem has evolved out of opposition between that ordinariness which seems to be without value and that poetic extraordinariness which is essentially value itself.[26]

Stevens himself admits this dualism when he says:

> The general intention of the Blue Guitar was to say a few things that I felt impelled to say 1) about reality; 2) about the imagination; 3) their interrelations; and 4) principally, my attitude toward each of these things.[27]

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 138.

[25] Merle E. Brown, Wallace Stevens: The Poem As Act (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), p. 91.

[26] Ibid., p. 95.

[27] Letters, p. 174.

Vendler points out that

> Stevens settles into a new accomodation to the real, but without disguising his hostility: with only the self and his guitar, he must face the vortex of chaos that threatens the individual everywhere.[28]

The poet must work to achieve a harmonious relationship with reality.

Riddel sums up the points elaborated by the poem and says that "The Man With the Blue Guitar" is a "critique of his [Stevens'] prescribed aesthetic."[29] Four points that Riddel finds discussed in the poem are 1) "the kind and nature of divinity" in the modern world, 2) "the danger of a world without imagination," 3) "the amorphousness and disorder of things as they are," and 4) "the empty purity of imagination which does not focus on reality."[30] The poems of "The Man With the Blue Guitar" are important in that they bring together such conflicts from the poet's mind and give a sense of self-assurance in the poet's ability to recognize and perhaps resolve the duality he is faced with. Vendler asserts that the poem is a "declaration of independence, a brusque coming-of-age."[31]

With this poem and those before it, Stevens clarifies the qualities of reality and of the imagination.

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[28]Helen Hennessy Vendler, On Extended Wings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 120.

[29]Riddel, p. 141.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Vendler, p. 121.

He has prepared the way for the later poems (such as "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction") in which definite propositions for resolving the conflict will be given. These poems are essential in that they 1) introduce the concept of a major man, or poet, and 2) set up the basis for the need of a fiction to give life meaning and make the world easier to live in. The next chapter will discuss these propositions and relate them to the concepts discussed here by showing their development as significant to Stevens' own development in his conception of the imagination's role.

CHAPTER IV

THE VIVID TRANSPARENCE

While the early poems offer an exposition of the forces of reality and imagination, "The Man With the Blue Guitar" brings Stevens into direct confrontation with the two. As an artist, Stevens feels the need to reconcile this duality and find a way for the opposites to work harmoniously. The imagination, which in the early poems serves to contrast the characteristics of reality with those of the mind's interpretations, assumes a different function in the later poems. After "The Man With the Blue Guitar," Stevens becomes more and more adept at controlling the imagination, harnessing its power, using it to create with reality a new belief to replace traditional ones that are no longer acceptable. Instead of describing the world through interpretation, the imagination is often personified as "major man," the force that can bring reality and imagination into a relation that forms a "fiction," a construction that combines self with reality into an accord that satisfies both forces. Poetry, the imaginative act of the mind, is the force that brings fiction into being. As Pearce suggests, one must know the world before belief can be achieved. The early poems, then, record Stevens' process of knowing the world; they are the preparation for

the ultimate act of belief. The particulars of such an act are described in detail in the later poems.

While the early poems describe and make attempts to grasp reality, the poems after "The Man With the Blue Guitar" use language that is less circular and less concerned with resemblance. Stevens develops into more of a philosopher, relying on logical analysis as he puts forth propositions for ways to deal with reality. The imagination, instead of being the faculty that makes man aware of reality's characteristics, becomes the force used to confront reality and unite with it. With this union comes the possibility for belief.

Stevens' specific propositions for modern faith are summarized in two of his later poems, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthetique du Mal." This chapter will offer an explanation of the requirements for fiction that are given in the two. In these poems, reality's bounds are accepted. It is possible for man to become reconciled to the real world by developing a faith that includes four characteristics: abstraction, changeability, pleasurability, and acceptance of evil. These characteristics center around the imagination's ability to channel the discomfort reality causes (the dismay man feels when he is confronted with flux, terror, mutability and the absence of God) into a positive belief that is appropriate for the modern world. A careful examination of "Notes

toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthetique du Mal" show how man can triumph over his mortality and, through asserting his imagination as a force that is as powerful as reality, come to the possibility of faith. The two poems and their propositions for the formation of a fiction combine reality and imagination in order to create a world in which man is not cowed by his existence.

