To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Elizabeth J. Giddens entitled "Stevens' Illusion of Distance in Landscape Description." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

B. J. Leggett

B. J. Leggett, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Edmund W. Burton

Joseph B. Fuller, Jr.

Accepted for the Council:

L. Evans Roth

Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

Thesis
1983
G634
cop. 2

STEVENS' ILLUSION OF DISTANCE IN LANDSCAPE DESCRIPTION

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Elizabeth J. Giddens

March 1983

3066639

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Professors Edward W. Bratton and Joseph B. Trahern, for carefully reading and commenting on my thesis despite their busy schedules. Special thanks goes to Professor B. J. Leggett, the director of my thesis, for his invaluable guidance through the sometimes perplexing Stevens criticism, for his interest in my topic, and for his practical suggestions about writing. I am also grateful for Dr. Leggett's support and encouragement throughout my graduate study.

I deeply appreciate the support of my family and friends. Without the prodding of my parents, the commiserating with Kirsten Benson, and the friendship of Vickie McQuay and Charles and Jackie Rees, this thesis would never have materialized.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to define the characteristic tone of Wallace Stevens' poetry. This tone is reserved, contemplative, and deliberate. The perceptually rendered landscape descriptions of Stevens' work reveal this tone clearly because they are strikingly detailed and visual and yet, when compared to the impassioned descriptions of Keats and Hopkins, divulge very little of the poet's personal feelings for the scene.

The theory behind Stevens' detached stance is found in his belief in the inevitable influence of the poet's individual personality, or temperament, on the poem and in his opinion that the subjective elements of a poet's thought should not be allowed to dominate the poem. In other words, Stevens wants the reader to confront the subject of a poem without the interference of the poet's own opinions although he realizes that such objectivity is impossible. Stevens' desire for an impersonal stance relates his tone to the theories of aesthetic distance posited by aestheticians such as Charles Mauron, whose Aesthetics and Psychology Stevens read, and Edward Bullough. Both of these aestheticians define an aesthetic attitude, the approach that an artist should take when creating a work of art. This attitude is composed of elements that are found in

Stevens' poems, and these elements are the artist's absorption in the present moment, a heightened perception of the setting which arouses associations and memories, a disregard of the practical nature of things, a pleasurable reaction to seeing reality in a new way, and a discarding of the usual organization of the scene for a new one. This complex attitude becomes the poet's process of seeing the world and recreating it in a work of art. When Stevens maintains this aesthetic attitude as he writes a poem, the structure of his landscapes becomes deliberate and the style becomes reserved.

In passages of landscape description Stevens structures his poems by constructing a seemingly physical space with words. He does this by noticing details of a scene in a sequence that explains their position in a landscape. It is helpful to think of Stevens' structural organization in terms of the mental movement of the eye of the speaker through space. As the eye moves from point to point, a scene is composed. This piecing together of details is a motif that reinforces the poet's detachment by forcing the reader to focus on the scene rather than on the poet's attitude and by preventing him from crediting nature with human emotions.

Stevens' reserved stance causes him to develop two distinct formats for landscape description. One is distinguished by curt, matter-of-fact sentences, and the

other depends on complicated syntax with appositive phrases that reveal the poet's effort to describe a scene as exactly as possible. Although these formats are designed to suppress the poet's personal feeling for his subject, they nevertheless betray some amount of emotion. The curt style usually indicates that the speaker is dissatisfied with the scene; the appositive style, because it allows one to see the speaker's mind at work, retains emotions of sadness, lament, or quiet pleasure. Therefore, despite Stevens' effort to avoid subjectivity, a degree of it is exposed in the brevity or the meticulousness of his style.

The significance of Stevens' contemplative stance is that it complements his preoccupation with the relationship between the imagination and reality. Stevens' precise and dispassionate construction of a scene shows how concerned the poet is with seeing reality clearly and how convinced he is that man's consciousness and his temperament are ineluctable barriers to objectivity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	"POETS ACQUIRE HUMANITY"	1
II.	TANGIBLE LANDSCAPES: SPATIAL METAPHOR IN STEVENS' POETRY	44
III.	"THE TROUBLE OF THE MIND"	72
IV.	CONCLUSION	102
BIBLIOGRAPHY		107
VITA		111

CHAPTER I

"POETS ACQUIRE HUMANITY"

Wallace Stevens has been characterized as a poet who was reserved in both his public life and in the amount of emotional display in his poetry. One important critic, Joseph Riddell, contrasts Stevens' stance as a man and poet to that of William Carlos Williams and concludes that if Williams seems to view "the world through the eyes of an innocent child, Stevens sees it through the eyes of a self-conscious, middle-aged man . . . who knows what he sees is a fiction of his own making."[1] For confirmation of this character analysis one need only look into the personae of his poetry and into Stevens' quiet biography. Both parts of his existence reveal Stevens to be a man more interested in the life of the mind, in passive observation and vigorous contemplation, than in an exciting life or dramatic, confessional verse. Perhaps a rather harsh characterization of Wallace Stevens' personality can be found in the "dull scholar" of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" who believes himself to be fit only for lecturing and intellectualizing about the physical joys of youth and love.

---

[1]Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: Wallace Stevens' Poetry and Poetics (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 13.

Another reserved persona also echoes something of Stevens' character in his desire to expel the personal from his view of the world. This persona, Professor Eucalyptus in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," suggests Stevens' own deliberative, reserved, self-conscious nature:

> For what he sees, it comes in the end to that.
>
> The description that makes it [the object]
> divinity, still speech
> As it touches the point of reverberation—not grim
> Reality but reality grimly seen
>
> And spoken in paradisal parlance new
> And in any case never grim, the human grim
> That is part of the indifference of the eye
>
> Indifferent to what it sees.[2]

This explanation of the professor's attitude emphasizes that a description of an object, in moving words, "paradisal parlance," can yet be "grim," or faithful to the object, if the eye and consequently the heart behind the eye can remain indifferent. Indifference, in this instance, implies an effort to be objective, and therefore to inhibit the personality of the speaker or poet attempting to present the "reality grimly seen" of New Haven on a rainy evening. It

---

[2]Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (1954; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 475. All future references to primary sources will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number with the following abbreviations: CP., The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens; OP., Opus Posthumus (1957; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980); NA., The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York: Vintage Books, 1951).

is essential to note that simply because Stevens and his professor struggle to be aloof they do not necessarily deny the impossibility of objective description; rather, hesitation to reveal one's personality and the knowledge that what one is seeing is a fiction of one's own making merge into a pose that is undemonstrative and yet painstaking for the cause of accuracy in speech and poetry.

As for his reserve in life, certainly Stevens' quiet profession as insurance executive for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and the stability of his domestic life connote that he was not the sort of poet who wished for recognition through an unorthodox lifestyle. Further evidence of Stevens' reserve is found in his hesitancy to give readings of his poetry, his lack of interest in association with a particular group of contemporary poets, and his decision at age seventy-five to continue to work for the insurance company even after he was recognized as an important poet and offered the Charles Eliot Norton professorship at Harvard in 1954.[3] The routine of Stevens' life appears conventional and modest, a perfect complement to a personality that tends toward the reclusive. He seems to have wanted to be a poet and yet live and observe life without the pressure of being

---

[3]Barbara Ann Farris Graves, "Stevens' Readings in Contemporary French Aesthetics: Charles Mauron, Thierry Maulnier, Roger Caillois," Diss. The University of Oklahoma, 1975, pp. 34-35, and Samuel French Morse, introd., Opus Posthumus by Wallace Stevens (1957; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pp. XV-XVI.

poetic in the extravagant sense. This desire is not estranged from the constant effort he made to write poetry about "things as they are."[4]

The parallel between these two sides of Stevens' life—his personality as a poet and as a man—is not trivial simply because it is obvious. First, it is necessary to underline the fact that Stevens was aware of the kind of self-conscious man he was and that he admitted freely and repeatedly that his personality affected his poetry. Stevens' theory of the function of the temperament of a poet discloses his concern for the subject. The word "temperament" is introduced in "The Effects of Analogy," one of the essays included in The Necessary Angel, to help explain how personality influences, or, more properly, determines, the particular subject of a poet:

> A man's sense of the world is born with him and persists, and penetrates the ameliorations of education and experience of life. His species is as fixed as his genus. For each man, then, certain subjects are congenital. Now, the poet manifests his personality, first of all, by choice of subject. Temperament is a more explicit word than personality and would no doubt be the exact word to use, since it emphasizes the manner of thinking and feeling. It is agreeable to think of the whole poet as a biological mechanism and not as a subordinate mechanism within a larger one. (NA., p. 120)

---

[4] CP., p. 165. Although the effort is made to portray reality accurately in his poetry, both the guitarist and the poet recognize that one cannot "play things as they are" on a guitar or in poetry since all art interprets its object through the artist.

The final sentence of this excerpt intimates the notions that not only is one born a poet but that the scope of one's poetry equals the entirety of one's existence. A little further on in the essay this point is expressed as an equation:

> What is the poet's subject? It is his sense of the world. For him it is inevitable and inexhaustible. . . . It is often said of a man that his work is autobiographical in spite of every subterfuge. It cannot be otherwise. (NA., p. 121)

In another essay, "Two or Three Ideas" published in Opus Posthumus, the question of the origin of a poet's style is brought under the heading of things designed by temperament: "A man has no choice about his style. When he says that I am my style the truth reminds him that it is his style that is himself" (OP., p. 210). This connection between self, style, and subject is vividly illustrated in "Tattoo," a poem which links the object to the poet by means of weblike rays of light:

> The light is like a spider
> It crawls over the water.
> It crawls over the edges of the snow.
> It crawls under your eyelids
> And spreads its webs there—
> Its two webs.
>
> The webs of your eyes
> Are fastened
> To the flesh and bones of you
> As to rafters or grass
>
> There are filaments of your eyes
> On the surface of the water
> And in the edges of the snow. (CP., p. 81)

In other words, for the observer to see the scene at all, he must see by means of the webs joining flesh, bones, optic nerve, and the water and snow of the landscape. What besides the nature of the poet, besides his temperament, could function as these delicate and sensitive webs? Furthermore, it is because of the relationship between the poet and his subject and style that the poet has a sense of the world, the perennial subject for his poetry.

However circular Stevens' reasoning may seem in this theory of temperament, the three-way equation he posits, temperament=subject=style, shows something important, although paradoxical, about the degree of personal expression in his work. It is paradoxical that a poet who so readily states that temperament is always present in poetry is willing to reveal so little of his own feelings. A resolution of the paradox lies in the consideration of Stevens' chosen reserved manner in both his life and poetry. Stevens' temperament is most clearly evident in his attempt to conceal or disguise the personal in his poetry. At least two of his Adagia help expose his tendency to keep his poetry from becoming too intimate. "Poetry is not personal" (OP., p. 159), he says, as if to define his attitude toward poetry as language that should address the universal struggles and triumphs of human life. But such a disclaimer does not allow the poet freedom from approaching his subject in a way that

is meaningful to his readers in a private sense. Maybe a richer restatement of his aim here can be found in another maxim that treats the double responsibility of the poet to be both wide-reaching and objective, specific in his terminology and piercing in his insight: "Poets acquire humanity" (OP., p. 170). Despite the fact that this blatant, unqualified pronouncement is difficult to interpret because of ambiguity (do poets acquire humanity in their personal lives or only in their poetry?), it seems to me that it refers to the process that the poet must undergo while writing in order to keep his personal life out of the poetry and yet include enough of his sense of the world to write poetry that speaks directly about an individual's sense of the human condition. Stevens implies that a poet approaches a poem in an indifferent, dispassionate mood and slowly, either in the same poem or in a later one, acquires an individual flavor by the way his temperament seeps into the words that were intended to be objective. The adage hints that Stevens can be comfortable with gradual exposure, through snippets and innuendoes, of his personality because he knows that eventually his temperament must surface in both his subject and style. The poet's feelings can be discovered, then, in his manner of description, in the way he tries to withhold all but the objective fact from his poems and fails continually.

For example, Stevens often presents strikingly descriptive landscapes, apparently without personal comment. In contrast to the landscapes of Keats and Hopkins that are at once perceptually and emotionally rendered (consider the explicit emotions of "To Autumn" and "Binsley Poplars"), those of Stevens display an equally sharp eye but a suppression of personal involvement. The prototype of Stevens' aloofness occurs in epigrammatic poems like "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" where the image is curtly supplied:

> It was evening all afternoon.
> It was snowing
> And it was going to snow.
> The blackbird sat
> In the cedar limbs. (CP., p. 95)

Perhaps an eeriness of mood is suggested in this image, but that mood is aroused by the reader's memory rather than by the poet's attitude. Also, despite the informal vocabulary and syntax, the image emits a certainty of pared-down perfection, planning, and composition. In short, Stevens could hardly be more precise in his imagery and less free with his feelings. And yet even this flatness of tone exposes the reserve and care of a perfectionist. In this case, the poet acquires humanity in the reader's mind only after style and the reader's associations of a bleak, chilly day are considered.

Stevens' opinion of the necessity to remove the personal from poetry is perhaps most clearly explained in "The Creations of Sound," in which he demonstrates why poetic speech should seem less singular than human speech and why therefore it must be distanced from the eccentricities of a particular man. Stevens never wants to be poet X, "an obstruction":

> If the poetry of X was music,
> So that it came to him of its own,
> Without understanding, out of the wall
>
> Or in the ceiling, in sounds not chosen,
> Or chosen quickly, in a freedom
> That was their element, we should not know
>
> That X is an obstruction, a man
> Too exactly himself, and that there are words
> Better without an author, without a poet,
>
> Or having a separate author, a different poet,
> An accretion from ourselves, intelligent
> Beyond intelligence, an artificial man
>
> At a distance, a secondary expositor,
> A being of sound, whom one does not approach
> Through any exaggeration. From him, we collect.
> (CP., p. 310)

This is a portrait of the poet Stevens would be; he would be one who writes poems out of sounds that "rise from the floor rising in speech we do not speak," not the one he is who must choose words carefully, arrange phrases for effect, and inadvertently let part of his individual temperament into his pristine creations. Donald Sheehan, in his discussion of Stevens' poetic technique, prefaces a quotation from this

poem by saying that "it is as if the presiding personality (in the poem) were born whole and complete, with no personal past to disentangle and no private future to cause concern and with only the present moment to respond to and sing about."[5] After this comment it is very tempting to describe the voice Stevens creates as the voice of a major man, as described in "Asides on the Oboe," a being who is "the transparence of the place in which / He is . . ." (CP., pp. 250-51). Although this identification is rather risky before we consider just how the poet acquires humanity in his use of landscape for his subject and in his method of description, it is clear that in his wish to keep from being a poet who obstructs a view of the way things are, Stevens becomes remote, self-conscious, and deliberate in his invention.

