

12-1988

# Desire: An Essential Element in Wallace Stevens' Poetry

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Gary,  
Barry M.  
1988



DESIRE:  
AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Barry M. Gary  
December 1988

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DESIRE:

AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY

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To Melody

"And for what, except for you, do I feel love?"

DESIRE:  
AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY

Barry M. Gary

December 1988

83 pages

Directed by: William McMahon, Nancy Davis, and George McCelvey

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Man naturally pursues that which brings pleasure, and Wallace Stevens recognizes this inescapable desire, exploring it fully in his poetry, prose, and letters and depending upon it to build the foundation for many, if not most, of his major themes. For Stevens, one's world evolves through the use of poetry, and this world, complete with jubilations of fulfilled desire and frequent despair as illusions of fulfillment are destroyed, chronicles the life of every man. As a result, different kinds of desire and different attempts at satisfying these desires emerge as one reads Stevens--three of which will be advanced in this study.

The first, the desire for an ideal truth, takes an intellectual approach, searching for a clue to reality, for a "first idea." This ideal, though, in order to prove satisfactory to the intellect, needs to reconcile the apparent "war between the mind and sky." How do the realm of the imagination and the realm of reality work together? For Stevens, the attempt at an intersection often occurs in the realm of poetry, a world which provides a means of ordering the chaos of

reality.

Stevens' investigation of human desire in this world is not limited to the intellect, however. At times the sensuous world itself provides the most appropriate objects for our desire. The wonders of our world, the mere experience of living, may provide needed stability in an otherwise precarious existence. Just as the jar placed in Tennessee gives order to the surrounding landscape, a life of observation and experience, established through the beautiful objects which are the focus of the lover's desire, attempts to provide an order.

The third, and perhaps the most interesting desire, occurs in the mind of the believer. Stevens recognizes the basic need for a deity; however, he also recognizes the origin of belief to be the collective creation of the myth-making force of a people, implying the ability to create new beliefs as unsatisfactory gods fade from importance. Stevens takes part in this recreation of myth through the emergence in his poetry of supreme fictions, possibilities he provides as examples of adequate beliefs.

This study, then, focuses on desire as a major thematic element in Wallace Stevens' poetry and emphasizes the role of desire in man's search for a harmonious existence with this world. In three major chapters the desire to reach an ideal truth through the blending of reality and imagination, the desire to find



pleasure in a world of objects, and the believer's creation and "decreation" of major fictions will be examined as key aspects of the essential element of desire in Wallace Stevens' poetry.

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## Preface

Man naturally pursues that which brings pleasure. Consequently, the choices one makes originate primarily from the intense need to find ways to satisfy various and important human desires: intellectual fervor, the deep appreciation of the sensuous world, and even religious orthodoxy can trace their roots to man's attempts to recreate the world in his own terms. Wallace Stevens recognizes this inescapable desire and explores it fully in his poetry, prose, and letters.

Though Stevens' poetic interests reach in many directions, critics tend to place their focus on topics such as his interest in the relationship between reality and imagination, his use of symbolism, or on some other concern such as the epistemology in his poetry; however, providing the foundation for many, if not most, of Stevens' major themes is the ever present element of desire. Helen Vendler writes that "Desire, its illusions and its despairs, is Stevens' great subject," noting also that Stevens sees "It is not possible for us to be without desire; we cannot help but engage in that process that Freudians call idealization . . ." (Words 31-2). According to



Vendler, our common names for these idealizations are "romantic love, religious belief, and political engagement" (Words 32), and she recognizes the similarity between these ideals and the poet's creation of an aesthetically ideal world: "All human beings engage in poesis in constituting an imagined world to live in; and the engagement in poesis is coterminous with life. To be alive is to desire . . ." (Words 32).

For Stevens, this fictive world evolves through the use of poetry, and his world, complete with jubilations of fulfilled desire and frequent despair as illusions of fulfillment are destroyed, chronicles the life of every man. As a result, different kinds of desire and different attempts at satisfying these desires emerge as one reads Stevens--three of which will be advanced in this study: the desire for an ideal truth, the desire for the pleasures of the sensual earth, and the desire for an adequate belief.

In meeting the demands of reality, desire often takes an intellectual approach. The thinking man, through close inspection of both "things as they are" and "things as they seem," searches for a clue to reality, for a "first idea." Vendler agrees that "it is not only our sexual and religious desire that imagines the existence of an ideal object; it is also our intellectual desire, hungry for an ideal truth . . ." (Words 29). This ideal, in order to prove

satisfactory to the intellect, needs to reconcile the apparent "war between the mind and sky." How do the realm of the imagination and the realm of reality work together? For Stevens, the attempt at an intersection often occurs in the realm of poetry, a world which Benard Heringman describes as a "means of escape from reality, a means of ordering the chaos of reality, a means of finding the good in reality, and, simply, a means of describing reality" (3).

Stevens' investigation of human desire in this world is not limited to the intellect, however. At times the sensuous world itself provides the most appropriate objects for our desire. The wonders of our world, the mere experience of living, may provide needed stability in an otherwise precarious existence. Just as the jar placed in Tennessee gives order to the surrounding landscape, a life of observation and experience, established through the beautiful objects which are the focus of the lover's desire, attempts to provide an order.

Perhaps the most interesting desire occurs in the mind of the believer. Stevens recognizes the basic need for a deity, that one arbitrary source of order and direction; however, he also recognizes the origin of belief to be the collective creation of the myth-making force of a people. In tandem with this ability to create myth comes the ability to destroy the pantheons of man, and when the common beliefs of a



people no longer satisfy their needs--as in the case of modern orthodoxy where valuable human desires such as the freedom of individual thought, the divinity of nature, and the divinity of sex and reproduction have been neglected or ignored--the people have the ability to destroy one myth and create another fiction on which to base their beliefs. Stevens takes part in this recreation of myth through the emergence in his poetry of supreme fictions, such as Stevens' "God," a vision of perfected humanity which provides the essential human element that religions such as modern Christianity often neglect.

This study, then, will focus on desire as a major thematic element in Wallace Stevens' poetry and the role of desire in man's search for a harmonious existence with this world. In three major chapters the desire for order through the examination of reality and imagination, the desire to find pleasure in a world of objects, and the believer's creation and "decreation" of major fictions will be examined as key aspects of the essential element of desire in Wallace Stevens' poetry.



## Acknowledgments

The completion of the master's thesis, marking the culmination of my work at Western Kentucky University, seems the logical place to thank all of the faculty and staff of the English department for the guidance and encouragement I have received over the last two years. Each course has provided a stimulus for intellectual growth, and every instructor has been helpful and warm to an extent that I am sure is the exception rather the rule for most universities.