In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens gives his most explicit directions for the formulation of a fiction that will replace traditional belief by creating, through the imagination, a comfortable relationship between self and reality. The poem is divided into three sections that dialectically enumerate the three main qualities of a fiction: its abstract quality, its changeability, and its pleasurable quality. Didactic in its tone, the poem gives a description of belief in terms of what it should be, not what it is now.[1]

The introductory stanza summarizes the intent of the poem: to achieve a "living changingness" in which the "clarity ('vivid transparence') of imaginative truth, brings peace."[2] The equality of the "moment in the central

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[1]Roy Harvey Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 122.

[2]Ronald Sukenick, Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 136.

of our being" could refer to the resolution of subject and object that is the aim of a supreme fiction. This stanza both introduces the three qualities that follow and summarizes the intent of a fiction which is to bring peace to man.

The first section of "It Must Be Abstract" addresses an ephebe, an initiate or "apprentice poet"[3] (who is a young Greek "undergoing his education at the hands of the state as his final initiation to citizenship")[4] with a command to begin by "perceiving the idea/ Of . . . this invented world" in its opposition to the "inconceivable idea of the sun." The opposites of perception and reality itself are paired from this beginning. To see the sun "in its idea" is to be ignorant, or free from perception. This, as the early poems emphasized, is impossible for man--but it is the poet's quest to get as close as possible to "things as they are." Man's perception names objects (Phoebus is a name, or interpretation, of the sun) in a futile attempt to know reality exactly. Phoebus should lie dead while we expel our images in the same way heaven has expelled us after the death of the gods, or the modern world's death of religious faith. If the sun is apprehended in abstraction, it will have no name; it will be "seen as part of a cosmos purged of anthropomorphic inventions. . . ."[5] It

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[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., p. 137.

will "be/ In the difficulty of what it is to be," or the "first idea." Fiction must be simplified in its effort to approach the "first idea."

The second section speaks further of the longing for the "first idea," for reality in itself without interpretation. Pearce describes this poem by saying that "we are driven by the very divisiveness of our lives to seek a unitive source of our idea of reality."[6] Our enclosed, divided nature ("ennui of apartments") makes us seek reality and compels us to try to capture it in poems. There is the hope that knowing reality directly will ease the need for faith. But reality, while it is easily approached in poetry, is very hard to capture--it "comes and goes all day" but is a "hermit in a poet's metaphors," hiding but not really speaking. This inability to know the first idea directly is the source of desire. When the artist and the philosopher observe changes in the world ("the calendar hymn"), they realize a lack within themselves and want to fill it. This section, then, re-emphasizes the qualities the early poems elaborated.

Section III speaks of the possibility that poetry can give this fulfillment of desire by allowing a momentary sharing of the first idea. An example of poetry's "pure power" is found in the Arabian who, with his "damned

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[6]Pearce, p. 123.

hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how," echoes the wood-dove's chant and the ocean's rise and fall. His primitiveness approaches the first idea through its "ever-early candor." The idea here is that innocence might be a source for the ability to know the "first idea."

The fourth section, however, begins to realize that the "first idea" can never be achieved, and that the imagination manifested in poetry must be looked to as a source for comfort rather than a primitive or ignorant outlook. This section discusses the origin of poetry in the past and present.[7] Riddel, agreeing with Pearce, speaks of the stanza as Stevens' "secularization of the Fall" and describes the "origin of consciousness" or self-awareness as the beginning of imagination.[8] The fall, which Riddel sees as fortunate, brought about self-consciousness, the concept of Descartes' "I am," and thus the concept of duality between self and world. Poetry comes about from the desire to be one with the first idea, the origin before the fall. While now we are "mimics," we desire to know, through poetry, "myth before the myth began." We seek that origin through the imagination.

The sixth section of "It Must Be Abstract"

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[7]Ibid.