Stevens' theory of temperament and his attempts to present things as they are put him in an awkward bind when he writes poetry. His complete agreement with Henri Focillon's assertion in The Life of Forms that "the chief characteristic of the mind is to be constantly describing itself" (NA., p. 46), a statement that Stevens quotes in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," encourages

---

[5]Donald Sheehan, "The Whole of Harmonium: Poetic Technique in Wallace Stevens," in The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, ed. Warren French (Deland, Fla.: Everett-Edwards, Inc., 1970), p. 182.

him to be acutely aware of his state of mind. In addition, his temperament of an introspective and reserved man causes him to desire to present an understanding of the physical world in his poetry more than to express the moods of his own mind, and this desire provokes his interest in places rather than people as a subject for his poetry. In the Adagia he says, "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (OP., p. 158). The trouble with life as an affair of places is not merely that such an outlook is unusual, since it is not unusual for an artist to be overwhelmed by the physical world, but it is a problem because the poet is a man who can never leave his state of conscious humanity to live freely in the physical world. Consequently, Stevens is at once trying to become distanced from his human emotions to sense the world directly, and still he must not lose his understanding of the human condition if he is to write poetry. Doris Eder interprets the problem engendered by Stevens' affinity for places as his greatest limitation; in her article "Wallace Stevens' Landscapes and Still Lifes" she says, "The fact that Stevens is so much engaged by abstraction and inhuman objects, not by human beings, accounts for the lack of emotional tension in his poetry."[6] However, it seems

---

[6]Doris L. Eder, "Wallace Stevens' Landscapes and Still Lifes," Mosaic, 4 (Summer 1971), p. 5.

to me that the poet's inhibition of the privately emotional and his ease with the inhuman create a great deal of tension once they are coupled with his theory of the function of poetry for his readers—to "help people live their lives" (NA., p. 36). Stevens' job as a poet is to make his temperament, his sense of the world which is noticeably detached, meaningful to readers who may or may not share his love of the physical world. The tension that this "limitation"—perhaps "challenge" is a kinder word—creates sets the stage for a poetry remarkably subtle in style. And, once again, that subtlety matches the reserved stance of both the poet and man.

The difficult stance of reserve with insight to which Stevens aspires is an attitude toward art and toward the object being interpreted by an artist that is commonly termed detachment, or aesthetic or physical distance, by aestheticians. Stevens was certainly aware of the ideas of distance as an aesthetic problem because at the time he was preparing for the lecture "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" he had carefully read, even filled with marginalia, his copy of Charles Mauron's Aesthetics and Psychology.[7] This book elaborates and clarifies the aesthetic theory of

---

[7]B. J. Leggett, "Stevens' Psychology of Reading: 'Man Carrying Thing' and Its Sources," Wallace Stevens Journal, 6, Nos. 3 & 4 (1982), p. 52.

Roger Fry and devotes much attention to the unusual attitude an artist takes toward his subject.[8] In addition to Mauron's understanding of the aesthetic attitude, Stevens' stance can be compared to the theory of distance posited by Edward Bullough in his archetypal article "Physical Distance as a Factor and an Aesthetic Principle."[9] Before detailing the components of the aesthetic attitude that Mauron and Bullough discuss with remarkable similarity, it seems necessary to make this idea of a vague and little-discussed theory of distance more familiar. Significantly, the notion of aesthetic distance is not strange to those familiar only with Stevens' best known poems. For instance, one of the most reprinted and most frequently explicated of his poems treats the stance and the typical situation of Stevens as poet while writing. This poem, "The Snow Man," describes the necessary state of mind for a poet if he is to see his object without witlessly subjective obstruction. "One must have a mind of winter / . . . And have been cold a long time" (CP., p. 9), says the poet who wants the reader to feel the

---

[8]For a complete study of Mauron's influence on Stevens' poetics refer to Barbara Ann Farris Graves, "Stevens' Reading in Contemporary French Aesthetics," Chapter I.

[9]Edward Bullough, "'Physical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," 1912; rpt. in Problems in Aesthetics: An Introductory Book of Readings, ed. Morris Weitz (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), pp. 646-56.

metaphorical coldness with which the poet views the snow-laden pine trees and iced junipers. Although I do not deny the paradox that to explain his nonsensual stance Stevens must make his reader shiver and squint into an artic landscape, must cause the reader to know the lack of feeling by manifesting a particularly biting one, the task has been accomplished, and the required perspective of indifference realized in this poem.[10] Besides the typically reserved

---

[10] I am conscious that my discussion of this poem echoes more critics' interpretations than it would be reasonable for me to cite. However, two have readings especially close to mine in their mention of the poet's need to be indifferent. In his book The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of Yeats and Stevens (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968), Frank Lentricchia says that "Stevens suggests on the one hand that by approaching nature passively, by refusing to commit the pathetic fallacy, we will not hear the sound of misery in the wind for the simple reason that reality is inhuman. Yet insofar as we do not imagine his conclusion is not without humor—we do not exist, we are 'nothing'" (p. 156). William Bevis in "Stevens' Toneless Poetry," English Literary History, 41 (1974), pp. 257-86, discusses "The Snow Man" as a poem which creates a state of ecstasy known to Eastern mystics that can be casually described as not seeing "nothing" but as seeing "The Nothing." He distinguishes this state of experiencing ecstasy which he finds only in one other poem, "The Course of a Particular," from the fluctuating state of detached perspective described in "Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself" and "The Plain Sense of Things." Although I agree with Bevis, my concern is a bit different from his in that he treats poems whose theme is detachment, whereas I am only trying to reach a definition of the artist's stance at this point and later to find evidence of his detached stance in his methods of description. Interestingly, the crux of Bevis' thesis supports the notion that "poets acquire humanity," that Stevens cannot but help to infuse his poems with his temperament. Bevis says, "when the distinction between poems discussing blankness and poems expressing blankness is preserved, many Stevens poems emerge as reflections, criticisms, even misunderstandings of his ecstatic experience:

perspective of "coldness," "The Snow Man" reveals the common set of circumstances Stevens finds himself in as someone who has affairs with places; in short, the speaker of the poem faces a scene, a landscape, that he wishes to describe faithfully without the intrusion of man's tendency to personify nature. He wants to hear and denote the sound of the wind without finding any human pain in the way the wind rustles a few leaves. So the speaker must use his senses to perceive, but he must not let them make an inanimate landscape suffer in description as a man exposed to such harsh weather suffers physically.

Mauron and Bullough would interpret the situation and pose of the snow man in terms that elaborate on the give-and-take, hide-and-go-seek game the senses must play. Mauron explicates it as "a curious mixture of sensation and inhibition—the first depending on the second for its keenness, richness and duration. . . ."[11] In this manner of explaining the aesthetic attitude Mauron emphasizes the

---

they are not blank poems at all, but being about blankness they are likely—by their nature as well as his cultural bias [as a Westerner unfamiliar with mystical terminology for and understanding of 'nothingness']—to be a bit unsympathetic to the experience which shapes their existence" (pp. 278-79, Bevis' emphasis).

[11]Charles Mauron, Aesthetics and Psychology, trans. Roger Fry and Katherine John (London: Hogarth Press, 1935), p. 33.

intensity with which an artist sees an object. Bullough takes a different path to reach the same central point when he initially uses the term "psychical distance" to stress the tenacity with which an artist must remain personally unmoved by an object or scene that would normally stir him: "This [psychical] distance appears to lie between our own self and its affections, using the latter term in its broadest sense as anything which affects our being bodily or spiritually, e.g., as sensation, perception, emotional state or idea."[12] Conincidentally, the first illustration of distance that Bullough offers, a discussion of a fog at sea, is not very different from the setting of "The Snow Man" in its danger to human safety and comfort and in the almost perverse pleasure with which an artist might contemplate it:

> Imagine a fog at sea: for most people it is an experience of acute unpleasantness. Apart from the physical annoyance and remoter forms of discomfort such as delays, it is apt to produce feelings of peculiar anxiety, fears of invisible dangers, strains of watching and listening for distant and unlocalized signals. The listless movements of the ship and her warning calls soon tell upon the nerves of the passenger; and that special expectant, tacit anxiety and nervousness, always associated with this experience make a fog the dreaded terror of the sea (all the more terrifying because of its very silence and gentleness) for the expert seafarer no less than for the ignorant landsman.

---

[12]Bullough, p. 647.

> Nevertheless, a fog at sea can be a source of intense relish and enjoyment. Abstract from the experience of the sea fog, for the moment, its danger and practical unpleasantness; just as everyone in the enjoyment of a mountain-climb disregards its physical labor and its danger (though it is not denied that these may incidentally enter into the enjoyment and enhance it); direct the attention to the features "objectively" constituting the phenomenon—the veil surrounding you with an opaqueness as of transparent milk, blurring the outlines of things and distorting their shapes into wierd grotesqueness, observe the carrying power of air, producing the impression as if you could touch some far-off siren by merely putting out your hand and letting it lose itself behind the white wall; note the curious creamy smoothness of water, hypocritically denying as it were any suggestion of danger; and, above all, the strange solitude and remoteness from the world, as it can be found only on the highest mountaintops; and the experience may acquire, in its uncanny mingling of repose and terror, a flavor of such concentrated poignancy and delight as to contrast sharply with the blind and distempered anxiety of its other aspects. This contrast, often emerging with startling suddenness, is like a momentary switching on of some new current, or the passing ray of a bright light, illuminating the outlook upon perhaps the most ordinary and familiar objects—an impression which we experience sometimes in instants of direst extremity, when our practical interest snaps like a wire from sheer over-tension and we watch with the marveling unconcern of a mere spectator.[13]

I have thought it worthwhile to cite Bullough's example at length because he elaborates on the aesthetic attitude in terms that Stevens would approve; that is, he presents two ways of approaching a scene much like Stevens' variations of landscapes ("Variations on a Summer Day," "Thirteen Ways

---

[13]Bullough, pp. 646-47.

of Looking at a Blackbrid," "Sea Surface Full of Clouds") and analyses the significant differences by juxtaposition.

Perhaps most importantly, Bullough's fog and Stevens' "The Snow Man" can serve as models from which the elements of the aesthetic attitude and the use of that attitude to form an aesthetic distance can be discerned. The elements of this attitude which both Mauron and Bullough remark are the artist's absorption in the present moment, a heightened perception of the setting which causes many associations to be brought to mind, a disregard of the practical nature of things, a pleasurable reaction to seeing reality in a new way, and a discarding of the usual organization of the scene for a new one.[14] Of course, it would be artificial to insist that every poem of Stevens' contains all of these elements, or even primarily concerns itself with them. The point is that they may appear in the poetry as either a latent influence or an active theme. In returning to Bullough's fog and Stevens' snow man, let us identify the now explicitly expressed elements.

---

[14]In this listing of the elements of the aesthetic attitude I have combined and summarized both Mauron and Bullough. Both deal with all the elements, although they do not designate them in the same manner. In the following discussion I frequently refer to and cite the two aestheticians individually so that any fine distinctions between their theories neither inhibits nor confuses an explanation of Stevens' use of aesthetic distance.

The first element, although there is no proper order to these factors, is that of the artist becoming absorbed in the present. Once caught in the fog at sea, Bullough becomes unconcerned with the passage of time as evidenced by the fact that he never guesses when or wishes that the fog will clear. Similarly, in a literal reading of "The Snow Man," the only reference to time is that the necessity of "be[ing] cold a long time," or of stretching the moment to its limit, is granted. Mauron touches on this absorption in the present by differentiating between an active and contemplative disposition: "What distinguishes the active from the contemplative spirit is that the former never ceases to think of a future more or less near at hand, whereas the latter is absorbed in the present."[15] Such a contemplative spirit can also be noticed in several other poems' personae. In "The Latest Freed Man" the doctor rises early in the morning and forgets about the theories he may have propounded at other times; he simply dwells on the instant:

> Tired of the old descriptions of the world,
> The latest freed man rose at six and sat
> On the edge of his bed. He said, I suppose there is
> A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just
> Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,
> Which is enough: the moment's rain and sea,
> The moment's sun (the strong man vaguely seen),
> Overtaking the doctrine of this landscape. . . .
> (CP., pp. 204-205)

---

[15]Mauron, p. 29.

This freed man is not unlike the fisherman of "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors," who also allows himself to become distracted from an awareness of time. Instead of expressing his concern for having a good catch of fish at the end of the day, he is arrested by the sight of a dove:

> The fisherman is all
> One eye, in which the dove resembles the dove.
>
> There is one dove, one bass, one fisherman.
> Yet coo becomes rou-coo, rou-coo. How close
>
> To the unstated theme each variation comes . . .
> In that one ear it might strike perfectly:
>
> The fisherman might be the single man
> In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow
> still. (CP., pp. 356-57)

Stevens seems to suggest that this state of suspended animation allows a chance for the fisherman to see and hear the bird as a dove without the dove becoming symbolic or without distorting the dove's coo beyond recognition. A final example of absorption in the present is found in "Local Objects," the poem that most openly treats the subject of the poet's aesthetic attitude. The poem begins by explaining the speaker's lack of a foyer, a particular perspective, a standardized point of departure, for his musing on local objects. This lack is fortunate because the observer is not pressed to arrive any any conclusion, any figurative "place;" he can extend a moment into stasis:

> He knew that he was a spirit without a foyer
> And that, in his knowledge, local objects become
> More precious than the most precious objects of home:
>
> The local objects of a world without a foyer,
> Without a remembered past, a present past,
> Or a present future, hoped for in present hope. . . .
> (OP., p. 111)

In a world without foyers, without such necessities as being responsible for a near future or influenced by a recent past, or such a push for coming and going, "getting and spending," the contemplative spirit of an artist may emerge. As in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," here Stevens argues for "a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without" (NA., p. 36), and in this terminology, the "violence from within" takes the shape of concentration.

Once suspended in time, the artist's perception becomes heightened; he not only can see the object in minute detail but his attention to it calls forth memories, associations, and figurative comparisons to help him verbalize his sensations. Bullough develops a keen interest in portraying the opaque whiteness of the fog; he whimsically feels that he can reach through space as through a curtain to touch a distant horn, and he allows figurative language to enter his philosophical prose by comparing his sense of solitude on ship to being on a mountaintop. In a similar manner, the snow man notices details about the trees, differentiating between crusted pine trees and shagged junipers. Despite an effort to dispel anything but the fact of the sight, he

draws on metaphor to describe the trees ("shagged") and needs the connotations of "nothing" to interpret his image of barrenness. Even in his most austere mood, Stevens allows his mind to fix on his object and to recall and form associations. Mauron explains these factors as the consequences of the aesthetic attitude. He says that "the artist's eye, by the more brilliant light of an attention concentrated on the present, sees more details, discerns finer shapes. . . . The aesthetic universe becomes at once richer and stranger. The spectator feels himself as it were transported into another world, full of monsters and fascinating subtleties."[16] This increased sensitivity can be witnessed in "A Dish of Peaches in Russia" where all the speaker's energies are focused on a bowl of fruit that is suddenly beautiful:

> The peaches are large and round,
>
> Ah! and red; and they have peach fuzz, ah!
> They are full of juice and the skin is soft.
>
> (CP., p. 224)

From this humorously enamoured description the speaker then begins to compare the peaches to other things he loves; he experiences a "multiplication of echoes," as Mauron would term it, a state in which "a colour is not only a colour, but,

---

[16]Mauron, p. 41.

for example, a haze of memories."[17] The peaches prick memories in the speaker's mind until a slight movement of the curtain causes him to remember himself:

> They are full of the colors of my village
> And of fair weather, summer, dew, peace.
>
> The room is quiet where they are
> The windows are open. The sunlight fills
>
> The curtains. Even the drifting of the curtains,
> Slight as it is disturbs me. I did not know
>
> That such ferocities could tear
> One self from another, as these peaches do.
> (CP., p. 224)

The final sentence of the poem sadly refers to the loss of the heightened state of perception when the speaker is conscious that he has momentarily left practical concerns behind. But to return to the notion of multiplication, Stevens frankly presents this affluence of associations in several other poems. "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetary," "Variations on a Summer Day," "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" are some of these, yet "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" provides the most compressed enumeration of the overlays an artist conjures:

> How thick the gobbet is with overlays,
> The double fruit of boisterous epicures,
> Like the same orange repeating on one tree
>
> A single self. Divest reality
> Of its propriety. Admit the shaft
> Of that third planet to the table and then:

---

[17] Mauron, pp. 40-41.