Specifically, I thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. William E. McMahon, Dr. Nancy Davis, and Dr. George McCelvey. Your direction and insight, both in coursework and during my thesis project, has helped to make my graduate work rewarding.

Finally, thanks to all of the other paupers who make their precarious living in the basement of Cherry Hall. The exchange of ideas, friendships, and fun that occurs between graduate students brings a richness that is at least a consolation and at best a treasure.

The Desire to Satisfy the Mind

If knowledge and the thing known are one  
So that to know a man is to be  
That man, to know a place is to be  
That place, and it seems to come to that;  
And if to know one man is to know all  
And if one's sense of a single spot  
Is what one knows of the universe,  
Then knowledge is the only life,  
The only sun of the only day,  
The only access to true ease  
The deep comfort of the world and fate.  
(Stevens Opus 99-100)

The reader of Wallace Stevens' poetry, like Ulysses, has experienced the fleeting serenity of those occasions in which one simply "knows," moments in which the portal begins to open just enough to allow one to decipher the world's secrets--if only the experience would continue for just a little bit longer--but no; as quickly as the sensation began, it is over, and the viewer is left just as ignorant and confused as before. Stevens acknowledges these brief interludes, and he sees the desire to satisfy the mind as a valuable stimulus towards order in an otherwise chaotic existence. His suggestion is clear:

. . . talking of happiness, know that it means  
That the mind is the end and must be satisfied.  
(CP 257)

The search for knowledge continues, then, and one hopes for a complete and stable truth in which he may



place his confidence. Helen Vendler agrees that not only do commonly accepted modes of desire motivate man--such as the sexual drive and religious uncertainty--but that "intellectual desire," the hunger for an ideal truth, inspires one as well (Words 29). For Stevens, this acute inquisitiveness of the mind involves coming to terms with one's world, and the resolution of this struggle depends upon a precarious balancing of two particular realms of being: things as they are (reality) and things as they seem or could be (imagination). Interpreting Stevens' assessment of chaos, Ronald Sukenick points to the consequence of a lack of harmony between these two states, imagination and reality, by explaining disorder as "reality apprehended without the projections of the ego" (10). The result, Sukenick continues, is an alienation from reality "of which we are a part" (10). One merely needs to substitute "imagination" for "ego," and Sukenick's view approaches the ideal Stevens sees as the ultimate end to the mind's desire for knowledge, an end Stevens defines as "poetic truth":

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

To arrive at an order, then, one must somehow manage to merge the powers of the imagination and the forces of reality, reaching a balance between the two.

A brief examination of a few scholarly opinions will be helpful in assessing Stevens' emphasis on the relationship between imagination and reality, revealing how these two forces play an essential role in the attempt to satisfy the desire for knowledge (an "ideal truth") and, properly balanced, can provide "The joy of meaning in design / Wrenched out of chaos" (Opus 100).

William Van O'Connor approaches Stevens' relationship between imagination and reality from an acceptable standpoint. Agreeing that Stevens is "deeply concerned with the ideal," he maintains that "it is found in the individual's imagination" (124). Stevens, O'Connor continues, would not find it necessary to label such idealism as "false" or "pseudo" even though one no longer finds truth in certain beliefs which have arisen from the imagination (107); quite the opposite is in fact true. To illustrate, O'Connor points to Stevens' regret that the imagination ("the agent of our sensibilities") cannot function freely:

Stevens recognizes the terrible irony of decrying the imagination, the agent for the creation of values, in a time so desperately in need of it. And in his creation of an interrelated body of images and symbols, collectively giving evidence of "solid reality," he has demonstrated both our need for an imagined reality and the absurdity of pretending that reality has significant relationships with only rationality. (103-4)

Consequently, coming to terms with the world, reality, involves an understanding of the imagination. O'Connor notes Stevens' acknowledgment that "We must,



through the agency of the imagination, impose order on the wilderness, just as the jar in 'Anecdote of the Jar' imposes its order" (6). This reference to Stevens' jar is well taken. The jar, an art object--an act of the imagination--is placed among the "slovenly wilderness" of Tennessee; the wilderness (arguably representing the chaos of the world of reality) "sprawled around [the jar], no longer wild." The jar takes dominion over the disorder of the wilderness: the imagination marshals reality. Using "Anecdote of the Jar" as example, O'Connor fortunately recognizes that though the jar imposes order, acknowledging the place of the imagination in no way denies the "presence, nature or importance of 'things as they are'" (24). Therefore, while one must allow the imagination its freedom (O'Connor continues), it can add nothing to reality that is not inherent in it (27). To elaborate, O'Connor, correctly paraphrasing Stevens' generalization about the imagination's adhering to what is real, concludes that

The imaginative expression that moves out from something we know as real intensifies its reality, whereas that which moves out from something we know as unreal intensifies its unreality. Or, at least, it makes for the uneasy feeling that we are, at best, experiencing a dream reality. (28-9)

O'Connor's final analysis supports "the old dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, between reality and appearance"; the two forces, though opposites, are dependent on one another: "in our minds the two are

never separate" (91).

Another scholar, Roy Harvey Pearce, agrees that "The world of Wallace Stevens' Poetry has always been two, 'things as they are' and 'things imagined,'" listing an acceptable collection of stock symbols for both: "The moon, blue, the polar north, winter, music, poetry and art"--refer to the imaginative; "The sun, yellow, the tropic south, summer, physical nature"--these refer to the realm of reality (Act 1). According to Pearce, Stevens' "local and particular starting point" concerns "the sensitive individual trying to satisfy simultaneously the claims of reality and the imagination" (Life 569). Pearce recognizes, therefore, how one's desire to reconcile these two forces provides the momentum for much of Stevens' work, and, outlining this struggle, Pearce readily refers to three significant components of Stevens' view of the imagination:

- 1) One's imagination must come alive, and Pearce identifies "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" and "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)" as two poems which illustrate the dire aspect of a dead imagination;
- 2) To indicate how the imagination comes alive, Pearce, explaining the need to base the imagination in reality, points to three other poems, "Farewell to Florida," "Lions in Sweden," and "Mozart, 1935";
- 3) Most importantly, the imagination must give to our reality "whatever order we can be sure resides



therein," and Pearce acknowledges "The Idea of Order at Key West" as a poem in which Stevens treats this principle. (Life 567).