[8]Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 171.

discourses on the interdependence of perception, knowledge, and feeling.[9] Riddel asserts that this section and the next two affirm "the life of the mind":

> Out of the imaginative intercourse between the "weather and the giant of the weather" comes the abstraction blooded, Stevens' principle figure for a vital idea and a poem.[10]

The next two sections give the possibilities of this affirmation. The seventh investigates "the natural harmonies of the external world for evidence of 'balances',"[11] those "balances that happen," while the eighth seeks human balances that adapt to nature's. Human balances come about from the use of the imagination. MacCullough, as a symbol for self, becomes a major man, "a humanistic extension of finite man into creator of the infinite idea."[12] This is the concept of a human hero who can replace the displaced divine hero. Since MacCullough is a man with imagination, he can imagine such a major man-hero, just as he once imagined God. The important thing is that he can imagine and create, can take "the world into his self, there to give it order and meaning as it gives him body and sustenance."[13] This is the harmonious relationship Stevens sees man as seeking. MacCullough is an example of a major man who can achieve it through the use of imagination and

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[9] Pearce, p. 123.

[10] Riddel, p. 172.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., p. 173.

[13] Ibid.

language. Section nine continues this discussion with "a reverie of faith"[14] in which major man can find harmony in reality's flux. Such an action is admirable, but major man should be imitated rather than worshipped: the poet says, "Dismiss him from your images." MacCullough's function in section X is to invigorate man by turning him toward the world and the self-creative act. Fiction, the habitable ground the imagination can bring forth, is thus abstract since it is a creation of self and mind; the master of this creation is the major man. This first third of the poem has dismissed the possibility of knowing reality directly ("the first idea") and has asserted the need for imagination in the formation of faith.

The second requirement for a supreme fiction is that "It Must Change." The major theme of this division is that, since reality changes, the fiction must change. As Riddel explains, "Since the essence of the real is change, to affirm life is to affirm living in change."[15] The focus of these sections is on nature's flux and the poet's paradoxical efforts to both "resist and embrace change."[16]

Sections I and II discuss change in terms of repetition; the "old seraph," another man of imagination, finds mutability a source for joy. Natural things are alive not

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[14] Ibid., p. 174.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

from rebirth, but from the fact of death. Section III illustrates man's need to survive beyond change, while the fourth gives a proposition to impose "an aesthetic order on change"[17] as a part of human life (not change as a law of nature). This aesthetic sees change as originating in human consciousness, the realization that "Two things of opposite natures seem to depend/ On one another. . . ."

Part V emphasizes the changes found between opposites.[18] The sensuous description of the fifth section is a contrast to the analytical frame of the fourth; together they emphasize both the similarity and difference of man's order and nature's. The discovery of these two parts is that "if nature finds its immortality in recurrence, man must find his in his fictions."[19] Like "Sunday Morning," these poems show that growth and change, in man as well as in nature, make life bearable. The opposites mentioned are reconciled by this common principle--"the sailor and the sea are one." Both man and his world are subject to change.

Section VIII is a reminder of the impossibility of knowing reality directly. Nanzia Nunzio confronts Ozmandias in another pairing of opposites. This confrontation brings out the principle that nothing is ever naked--all

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[17]Ibid., p. 176.

[18]Pearce, p. 124.

[19]Riddel, p. 176.

our knowledge of reality has a fictive covering of interpretation that links it with the temporal. This leads to section IX, which discovers that "somewhere between the isolated self and its alien world the poem captures not an absence of reality but the only reality available to man. . . ."[20] Poetry changes as interpretation changes. Therefore, man's version of reality changes; a fiction must be based on this principle.

The third requirement for a supreme fiction is pleasure. This division begins by denying preconceived ideas of pleasure such as in celebration: it is easy to celebrate through the occasions of tradition or custom, but it is harder to do so from moment to moment.[21] The second section of "It Must Give Pleasure" calls for pleasure in the particular things of life; the five sections following give examples of such. The "blue woman" lives in a vital world; her pleasures are found in perceptions that are "clear and, except for the eye, without intrusion." They are enjoyed for their own sake, as things in themselves. Section III celebrates innocent, natural love of children,[22] while IV discusses love between two people (the marriage in Catawba of the captain and Bawda) that "is of this world and no other."[23] Sections V and VI

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[20] Ibid., p. 177.

[21] Pearce, p. 125.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Riddel, p. 181.

contrast the bawdy ceremony with the Canon Aspirin and Stevens' rejection of religious abstractions. All these sections emphasize the quest for pleasure that is necessary in everyday living.