1. The hut stands by itself beneath the palms.
2. Out of their bottle the green genii come.
3. A vine has climbed the other side of the wall.

4. The sea is sprouting upward out of rocks.
5. The symbol of feasts and oblivion . . .
6. White sky, pink sun, trees on a distant peak.

7. The lozenges are nailed-up lattices.
8. The owl sits humped. It has a hundred eyes.
9. The coconut and cockerel in one.

10. This is how yesterday's volcano looks.
11. There is an island Palahude by name—
12. An uncivil shape like a gigantic haw.

(NA., pp. 86-87)

Despite the playfulness of these images, these interpretations of a pineapple, Stevens argues, and I think Mauron and Bullough would agree, that he is not abandoning the reality of the fruit for a fanciful, meaninglessly obscure world; he is seeing all that there is of the world in the fruit since he is not a stickler for the literal, the practical. One of the concluding stanzas clarifies this point:

> An object the sum of its complications, seen
> And unseen. This is everybody's world.
> Here the total artifice reveals itself
>
> As the total reality. (NA., p. 87)

Barbara Graves, in her dissertation about the French aestheticians who influenced Stevens, sums up what both Mauron and Stevens felt about the active participation the senses and the imagination play in an artist's stance. She feels that "by 'detachment,' then, Mauron seems to mean neither the absence of all emotional response nor the artist's

detachment from reality but rather the artist's ability to love and to enjoy all the details of the world outside himself."[18] This conclusion brings an association to mind: Stevens says, "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world" (CP., p. 325).

Beyond the vivid sense of the world that the aesthetic attitude gives the artist and reader in turn, what is the outgrowth of art? Since the practical, time-oriented nature of things has already been excluded, it is unlikely that the contemplative spirit would admit art to have a specific social function. Stevens answers this question himself and opens a discussion of the impractical nature of art in his gloss of Mauron's argument about the difference between the aesthetic emotion, the result of detachment, and the emotions of ordinary life. This gloss appears in the margins of Stevens' own copy of Aesthetics and Psychology:

> A work of art is inactive and useless and constitutes a stimulus which we enjoy for its own sake, since it entails no reaching beyond the enjoyment of the sensation it provokes. Thus the basis of the aesthetic emotion is the aesthetic attitude; contemplation without any idea of making use of the object of comtemplation.[19]

In returning to the prototypes of the aesthetic emotions, it is easy to point out that once Bullough becomes lost in his fog he no longer worries about the danger of his circumstances,

---

[18] Graves, p. 23.

[19] Leggett, pp. 3-4.

rather he explains how his rational reason for concern vanishes as he feels he is becoming a spectator. He removes himself from all practical considerations and beings to appreciate his surroundings for their inherently interesting, somewhat mysterious qualities. This overlay of distance allows him to derive pleasure from the fog alone, without asking for any reward of comfort or security. Bullough accepts what the landscape gives gratuitously in and of itself. A familiar correlation can be found in the snow man's expectations of the snow scene before him. Because he is detached from the notion of being physically uncomfortable while observing, he not only does not ask for the landscape to satisfy him in any human way by suggesting a human emotion, misery, in the sound of the leaves, but he would rather rid himself of all mortal anxieties and enjoy the pristine essence that the scene embodies, the paradoxical sense of nothingness. Something of this same attitude, the love of what the landscape offers to the sensibility without a desire to gain a pragmatically useful idea or feeling, can be observed in the conclusion to "Local Objects." In the last four stanzas the speaker explains how he enjoys the local objects—whatever they are—for their existence without any functional application and for the way they always solicit new associations from him. The objects are

> Objects not present as a matter of course
> On the dark side of the heavens or the bright,
> In that sphere with so few objects of its own.
>
> Little existed for him but the few things
> For which a fresh name always occurred, as if
> He wanted to make them, keep them from perishing,
>
> The few things, the objects of insight, the
> integrations
> Of feeling, the things that come of their own accord,
> Because he desired without knowing quite what,
>
> That were the moments of the classic, the beautiful.
> These were that serene he had always been approaching
> Toward an absolute foyer beyond romance.
>
> (OP., p. 112)

In this case, the gratuitous renumeration the speaker receives is a feeling of getting toward a glimpse of what is beautiful and absolute. However, except in a spiritual way, this reward is neither sought nor accepted as something useful. Bullough interprets this factor of the aesthetic attitude in describing it as "putting the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self; by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends."[20] The detachment which this attitude requires is illustrated by the commands of the speaker of "Mozart 1935" (CP., p. 131), who orders the poet to play at the piano the sounds of the present without becoming diverted from his "arpeggios" when the world around him is chaotic. The poet as pianist needs to find a balance between a knowledge of the present

---

[20]Bullough, pp. 647-48.

and his (and his audience's) need for the sublime; he tries to become indifferent to the crisis at hand in order to see the world, which includes that crisis, more clearly.

Seeing local objects plainly leads to a sensation of joy for the spectator or artist. This feeling can only be labeled an emotion, however, with the most careful clarification. Since it is difficult to conceive of joy without some personal overtones, Bullough distinguishes between what is emotional in a solely personal and in a refined aesthetic sense. He says that "distance does not imply an impersonal, purely intellectually interested relation. . . . On the contrary, it describes a personal relation, often highly emotionally colored, but of a peculiar character. Its peculiarity lies in that the personal character of the relation has been, so to speak, filtered. It has been cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal, without, however, hereby losing its original constitution."[21] This emotional response is termed by Bullough in his fog description as a "concentrated poignancy and delight" produced by his heightened perception and his disregard of the practical. Although there is little in "The Snow Man" that can be taken for an expression of joy, the "listener's" ability to "behold" the scene chastely implies a mood of aesthetic and emotional

---

[21]Bullough, p. 649. Emphasis is Bullough's.

height. Perhaps this point can be better made by a negative argument: if one cannot say the emotion of the final stanza is elation, then one can certainly say that there is no sense of depression or loss in the snow man's view of stark reality:

> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.
> (CP., p. 10)

Whatever the case with this very ambiguous poem, the artist's pleasure in the conclusion to "Local Objects" is undeniable. In this poem the state of immanence, of being within the limits of possible experience, becomes obvious when the speaker talks of his close brushes with the beautiful, the absolute, and the serene. Another instance of this pleasure is found in the speaker's reaction to the peaches in "A Dish of Peaches in Russia" when he explains his feelings with several similes:

> I absorb them [the peaches] as the Angevine
> Absorbs Anjou. I see them as a lover sees,
>
> As a young lover sees the first buds of spring
> And as the black Spaniard plays his guitar.
> (CP., p. 224)

The effusiveness and excitement of the speaker's exclamatory "ah's" further reveal his elation. Mauron treats this element of the aesthetic attitude in similar terms to those of the viewer of peaches. He characterizes the artist's feelings toward immanence as those of a lover by quoting

Auguste Bréal who sees the artist as "un amoreaux perpétuel."[22] Furthermore, the desire for aesthetic pleasure determines not only the artist's humor but influences the reader as well; the outcome of the emotion is viewed as a kind of jovial connoisseurship. Mauron concludes that "the artist transforms us, willy-nilly, into epicures."[23] Such a notion leads us to consider the relation between the artist and his audience.

It seems to me that the relationship between artist and audience caused by this emotional element, an emotion that both Bullough and Mauron consider analogous but of more intensity in the artist,[24] points to another way in which "poets acquire humanity." In poetry the artist's sensitivity is revealed. If he is a poet of detachment, reserve, and precision, those qualities are manifest too. But what happens as the reader progresses through a collection of poems is that he alters his own conception of the world to be open to the poet's, and, at least for a time, if the reader wishes for any deep understanding, he becomes like the poet, he adopts

---

[22]Mauron, p. 51.

[23]Mauron, p. 38. For a full discussion of Stevens' interpretation and use of this phrase, see B. J. Leggett's "Stevens' Psychology of Reading: 'Man Carrying Thing' and its Sources," cited earlier.

[24]Both Bullough and Mauron view the desired attitude of the audience to be as close to that of the artist as possible, despite the fact that it must be of lower intensity. Refer to Mauron, p. 39, and to Bullough, pp. 650-56.

the poet's temperament. So, although the reader is the one whose attitude has altered, it is the poet's view of the world that appears to take on universality. Stevens attests to this phenomenon himself when in "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet" he argues for the advantages of a long poem:

> Anyone who has read a long poem day after day as, for example, The Faerie Queene, knows how the poem comes to possess the reader and how it naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there. (NA., p. 50)

Stevens later elaborates on the importance of "naturalization" when he talks about how, despite the individual sense of the world that a poet's work springs from, the success of a poet depends on his ability to stir his readers. In "Effects of Analogy" he claims, "the measure of a poet is the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent to which it involves the sense of other people" (NA., pp. 123-24). Therefore, from this chain of thoughts, from elation to epicures to naturalization, one can determine that in spite of the seeming impersonality of Stevens' poetry, it is the ability he has to make us see and feel as he does that transforms our perception of him; in our donning of Stevens' temperament, Stevens himself becomes less remote. Helen Vendler also notices this point while she quotes a statement Stevens

first made in View in 1940: "the poet confers his identity on the reader. He cannot do this if he intrudes personally."[25]

The final element of the aesthetic attitude is that of abandoning the old organization of the view seen by the artist for a new one. This element acts as the basis of the need for originality and uniqueness in art because if the artist is completely removed from the practical demands of the world, then it follows that what he sees, and the way he depicts what he sees, will appear completely new. Therefore, art without some quality of novelty is the result of an artist who has not fully distanced himself from the quotidian, and thus he is an artist who is no more sensitive than his audience. However, in the prototypes of the aesthetic attitude that we have been analyzing, there is no danger of such a lack of creativity. In the fog description, Bullough emphasizes that he abdicates from the realm of the usual in order to view his scene freshly as a milky veil. In Stevens' "The Snow Man" the speaker makes an effort not to feel ordinary sensations of coldness and not to think ordinary thoughts of how the cry of leaves connotes misery; he takes a startlingly new perspective toward the snow landscape when he terms seeing it as seeing nothing. The desire to get rid

---

[25]Helen Vendler, On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 197.

of the old ways of viewing reality and the old images used to express an artistic insight into reality constitutes an important theme in Stevens' work and can be represented by the description of a decayed resort in the first part of "Academic Discourses at Havana." In this poem the trite images of the world are replaced by unconventional ones:

> Canaries in the morning, orchestras
> In the afternoon, balloons at night. That is
> A difference, at least, from nightingales,
> Jehovah and the great sea-worm. The air
> Is not so elemental nor the earth
> So near. (CP., p. 142)

Although the speaker is uncertain whether or not the canaries, orchestras, and balloons show any improvement in the modern world over the old, romantic view of the world, he is satisfied that the images have changed because they should reflect the change in civilization. In fact, Stevens is not claiming that balloons symbolize an advance over the world that believed in the "great sea-worm" since he hints that man now breathes air that is not as "elemental" and inhabits an earth that is more artificial, more removed from nature. The old "sustenance of the wilderness [the old images] / Does not sustain us in the metropoles" (CP., p. 142); modern poets need to find new images to sustain modern man. Other poems that support the call for a new way of perceiving reality are "Farewell to Florida," "Sailing After Lunch," and "Lions in Sweden."

Charles Mauron presents the best explanation of the process the artist undergoes to destroy the old and find his own unique view of a scene. He clarifies the artist's movement toward creativity by experimenting with his own perception of reality:

> By altering his focus, and treating as negligible the future and the conduct required in it, the artist of course loses all the advantages of this practical organization; it becomes perfectly foreign to him. At this very moment I see through my window a landscape with a house, trees and hills. Certainly I know, as a result of long experience, how to behave towards these different objects. But if I consider them from an aesthetic, that is a static point of view, my knowledge becomes useless lumber; what is the point of being able at a glance to distinguish chalk from slate, acacia from pine, thin air from the firm ground? All that is henceforth of no importance. Henceforth there is nothing in front of me but forms and colours between which strange affinities assert themselves; the shadow is perhaps what is most like stone, and the form of an olive tree repeats almost exactly, who knows why, the angle of a distant valley; one cypress speaks to me of Italy, the other utters a vehement denial. What was distinct draws nearer, and what was mingled separates. The landscape I could find my way about so easily returns to chaos.
>
> But not for long. The man who pauses thus may indeed repress all outward activity, but he will not prevent his mind from working. And just as he listened to the most distant echoes awakening within him, so, whether he likes it or not, he must witness all the labour of reorganizing the data supplied to his intelligence. Doubtless the point of view has changed; but the machinery remains. Give it corn to grind, and it will grind; thread to weave, and it will weave. Between the different sensations or between the echoes, or between echoes and sensations, correspondences arise, systems are formed, composing what will afterwards become the unity of the work.[26]

---

[26]Mauron, pp. 43-44.

Thus Mauron describes "the poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice," as Stevens phrases the business of finding a new organization, a new stage for the theatre of poetry, in "Of Modern Poetry" (CP., p. 239). The process of abandoning the old, seeing reality as chaos without any organization, and letting the mind piece a new organization together depends on two things. These two things are the richness of reality and the determination of the artist. For Stevens there is no question of the fecund nature of the world; for example, his ability to be inspired by reality is the point of "Nomad Exquisite" (CP., p. 95). In this poem Stevens draws an extended simile between how the "immense dew of Florida / Brings forth" not only palms and vines but also hymns from the beholder of reality and "forms, flames, and the flakes of flames" from the poet.

The determination of the artist to piece together a new landscape is another common topic in Stevens' poetry:

> I cannot bring a world quite round,
> Although I patch it as I can. (CP., p. 165)

This statement from the second canto of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" may be initially understood as the poet's admission of his limitations. However, after further consideration it reveals more about the goal of the poet and his method of achieving that goal than about his sorrows.

The impossibility of recreating the world in art is calmly accepted; there may be some pathos implied in the sense of uselessly expended energy connoted by "cannot," but self-pity is not emphasized. What one does learn about the poet's ability is that the partial success of conveying a sense of the world can be achieved through effort and through a deliberate piecing together of details, patching. The same idea of the consciousness of the creative process appears in the essay "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting," and now the metaphor rests more surely on a vital comparison of the visual and literary arts. Stevens equates: "poetry and painting alike create through composition" (NA., p. 163). In order to elucidate the meaning and implications of the dictum of composition, of structure, Stevens continues in the essay to disavow the role of inspiration in the artistic process and proclaims that a "laborious element" is response for the "miraculous kind of reason that the imagination somehow promotes" (NA., p. 165). The connection of this "laborious element" to the deliberate, self-conscious temperament of Stevens should be apparent. It is only natural that a contemplative man and poet should stress the undemonstrative, quiet, yet vigorous activity of the mind in writing. A poem that confirms the necessity of travail is "How to Live, What to Do" (CP., pp. 125-26). Here the man and his companion gain

a view from a "heroic height" of a "tufted rock / Massively rising high and bare" in addition to an opportunity to hear a "heroic sound / Joyous and jubilant and sure" only after they have climbed through the cold wind all day (the setting of the poem, which takes place during the evening, implies a day-long journey). I interpret this early appearance of the rock image as the poet's first sight of his image of bare reality, an image he has had to struggle to attain. Moreover, the title suggests that this kind of labor, mountain climbing, is the proper activity of man. The implication is that the poet should accept such labor willingly since he is more ardent than other men in his attempts to see reality clearly.