For Pearce, as for O'Connor, these components, leading to the projection of order into the world of chaos, are crucial. He shrewdly writes that the fusing of imagination and reality allows the possibility of "that ultimate belief which was denied to the protagonists of 'Sunday Morning,' 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,' and 'To the One of Fictive Music'" (Life 571). To elaborate, Pearce explains that the "esthetic experience" provides the only means of inquiry by which we arrive at certain epistemological, ontological, and moral propositions; furthermore, this experience also provides our only means of "realizing and believing in them" (Life 571). Pearce also includes the correct assumption that the esthetic experience, based on the sensibilities of the man of imagination (most often the poet), would ideally be free from any abstract system which would impose order from outside the poet's sensibilities:

. . . for order, esthetic order, "the structure of things," must be derived from a dynamic relationship between the individual imagination and the reality which it beholds. So the poet-esthete becomes the philosopher-moralist. To him a philosophical proposition fully realized is one realized as a poem. For propositions are statements involving the conjoining of the individual imagination and reality; and such a conjoining is the work of the poet, of "any man of imagination." (572)

Pearce understands the imagination and reality

blend as a central concern of Wallace Stevens; Ellwood Johnson, writing on Stevens' "Transforming Imagination," also recognizes that the relationship between these two states of being is central to art and life:

. . . the controlling idea, or vision, that motivated the writing of all of this poetry, which is that art, whether it is, as he called it, life lived as art, or painting or poetry as art, becomes when it approached perfection a harmonious merging of imagination and reality. (28)

Johnson, however, adds a necessary distinction between two kinds of imagination: one type of imagination involves "transforming activities of the mind without which we could not experience reality except as a meaningless chaos of sense impressions," and the other involves the creation of objects out of imagination (30). Borrowing from Stevens, Johnson calls the first "imagination as metaphysics"<sup>1</sup>; and the second is "creation, it is art" (30). In addition, Johnson identifies at least two kinds of reality as well: "'alien' reality, nature that exists in its own unhuman mythology, beyond human imagination, beyond knowledge, and beyond pain" (37), and "tangible reality," an insolid "process" that is the "knowable" world (35). In essence, Johnson describes the world of Stevens thus: there is an "alien" reality that existed prior to mankind; man knows nothing of this reality--it is "undetermined by human consciousness" (Johnson 30). On the other hand, a tangible reality coexists with man<sup>2</sup>; this reality can be "felt," can be "shaped into a



tangible experience" by the imagination acting in its metaphysical capacity. Concurring with O'Connor and Pearce (though in a more complicated fashion), Johnson also empowers the imagination with an ability to project order into a chaotic reality. As a result, the conflict in Stevens' poetry (Johnson exclaims) arises between a reality, which is chaotic and alien to human consciousness, and imagination ("the human spirit"), which strives to "contain the whole of reality within itself" (28). Johnson's analysis is not quite clear when addressing the relationship between "alien" reality, "tangible" reality, and the imagination (are these two realities or is alien reality merely made tangible by the imagination?); however, his illustration of Stevens' recognition of the imagination as a "unifying and universalizing" force illuminates the struggle:

The more one's imagination dominates reality, the more abstract or universal the world appears. The more reality dominates the imagination, the more particular the world appears. In its "metaphysical" purpose of penetrating into life, imagination seems a "connoisseur of chaos"; in its poetic function of reshaping and ordering life, it may provide an order that is not actually visible in the world, but which can become an awareness that helps the ordinary person in his understanding or "penetration" of life. (31)

In addition to expounding upon the conflict which he believes gives rise to Stevens' poetry, Johnson proposes two other ideas. Johnson's first suggestion concerns the creation of desire in the spirit. As Johnson explains, the imagination orders, recreates,

and makes reality tangible so that one can experience it; however, it lacks the permanence necessary to satiate completely the desire which the experience of reality stirs in the human spirit. As one desire is fulfilled, a new desire must fill the void, "as a season of heat and mosquitoes must create a desire for a season of cold" (Johnson 32-3). The imagination merges with reality, then, in a continuous cycle of desire and the satiation of desire, a perpetual transformation of reality necessary to continue fulfilling human desire. The second suggestion that Johnson presents distinguishes between Stevens' uses of the imagination and his uses of the reason. Johnson points out that Stevens defines reason as "imagination methodized," and though its sources are found in the imagination, by becoming ideology--"impos[ing] an order on nature that is not actually existent in nature herself" (34)--it can act "as an obstacle to the attainment of a normalizing balance between imagination and reality" (33). Johnson is correct in both assumptions, and Stevens indicates that desire does perpetuate itself and that the reason and imagination also engage in a constant battle for interpreting the world.

O'Connor, Pearce, and Johnson all provide valuable insights into Stevens' views of the imagination and reality and illustrate how these forces work to satisfy the human desire for order in the chaos of this world.



In addition, others have contributed to the study of this concern in Stevens' work, and merit consideration.

J. Hillis Miller claims that the death of the gods leaves Stevens with an "inner nothingness" (imagination) and an "external barrenness" (reality) "with which the imagination carries on its endless discourse" (145). Stevens' problem, then, is the impossible task of reconciling the two:

But such a reconciliation turns out to be impossible. This way and that vibrates his thought, seeking to absorb imagination by reality, to engulf reality in imagination, or to marry them in metaphor. Nothing will suffice, and Stevens is driven to search on tirelessly for some escape from conflict. (Miller 145-6)

It is this endless search, Miller accurately explains, that provides "the motive and life of his [Stevens'] poetry" (146).

Some scholars agree that the stimulus for Stevens' art comes from the tension springing from the attempt to conjoin imagination and reality: Herbert J. Stern, like Johnson, sees desire as the fuel for the conflict. If the imagination is to remain alive, it must respond to the pressures of reality by continually balancing the "new events in life" and the desire for an understandable, ordered reality (108-9). Stern finds relief for the tension in Stevens' reacting against chaos "by pursuing patterns of universal order, indulging the mind's desire for resemblance" (123). He cleverly warns, however, that fully satisfying this desire is to move into "a world of perfectly harmonious

form" which may be "metaphysically satisfying, but is not a world in which the mind can any longer act"

(124).

In contrast, Ronald Sukenick states that one must bring the ego into a "gratifying relation" with the chaos of reality, for it is the only order that exists (10). The thinking man, explains Sukenick, "faced with the depressing prospect of a reality that seems dull, plain, and irrelevant to the needs of the ego," must make use of the imagination to reconcile reality to the ego's needs, making it seem "intensely relevant to the ego . . . more real" (14-5). Sukenick, like Stern, sees that the ordering of reality takes place as one finds relations between objects, resemblances: "The imagination, in other words, brings out meaning, enables us to see more. It does not create but perceives acutely, and the object of its perception is reality" (16).

Others who approach the imagination and reality theme include Beverly Lyon Clark, who sees the poem as an "acrobatic balancing" of Imagination and Reality (13); Anthony Hartley, who reports Stevens' concern about the "possible gap" between "the poet's mythical hypotheosis" and "things as they are" (547); Bernard Heringman, who points out that Stevens stressed the need for the poet to make use of the imagination, abstracting himself and taking reality into abstraction with him (6); Frank Doggett, who argues that the



reality of this world is shaped, at least in part, by man's conception of it (15); and Loren Rusk, whose examination of "The World as Meditation" reveals the power of desire to supplant exterior reality (20).