Sections VIII and IX pursue "the fiction of an absolute" by affirming that change, even in the self, is enjoyable: that "merely going round is final good." Stevens' question in VIII, "What am I to believe?" is answered in the last sections of the poem. "We enjoy like men," mutable creatures, for whom death means life. As in "Sunday Morning," change is cause for celebration. Section X shows the triumph of fiction. The fat girl, "the soft-footed phantom," becomes the "fiction that results from feeling." Riddel interprets the concluding lines as the elaboration of the aesthetic of fiction--by possessing the world through acceptance and affirmation, man "possesses finally and irreducibly himself,"[24] captured in crystal, in vivid transparence that is a moment of belief.

The coda returns to man without imagination who depends on the poet or major man for identity. For the human warrior, "the fictive hero becomes the real" and the effort to "patch the moon," to reconcile subject and object, to call the fat lady by name continues as a constant battle. Belief is "momentary in the mind" and must be sustained.

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[24] Ibid., p. 183.

"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" sets up the requirements for a fiction that can take the place of faith, and asserts not only its necessity but its possibility. When man recognizes his need for belief and accepts reality's characteristics as part of life, he is free to develop his imagination into a power that can confront and combine with reality. This union must retain the qualities of abstraction and change, and must give pleasure as well. A fourth quality is discussed in "Esthetique du Mal."

Pearce asserts that the "final condition for belief in the Supreme Fiction is the acceptance of reality" with its evil as well as its good.[25] After the tenets for a believable fiction have been outlined, Stevens turns to the problem of theodicy in his secular society. Knowledge of the world, which includes pain as well as pleasure, is what Stevens believes will compel belief. "Esthetique du Mal," written in 1944, deals with this necessity to reconcile evil with good as the imagination develops in its relationship with the world.

As the title reveals, this sequence of fifteen poems develops an aesthetic of evil, or, as Pearce indicates, an account of "positive evil in the texture of reality."[26] Sukenick sees the poem as an attempt "to come to terms with evil through the imagination."[27] The poem,

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[25]Pearce, p. 126.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Sukenick, p. 123.

then, represents a series of explorations of the relationships of evil, good, imagination, and reality. Stevens discusses aspects of evil such as pain, despair, and self-pity in the first sections. These are human qualities--objects do not feel them even though they may cause them to come about. In section I the groanings of Vesuvius bring a reminder of pain, while section II shows how sounds of the night can create a mood of despair in man. These feelings that come from external sources must be rejected since they are separate from human events. A recognition of this separation helps to reconcile the presence of evil in the world and to give man a sense of detached freedom from pain--"that which rejects it saves it in the end."

Another key to reconciliation is found in section VII, which is similar to "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" in the effort to create "the mythology of modern death."[28] Possibly an attempt to deal with the events of World War II, this poem sees the soldier as wounded by the world that loved him--a parable for the paradox of the coexistence of good and evil. The paradox is resolved by the assertion that "his wound is good because life was." Good and evil, life and death must be equated if the wholeness of reality is to be accepted--if life is good, then mortality must be likewise good since it is part of the same world.

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[28]Ibid., p. 127.

The tenth section speaks of the nostalgia for an escape from evil, but "reality explained" that this "last nostalgia" is useless. To seek reality is to seek suffering and death, but to evade reality is to avoid the fullness of life. Describing life as "a bitter aspic," section XI re-emphasizes the need for facing the harsh realities of random death. The harsh realities humans face as "Natives of poverty, children of malheur" should be cherished rather than rejected since they distinguish reality and its "essential savor"[29] from "a well-made scene" that is bland and artificial.

In a further attempt to gain an acceptance of evil, section XII describes three ways of looking at pain. The first emphasizes knowledge of the self, the second knowledge of others, and the third emphasizes the need for a passive state without knowledge of any kind. If achieved, the third world would allow the acceptance of pain and thus destroy its influence: "It accepts whatever is as true,/ Including pain." This is an idealistic rather than realistic view; section XIII denies this third proposition by asserting that pain and inevitable death are desirable since they define the limitations of the world and allow for good to be discovered within these limits.