Stevens' possession of both the inspiration and determination necessary to form a new organization of a scene leads to the explication of the constructive nature of his poetry. Since the poet, like the guitarist, pieces reality together in his poems, what are the units that he uses as materials? The answer, simply enough, is that his materials are words and, more specifically, words that give a vitality to the world. R. P. Blackmur recognizes this point in his article "Examples of Wallace Stevens" when he states that "his success is due largely to his double adherence to words and experience as existing apart from his private sensibility. His great labor has been to allow the

reality of what he felt personally to pass into the superior impersonal reality of words."[27] Blackmur's opinion identifies the artist's materials and, further, echoes the qualities of the aesthetic attitude necessary to any artist: a filtered personal feeling for reality and a laborious determination to create objectively with words. An even more inclusive account of the interplay of the aesthetic attitude with reality, the combination which encourages a new organization for reality within the realm of art, is found in the twelfth poem of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it.
> The poet speaks the poem as it is
>
> Not as it was: part of the reverberation
> Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues
> Are like newspapers blown by the wind. He speaks
>
> By sight and insight as they are. There is no
> Tomorrow for him. The wind will have passed by,
> The statues will have gone back to being things
> about.
>
> The mobile and the immobile flickering
> In the area between is and was are leaves,
> Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees
>
> And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
> Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
> Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

---

[27] R. P. Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens" in Language as Gesture (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 243.

> In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
> The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
> Together, said words of the world are the life
> of the world.
>
> (CP., pp. 473-74)

This poem shows Stevens' recognition of all the elements of the aesthetic attitude—absorption in the present, heightened perception, disregard of the practical nature of things, a pleasurable reaction, and a new way of viewing the world—as it constructs the new organization of reality, the poem. The organization in this case takes the form of drawing a comparison between leaves and thoughts; and by the end of the poem the scene transforms itself, by means of the poet's simile, into an accumulation of words. The new organization of reality is the significance that the poem gives to leaves as "presences of thoughts" and in turn to the words, born from thoughts, that now make up the world. So, the new organization is the result of seeing reality freshly; it is the art object.

Beyond the conception of aesthetic distance as an attitude of detachment that allows for an original interpretation of the world, aesthetic distance also enables the artist to see reality as a basis from which he can create new forms—poems, paintings, or sculptures. These new forms are artifacts, physical manifestations of the artist's sense of the world. Thus aesthetic distance is not only psychical in nature, but also it is physical in the sense

that artworks both define and fill space. Once the artwork becomes physical, distance too becomes a physical factor; now the artist must define the spatial relationship between the parts of the landscape in themselves and between the landscape and his position in it. Thus, the question of what point of view the artist takes, from what location and attitude he writes a poem, arises. This is the foundation of spatial metaphor in Stevens' poetry and can be most easily understood as a conjunction in the tone and style of a poem with the artist's location within the landscape of the poem. The poet's stance—his location, his pose, and his temperament—serves as the term that includes both the psychical and physical meaning of aesthetic distance. Henri Focillon presents the clearest explanation of this shift from mental attitude to physical artwork:

> Art is made up, not of the artist's intentions, but of works of art. . . . In order to exist at all, a work of art must be tangible. It must renounce thought, must become dimensional, must both measure and quantify space. It is in this very turning outward that its inmost principle resides. It lies under our eyes and under our hands as a kind of extrusion upon a world which has nothing whatsoever in common with it save the pretext of the image in the so-called "arts" of imitation.[28]

---

[28]Henri Focillon, The Life Forms in Art, trans. Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1948), p. 3.

It is easy for one to grasp this notion, the ultimate physicality of the artist's new organization of the world, in painting, sculpture, and dance,[29] but one must stretch his conception of what is physical to include the literary arts within this spatial realm. However, Stevens seems to argue for just this kind of acceptance of the significant physicality of poetry in poems like "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain" and "The Planet on the Table." In the former of these, one sees the reader, presumably Stevens, reenact the patching of a world, the writing of a book of poetry:

> There is was, word for word,
> The poem that took the place of a mountain.
>
> He breathed its oxygen,
> Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.
>
> It reminded him how he had needed
> A place to go to in his own direction,
>
> How he had recomposed the pines,
> Shifted the rocks and picked his way among the clouds,
>
> For the outlook that would be right,
> Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:
>
> The exact rock where his inexactnesses
> Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,
>
> Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
> Recognize his unique and solitary home.
>
> (CP., p. 512)

---

[29] Refer to Bullough, p. 653.

The poem is a place that he constructs to his own design (notice the emphasis on selective formation in verbs like "recomposed," "shifted," and "picked"), and the landscape that he finally views from the summit, "his unique and solitary home," represents the poet's own sense of the world that incorporates both his subject (an actual landscape) and his style (the use of spatial metaphor and accurate description). "The Planet on the Table" deals with the physical nature of art in much the same way, only in this poem the scale is a bit more grand. Here, Ariel, the poet, views the writing of his poetry as more than analogous, as equal to the "makings of his self" and of a self-contained planet (CP., p. 532). Although the poem concludes with the hope that there is some "lineament or character, / Some affluence" that relates the world of poetry to the real world, the physical nature of the volume of collected poems, the planet on the table, is indisputable. Other poems which also treat the tangible nature of the poet's art are the sixth canto of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Crude Foyer," and "The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour."

The interrelation of temperament, aesthetic distance, and spatial metaphor requires further investigation into Stevens' methods of landscape description. The tone and style of his descriptions must also be considered along

with an analysis of the perceptual detail of the landscapes he portrays. The significance of the adage "poets acquire humanity" may now be said to be that Stevens' self-conscious, reserved character permeates his poetry in its very insistence on the aesthetic attitude; therefore, the new organization that the poet gives reality in his landscape descriptions reveals his sense of the world, his love of the physical world, and his acute detachment from it:

> From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
> And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.
> (CP., p. 383)

CHAPTER II

TANGIBLE LANDSCAPES: SPATIAL METAPHOR IN STEVENS' POETRY

Because Stevens believes "it is life we are trying to get in poetry" (OP., p. 158) he makes his images, his landscapes, and his settings as tangible as possible for his reader; and to be tangible in poetry means to exist in the physical world of a poet's imaginative construct. When reading poetry, one enters the imaginative, yet illusionistically physical realm of the planet on the table. Alan Perlis phrases his interpretation of this tangibility in terms of a transformation: "For Stevens, language provides the illusion of reproducing objects and actions in external nature while in fact language transforms them from one circumstance to another: being-in-nature to being-in-the-mind. . . ."[1] Despite the fact that such a transformation may be difficult to explain, it is no more mysterious than any "willing suspension of disbelief" that enables a reader

---

[1]Alan Perlis, Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976, p. 84. Haskell M. Block also notices the transformation of landscape from reality to mind in his article "The Impact of French Symbolism on Modern American Poetry," in The Shaken Realist ed. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana St. University Press, 1970), p. 208.

or writer to become absorbed in a work of art. Therefore when Stevens claims that

> Description is revelation. It is not
> The thing described, nor false facsimile.
>
> It is an artificial thing that exists,
> In its own seeming, plainly visible,
>
> Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
> Intenser than any actual life could be . . . (CP., p. 344)

he is not so much asking that one view his descriptions as texts without reference to places (description without place) as he is asking that the descriptions be accepted as places themselves (description as place).[2] To put it another way, Stevens' constructive theory of poetry demands that he abandon the notion that poetry merely presents theories or descriptions of the world for the conviction that a poet writes "letters of rock and water, words / Of the visible elements" (CP., p. 232).

The final poem of Ideas of Order illustrates the fluidity between the actual planet and the one on the table, comments on the theoretician's reaction to the interplay, and reproduces the poet's response and the depiction of a sunset:

---

[2]Barbara Ann Farris Graves, "Stevens' Readings in Contemporary French Aesthetics: Charles Mauron, Thierry Maulnier, Roger Caillois," Diss. The University of Oklahoma, 1975, p. 59. Graves says that the process Stevens outlines when he views reality with a contemplative attitude and then reorganizes it is "Description without Place."

Delightful Evening

A very felicitous eve,
Herr Doktor, and that's enough,
Though the brow in your palm may grieve

At the venacular of light
(Omitting reefs of cloud):
Enpurpled garden grass;

The spruces' outstretched hands;
The twilight overfull
Of wormy metaphors. (CP., p. 162)

A doctor, a man who finds significance in concepts, must grieve at the sight of an impressive sunset since no ideas can be attached to its simple existence. Meanwhile the poet, the speaker of the poem, warms to the vista and elaborates it because by granting the evening its felicity, he can view it with an aesthetic attitude that is removed from all practical and rational concerns. This attitude allows him to acknowledge and create the evening's resonance. For the poet alone is the evening fecund with "wormy metaphors," and these aid in his simultaneous description and creation of an imaginative landscape. The moment is felicitous because the shift from a real landscape to an artificial one occurs easily; the poet has little trouble writing this poem. The ease with which the speaker avoids generalizations allows him to see, analyze, enjoy, and reconstruct the landscape. Furthermore, as the poet enumerates the parts of the landscape (sky, clouds, grass, trees) he orders them so that a reader is able to visualize the shapes and colors that make up the twilight.

Ultimately, the fluidity and richness of the poet's perception enable him to organize his landscapes according to spatial perspective.

Michel Benamou has noticed that Stevens "create[s] pictorial images, that is, representations of visual elements of reality organized pictorially,"[3] and thus Stevens' attention to places and the look of things reveals a common structuring technique in poems containing perceptual landscape description. One of Stevens' common structural motifs is to create spatial perspective in his poems as painters do in their paintings.[4] Not only does Stevens use painterly terminology as Kathleen Weiss details in her citation of "words like 'chiaroscuro,' phrases like 'daubed out,' and color descriptions that correspond to a mixing of the pigments: 'The sky is a blue gum streaked with rose,' 'Your dress was green / Was whited green'. . . ."[5] Stevens also frankly states that "poetry and painting alike create through composition" (NA., p. 163). Although this remark is casual, when coupled with the poet's "affair with places" it suggests that some similarity exists

---

[3]Michel Benamou, "Wallace Stevens: Some Relations between Poetry and Painting," Comparative Literature, 11 (1959), p. 54.

[4]Kathleen Petrisky Weiss, "The Fundamental Aesthetic: Wallace Stevens and the Painters," Diss. University of Massachusetts, 1975, p. 7.

[5]Weiss, p. 30.

in the poet's and painter's techniques of composition. Another reason why the perspective structuring technique seems plausible is the recurrence of the analogy between poetry and painting. The lecture "Some Relations between Poetry and Painting" stresses the validity of the comparison in the notion that both kinds of artists create because of a "laborious element"; perhaps that element is viewing reality directly before engaging in recreation (sadly enough, not all evenings are felicitous; the artist most often struggles for his metaphors). In addition, a revealing statement later in the essay encourages this line of thought: "The truth is that there seems to exist a corpus of remarks of painters themselves, which are as significant to poets as to painters" (NA., p. 160). The examples Stevens provides of such remarks, one about a painting as a "horde of destructions" by Picasso and another by Braque: "The senses deform, the mind forms" (NA., p. 161), continue to emphasize composition and remind one of Mauron's advocacy of the abandonment of a practical organization for a new one in the process of creation. Another similarity of the two arts' methods of composition appears in "Three Academic Pieces"; here Stevens explains that both artists need the powers of their eyes and minds to organize their works:

> What the eye beholds may be the text of life. It is, nevertheless, a text that we do not write. The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in representation; that is to say as a painter makes his world within a world. (NA., p. 76)

The persistent analogy drawn between poetry and painting is not accidental. Stevens' temperament and his choice of landscape as subject may be partial causes of the frequent comparison. My belief is that Stevens' perspective structuring as well as his references to the visual arts are children of his predilection for places and his opinion of the function of poetry. Susanne K. Langer's theories of the basic illusions created by the different art forms as expressed in her book Feeling and Form are helpful in explaining the ancestry of the perceptually rendered, illusionistically physical landscapes. In the chapter titled "Poesis" Langer identifies the poet's goal in terms similar to Stevens' precept "It is life we are trying to get in poetry." She says, "the poet's business is to create the appearance of 'experience,' the semblance of events lived and felt, and to organize them so they constitute a purely and completely experienced reality, a piece of virtual life."[6] Incidentally, the qualifier "virtual" signifies that the artistic image is removed from the mundane, actual reality;[7] such a distinction agrees with the attitudes of Mauron, Bullough, and Stevens toward the artificial nature of the art object. Langer then

---

[6]Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Scribner's, 1953), p. 212.

[7]Langer, pp. 58-60.

continues in the chapter to posit a notion that reminds one of Stevens' acknowledgement of the influence of a poet's style and subject: "the virtual world in which poetic events develop is always peculiar to the work; it is the particular illusion of life those events create. . . ."[8] Therefore, because Stevens admits that he is a poet who places much of his personal emotion behind the veil of his descriptions, the particular "illusion of life" that he creates can be identified as "an affair of places." The sense of space created by a description provides an accurate vehicle for the expression of his sense of the world, a sense determined by his personality, his knowledge and love of painting, the his desire to reveal personal feelings quietly and indirectly. Stevens' pieces of virtual life, his poems, are sometimes controlled by the structural motif of organizing his descriptions as if he were organizing space on canvas.[9]

---

[8]Langer, p. 217.

[9]James Baird treats the idea of composition in Stevens' poetry as similar to a painter's use of color in chapter 11 of his book The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Pr., 1968), pp. 167-191. Baird also examines Stevens' use of color imagery as well as thematic methods of composing a poem that is organic in which "all the words of the line imply each other" p. 170). Doris L. Eder in 'Wallace Stevens' Landscapes and Still Lifes," Mosaic 4 (Summer 1971), p. 1, calls Stevens' poems "a series of landscapes or still lifes, nature volatile en plein air or nature transported into the studio, nature morte, which the poet's imagination causes to vibrate with color, shape, vitality, and sometimes—not always—with significance."

The significance of this spatial metaphor may be further revealed by Langer's definition of a motif; she says "motifs are organizing devices that give the artist's imagination a start, and so 'motivate' the work in a perfectly naive sense. They drive it forward and guide its progress."[10] Perspective landscape description is not Stevens' only motif; certainly the recurring persona of the singer or guitarist hints that an equally significant motif may be discovered in a metaphor of musical terms and patterns. However, Stevens' landscapes provide a unique opportunity for the reader to find the strong subjective element of his poems underneath a seemingly detached rendering of a scene in words.

In Langer's terminology, Stevens' virtual life is manifest by his metaphorical treatment of the primary illusion of the visual and plastic arts, virtual space. Langer explains virtual space as the art form that "is a semblance of things, and the planes of vision, staggered one behind the other opposite the perceiving eye, . . . a semblance of space."[11] In applying this notion of virtual space to Stevens' poetry one begins to realize how his sense of the world is embodied by creating a virtual space, a summer to anatomize. The relationship between landscape description, spatial

---

[10]Langer, p. 69.

[11]Langer, p. 75.

metaphor, and the actual world is the subject of "A Reader."[12] In this poem the two worlds, one of art and one of reality, become an indistinguishable whole when the acts of reading about, imagining, and viewing a night sky commingle:

> All night I sat reading a book,
> Sat reading as if in a book
> Of sombre pages.
>
> It was autumn and falling stars
> Covered the shrivelled forms
> Crouched in the moonlight.
>
> No lamp was burning as I read,
> A voice was mumbling, "Everything
> Falls back to coldness,
>
> Even the musky muscadines,
> The melons, the vermillion pears
> Of the leafless garden."