The scholars examined in this brief overview provide some unique opinions concerning the relationship of imagination and reality in Stevens' thought. While the suggestions about Stevens often vary, they often coincide as well, and from this summary one may propose some general conclusions supportable by Stevens' work:

1. **The thinker's desire is for knowledge about the world around him, a desire for an ideal truth.**

Stevens calls this truth "Poetic Truth," and it involves a necessary agreement with reality (NA 54). In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" Stevens explains that

We seek  
The poem of pure reality, untouched  
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,  
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object  
  
At the exactest point at which it is itself,  
Transfixing by being purely what it is,  
A view of New Haven, say, through a certain eye,  
  
The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight  
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek  
Nothing beyond reality. (CP 471)

In this same poem Professor Eucalyphus reiterates the importance of reaching an understanding of reality:

The search  
For reality is as momentous as  
The search for god. (CP 481)

Stevens' thought, then, indicates that an

agreement with reality stands as a prerequisite to knowledge; furthermore, his reality, one must note, involves much more than the objective world. Reality, Stevens explains in his essay "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," includes "everything the imagination includes," equating the unseen with the seen (NA 60-1). Reality, then, includes not only rocks, trees, and flowers but everything that has been seen and imagined over generations: what we see is the result of the imaginative efforts of ourselves and those who have gone before us (NA 35).

**2. This ideal truth will be found only as one reconciles the co-existent forces of reality and imagination, using the powers of the imagination to instill order and bring reality into a knowable form.**

In other words, one must "enter boldly that interior world / To pick up the relaxations of the unknown" (CP 333), must use the powers of the imagination to internalize reality--giving it meaning and order. Stevens describes a "pressure" caused by reality--not the pressure caused by normal human experience, but a pressure of "an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA 17-20). One creates such a pressure through the absence of the imaginative power; the imagination, "the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos"



(NA 153), must co-exist with reality, allowing one to perceive a significant relationship with the real world. Stevens' July spectacle in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" illustrates the disarray which occurs when Ludwig Richter loses "the whole in which he was contained":

Scene 10 becomes 11,  
In Series X, Act IV, et cetera.

People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,  
Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old,

The air is full of children, statues, roof  
And snow. The theatre is spinning round,

Colliding with deaf-mute churches and optical  
trains.

The most massive sopranos are singing songs of  
scales. (CP 357)

In contrast to this scene of confusion, consider the calm arrangement of "The Idea of Order at Key West":

She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

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,  
As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (CP 130)

In singing, the lady walking by the shore engages in an act of the imagination, and her song, a creation of the imagination, becomes her perception of the world around her. Hearing and watching the woman, the poet and his companion acknowledge the power of the woman's song,



and as they turn toward their destination, the arrangement of the lights on the harbor takes on a new significance: while the woman's song provided her with an imaginative world of her own, this creative act also allowed the two beach walkers to perceive and acknowledge a moment of balance in the world, fulfilling their "Blessed rage for order." Such moments the ancient Greeks termed "Epiphanies," and one would do well to acknowledge Stevens' classical desire for harmony, one delicately balanced whole. In this case, what is real and what is imagined become one, and the two walkers, along with the lady, enter "a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible . . . to the acutest poet" (OPUS 166). This momentary fulfillment of the desire for order might be viewed as a Stevens "epiphany."

3. **The search for a reconciliation between imagination and reality cannot be completely fulfilled. As the imagination satiates desires, other desires--stimulated by the continuing presence of new realities--rise to fill the void left by those desires which have been satisfied. The changing nature of reality produces a cyclic relationship of reality, imagination, and desire that is continuous and essential.**

Although one tries to reconcile the imagination and reality, the task is made impossible by the continuing presence of new realities. "The first idea is an

imagined thing" (CP 387), Stevens claims, yet to reach beyond reality, to live at the centre of one's being, requires an unimpaired imaginative life. Two forces work against this perfected state, change and reason. However, while these two forces do work in opposition to a perfect balance of imagination and reality, Stevens finds both to be necessary. The primary hindrance to balance, Stevens explains, is the reason; the imagination and the reason are constantly struggling for reality: there will never be a permanent outcome (NA 141). Yet, Stevens claims that the two can work together for one's benefit: as the reason tries to impose a false order upon reality, an order not inherent in nature, the imagination must, on the other hand, help the individual perceive the order already existing, adding nothing. Therefore, as one comes to terms with one reality and a new one takes the place of the first, this struggle between the imagination and reason is repeated. One might consider the pressure created by the reason necessary, then, as a stimulus for the imagination.

In contrast to the imagination's reaction against a complete rule of reason, the imagination also works to execute change. When beliefs become inadequate, Sukenick explains, new, more credible resolutions follow; in purging the world of the "old delusion" and helping to acknowledge new solutions that will be acceptable for a time, the imagination participates in



a self-perpetuating cycle of growth, replacing the "satisfactions of one season" and providing "another season with satisfactions of its own" (8). Stevens applauds change in this passage from "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue":

It is only enough  
 To live incessantly in change. See how  
 On a day still full of summer, when the leaves  
 Appear to sleep within a sleeping air,  
 They suddenly fall and the leafless sound of the  
 wind  
 Is no longer a sound of summer. So great a change  
 Is constant. The time you call serene descends  
 Through a moving chaos that never ends. (Opus).

4. **Though the desire for a complete understanding of reality cannot be totally satisfied, occasional fulfillments occur. The realm of poetry provides many of these satisfactions, both on a small scale in the fictive world one creates and on a larger scale in the world which is the age in which one lives.**

Stevens explains in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" that the pressure of reality is "both the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and also in the artistic character of an individual" (22-3); however, in many ways the pressure of reality and the imagination's reaction to that pressure determine much more than the artistic nature of an individual and era: the desire for a balance between reality and imagination plays a determining role in life itself. Over and over, Stevens stresses the necessity to utilize the imagination to hold back the



pressures of reality and create a world of one's own, including the essential element of reality but rising above it as well. Often, the imaginative realm of the poem provides the essence of Stevens' world; Vendler finds evidence of this interpretation of "poem" in an inscription Stevens wrote on a copy of his Collected Poems given to his daughter's English professor:

Dear Elias: When I speak of the poem, or often when I speak of the poem, in this book, I mean not merely a literary form, but the brightest and most harmonious concept, or order of life; and the references should be read with that in mind. (Words 5).

In addition, many of Stevens' Adagia would seem to support a view of the poem as life:

A poem should be part of one's sense of life. (Opus 164)

We live in the mind. (Opus 164)

It is life that we are trying to get at in poetry. (Opus 158)

In other words, one should live the life of poetry, depending upon the imagination to make sense of the multifarious collisions with reality that occur.