Section XV provides a conclusion for these

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[29] Ibid., p. 129.

improvisations on the theme of evil by asserting the feasibility of the "good life" in spite of the presence of evil. Poverty is denying the physical world ("The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world") since aspects of pain, as well as of pleasure, are the determiners of human life. The variety and richness of experience are emphasized by "merely . . . living as and where we live." The world can be seen, as in "Sunday Morning," as a better place because of the presence of evil, since its presence makes pleasure more easily recognized and appreciated. "What one feels" allows for the recognition of "So many selves, so many sensuous worlds." The richness and variety of life make it appealing in spite of the presence of evil.

"Esthetique du Mal" gives four major premises for the incorporation of evil into the world of reality from which a supreme fiction is created. First of all, man must recognize that pain comes from external sources: a recognition of this separation can bring about a detachment that allows a degree of freedom from pain. The second premise shows that death's presence in a good world makes man more vividly appreciative of pleasure in the world by making him aware of his ultimate end. Since death cannot be escaped, the third premise denies even the desire for escape. In the fourth, the qualities of evil, pain, and death emphasize man's temporality, but also allow him to enjoy the richness of the world with more vitality. Evil

can thus be seen as a beneficial force; its presence within reality must be included in the formation of a supreme fiction since fiction is created from the world.

The two long poems "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthetique du Mal" form Stevens' proposition for a habitable world in which imagination and reality co-exist. Our view of reality is based on our imaginative interpretations of it; this allows for human feeling to surface and determine the degree of vitality in life. The imagination, acting like a poet, or major man, develops a fiction to replace belief in a world in which there are no gods.[30] Stevens' propositions for a supreme fiction can be summarized thus:

1) A fiction must be abstract since it will be based on interpretations of "the first idea," or "things as they are."

2) A fiction must change since reality and everything involved in it changes.

3) A fiction must give pleasure since it will provide a comfortable rather than a frightening world for man.

4) A fiction must include evil since pain, despair, and death are parts of the world; these very qualities determine vitality in life.

The poems that follow these two are written with such a fiction as their basis. An examination of three of these

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[30] J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," in The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 143-62.

will reveal how a fiction can inspire the poet and make reality compatible for the imagination.

CHAPTER V

THE SELF AS SIBYL

When Stevens has set forth the requirements of a supreme fiction, he accepts the imagination as a power with which to combat the undesirable characteristics of reality. As a poet, he is able to create a relationship between the mind and the world that allows the imagination to assert its creative power by making belief possible in spite of reality's characteristics of flux, terror and mutability. Knowledge of the world and subsequent faith are achieved through the imagination's developed ability to act on the world of reality. When this development has occurred, there is less tension in the poems. The last poems forsake resemblance and logic and become statements of what the imagination does after the concept of a supreme fiction has been established and believed in.

In one of the most explicit of Stevens' last poems, "The Sail of Ulysses," the protagonist speaks of knowledge (which refers to the joining of reality and imagination) and of the self. Ulysses "read his own mind" and found a knowledge of the general through contact with the particular: "to know one man is to know all." He asserts the necessity of individual knowledge as the "deep comfort of

the world and fate" and implies that Stevens' own search for knowledge of "things as they are" and of the imagination has been a fruitful one. Ulysses, like Stevens, is able to reject tradition and believe in the supreme fiction.

Ulysses sees human loneliness as a necessity for the breeding of knowledge, described as the "luminous companion" and the "completely answering voice." The quest to find knowledge in solitude gives direction and force to living. The imagination is "the true creator," the raw material out of which it structures knowledge is chaos or reality. Their combination brings about "black constructions" and "murky masonry" out of the darkness of chaos. To learn to shape chaos is to use the imagination to gain "A freedom at last from the mystical/ The beginning of a final order" that develops the self into a "future man." Therefore, man's isolation makes it necessary to create meaning from chaos in order to break free from tradition and make a future order, a supreme fiction that gives knowledge of the self and of the world.