The different worlds become indistinguishable because of the smooth, barely noticeable transition from reality into an imaginative world signalled by "as if." In this poem the reading man experiences a transformation but is unaware of it. At first he is conscious that he is performing a mental act of reading, but since the book is so engrossing he is tricked into believing that the sky he imagines is an actual sky. The transformation is complete when he does not recognize the sound of his own voice reading, but instead believes it to be a voice mumbling a description of the scene

---

[12]Because of this poem's title, I will refer to the persona of the poem as "the Reader"; the audience of the poem will be signified by a lower case "r" as "the reader."

he now sees. The subject of the book, the falling stars in autumn, takes physical shape for him, and his awareness of the practical world fades as he becomes lost in contemplation of an imaginative construct. The fact that this poem is written in past tense, however, does suggest that the Reader understands the transformation when he reflects on it at a later time. Despite the Reader's momentary confusion, a place is created, and the description of it is organized by the motion of "fall[ing] back to coldness" from the autumn sky, to the falling stars whose trails lead toward the earth, to the muscadine vines, the pear trees, and finally the unadorned soil of the garden. The virtual space is artificial, yet is "exists / In its own seeming, plainly visible, / . . . Intenser than any actual life could be" (CP., p. 344). Like the Reader in this poem, any reader is surprised to recognize how convincing a depiction with words can be.

Although the exact character of each landscape differs and although some aspects of each poem are determined by the poet's style and major concerns at the time of composition, the landscape passages in general all share an ordering system of the delineation of perspective by mental movement in space. Such a spatial system can be communicated in poetry only by means of sequential mention of various details about a scene; as a landscape passage is read, one pieces significant parts of a view together. The progression of details may shift

from an account of particulars toward a whole, sometimes an aerial view, or the poem may begin in the heavens and end in the grass, that is, move from a panoramic sweep of a large area to the minutia of the subject. Michel Benamou notices this technique in regards to "An Idea of Order at Key West." He says that the last two stanzas of the poem show how Stevens uses his perspective vision as an ordering force for the beach panorama to symbolize the ordering force of poetry:[13]

> Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know
> Why when the singing ended and we turned
> Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (CP., p. 130)

The succession of details begins on a broad scale, turning from the sea to the town, and narrows down to lights, fishing boats, and the boat's moorings. This action is then claimed to be a fixing and arranging force; thus, space in the landscape is defined, and the definition is followed by a recognition of the organization of the scene as a whole. The reader senses a dual motion into the dock and back out to the "enchanting night." This picture serves as a very inclusive method of preparing for the blessing of the poet's "rage for order" in the last stanza because the rage in this poem has

---

[13]Benamou, p. 54.

already been satisfied by the description. In his book The Dome and the Rock James Baird also discusses this scene as a composition:

> There is no better example in Stevens of poetry as process. One thinks again of the tongue as an eye (OP, p. 167). As we read the data of the senses are organized by an act of seeing and an act of words. The scene rushes to composition. These emblazoned zones and fiery poles are established by the imagination as points of reference. We are spectators before an act of poetic will. But it is the movement directed by this will which distinguishes Stevens as the poet. If a similar experience were possible in a painting, it would run in this fashion: we regard the finished composition; but at the very same moment of this regard we are admitted to the process of the painter as he once fixed dominant points of light against the dark and by these established the arrangement of other elements in his composition. With Stevens this talk of zones and poles is a clear sign of the architect in poetry. The scene at Key West, as the final resolution, is literally built upon spatial relationship.[14]

Part of the reason for Stevens' ability to compose an intricate scene of points of reference lies not only in the acuteness of his eye but in his management of a complex syntax in his poetry. In short, the fullness of the beach scene depends on the accumulation of facts about the scene within one slow-moving verse sentence. The movement in the poem occurs within the limits of an expression of one thought. Donald Sheehan comments on this characteristic; he notices that Stevens' simple verse and stanza forms "allow the drama

---

[14]Baird, p. 80.

of aesthetic surfaces to move unimpeded. The true 'unit' of his prosody is precisely the primary element in the drama: the verse sentence; and his prosodic technique therefore merges into his larger aesthetic. . . ."[15] So, in the case of the landscape at Key West, both the landscape and the stanza are unified by syntax. I will devote more attention to the style and syntax of Stevens' landscape poems in the following chapter; however, even when considering only the perspective structure of his images, one must grant that Stevens' aptitude for complex, interdependent images gives his landscapes literal and figurative depth as well as descriptive detail. R. P. Blackmur explains how the images of Stevens' poetry are complex through a comparison with those of Ezra Pound:

> Mr. Stevens's various images are separately incomplete and, on the other hand, taken together have a kind of completeness to which Pound's lines may not pretend: everything to which they refer is present. Pound's images exist without syntax, Mr. Stevens's depend on it. Pound's images are formally simple, Mr. Stevens's complex. The one contains a mystery and the other, comparatively, expounds a mystery.[16]

---

[15]Donald Sheehan, "The Whole of Harmonium: Poetic Technique in Wallace Stevens" in The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, ed. Warren French (Deland, Fla.: Everett-Edwards, Inc., 1970), p. 180.

[16]R. P. Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens" in Language as Gesture, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 237.

Perspective structuring is the result of Stevens' capacity for complex syntax and interdependent images.

Besides "The Idea of Order at Key West" there are several other poems that use a perspective landscape as a resolution to a quandary. The function of these landscapes is usually to suggest that the beauty of the physical world prevails over the metaphysical dilemmas man faces. The final stanza of "Sunday Morning" is a celebrated example of such a resolution. At the beginning of this stanza the woman concludes that despite all the religious myths and despite her own desire for some "imperishable bliss" "[w]e live in an old chaos of the sun" that offers no immortality (CP, pp. 68-70). Still her admission of this point neither comforts nor satisfies her; only the final landscape, a solemn and grand view of a mountain scene, solaces the woman and the reader:

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

The perspective structure in this poem takes the shape of the wilderness seen, ironically, from an omniscient point of view. The reader feels as if he is suspended, god-like, in the air and observes the various parts of the prospect in succession. At the highest altitude he sees deer; then quail and eventually berries come into focus; lastly the

motion of the pigeons is distinguished just before they descend into the darkness of the thicket. This elegant descent stresses the earthbound existence of man and persuades the reader that metaphysics is unnecessary and undesirable. The gentle movement along with the serial perception of detail creates an environment that soothes by its very completeness.

Another final landscape that offers a solution to a dilemma appears in "Landscape with Boat." This poem presents the thoughts of a man who, like "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard" and "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay," searches for reality beyond myth and subjective perception; this persona believes he can find "a truth beyond all truths" if he can "suppose" or conceptualize it into existence (CP., p. 242). In the first line of the poem the persona is identified as a "floribund ascetic" (CP., p. 241), or one who denies the possibilities of partial truths with his proposals of deadly, but abundantly flowering theories of unfathomable truths. Yet the man fails because he denies too much by believing "He had only not to live, to walk in the dark / To be projected by one void into / Another" (CP., p. 242). The speaker of the poem then explains that the pilgrim's failure is caused by his distrust of the obvious: "he never supposed / That he might be the truth, himself, or part of it / . . . He never supposed that divine / Things might not look divine . . ." (CP., p. 242). The ultimate truth is discovered to rest in the reality that one can apprehend, and as support for this deduction Stevens

illustrates the reality that man can perceive. The reality is not enigmatic; it is available to anyone capable of concentrating on the moment:

> Had he been better able to suppose:
> He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
> Above the Mediterranean, emerald
> Becoming emeralds. He might watch the palms
> Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
> A yellow wine and follow a steamer's track
> And say, "The thing I hum appears to be
> The rhythm of this celestial pantomine." (CP., p. 243)

Again the setting is constructed by painterly rendering of space; the poet forms a background, establishes a foreground, and adds detail. The persona's terrace, a "foyer" into reality, overlooks the sea. While sitting there he might account for the most distant objects, the sea and palms, denote the plane closest to him by noticing the wine glass, and complete the picture with the central detail, the boat pursuing its course. Stevens' description shows how the persona could "suppose" a frame for a scene and then situate the most important object within it; the "truth" is that there is a boat in the sea which dominates and organizes reality. The fact that the persona is unable to appreciate and construct the scene before him does not require a weak conclusion for the poem. Regardless of the persona's failure, the reader, because of the illustration, is able to imagine the landscape and understand the resolution offered in the hypothetical statement which ends the poem. This remark

explains the essential roles that description and perception play in reaching the truth: to hum in time with the "celestial pantomime" is to follow the mute but expressive look of things with an equally impressive poem. The motif of perspective landscape description functions as a resolution to the theorizing of the rest of the poem.

In spite of the propriety of this method of ending a poem with a landscape that illustrates the point of previous discussion, Stevens does not overwork this structure. Several other poems, "Evening without Angels," "Botanist on Alp #1," "The Dove in the Belly," and "The Plain Sense of Things," roughly conform to this structure, but Stevens also finds other opportunities to include perspective landscapes as a structural device. Before exploring the alternatives, it is nevertheless necessary to emphasize how satisfying landscapes are as conclusions. For instance, in "Evening without Angels" after a lengthy philosophical consideration of light, angels, and air, the reader is brought down to earth in the last stanza:

> . . . Evening, when the measure skips a beat
> And then another, one by one, and all
> To a seething minor swiftly modulate.
> Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare
> Except for our own houses, huddled low
> Beneath the arches and their spangled air,
> Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire,
> Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,
> Where the voice that is great rises up,
> As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.
>
> (CP., pp. 137-38)

The settling effect of the slow but insistent movement downwards caused by the repetition of "bare" and "beneath" creates a mood of humility because of man's mortality and because of his instinctual love of the physical world he cannot escape. This humility then allows for sincere expression of man's awe of reality, and he stands as a primitive in wonder of the moon above him. Yet this wonder does not lead to more questioning or introspection; it generates silence and peace at the end of the poem. Similarly, the "tempestuous bird" of "The Dove in the Belly" (CP., pp. 366-67) is told to "placate" himself and his shameful dissatisfaction with "[t]he whole of appearance [that] is a toy." The loveliness of nature, as described in a panoramic sweep from rivers, to trees, to mountains, to fields, overwhelms the speaker and refutes any nagging doubts about the physical world's significance. As an answer to intellectual doubts, fears, and questions about reality, the perspective landscape serves as a conclusion that offers contentment. "July Mountain" perhaps best explains how the landscape, when seen as a whole, fulfills the need of understanding reality:

> We live in a constellation
> Of patches and of pitches,
> Not in a single world,
> In things said well in music,
> On the piano, and in speech,
>
> As in a page of poetry—
> Thinkers without final thoughts
> In an always incipient cosmos,
> The way, when we climb a mountain,
> Vermont throws itself together. (OP., pp. 114-15)

Landscapes at least temporarily order the "incipient cosmos" that is usually perceived only as "patches and pitches."

These very effective conclusions can also serve as beginnings of poems. And although Stevens structures only a few poems in this way, this use of landscape continues to show how the poet wishes to construct a place for the action of his personae or for the speaker's contemplation. Perhaps the most arresting of these initial landscapes occurs in "The Novel," a poem reminiscent of "The Reader" in the way that contemplation becomes experience. In this poem the landscape that motivates meditation is a memory of the persona's summer vacation spot, Varadero, a beach in Cuba:[17]

> The crows are flying above the foyer of summer.
> The winds batter it. The water curls. The leaves
> Return to their original illusion.
>
> The sun stands like a Spaniard as he departs,
> Stepping from the foyer of summer into that
> Of the past, of the rodomontadean emptiness. (CP., p. 457)

The movement in this sequence of detail is from air to water to land. The sunset, described as a Spaniard and connoting the flashiness and pride of a flamingo dancer, pervades the scene and acts as a point of departure because it leads to dusk and eventually to winter. From this memory José, the

---

[17]Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 223. José is José Rodríguez-Feo, a friend of Stevens' who was attending Princeton at the time of the poem's composition.

persona, departs into a world of recollection and then into the present winter he is experiencing. The past is a remembrance of a story his mother once told him about an Argentine writer who suffered through a Parisian winter; the present is his parallel experience of winter. The way Stevens structures his poem, however, is curious because he does not narrate the sequence of events chronologically. Instead, he prefers to sketch three scenes, one of the recent past, one of the distant past, and one of the present, in an order that confuses the reader's conception of time. This order is functional because it allows the reader to focus on the scenes as moments of stasis rather than on the passage of time. The initial memory of a seascape is a reality that is made vivid by description; it leads to other moments of concentration, but it is complete and striking enough to seem like a present moment. The fact that these first two stanzas of description are in present tense further accounts for the unfaded quality of this memory. Other initial landscapes are not so complex in their relation to their poems' deliberative passages. In "St. Armourer's Church from the Outside" the shift from description to a consideration of the symbolic meaning of a dilapidated church occurs in the break from the second to the third stanza and is not confusing. Much the same structure can be found in "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," "From the Packet of

Anacharsis," "The Common Life," and "Add This to Rhetoric." In these poems the landscapes function as a given, an instance of reality, that the poet interprets in terms of his aesthetics in the remaining stanzas of each poem; they act as physical foyers that lead to metaphysical questions.

At other times the landscape and the definition of the space by sequential detail act as a structure for an entire poem. In these poems, landscape is not used as an example; spatial definition and contemplation are simultaneous. "On the Road Home," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" II.v., and "Dry Loaf" all reveal a use of perspective structure that connotes the main ideas of the poems. The first of these is paradoxically and inversely arranged so that a narrowing of the belief in theory, the belief that there is a single truth that explains life, is accompanied by a broadening of images; from one truth and specific images of grapes and a fox-hole one reaches a denial of truths and a description—via superlatives—of the grand silence that fills the entire evening. What should coalesce to no more than "the sum of the parts" (CP., p. 203) becomes a sense of completeness and fullness.

The poem from "Notes" starts with a consideration of the globe and moves toward a view of the small, enclosed life of man and his inhabited space; the description of the planter's island becomes more and more minute with each

building on of detail, color, and light. This accumulation is joined by a string of appositions that argues for the goodness of the temporal:

> On a blue island in a sky-wide water
> The wild orange trees continued to bloom and to bear,
> Long after the planter's death. A few lines remained,
>
> Where his house had fallen, three scraggy trees weighted
> With garbled green. These were the planter's turquoise
> And his orange blotches, these were his zero green,
>
> A green baked greener in the greenest sun.
> These were his beaches, his sea-myrtles in
> White sand, his patter of the long sea-slushes.
> (CP., p. 393)

From this island the speaker's eye proceeds to include a description of "An island to the South, on which rested / Like a mountain, a pineapple pungent as Cuban summer" where bananas grew. The lushness of the setting is sufficient in itself to satisfy a reader with man's existence in a temporal realm (one knows that the planter dies despite his love of the ever-blooming island). Yet the final stanza explains how the planter's pleasure and appreciation of beauty is contingent on his mortality:

> An unaffected man in a negative light
> Could not have borne his labor nor have died
> Sighing that he should leave the banjo's twang.
> (CP., p. 393)

In other words, only a man affected by the passing of time can value the landscape's beauty, "The planter's turquoise / And his orange blotches, . . . his zero green." Furthermore, since the poem is written, the landscape constructed, after

the planter's death, it seems as if the planter's moment of concentration becomes imperishable because on the shape of a place in the reader's and poet's minds. The "blue island" exists in description.

In "Dry Loaf" Stevens chooses a spatial metaphor to characterize a time of war. The poem is about the difficulties and painfulness of life during a time of war, but Stevens comments on this period with a description of a landscape. The validity of his metaphor is assured in the first two lines of the poem: "It is equal to live in a tragic land / To live in a tragic time" (CP., p. 199). Stevens' choice of a perspective landscape over a chronological narration of events in a poem that treats a subject that lends itself to chronology points to his preference for places. The speaker begins his description by establishing the background:

> Regard the sloping, mountainous rocks
> And the river that batters its way over stones,
> Regard the hovels of those that live in this land.