Heringman appears to be on the right track as he states that "Starting from an intersection of imagination and reality, poetry creates a synthesis, and thus creates a new world of transcendent reality" (4). Vendler, describing the process in much more detail, also agrees that the individual establishes a "personal" reality. She explains that each new expression of reality requires a new term of description, a term drawn from this world; after this action repeats itself, one

begins to identify a developing network among these terms, a network that reaches not outwardly to some "putative 'real world,' but inwardly to a world of one's own terms or images" (Words 53-4). This interior world, Vendler continues, is of one's own construction, and consequently is one of "great vividness and reality" (Words 5).

Two poems which illustrate Stevens' idea of the imagination's ability to create order through one's individual perception of reality are "Human Arrangement" and "The World as Meditation."

The first poem opens during a dreary day for the personae in the work: "place-bound" and "time-bound" during a changless rain, the poem's character escapes through powers of imagination. Serio elaborates that for the personae in the poem, the imagined edifice, "Forced up from nothing," becomes the center for transformations that are real, transformations that become "a glitter that is a life" (25).

In contrast to "Human Arrangement," "The World as Meditation" provides an example of a union brought about solely through the imagination. In this poem Penelope imagines the return of Ulysses; she doesn't daydream about his return, rather she feels his actual presence, his warmth beside her as she dreams in the sunlight. Of course, the presence she feels is not truly Ulysses; it is merely the warmth of the sun. Or is it? For Penelope, the experience is enough; in her



mind they had met, and her strength during Ulysses' absence is upheld by this imaginative interlude.

"Human Arrangement" and "The World as Meditation" illustrate the individual's ability to perceive in reality an individual order; however, using the poet as an example, Stevens also shows how the imagination helps to perceive and direct the realities of one's era of existence. Sukenick explains that each age has its particular beliefs; in time these beliefs no longer hold the power to satisfy the needs of the age, yet one still desires the direction and power of "sovereign images" (6). In order to satisfy this desire, the imagination attaches itself to new realities, again forming the foundation for belief. While he does not actually create the new bases for belief, it is the poet, Sukenick points out, that Stevens designates as one who can help to bring about the change:

The poet is able to add to our vital experience of life because of the heightened awareness of life that results from the intensity of his thought and feeling. (16-7)

The poet can contribute, therefore, to the search for a new reality that can once again be credible when the epochs that temporarily satisfied one era are passed over and desire rises again. Two statements by Stevens in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" bring the poet's role into clear focus:

. . . what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive



of it. (NA 31)

And:

I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs [the people's] and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives. (NA 29)

The poet, then, does not dictate beliefs to his people. More accurately, one might claim that the poet merely makes use of unusually acute sensibilities in order to bring into focus, through the medium of the poem, the dominant forces at work during a given time.<sup>3</sup>

These efforts to comprehend Stevens' version of the bond between reality and imagination are crucial to his theory of the desire. It is the self which desires passionately some proper understanding of the world as men and women encounter it and live in it. The intense passion by which Stevens pursues such final comprehensions is a measure of the strength of the desire that fuels the search.

## The Desire for Pleasure

Seeking out the things which bring happiness, looking for enjoyable experiences, man strives to fulfill an inherent desire for the pleasurable. Stevens acknowledges this desire as an active and directive force for humans, and he praises the many avenues available to satisfy the search for pleasure during one's life. Particularly human characteristics, such as the ability to perceive the beautiful in the world, the faculty of the memory, and the capacity to see relationships, provide experiences which fulfill the will's attraction to the pleasurable. Affirming the importance of pleasure, Stevens acclaims the sensual world and the enjoyable experience of life.

As the first chapter of this study indicates, Stevens places a high value on the powers of the imagination; however, one must also note that the imagination which Stevens applauds requires a firm basis in reality, in the world in which man lives. With this foundation in reality, one's imaginative flights are sustained by an everpresent stimulation; consequently, the individual finds the process of blending the imagination and reality very satisfying to the mind as it works to recognize and order the



objective world. As a result, Stevens' pleasure principle maintains his affirmed relationship between the imagination and reality. Consider the short poem "Life is Motion":

In Oklahoma,  
Bonnie and Josie  
Dressed in calico,  
Danced around a stump.  
They cried,  
"Ohayoho,  
Ohoo" . . .  
Celebrating the marriage  
Of flesh and air. (CP 83)

Bonnie and Josie, dancing around the stump, celebrate the whole of the sensuous world, the "marriage / of flesh and air." They celebrate more than the freedom to dance out in the open air, however: their joy is in part a product of the marriage between the objects of the sensual world (such as the flesh) and the force of the imagination (represented by the abstract quality of air).

One might suggest that the power of the imagination allows one to perceive the pleasurable world in which life progresses from day to day. Stevens elaborates in "Six Significant Landscapes," illustrating how one finds great pleasure in allowing the imaginative faculty the freedom to respond to the sensuous earth. The poem is broken into six stanzas--each representing a particular view or "landscape." In the first, the poet observes an old Chinese man; the man's beard, the nearby flowers, and the pine tree under which the man sits all blow in the wind. To the



poet, the effect resembles the appearance of water flowing over weeds. In the second stanza the poet brings the night to life in the image of a woman: the day is not quite over yet; night (the woman) is just arriving. Like the entrance of a beautiful woman into a room, the night's body is still shielded behind the door; only the arm shows--her bracelet shining in the last light of day.

The third stanza provides still another view. The poet, looking up at a tall tree, feels his own enormity. Yes, the tree is tall, but the poet can reach to the sun with his eye and hear the distant shore with his ear. However, the audacious ants crawling in and out of the poet's shadow disturb his colossal stance. The fourth stanza is similar: the poet advances his own importance through his observation of the moon. On the beams of the moon, the poet rises to its height. In the fifth stanza the poet again contemplates the night sky. Although he has seen the lights of lamp-posts and busy streets and buildings and high towers, the images cast from their illumination cannot compare to the sight of one star carving shadows through a grape-vine.

The final stanza offers a contrasting landscape. Instead of viewing the beautiful vistas of the sky and earth, the poet this time confines his sight to a square room of "rationalists." Likewise, the rationalists also confine their views to this room of

straight lines and right angles, ignoring other possibilities: "rhomboids / Cones, waving lines, ellipses" (CP 75). Essentially, the rationalists have neglected the exhilarating possibilities of an active mind in contact with the sensual world. These men will not fulfill that desire for pleasure, instinctively human and satisfied through the acute observation and the imaginative transformation of our world--the straight lines and the curves.