Knowledge of self and world means that "knowing and being are one." When man achieves that realization, he "shall have gone behind the symbols/ To that which they symbolized" and shall experience "A divination, a letting down/ From loftiness" which constitutes truth and makes man "Master of the world and of himself." Man seeks to

know the abstract through the particular; the imagination must seek the sublime in obedience to "a law/ That bends the particular to the abstract." Man must "obey the coaxings of [his] end" by knowing the particular things of the world in an effort to get closer to the abstract. The sibyl, then, the revealer of truth, is the self. The individual must, out of necessity, structure the chaos of reality by allowing the imagination to seek knowledge that gives modern life meaning.

The imagination imposes an order on reality and tames flux by allowing the development of the faith that makes man comfortable in his world. His order, however, does not change reality. The imagination, when the supreme fiction is accepted, alters an individual's perception of reality; it cannot destroy the frightening characteristics but it can minimize them. It was the lack of faith that made them unbearable. The imagination, then, gives a new kind of knowledge of reality, one in which man can assert his own place within reality. There is no longer the need to seek an accurate description of "things as they are." The imagination is the power that is sought instead.

In "As You Leave the Room" Stevens shows that belief in a fiction allows for an assertion of humanity--the protagonist is not a skeleton but a person who is "Part of a major reality, part of/ An appreciation of a reality/ And thus an elevation" even though "nothing has been

changed except what is/ Unreal." Thus perception is changed so that it welcomes, rather than rejects, the imagination's "unreal" structuring. Reality is unchanged, but Stevens himself is. "Of Mere Being" emphasizes this change. The bird in the palm sings, like the sea in "The Idea of Order at Key West," a foreign song "without human meaning." Yet the bird is accepted as a part of reality that, while it cannot be articulated or reproduced in exact language, can be perceived and appreciated by the imagination. The imagination recreates the chaos of reality by giving it the order of perception. By testifying that both forces are equally powerful, man can find the belief that will make him comfortable in his world.

After the role of the imagination is clarified through an examination of the last poems, Stevens' body of poetic effort can be seen as a unified collection. When viewed as a whole, Stevens' poems record the progress or development of the imagination. In the early poems the imagination reveals reality; the poet's perception discovers the real world to be one in which the frightening characteristics of change and finitude bring discomfort to man. The imagination is the gauge by which discomfort is measured. Man's dismay is intensified by the lack of valid beliefs. The poet begins to seek a way to reconcile the undesirable characteristics of reality with the imagination's power of transformation. There is the need for a

new world in which faith can be regained. Such a reconciliation is sought through images of sun, moon and water, but like Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C," no such use of images is possible since they represent only momentary reconciliations.

In "The Man With the Blue Guitar" Stevens begins to propose a solution. In this series of poems Stevens asserts the power that the imagination wields over reality. While the imagination cannot reproduce reality exactly, it can create versions of "things as they are" that are valuable in themselves. These poems are preludes to Stevens' greatest works, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthetique du Mal," because they introduce the idea of a necessary fiction that can replace "empty heaven" and furnish man with something to believe in.

Stevens' quest is a search for belief. God, as seen in "Sunday Morning," has either died or rejected man. Something must be found to restore meaning in a world of flux. Stevens sets up specific requirements for such a belief in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Fiction is the term he uses to refer to a modern belief; its rules are four. First of all, it must conform to reality by changing. Outdated beliefs must be continually replaced by changing ones. Secondly, it must be abstract since humans feel a need for abstraction, for an "imperishable bliss" that goes beyond earthly mutability. Thirdly, a

fiction must give pleasure since man longs to feel comfortable in his world. Moments of vision and belief bring the pleasure humans seek. The fourth requirement of a supreme fiction is found in "Esthetique du Mal," a poem in which Stevens deals with the problem of theodicy. Since evil is an active force in the world, it must be accepted with good; it is the presence of evil that allows for the recognition of good. All four qualities combine in the imagination's perception of the world. The early poems give a preparation for belief since knowledge of the world brings about an acute awareness of faith. When the qualities of changeability, abstraction, and pleasurability are meshed, the imagination is seen as a new god, a deliverer that makes reality bearable and even pleasurable.

The poems that follow these two major works reveal a world in which faith is achieved. While the characteristics of reality remain constant, they become tolerable when the imagination is recognized as a force with equal influence on man. The collected poems form a process by which man's imaginative powers are recognized and then used for the creation of a world in which the reconciliation of reality and imagination that restores faith is possible.

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