Next, the speaker pulls his eyes away from the plain backdrop and dwells on the loaf of bread. A reader visualizes an enlarged loaf in the center of the foreground, like an apple or flower that dominates a Magritte painting: "That was what I painted behind the loaf." At this point the picture is complete, but it is not yet in sharp focus; accordingly, the speaker repeats his description with added detail:

> The rocks not even touched by snow,
> The pines along the river and dry men blown
> Brown as bread, thinking of birds
> Flying from burning countries and brown sand shores,
>
> Birds that come like dirty water in waves
> Flowing above the rocks, flowing over the sky,
> As if the sky was a current that bore them along,
> Spreading them as waves spread flat on the shore,
> One after another washing the mountains bare.
>
> (CP., p. 199-200)

The brownness, dirtiness, and ugliness of the land become apparent during this review of the landscape. This tragic ugliness is then applied to life during war in the final two stanzas. As the river battered rocks, drums batter the speaker's ears; the stale loaf becomes a symbol of hunger; waves are marching soldiers; and the dirty birds represent the sombre and muddy coming of spring. A perceptually rendered landscape becomes symbolic of life during war but yet remains visible as a "tragic land." In this poem a landscape is constructed and interpreted simultaneously. Other poems also use a perspective rendering of a landscape as a structural device; some of these are "In the Clear Season of Grapes," "Auroras of Autumn" I, and "Long and Sluggish Lines."

Before one considers the significance of these perceptual landscapes and their relation to Stevens' detached stance, it is necessary to consider the validity of these images as representations of reality. It has already been suggested that these descriptions are fashioned to trick the reader

into believing that they are tangible; ideally, all readers should be transformed from an actual world into a world of "virtual space" when reading a poem, as is the persona of "The Reader." When a painting is convincing enough to cause such a transformation from one reality to another, it may be said to be a "trompe l'oeil" painting. This term has already been applied to Stevens' poetry by Fred Miller Robinson in his article "Stevens' Trompe L'Oeil: Visual Comedy in Some Short Poems."[18] In this article Robinson proposes that Stevens creates a trompe l'oeil effect in his poems by drawing an object or a situation as accurately as possible and then by comically and ironically revealing his depiction as a deception. It seems to me that this theory is helpful when discussing certain poems (Robinson explicates trick poems like "Study of Two Pears," "So and So Reclining on Her Couch," and "What We See Is What We Think"). However, in the poems that depend on spatial metaphor and perceptual description, Stevens does not seem to require that the reader realize that he is deceived. For instance, the landscapes of "Landscape with Boat," "The Novel," and "Long and Sluggish Lines" are successful because they are presented to and accepted by the reader as reality. In the last of these,

---

[18]Fred Miller Robinson, "Stevens' Trompe L'Oeil: Visual Comedy in Some Short Poems," Wallace Stevens Journal, 5, Nos. 1 & 2 (1981), pp. 3-10.

Stevens names the state of observation, contemplation, and poetry reading as a "wakefullness inside a sleep" (CP., p. 522). And this state of mind, I think, is desirable because it admits that the image is of a fictional nature, but it does not undercut the notion of a supreme fiction as something which organizes reality and gives life meaning. As he says in the Adagia, Stevens wants his reader to believe that "[w]hat we see in the mind is as real to us as what we see by the eye" (OP., p. 164), so his landscapes are more than deceptions, they are as close as a poet can get to reality.

Spatial metaphor is a significant motif for several reasons. First, it forces the reader to focus on the scene rather than on the poet's attitude. Although it is true that the reader must view the scene from the perspective the poet takes, the reader is left to piece the description together for himself; he cannot understand how the metaphysical questions of a poem are answered unless he can visualize the landscape for himself. For example, in "In the Clear Season of Grapes" unless the reader perceives the created space of the house from which one can see the mountains and the sea, and unless he understands that this space is significant because the speaker lives within it and composes it, he will believe that it is a "flip for the sun and moon" (CP., p. 110). Yet the speaker denies this idea and insists that the "conjunction of mountains and sea and our lands"

means "more than that." The only way the reader can follow the poem is to imagine himself as the speaker and thus realize the landscape's importance as the space where man lives. In this way the definition of space by sequential notation of parts encourages the reader to view the scene with the aesthetic attitude that the poet takes; it makes him concentrate on it and reorganize it into a new landscape.

Another reason spatial metaphor is significant in Stevens' poetry is that the stress on the composition of a scene prevents the reader from crediting nature with human emotions. The world surrounding the speaker or persona of the poem may be beautiful and lush or ugly and stark, but it has no feelings for its observers. It is a scene. One can view it and appreciate it, but one must always realize that any feelings he finds in the scene are his own. By carefully structuring the landscape according to perspective, the poet thus guards against the pathetic fallacy. Finally, this desire to describe carefully and convincingly preserves the detached stance that is part of Stevens' temperament. This detachment is supported by the distinction Stevens often makes between the speaker and the persona of a poem. The third person point of view in "The Novel," "Landscape with Boat," and "The Idea of Order at Key West" enables the poet to give his landscapes objective treatment and yet not divorce all humanity from his poems. In this preservation

of a detached stance Stevens encourages his reader to accept his sense of the world as dependent on places and prompts one to adopt the poet's aesthetic attitude.

CHAPTER III

"THE TROUBLE OF THE MIND"

Stevens' adoption of the aesthetic attitude has already been shown to result in the description of landscapes that are convincingly tangible. Furthermore, Stevens' manner of creating these passages, his organization of them by painterly perspective, points to the care and composure of his temperament. He wants to be as indifferent as possible when he writes because the objectivity of an aesthetic attitude encourages freshness of imagery and allows him to discount the practical application of his observations for a chance to see the world more directly. Yet for all of Stevens' defenses against subjectivity, he knows that his view of the world, his personality, and his preoccupations are fated to crop up in his poetry. In the poems that rely on a presentation of a vista both Stevens' efforts to be detached and the inevitable slips into subjectivity are divulged by the syntax, tone, and descriptive format he uses to construct his scenes. This approach toward uncovering Stevens' personal tastes, desires, and disappointments by stylistic analysis is supported by one of his three generalizations about the nature of analogy in poetry. In "The Effects of Analogy" he states, "Every image is a restatement of the subject of the image in terms of an

attitude" (NA., p. 128). Therefore, any account of objective reality will be one that reveals the artist's temperament, and since Stevens will not admit his feelings openly, a reader must investigate the style of his poems to find them.

"How Now, O, Brightener" is a poem that explains how a description can be objective and still contain vestiges of the artist's struggle against subjectivity:

> Something of the trouble of the mind
> Remains in sight, and the sayings of the sight,
> Of the spring of the year,
>
> Trouble in the spillage and first sparkle of sun,
> The green-edged yellow and yellow and blue and
> blue-edged green—
> The trouble of mind
>
> Is a residue, and land, a rain, a warmth,
> A time an apparition and nourishing element
> And simple love
>
> In which spectra have dewy flavor and live
> And take from this restlessly unhappy happiness
> Their stunted looks. (OP., p. 97)

In this poem the reader sees a sharply drawn image, learns about the process the poet endures to create the image, and hears the poet's confession of subjectivity. Each stanza is a new attempt to explain the "trouble of the mind," and each of these false starts and revisions evidences Stevens' honesty and humility. The reader watches the poet struggle to create an image despite the hindrance of the poet's attitudes; these attitudes act as a "residue,"

or film, which cannot be stripped from the colorful image of the spring sun. Incidentally, the image of the light of the sun metaphorically represents the mind's influence on reality, the light by which the poet sees. However, it is interesting to note that the poet's undesirable subjectivity is not entirely condemned; although it gives "spectra" "stunted looks," it also nourishes these images and adds "dewy flavor." Stevens implies that without the accidental appearance of the poet's feelings, the image might seem a bit bland.

In order to preserve a balance between the potentially bland objective reality and the deformations of the poet's personality Stevens develops two descriptive formats for his landscapes. The first is a style of matter-of-fact and declarative statement, and the second is the mode of uncertain yet dogged repetition and variation. Both of these formats are motivated by the desire for perceptual depiction of landscape, but the poet's shifting moods, attitudes, and levels of inspiration foster their conspicuous differences.

The first of these formats is that of curtness and denotation. In this style of trenchant description Stevens' detachment from the scene seems almost complete. For instance, it would be difficult to imagine Stevens more disinterested in his subject than he appears in "Thirteen

Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" because the brevity of these "ways" suggests epigrammatic cleverness and iron-clad self-assurance:

VI
Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass,
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

Unlike the deliberation and struggle evident in "How Now, O, Brightener," this poem exists as if no poet had to create it. The three sentences are direct, short, and unquestionable in their exactness of diction. There can be no conjecture that the poet is any less severe than the landscape since he eradicates all indication of the process involved in paring this image to perfection. Although, as Ronald Sukenick comments, there is no apparent meaning in the mood created by the image,[1] the image succeeds as something tangible and complete. Part of the sense of completeness results from the omniscient character of the speaker; the reader is forced to accept the facts of the image as a totality because the artist seems so satisfied, so finished with his description. In using this style of denotative simplicity, Stevens dons his most aloof

---

[1]Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 76.

stance in order to induce the reader to accept the landscape as undeniable, physical fact; the role of human eccentricity or temperament is diminished to a minimum and the effect is that of a faithful reproduction of a scene. This impersonality acts in other poems to produce the impression of a cold transcription of fact. In "The Public Square" the destruction of a plaza is related in violent but unemotional terms:

> A slash and the edifice fell,
> Pylon and pier fell down,
> A mountain-blue cloud arose
> Like a thing in which they fell. . . .
>
> (CP., p. 109)

The lack of exclamation, the regularity of subject-predicate syntax, and the punctuality of the pause at the end of each short line imply that the spectator is indifferent to practical considerations. He describes the apocalypse from a third person point of view and seems to be motivated by curiosity rather than horror. Although his position is unspecified, his composure suggests that he is withdrawn to an emotional and physical distance. The remote third person point of view also appears in the matter-of-fact description of the cathedral during the archbishop's vacation in "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons" and in the dispassionate account of the restlessness of the end of winter in "Indian River." In the latter of these poems, all the parts of the landscape "jingle" with nervous anticipation of spring,

yet when spring does not arrive the speaker offers no consolation; he only records the fact, bluntly and systematically: "Yet there is no spring in Florida, neither in boskage perdu, nor on the nunnery beaches" (CP., p. 112). These speakers' imperturbability emphasizes their assumption of the element of the aesthetic attitude which demands the artist's dissociation from all practical consideration and sentimental emotions in order to view reality plainly.

Objectivity is also the goal when the speaker insists on using linking verbs or verbs of state in simple present tense. This simplicity of predication contributes to a tone of finality or stasis in the landscape; references to the time dimension are deemphasized:

> Two wooden tubs of blue hydrangeas stand at the foot of the stone steps.
> The sky is a blue gum streaked with rose. The trees are black.
> The grackles crack their throats of bone in the smooth air.
> Moisture and heat have swollen the garden into a slum of bloom. (CP., p. 62)

Nothing moves in this present opressive humidity. The verbs only add to the stagnation as the speaker's line of vision maps out the landscape. At the doorstep flowers "stand"; the colors of the sky and the trees "are" fixed; the birds' chirps sound but suggest no melodic progression in their "cracking"; and the swelling of the flowers and fruits of the garden, an event recorded in the present perfect tense, imposes a sluggishness and immutability on the scene. It

is as if the speaker's acute concentration on the present moment allows him to recreate the scene but simultaneously prohibits him from a more lively description. The insistent present tenseness of description also stagnates other landscapes cast in the denotative format. The stasis of summer reappears in "The Green Plant"; furthermore, "Ghosts as Coccons," "Contrary Thesis" I, and "Academic Discourse at Havana" II duplicate the inertia in an autumn setting:

> The grass is in seed. The young birds are flying.
> The house is not built, not even begun.
>
> The vetch has turned purple. (CP., p. 119)
>
> Now grapes are plush upon the vines.
> A soldier walks before my door.
>
> The hives are heavy with combs.
> Before, before, before my door. (CP., p. 266)
>
> Life is an old casino in the park.
> The bills of the swans are flat upon the ground.
> A most desolate wind has chilled the Rogue Fatima
> And a grand decadence settles down like cold.
> (CP., p. 142)

Wintertime eternities are the settings of "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters," "Vacancy in the Park," Metamorphosis," and "Poesie Arbrutie." The latter two of these winter poems treat the whole season rather than just one day, but they nevertheless present the progression of a period of time in simple present tense that makes the season seem timeless. A sense of unquestionable accuracy is conveyed in these landscapes; the artist freezes the action for the

sake of exactness. As Stevens notes in the Adagia, "Accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking" (OP., p. 158), and there is no hedging, no unexplained complexity, no revision, no backstepping in these landscape descriptions to cause a reader to doubt their precision.

Despite the refusal of personal comment in these clipped descriptions, the terseness of the passages implies more than an interest in exactness. A tone is also suggested. The reserve and control of the speaker insinuates a dislike of the scene he constructs. For example, the flat, unpoetic tone of "Banal Sojourn" reveals that the speaker is repelled by the scene. He yearns for a less oppressive season, and he admits his repulsion of heavy summer: "One has a malady, here, a malady. One feels a malady" (CP., p. 63). The poet does not reject the summer landscape as a subject, but he unwillingly accounts for it through clenched teeth, pretending no enthusiasm. Another landscape that Stevens dutifully but stubbornly portrays is the city skyline of "The Common Life." The short, end-stopped lines coupled with the prosaic diction attest to the speaker's contempt:

> That's the down-town frieze,
> Principally the church steeple,
> A black line beside a white line;
> And the stack of the electric plant,
> A black line drawn on flat air.

It is a morbid light
In which they stand,
Like an electric lamp
On a page of Euclid. (CP., p. 221)

Michel Benamou discusses the flatness of tone and perspective in this poem and calls it a pen-and-ink drawing. His interpretation of the tone explains the speaker's disgust:

> The whole poem is a single image, in which vocabulary achieves the economy of Fernand Leger's technique. But again symbolism gives poetic meaning to plastic effects. The straight lines, the glaring contrast of black and white, the absence of depth and shadows, are metaphors for the spiritual vacuity of modern life.[2]

Certainly the colorlessness of the scene and language connotes the speaker's cynicism toward the town. This cynicism is even more directly stated in "Gubbinal," a poem where the speaker borders on hostility toward his surroundings:

That strange flower, the sun
Is just what you say.
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad,

That tuft of jungle feathers,
That animal eye,
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire
That seed,
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad. (CP., p. 85)

Yet even in this most obviously bitter poem, the speaker's

---

[2]Michel Benamou, "Wallace Stevens: Some Relations Between Poetry and Painting," Comparative Literature, 11 (1959), pp. 54-55.

dissatisfaction is communicated by tone and style; without the snippiness of the end-stopped lines and the badgering rhyme and repetition, the depiction of the landscape would be brief rather than harsh.