Regardless of the view of the rationalists, the experiences of the world in which one finds pleasure are virtually countless; however, some of these received special attention from Stevens. One such experience is the recognition of the beautiful--the colorful, the "essential gaudiness" of life. Stevens finds great pleasure in the rich beauty permeating the earth; for him, the observance of a sunset translates into an appreciation of intermingling color:

In the sunset to-night I tried to find the value of the various colors. The sun was dimmed by a slight mistiness which was sensitive to the faintest colors and thus gave an unusual opportunity for observation. In this delicate net was caught up first of all a pure whiteness which gradually tinted to yellow, and then to heavy orange and thick, blazing gold; this grew light again and slowly turned to pink. The feathery deer-grass before me twinkled silverly in a little breeze, the ordinary blades of green-grass and wheat stubble glittered at their tips while the ragweed and clover were more dark and secret. The middle-distance remained stolid and indifferent. The horizon, on the contrary was deepening its blue--a color to which the outermost clouds were already turning. The pink in the sky brightened into a momentary vermilion which slowly died again into rose-color edged with half-determined scarlet and purple. The rose-color faded, the



purple turned into a fine, thin violet--and in a moment all the glow was gone. (Letters 32-3)

The physical world, then, for Stevens and any other man of imagination, provides an endless source of pleasure--so long as one acknowledges the power of physical presence. "I'm completely satisfied [says Stevens] that behind every physical fact there is a divine force" (Letters 32); therefore, the "greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world" (CP 325).

Filled with such a joy for life in this human realm, Stevens' work, acknowledging the desire for pleasure, reverberates with the pulses of the natural world:

After a lustre of the moon, we say  
We have not the need of any paradise,  
We have not the need of any seducing hymn.

It is true. Tonight the lilacs magnify  
The easy passion, the ever-ready love  
Of the lover that lies within us and we breathe

An odor evoking nothing, absolute.  
We encounter in the dead middle of the night  
The purple odor, the abundant bloom.

The lover sighs as for accessible bliss,  
Which he can take within him on his breath,  
Possess in his heart, conceal and nothing known.  
(CP 394-5)

It is in the objects of nature, in the moon and lilacs, that one finds pleasure, "For easy passion and ever-ready love / Are of our earthy birth . . ." (CP 395).

Stevens' images of "our earthy birth" are often based on particular landscapes; his "Florida" or "Yucatan" imagery, for example, involves a deep appreciation for the exotic colors of life: natural



reds, blues, yellows, greens, and oranges all merit praise, and Stevens' poetry radiates with florid images. This imagery is scattered throughout Stevens' work, yet some poems seem to focus directly on the pleasure one can derive from the fecund tropical landscape. In poems such as "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" the reader not only feels Stevens' pleasure in the colorful world, but catches his implicit criticism of those who ignore this world as well:

The houses are haunted  
 By white night-gowns.  
 None are green,  
 Or purple with green rings  
 Or green with yellow rings,  
 Or yellow with blue rings.  
 None of them are strange,  
 With socks of lace  
 And beaded ceintures.  
 People are not going  
 To dream of baboons and periwinkles  
 Only, here and there, an old sailor,  
 Drunk and asleep in his boots,  
 Catches tigers  
 In red weather.

Oh to be a hunter of tigers in tropical lands; this is Wallace Stevens' dream. Yet so many people confine themselves to lives of living ghosts, walking in safe houses in white night-gowns. The colors and the excitement of the tropics move Stevens, and one feels that to desire less suggests an inadequacy of imagination or courage.

Examining Stevens' work, many scholars recognize the value Stevens gives to the sensual world as it relates to the satisfaction of the human desire for pleasure: Henry W. Wells describes Stevens as "one of

the most lusty, robust, and firm-grained writers in American literature . . . perhaps the most gifted of all in expressing the joy of life" (8-9); Pearce, on the other hand, stresses Stevens' love for "things-in-themselves," stating that one loves things because he can take joy in them for their own sake (Life 575); Joseph Riddell agrees, claiming that "Stevens' images adhere to a world of things--as often ordinary and commonplace as exotic and rare" (12); Hartley, claiming that Stevens' ordering myth will parallel the world "rather than drastically reverse the hierarchy of its elements," states that Stevens is determined to "found his poetry on the world of experience rather than on a mythical cosmology" (547); likewise, Rusk, using this excerpt from "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,"

Perhaps  
The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires, a stop  
To see hepatica, a stop to watch  
A definition growing certain and

A wait within that certainty, a rest  
In the swags of pine-trees bordering the lake,

illustrates how Stevens' intellect may open "itself to the world, allowing exterior beauty to act upon it," an act which brings it into conjunction with nature (17); Doggett also establishes Stevens' "moral" directly in this world:

He emphasizes his moral with his singing hidden rhymes and illustrates it with his symbolic picture of wine coming to men in a wood who enjoy the good that comes to them, just as they do the contemplation of the simple activity of that which exists, of the leaf spinning, paradigm of the



spinning world. To put his moral in paraphrase: experience is a good in itself. ("Invented World" 28)

Experience is a good in itself, and it is an inherent characteristic of human existence to desire the good and find pleasure when this desire is fulfilled. Finally, Stern, emphasizing the place of poetry, traces Stevens "fundamental concern" to his remark that "The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness" (78). In doing so, he explores perhaps the greatest source of physical pleasure, finding a connection between Stevens' appreciation for the sensual world and another great source of pleasure, the sexual experience:

The most intense sensual pleasure is the sexual experience, and the poet's response to the beauty of the world is in several ways analogous to a man's response to the beauty of a woman. Both responses are sensual at bottom, and both seek union with the object of beauty, one through an act of imaginative love that we call crudely "the aesthetic experience," and the other through the act of physical love. (81)

Stern's assumption seems correct, and his further suggestions that Stevens frequently uses the marriage ceremony "as metaphor for the establishment of harmony between man and his environment" (80-1) and that the figure of the woman often represents the beauty of the earth (81) can be supported by poems such as "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"--where in part IV of the section titled "It Must Give Pleasure" the marriage of the great captain and the maiden Bawda suggests an appreciation for Catawba, Bawda's native land--and "Six



Significant Landscapes"--where in stanza II the image of a woman represents the beauty of the oncoming night:

The night is the color  
Of a woman's arm:  
Night, the female,  
Obscure,  
Fragrant and supple,  
Conceals herself.  
A pool shines,  
Like a bracelet  
Shaken in a dance. (CP 73-4)

This short piece illustrates Stevens' testimony that "a poet looks at the world as a man looks at a woman" (OPUS 165). For Stevens the pleasures of the physical realm do seem to culminate in the sexual experience: What can be more pleasing, more naturally human, than a union with an idealized member of the opposite sex? Stevens' female, in many ways similar to Hart Crane's fertile figure of the land as woman, provides a limitless stimulus to the imagination--as suggested by the tongue-in-cheek description of a "bad woman" who widens the scope of perception for a "good," rational man:

You say that spite avails her nothing, that  
You rest intact in conscience and intact  
In self, a man of longer time than days,  
Of larger company than one. Therefore,  
Pure scientist, you look with nice aplomb  
At this indifferent experience,  
Deploring sentiment. When May came last  
And equally as scientist you walked  
Among the orchards in the apple-blocks  
And saw the blossoms, snow-bred pink and white,  
Making your heart of brass to intercept  
The childish onslaughts of such innocence,  
Why was it that you cast the brass away  
And bared yourself, and bared yourself in vain?  
She can corrode your world, if never you. (Opus )

Even though the human world provides a myriad of

pleasurable experiences, as Stern and others have suggested, the absence of the desired object complicates Stevens' pleasure principle. The need to obtain one's objects of desire is evocative, and even when the object is no longer present one's memory feeds the fire. Ackerman points out that Stevens' "interior ocean of Memory" stimulates desire (618). Likewise, James Hasting, contending that without knowledge there is no desire, explains that "knowledge consists in the memory of former pleasurable experiences" (664). And one must agree. Stevens recognizes memory as a uniquely human trait. Without this faculty man would exist much like the lower animals, never reconciling the past with the present. As a result, many valuable experiences and ideas would be lost, experiences such as the past lives of the dead and the tragedies of war, and ideas such as the great mythologies, even Christianity. Without memory, one loses a source of great pleasure, valuable experience, and intellectual growth. The force of memory, therefore, often stimulates a desire for past experiences: such is the case in the desire for physical pleasure. Bloom explains that pleasures derived from experiences of beauty (whether revealed in the beauty of a landscape or the beauty of a sexual union) remain alive through the memory:

April dies; April's green lives, yet only as remembrance and desire. Beauty is immortal in the flesh because it provokes memory, that other mode of thought in poetry, or the only rival to



rhetorical substitution, which thrusts or defends against memory. Memory in turn provokes desire, activating the will. The immortality of the "body's beauty" reduces thus to the persistence of the will, if only the will-to-representation.  
(37)

Even isolated objects can serve to wake up the memory and thus stimulate one's desire for a past experience. Referring to "Bouquet of Belle Scavoir," Pack explains how no "symbol, image or memory of a woman" can provide an adequate substitute for a man in love. In this poem, Pack continues, the rose in the woman's bouquet cannot adequately fulfill the man's desires: the lover realizes that the rose is in itself an object with its own individual qualities; therefore, while the rose is a symbol of the desired woman, it is also a rose, and to look at the rose is to be reminded that the woman is not present, intensifying the pain of her absence (176). Pack receives a half credit. While the rose is a rose and does increase the lover's desire for the woman in the poem, the rose also recalls the pleasurable past--increasing the desire for future unions, but also providing momentary fulfillments by stimulating the memory to create images of the past. One's memory, holding endearing glimpses of the past, remains a great source of pleasure.

In addition to memory, Stevens reveals other inherently human traits which contribute to the satiation of the desire for pleasure; for example, the ability to perceive resemblances stands as a major consideration for him. David Galef writes that



"Stevens' sense of what constitutes resemblance is so broad as to be universal" (590), and Stevens would apparently agree, describing the relationships between things, resemblance, as making up "one of the significant components of the structure of reality" (NA 71). Stevens likes the irregularity of things, and, as he illustrates in "Connoisseur of Chaos," one can learn to appreciate chaos by looking for an inherent order among things. Resemblances activate the imagination, which in turn recognizes larger patterns of meaning in which definite perceptive orders are found.

Elaborating on this concept of the relationships between things, Stevens indicates in the essay "Three Academic Pieces" that resemblances can be between two real objects (as a cloud resembles a house), between something real and something imagined (as music resembles what is evoked by it), and between two imagined things (as in the statement "God is good," since the statement suggests concepts of both "God" and "goodness") (NA 72). Furthermore, poetry plays a role in satisfying the desire for finding these relationships: as the poet's resemblances work they touch upon and heighten reality, intensifying the partial similarity between the two objects. In objects of grand stature, the enhanced reality may create a grand reality of its own: the similarity of dignified objects becomes a reality "said to transfigure or to sublimate" the original objects. Stevens explains:

Take, for example, the resemblance between reality and any projection of it in belief or in metaphor. What is it that these two have in common? Is not the glory of the idea of any future state a relation between a present and a future glory? The brilliance of earth is the brilliance of every paradise. (NA 77)

Stevens calls poetry a means for satisfying the desire for resemblance, and in "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" he illustrates his theme. This poem is an exercise in resemblances. As the poet examines the pineapple on the table--casting the shaft of light from "that third planet," the imagination, upon the object before him--the fruit transforms. The poet intends to "Divest reality / Of its property" (CP 86), and he finds a series of resemblances:

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 spouting upward out of rocks.
5. The symbol of feasts and of oblivion . . .
6. White sky, pink sun, trees on a distant peak.
7. These 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 hawk. (CP 86)

The fruit becomes both "a pineapple on the table" and "An object the sum of its complication, seen / and unseen," and Stevens, unbridling his imagination, finds great pleasure in acknowledging these "connotations" of reality.

Part of the pleasure Stevens finds in perceiving



resemblances stems from the order these relationships identify in reality. Robert Pack adequately summarizes the process of seeing resemblances:

The architecture of reality, therefore, is seen by Stevens as a structure of infinite correspondences and resemblances, and since reality is not static, but dynamic, and since the world is still in the process of being created, it must be the function of the imagination to discover correspondences, knowing that "in some sense all things resemble each other" . . . Such a discovery is the highest satisfaction for man, according to Stevens, whose greatest desire is for order. (61)

Since the desire for resemblance relates to the desire for order, one expects to find pleasure in satisfying this desire, and as one seeks out resemblances, Stevens claims, the expectation to find pleasure is strong, and one rarely finds anything else.

As one examines the relationship between resemblance and the imagination's harmonizing effect on reality, the idea of order takes its place as a primary facilitator of pleasure. For example, Stevens' "ignorant man" in "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" allows the imagination to play upon his observations of nature, reaching, Stern explains, to "the good in what is harmonious and orderly" (136). Stern also correctly points out that though one may find pleasure in the mere observation of the natural world, a greater source of fulfillment dwells in the recognition of natural order. For Stevens, order is paramount: "for myself, the indefinite, the impersonal, atmospheres and oceans and, above all, the principle of order are precisely what I love" (OPUS

xxxii), and the pleasure one finds in acknowledging order in the chaos of reality he reiterates in poems such as "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The first poem, closing as two walkers on the beach notice how the lights on the harbor "Mastered the night and portioned out the sea," ends with an optimistic view of the future:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  
(CP 130)

Finding the order in the harbor lights is akin for the speaker in the poem to recognizing an order within himself--this temporary glimpse into the "fragrant portal" gives hope and pleasure to the speaker and his companion. Likewise, Sukenick points to the second poem to illustrate how an image can be used as a principle of order. Examining the ninth stanza of the poem,

When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles, (CP 94)

Sukenick states that "The blackbird, seen as a point of reference, defines an intelligible area among many possible but undefined intelligible areas" (11).