Perhaps the most subtle and moving instance of a landscape description cast in the flat style that betrays the speaker's attitude occurs in "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters." The description of the bleak winter scene opens with a tone of aloof disgust, moves toward one of despair, and ends in the speaker's resigned acceptance of the landscape's emptiness. The initial glimpse of the scene is rendered in an attitude of stoical loathing:

> He is not here, the old sun,
> As absent as if he were asleep.
>
> The field is frozen. The leaves are dry.
> Bad is final in this light. (CP., p. 293)

At this point the speaker's main interest is to provide an accurate, impersonal depiction; yet the disgust he feels seeps into his account by his characterization of the sun as old and by the severity of his judgment that the landscape is both "bad" and "final." A reader senses that the speaker feels trapped in his surroundings and blames nature for his captivity. The next five lines reveal more of the speaker's attitude when he tries to explain the look and sound of the trees. The level of objectivity is lowered by the use of figurative speech as the speaker attempts to personify the trees:

> In this bleak air the broken stalks
> Have arms without hands. They have trunks
>
> Without legs, or, for that, without heads.
> They have heads in which a captive cry
>
> Is merely the moving of a tongue.
>
> (CP., pp. 293-94)

The tone changes from disgust to despair as the effort to personify nature exhibits the tragic quality of the disabled trees. Every part of the trees' bodies that the speaker mentions, he simultaneously amputates; nature is helpless and cannot be enlivened by the speaker. Next, the glitter of the snow and the movement of leaves in the wind is noticed:

> Snow sparkles like eyesight falling to earth,
>
> Like seeing falling brightly away.
> The leaves hop, scraping on the ground.
>
> (CP., p. 294)

Although these details represent an effort to grant the snow scene some charm, the prettiness of the glistening snow and jumping leaves is undercut by the speaker's honesty. The landscape is tragic, and any pretended brightness or liveliness generates negative connotations; sparkles remind him of blindness and blown leaves must endure the smart of being scratched against the cold earth. The speaker's failure to find anything sincerely pleasant or appealing returns him to his initial stoicism as he recaps the view:

It is deep January. The sky is hard.
The stalks are firmly rooted in ice. (CP., p. 294)

The speaker has tried and failed at caring about the landscape; his wisest stance is a defensive indifference. The only comfort he finds in his observations comes from his contemplation of the lesson that he learns from his failure: "It is here in this bad, that we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good" (CP., p. 294). The acceptance of the painful, desolate reality of the winter scene leads to an understanding of the pointlessness of making value judgments about the reality over which man has no control. Like the crow he sees, he must observe, endure, and accept the cold landscape without trying to modify or judge it—to see the scene dispassionately is the "purity of the knowledge of good." Stevens further insists on the preservation of stoical detachment from the seeming tragedy of the cold landscape when in the last two stanzas the speaker, despite his empathy for the crow, maintains his distance from the bird as well as from the scene:

The crow looks rusty as he rises up.
Bright is the malice in his eye . . .

One joins him there for company,
But at a distance, in another tree. (CP., p. 294)

In his article "Wallace Stevens' Romantic Landscape. Notes on Meditation: 'No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,'" Allen Chavkin interprets the crow's indifference as "what will

suffice in the stark landscape."[3] He says that this attitude enables us "to create a meaningful view of this grim situation and avoid the alternatives of despair and nihilism."[4] Chavkin also notices Stevens' flat style: "The choppy, fragmented effect here suggests that in his dismal scene the imagination cannot function properly. The landscape cannot be humanized, despite the mind's noble straining to do so."[5] Therefore the descriptive format of the poem functions to establish an attitude of detachment and to test and confirm the necessity of aesthetic distance for the speaker and reader. Ironically, the speaker begins with an impersonal stance and learns that it is best to sustain it by unsuccessfully trying to humanize it.

As Chavkin suggests, the flat, denotative style is sometimes used to illustrate a situation in which the speaker or poet is incapable of recreating the scene with his imagination. This sort of imaginative paralysis can occur either because the scene is too dismal or too boring to inspire the poet. In these restricted circumstances, the poet renders vistas mechanically, and his hastiness amounts to an admission of difficulties. In "Fish-Scale

---

[3]Allen Chavkin, "Wallace Stevens' Romantic Landscape, Notes on Meditation: 'No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,'" Wallace Stevens Journal, 5, Nos. 3 & 4 (1981), p. 44.

[4]Chavkin, p. 44.

[5]Chavkin, p. 43.

Sunrise" the poet admits his problem before he indicates the landscape in scanty terms:

> And although my mind perceives the force behind the moment,
> The mind is smaller than the eye.
>
> The sun rises green and blue in the fields and in the heavens.
> The clouds foretell a swampy rain. (CP., p. 161)

These two factual sentences of description trace the landscape's essentials, but the lack of figurative language and the simplicity of the syntax demonstrate the mind's inability to meet the challenge of the landscape. "Contrary Thesis" I, "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons," and "The Man Whose Pharnyx was Bad" treat the same problem; in all of these poems the plainness of the syntax and diction attests to the poet's state of mind as "too dumbly in [his] being pent" (CP., p. 96) by the monotony of the environment. An interesting parallel to Stevens' handling of moments of little inspiration occurs in Mauron's Aesthetics and Psychology. In Chapter Seven, "The Pleasures of Sensibility," Mauron proposes that "[a] universe too monotonous or customary means a state of boredom which rapidly becomes unbearable. The only antidote is surprise."[6] Although Stevens does not always provide surprises to mitigate monotonous landscapes, these poems agree with Mauron's theory in their yearning for

---

[6]Charles Mauron, Aesthetics and Psychology, trans. Roger Fry and Katherine Johns (London: Hogarth Press, 1935), p. 47.

new forms. For example, in "Botanist on Alp" No. 1 after a description of unconnected, insignificant particulars of a mountain vista, the persona concludes that there must be some new, heretofore unnoticed, "central composition" (CP., p. 135):

> What composition is there in all this:
> Stockholm slender in a slender light,
> An Adriatic riva rising,
> Statues and stars,
> Without a theme?
>
> The pillars are prostrate, the arches are haggard,
> The hotel is boarded and bare.
> Yet the panaroma of despair
> Cannot be the specialty
> Of this ecstatic air. (CP., p. 135)

Of course, new forms are provided the botanist in the companion poem "Botanist on Alp" No. 2 where the glittering of light on convent roofs and crosses satisfies the persona. Another poem in which the persona sketches an unsatisfactory landscape and continues his search for a less dismal reality is "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion." Here the spirit of the persona, Ludwig Richter, is as depressed as the landscape: "The rain is pouring down. It is July. / There is lightening and the thickest thunder" (CP., p. 357). The persona's reaction concludes the poem and consists of hungering for unknown forms of reality; Richter "knows desire without an object of desire / All mind and violence and nothing felt" (CP., p. 358). Such a conclusion to a poem dependent on a denotative, unfulfilling landscape description is effective

because it shows how, although the poet or persona may be resigned to his state of detached nonchalance, he may not be happy with it. In these cases the landscape may be perceptually drawn, complete, and accurate, but the flat tone of the description alerts one to its insufficiency.

Surprisingly, this same curt style is found in a poem where the imagination dominates reality and produces five extravagant versions of one landscape. In "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" the intention to present the willful exercise of the imagination, however fanciful and colorful the images may be, ends in a series of meaningless, albeit inventive, descriptions. Because of the fantastic nature of the metaphors, all one can be sure of is that after a calm night at sea, the imagination of the speaker agitates the scene so much by its metaphors that the waves become turbulent; strangely, the imagination influences reality as well as the perception of reality. Yet the domination of the imagination seems somehow false, and rather than producing palpable images, it creates landscapes infused with a tone of artificiality and affectation. The second variation serves as a good example of the forced and arbitrary quality of the description:

> In that November off Tehauntepec
> The slopping of the sea grew still one night.
> At breakfast jelly yellow streaked the deck

> And made one thick of chop-house chocolate
> And sham umbrellas. And a sham-like green
> Capped summer-seeming on the tense machine
>
> Of ocean, which in sinister flatness lay.
> (CP., p. 99)

Despite the greater complexity and length of the sentences, the forumulaic approach to metaphor (the modification of types of chocolate, umbrellas, and greens in the five sections) suggests that the poet is as systematical and mechanical here as he was in "Banal Sojourn." Since there is no emotion behind the bizarre adjectives, an aesthetic distance is maintained between the speaker and the scene, and this detachment points out the fallacy of and condemns imaginative thought ungrounded in reality. While craftily avoiding a lessening in the visual details of the landscape, Stevens inhibits his conscientious loyalty to the world to draw attention to the power of the imagination. The undisciplined use of such a rich imagination, however, results in a fraudulent matter-of-factness. Aesthetic distance in this poem thus changes landscape description into a rhetorical part of the poem.

The final application of the flat style is its use as a convenient method to illustrate a theory succinctly. The poet reduces the landscape to a minimum of well-chosen details for the purpose of making an abstract notion concrete. Several of the "Variations on a Summer Day"

exemplify this function;[7] the twentieth one of these most clearly develops a scene and then interprets it:

> You could almost see the brass on her gleaming,
> Not quite. The mist was to light what red
> Is to fire. And her mainmast tapered to nothing,
> Without a teetering millimeter's measure.
> The beads on her rails seemed to grasp at
> transparence
> It was not yet the hour to be dauntlessly leaping.
> (CP., pp. 235-36)

The ship and atmosphere are minutely but quickly supplied before their significance is explained; it is not yet time to be "dauntlessly leaping" because it is too hazy or too early in the day to see the situation clearly. Other instances of this use of description can be found in "Les Plus Belle Pages," "New England Verses," and the itemizing of the scene's virtues toward the end of "Montrachet-le-Jardin." On the whole, these images are striking and delivered in an uncomplicated way. They belong to the flat style because they are impersonal and unemotional; they exist in the poem as irrefutable fact, and the speaker's attitude can only be recognized in the notions they accompany.

The other descriptive style that arises in landscape passages is that of the sentence embellished by apposition. In contrast to the curt, flat style, poems cast in this

---

[7]Other stanzas of "Variations on a Summer Day" (CP., pp. 232-36) that are structured as curt descriptions with a stated or implied theory are V, VI, X, XI, XIV, and XVII.

format reflect the poet's patience in description; in this format he allows himself the time and freedom to view the scene, ponder it, and revise his first impression before he moves to an abstract interpretation of it. Perhaps the rationale behind this style can be explained by Stevens' quotation of and commentary on a remark made by Xavier Doudan. This admission of the necessity of patience with the confused, piecemeal manner of man's perception appears in Stevens' lecture "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet";

> In one of his letters, Xavier Doudan says: "Il y a longtemps que je pense que celui qui n'aurait que des idées claires serait assurément un sot." The reply to this is that it is impossible to conceive of a man who has nothing but clear ideas; for our nature is an illimitable space through which the intelligence moves without coming to an end (NA., p. 53).

So the notion that perception and understanding are gained through process and over time reveals Stevens' willingness to allow his mind and the sentences of his poetry to account for the slight nuances the eye perceives as it concentrates on a landscape for a period of time. This logic denounces the incisiveness of the flat style, but the difference between the two formats lies in what the poet will allow the reader to see of the process of writing poetry. In the flat style the reader is provided only the finished product, and the product is often polished to the point that the

poet seems very distant. On the other hand, in the appositive style the reader is allowed to assess the poet's manner of thinking; a more complex and sometimes confused mind appears in the poems of this style because deliberation, revision, and doubt have not been refined away.

Both Frank Doggett and Helen Vendler view the technique of loose, complex, and lengthy sentences as essential to Stevens' later, more introspective style found in Transport to Summer and The Auroras of Autumn. Although these critics' interpretations of this style are distinct, both make valuable comments. Doggett emphasizes the air of improvisation:

> The special quality of the late style is so permeated with the effects of apposition that some criticism has felt that it resembled improvisation. The effect is given because in apposition the poet seems to deliberate about his original concept. He appears to reconsider it by seeking an equivalent in another and another version, continuously altered yet presented as though it were the same.[8]

In response to this concern with the poet's process, Vendler stresses the effect of apposition on the poet's effort to compose a scene by noticing particulars and then placing them in relation to each other. She says that apposition "shows us Stevens looking harder and harder at the object trying to see it for what it is and yet to see beyond it

---

[8]Frank Doggett, "Wallace Stevens' Later Poetry," ELH, 25 (1958), p. 146.

into a more satisfactory whole."[9] It seems to me that both attitudes toward Stevens' loosening of syntax are helpful and can be synthesized. Stevens appears to ramble and improvise in his appositive descriptions, but actually he constructs a scene with just as much tangibility and structure as he did with the flat style.

"Long and Sluggish Lines" illustrates Stevens' ability to give his poems the tempo of a man's rumination and still construct a perceptual landscape. In this poem extended line length, run-on lines, questioning, and backstepping make one sense the unhurried, careful thought patterns of an old man:

> It makes so little difference, at so much more
> Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there
> before.
>
> Wood-smoke rises through trees, is caught in an
> upper flow
> Of air and whirled away. But it has been often so.
>
> The trees have a look as if they bore sad names
> And kept saying over and over one same, same thing,
>
> In a kind of uproar, because an opposite, a
> contradicition,
> Has enraged them and made them want to talk it
> down.
>
> What opposite? Could it be that yellow patch, the
> side
> Of a house, that makes one think the house is
> laughing;

---

[9]Helen Vendler, On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 306.

> Or these—escent—issant pre-personae: first fly,
> A comic infanta among the tragic drapings,
>
> Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief,
> The spook and makings of the nude magnolia?
> (CP., p. 522)

In each couplet the speaker takes up a new thought that is kindled by a detail of the landscape; the speaker notices the detail, expresses an opinion or idea about it, revises or modifies that thought, and moves on to the next stanza. For instance, in the second stanza the speaker identifies the first detail of the landscape—the smoke. He sees it rise through the trees; then he restates the movement more carefully by noticing how the smoke is swirled in the wind before it disappears. This detail seems worthy of such scrutiny until the man remembers "it has often been so," becomes bored, and prepares for the inspection of the trees themselves in the next stanza. Such a slow building of a scene also makes the relationship of the parts to the whole apparent. The smoke rises through the trees; the trees act as a point of contrast to the yellow side of the house; the house is linked to the forsythia by color, the forsythia bush leads the speaker's eye back to the trees, this time the "nude magnolia," and all the elements compose "the pre-history of February." The organization and unification of the scene is formed by degrees.

The unification of a scene by degrees is a technique that Stevens uses in other poems and is often termed

resemblance. In poems structured by resemblance all parts suggest other parts of the whole scene; the notion is that the multiplication of associations that occurs when an artist views the world helps to unify the description, the work of art. "Domination of Black," "The Load of Sugar Cane," "The Man with the Blue Guitar" XI, "Somnambulisma," and "The House Was Quiet and The World Was Calm" are primarily structured by resemblance. Northrop Frye best characterizes Stevens' theory of resemblance; he says,

> By resemblance Stevens does not mean naive or associate resemblance, of the type that calls a flower a bleeding heart, but the repetitions of colors and patterns in nature which become the elements of formal design in art. He goes on to develop this conception of resemblance into a conception of "analogy," which beginning in straight allegory, ends in the perception that "poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality."[10]
>
> (NA., p. 130)

Therefore the quality of resemblance in the appositive descriptions in landscape poems causes one detail of a scene to imply another as in "The Load of Sugar Cane" where the boat is like the water, the water like the grass, the grass is under rainbows, and rainbows are like birds, and so on until the landscape is complete. It is this linking of

---

[10]Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," Hudson Review, 10 (1957), p. 363. Also see J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1965), pp. 226-27, and Frank Doggett, Wallace Stevens: The Making of a Poem (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 150-51.

elements that unifies appositive descriptions and distinguishes them from the stagnant present-tenseness of the flat descriptive style. In the appositive format the movement of the mind from one detail to another keeps the image in flux, and as the image seems to change or form a landscape, the speaker's interpretation becomes complex through variations and modifications. The landscape is not briefly sketched; it is composed gradually as one reads the poem.

Because the image is gradually pieced together in the appositive mode, there is the sense that the landscape is important in and of itself, that it is interesting enough to the speaker to dwell on or that it is significant because he has a certain personal attitude toward the landscape. For these reasons it is necessary to provide more than a brief outline of the elements; it is important to fix the image perfectly, to get it right. "Forces, the Will, and the Weather," an embryonic example of the appositive style found in Parts of a World, is primarily concerned with finding an exact image, a perfect way to describe the time when there were no new ideas:

> At the time of nougats, the peer yellow
> Sighed in the evening that he lived
> Without ideas, in a land without ideas,
> The pair yellow, the peer.

> It was at the time, the place, of nougats.
> There the dogwoods, the white ones and the pink
> ones,
> Bloomed in sheets, as they bloom, and the girl,
> A pink girl took a white dog walking;
> . . . . . .
> It had to be right: nougats. It was a shift
> Of realities, that, in which it could be wrong.
> The weather was like a waiter with a tray.
> One had come early to a crisp café.
>
> (CP., pp. 228-29)

The playful, half-serious metaphors—candy for blooming trees and the sun as a regent—are suitable to connote the dainty atmosphere of a spring morning. The connection between the color of the dogwoods and that of the girl and her dog serves to draw the parts of the scene into an harmonious whole. These intricacies of description show how carefully the landscape is rendered, and together with the deliberate slowness of progression from phrase to phrase due to repetition, the care supports the final stanza's admission of pickiness and high standards. An insistence on exact metaphor attains the trompe l'oeil, but the problematic objectivity persists. Stevens remains hesitant to involve his personal feelings, although he allows the reader to see his mind—his imaginative laborer—working; the aesthetic distance, the speaker's detachment lessens. Many other landscapes are draped in this half-exposed slow delivery; some of them are "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" I.vi., "On the Adequacy of Landscape," "The Dove in the Belly," "The Bouquet," and "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors."

Sometimes the appositive style reveals more than just the workings of the poet's mind; sometimes the meticulous description exposes a tone so quiet or pensive that an emotional reaction to the scene is implied. The description of the cabin in the second canto of "The Auroras of Autumn" is an example of the appositive's gift of the poet's thought, and of the narrowing resistance to the baring of his feelings:

> Farewell to an idea . . . A cabin stands,
> Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
> As by a custom or according to
>
> An ancestral theme or as a consequence
> Of an infinite course. The flowers against the
> wall
> Are white, a little dried, a kind of mask
>
> Reminding, trying to remind, of a white
> That was different, something else, last year
> Or before, not the white of an aging afternoon,
>
> Whether fresher or duller, whether of winter cloud
> Or of winter sky, from horizon to horizon.
> The wind is blowing the sand across the floor.
>
> Here, being visible is being white,
> Is being the solid of white, the accomplishment
> Of an extremist in an exercise. . . .
>
> (CP., p. 412)

Stevens painstakingly portrays the view; even though his words do not openly reveal his feelings, the dirge-like solemnity of the movement and the stops and starts of repetitions and additions divulge—beyond precision—an elegaic sadness. There is something pitiful but noble about the speaker's probing for a kind of whiteness that

the flowers used to have before they came to complement the withered "white of an aging afternoon." Furthermore, the indecision evident in his musings makes the speaker seem as mentally weakened as the cabin is faded and decrepit. Tone in this canto overwhelms the poet's desire for aloofness, and in this way the appositive style slides toward the inclusion of personal emotion in description. The accomplishment of the extremist in the curt landscapes gives way to human feeling of sorrow, lament, and searching—in an understated, demure way. Another example of how the appositive style expresses emotion is found in the accumulation of lush detail and in the breathless wonder of the poet's speech in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" II.v. In this poem style explains the necessity of mortality for an appreciation of the beauty of the planter's "blue island" and "zero green" (CP., p. 393). Other instances of the appositive format are found in "Extracts from the Academy of Fine Ideas" IV where the persona's curiosity about the end of winter takes the form of redundant consideration about the melting snow, the color of the water, and the amount of ice in the stream; in "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream" where each new detail about the sunny green water explains the bathers' joy in refreshing physical sensation; in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" III.ii. where the blue woman's pleasure in her memory of the summer's

clouds, waves, and flowers is demonstrated in the richness and elaboration of her description; and in "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers" where the leisurely and partially disconnected depiction of a flower arrangement explains how observation in conjunction with thought make the "crude [a]nd jealous grandeurs of sun and sky" (CP., p. 246) meaningful to humanity. In this last instance Stevens wisely and purposefully chooses the effusive appositive style to intimate a vague apprehension of immanence in his description:

> Hoot, little owl within her, how
> High blue became particular
> In the leaf and bud and how the red,
> Flicked into pieces, points of air,
> Became—how the central, essential red
> Escaped its large abstraction, became,
> First, summer, then a lesser time,
> Then the sides of peaches, of dusky pears.
>
> How the inhuman colors fell
> Into place beside her, where she was,
> Like human conciliations, more like
> A profounder reconciling, an act,
> An affirmation free from doubt.
> The crude and jealous formlessness
> Became the form and fragrance of things
> Without clairvoyance, close to her.
>
> (CP., pp. 246-47)

Although it is difficult to parse a concrete setting from the description of the flower arrangement, the complexity and cadence of the sentences simultaneously pick up details of the scene (leaf, bud, color, fruit) and manifest the woman's train of thought. The description is cast in a tone that builds toward the sense of convergence, of epiphany,

that the woman feels at the end of the poem. In this manner, particulars are cited, but the movement and mood of the speaker's mind gain control; the description becomes a revelation of the woman's state of mind.

Both descriptive styles, the curt and the expansive, employ the trompe l'oeil device of proffering a scene viable in its details. However, the illusion of the former is undercut by cynicism that makes the speaker unwilling to supply more than facts, and the illusion of the latter grows to include the perceptual sensors and organizers of the speaker's mind plus a relatively strong undercurrent of personal feeling. In each case, comment on the scene is indirect and understood through manner rather than exclamation. In poems that depend on perceptual landscape description, Stevens does not "bring the world round" by merging an objective view with subjective thoughts. But through a consideration of the amount of personal attitude that is by necessity included in an aesthetic attitude, Stevens does appear less isolated from the world he sees and from his readers who attempt to understand his sense of the world. That he is moved by and concerned with the appearance of the physical world is unquestionable; yet he is uncertain how thoroughly man can interpret the world in his own terms. For this reason his attitudes are implied

and revealed through style rather than direct exclamation. However, this tension created by Stevens' depth of insight and feeling and his chosen pose is one way that the poet acquires humanity.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Moments when the objective and subjective views toward the world blend do occur in Stevens' poetry, yet they do not shape themselves into exhilarated, impassioned descriptions of vistas. Ironically, these moments are the most intangible aspects of the poet's canon. Helen Vendler notices that in "Credences of Summer" Stevens places a lyrical speaker "firmly in a landscape of the present moment" for the first time. Furthermore, this present moment is one of the few instances when the speaker actually contemplates its fullness and his experience of its fullness, as is exemplified in the profusion of demonstrative nouns and adjectives in the first four cantos.[1] But for all of the reminders of the moment, one does not find a detailed description of a landscape that is put into perspective so that the reader may see the moment as well as feel it. The description, the "anatomy of summer" is postponed; all one gets by way of perceptual display is: "young broods / Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight of fragrance and the mind lays by

---

[1]Helen Vendler, On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 231.

its trouble" (CP., p. 372). It seems to me that Stevens represses his description to express the sense of the moment and to show that the wealth of feeling present in this poem causes a poverty of description. In "Lytton Strachey, Also, Enters into Heaven" Stevens explains why feeling and description cannot exist at equal levels of intensity in one poem:

> Perception as an act of intelligence
> And perception as an act of grace
> Are two quite different things . . . (OP., p. 39)

Therefore if the poet renders the description perceptually, his reaction to it is subdued; if he only implies the existence of a scene, he can give his interpretation and attitude toward that scene free reign. In this way Stevens avoids Romantic transcendentalism and continually reminds himself of the role his own consciousness plays in perception.

Another incomplete description of a potentially transcendent moment occurs in "Metaphors of a Magnifico" when the speaker breaks off from his enumeration of details in mid-sentence: "The first white wall of a village . . . / The fruit trees . . ." (CP., p. 19). In this case the speaker realizes that he is becoming more and more absorbed into the reality of the village setting and less and less distanced from the experience of it. As his aesthetic distance decreases, he becomes unable to continue his

contemplation of the scene. In "Of Bright and Blue Birds and the Gala Sun" a description of a scene is not attempted. Here the only indication of setting or circumstances is found in the title, and the rest of the poem is devoted to an enunciation of the observer's impulsive love of the physical world and sense of connection to it:

> It is there, being imperfect, and with these things
> And erudite in happiness, with nothing learned,
> That we are joyously ourselves and we think
>
> Without the labor of thought, in that element,
> And we feel, in a way apart, for a moment, as if
> There was a bright scienza outside of ourselves,
>
> A gaiety that is being, not merely knowing,
> The will to be and to be total in belief,
> Provoking a laughter, an agreement, by surprise.
> (CP., p. 248)

The point is that the presence of landscape in Stevens' poetry parallels the objective/subjective dualism found and pondered over throughout his career; the poet simulates a transcendent moment in the trompe l'oeil pieces, but the reader senses the aesthetic distance, the working imagination, and the personal reserve of the poet simultaneously. It is as if Stevens knew all along and continually implied in his descriptions that "There may be a time of innocence, / There is never a place" (CP., p. 418).

Thus, the undeniable distance preserved in Stevens' landscapes can be resolved as part of a larger scheme, a broader preoccupation. In the long run the motif of

perceptual landscape description helps to reveal the kind of poet Stevens wants to be. Ultimately, Stevens presents trompe l'oeil landscapes to reveal the world to his readers rather than to reveal his interpretation of that world; in this way he wants to act as the "necessary angel of earth," or as a "major man," who can represent humanity in both an abstract and particular sense. In "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" Stevens defines the function of the angel and the purpose for his aesthetic distance in landscape description:

> I am the angel of reality, . . .
> . . . . . .
> I am one of you and being one of you
> Is being and knowing what I am and know.
>
> Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
> Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,
>
> Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
> And in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
>
> Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
> Like watery words awash; like meanings said
>
> By repetitions of half meanings. . . .
> (CP., pp. 496-97)

As a creature more distanced from the earth than most men, the poet is able to assume the aesthetic attitude that Charles Mauron and Edward Bullough propose. And in assuming this stance, he creates images of the world, of landscapes, that show readers the world in a fresh light. It is true that his words, images, and poems are imperfect in their

objectivity, but the poet succeeds in giving man the most vivid portrayal of reality possible.

The notion of an internalized and perceptual image remains problematic, yet it is a stumbling block for at least one other artist as well. Since Stevens himself admits that remarks about paintings may sometimes say much about poetry, perhaps a summation of the style of a seventeenth-century Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer, will not roam too far from Stevens' concerns in description. Lawrence Gowing in his book on the painter explains:

> The illusion he seeks is not closeness but distance. It is the refinement of the trompe d'oeil, to counterfeit not only the credibility of visual perception but also its intangible remoteness. Immediacy, touch are excluded; his subject is the immutable barrier of space. It is for this, for the impalpable veil which it implies, that visual impression in all its genuineness is so precious to him. There is in his thought the paradoxical accompaniment of its clarity, a deep character of evasiveness, a perpectual withdrawal.[2]

In conclusion, I can only draw again on Stevens' own willingness to bridge the arts by means of the intellectual interpretation that can be gleaned from both sources.

> There is the same interchange between these two worlds [the worlds within and without—of landscape and the mind] that there is between one art and another, migratory passings, quickenings, Promethean liberations and discoveries. (NA., p. 169)

---

[2]Lawrence Gowing, Vermeer (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970), p. 25.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baird, James. The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Pr., 1968.

Benamou, Michel. "Wallace Stevens: Some Relations between Poetry and Painting," Comparative Literature, 11 (1959), 47-60.

Bevis, William. "Stevens' Toneless Poetry," ELH, 41 (1974), 257-86.

Blackmur, R. P. "Examples of Wallace Stevens" in Language as Gesture. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952, pp. 221-59.

Block, Haskell M. "The Impact of French Symbolism on Modern American Poetry" in The Shaken Realist, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970, pp. 198-213.

Bullough, Edward. "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," 1912, rpt. in Problems in Aesthetics: An Introductory Book of Readings, ed. Morris Weitz. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959, pp. 646-56.

Chavkin, Allen. "Wallace Stevens' Romantic Landscape, Notes on Meditation: 'No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,'" Wallace Stevens Journal, 5, Nos. 3 & 4 (1981), 43-45.

Doggett, Frank. "Wallace Stevens' Later Poetry," ELH, 25 (1958), 137-154.

_____. Wallace Stevens: The Making of a Poem. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Eder, Doris L. "Wallace Stevens' Landscapes and Still Lifes," Mosaic, 4 (Summer 1971), 1-5.

Focillon, Henri. The Life of Forms in Art, trans. Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler. New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1948.

Frye, Northrop. "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," Hudson Review, 10 (1957), 353-70.

Gowing, Lawrence. Vermeer. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970.

Graves, Barbara Ann Farris. "Stevens' Readings in Contemporary French Aesthetics: Charles Mauron, Thierry Maulnier, Roger Caillois," Diss. The University of Oklahoma, 1975.

Langer, Susanne K. Feeling and Form. New York: Scribner's, 1953.

Leggett, B. J. "Stevens' Psychology of Reading: 'Man Carrying Thing' and its Sources," Wallace Stevens Journal, 6, Nos. 3 & 4 (1982), 51-59.

Lentricchia, Frank. The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of Yeats and Stevens. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.

Mauron, Charles. Aesthetics and Psychology, trans. Roger Fry and Katherine Johns. London: Hogarth Press, 1935.

Miller, J. Hillis. Poets of Reality. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1965.

Morse, Samuel French, introd. Opus Posthumus by Wallace Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

Perlis, Alan. Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976.

Riddell, Joseph N. The Clairvoyant Eye: Wallace Stevens' Poetry and Poetics. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965.

Robinson, Fred Miller. "Stevens' Trompe L'Oeil: Visual Comedy in Some Short Poems," Wallace Stevens Journal, 5, Nos. 1 & 2 (1981), 3-10.

Sheehan, Donald. "The Whole of Harmonium: Poetic Technique in Wallace Stevens," in The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, ed. Warren French. Deland, Fla.: Everett-Edwards, Inc., 1970, pp. 175-86.

Stevens, Wallace. The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. 1954; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

_____. The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination. New York: Vintage Books, 1951.

_____. Opus Posthumus. 1957; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

Sukenick, Ronald. Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure. New York: New York University Press, 1967.

Vendler, Helen. On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969.

Weiss, Kathleen Petrisky. "The Fundamental Aesthetic: Wallace Stevens and the Painters." Diss., University of Massachusetts, 1975.

VITA

Elizabeth Jeanine Giddens was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on September 8, 1958. She attended elementary schools in that city and was graduated from Brentwood Academy High School, Brentwood, Tennessee, in June 1976. The following September she entered The University of Tennessee, and in June 1980 she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. In the fall of 1980 she accepted a teaching assistantship at The University of Tennessee and began study toward a Master's degree in English. This degree was awarded in March 1983.

The author is a member of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association and of Phi Beta Kappa.