The resemblance between the path of Stevens' blackbird and the concentric circles illustrates the bond between the process of drawing relationships from nature and the recognition of order. Doggett correctly



explains that "resemblance is a thread of continuity from one impression to another followed by the mind seeking relationships" (Poetry of Thought 19); however, Pack emphasizes the satisfaction of the desire for harmony, realizing that order

is not merely faithfulness to sense data, but also the organization of facts in relation to each other and to the perceiver. Without this order human aspiration is not able to achieve satisfaction, since, in chaos, it would be impossible for desire to distinguish the desirable object. (62)

Two other important concepts in Stevens' pleasure principle merit discussion. The first, the idea of spontaneity, reinforces Stevens' emphasis that one should not merely observe but should acutely examine the sensual world. His "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" sheds light on the idea of spontaneity. As this work illustrates, the pleasurable experiences of life, "One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths, / One's tootings at the weddings of the soul / Occur as they occur" (CP 222). One will never know when bluish clouds will burst forth in "floods of white" or when the bluejay will suddenly swoop toward earth; one can only notice and appreciate these experiences as they occur. Spontaneously and unpredictably, the grand experiences of life occur, and perhaps only the "ignorant man," the man who will merely live, observe, and feel, will successfully mate his soul with the "sensual, pearly spouse" of life.

Also vital to Stevens' pleasure principle is

change. As Quinn suggests, one of the constants in Wallace Stevens' poetry and thought is the emphasis on change (230). For Stevens, man requires change in order to progress; as Sukenick suggests, "He was a poet who, in this sense, refused to make up his mind because he believed that change was the life of the mind" (4). One must agree. Again and again, one returns to the idea of change as essential to the continuous cycle of desire and fulfillment. Again Sukenick accurately points out Stevens' depiction of this cycle in "Banal Sojourn." In this poem, Sukenick explains, the seasons represent a pattern of fulfillment that correspond with a similar pattern of emotional fulfillment: winter represents barrenness, a time in which the individual experiences the gloom of detachment from reality; in the spring desire flares, searching for ways to unite with the objects of desire; summertime brings fulfillment, the brief interlude with satisfaction; and finally, autumn brings a season of restlessness, the decay of desire--the old objects no longer bring fulfillment; the individual impatiently awaits a change (7-8).

As a result of its importance as it relates to desire and the satisfaction of desire, Stevens applauds the pleasurable ramifications of change. Change is the cog which turns the wheels of desire; without change, one would reach a fulfillment of desire and quickly remain in a life of barrenness as the original desire



subsides over time. Without change, a life-long ennui develops, impeding desire and the possibility of future satisfaction. Joseph Riddell suggests that "Participating in change, oneself is changed; remaking the world, honoring the vital, one remakes one's mortal self, even if in a peculiar speech" (178). And Stevens, it appears, would agree:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend  
 On one another, as a man depends  
 On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.  
 Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace  
 And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Change, resemblance, memory, love, physical reality: Stevens' pleasure principle contains complex ingredients; however, even with the complex nature of this desire for the beautiful life, the poet's work succeeds in bringing his thought into focus. "Peter Quince at the Clavier" serves as one poem which adequately expresses many elements of Stevens' pleasure principle. A particularly rich work, the poem begins by suggesting a resemblance between the emotion evoked by music and the feeling evoked by the musician's desire for a lover. Completing the opening section of the poem, a further resemblance points to the similarities between the musician's desire and the desire "Waked in the elders by Susanna" (CP 90). This opening leads the reader to a reconsideration of an episode from one of the rejected books of The Bible: in the original, Suzanna is celebrated for protecting

her chastity; however, Stevens changes the focus to emphasize the erotic feelings of the elders, celebrating Suzanna's sexuality. As the old men watch Suzanna bathe "the basses of their being throb," and the erotic images Stevens employs indicate why; Suzanna obviously enjoys her bath: she searches for the "touch of springs," fantasizes, and allows the breeze to caress her on the bank--all within a breath's reach of the hiding old men. It is, in fact, the breath of one of the men upon her hand that reveals the elders, and, as one sees in the third section, Suzanna's bath finds an abrupt and shameful end.

Stevens' final stanza speculates on his own interpretation of a beauty such as Suzanna's:

Beauty is momentary in the mind--  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.  
So evenings die, in their green going,  
A wave, interminably flowing.  
So gardens die, their meek breath scenting  
The cowl of winter, done repenting.  
So maidens die, to the auroral  
Celebration of a maiden's choral.

Suzanna's music touched the bawdy strings  
Of those white elders; but, escaping,  
Left only Death's ironic scraping.  
Now, in immortality, it plays  
On the clear viol of her memory,  
And makes a constant sacrament of praise. (CP 91)

Stevens' point is clear: the beauty of Suzanna, the sensual, erotic beauty of the world, is immortal. Through mediums such as memory, resemblance, and the recognition of change, beauty remains an active force, even in the absence of the object of desire,



contributing to the continuous cycle inherent in the satisfaction of the desire for pleasure.

### The Desire for an Adequate Belief

Encompassing both the desire for an ideal truth and the desire to satisfy human needs, Stevens' most pressing desire, the need for an adequate fiction in which to believe, stems directly from the ideas discussed in chapters one and two of this study. The need for an adequate belief, unlike the desire for the perfect truth realized only through a harmonizing unity of the imagination and reality, depends on both powers--the imagination and reality--in searching for a system of belief leading not to an ideal truth but to a purposefully fictionalized "religion." As this chapter suggests, Stevens' interest in the powers of the human mind to create, destroy, and recreate beliefs becomes the cornerstone of his loosely systematized conception of supreme fictions which are adequate to satisfy intense human desires.

For a person who professes that "I am not in the least religious" (Letters 96), Stevens seems peculiarly interested in the functions of religion in a modern world. Stevens, as a poet faced with many of the same difficulties troubling poets such as Yeats and Eliot, problems that O'Connor explains as the difficulties of writing in an age of no "universally acceptable system



of belief and corresponding body of cultural symbols" (120), must, by necessity, address the issue of belief. In such an age, O'Connor continues, the poet must assure himself in his own belief, justify this belief for his readers, and also express this belief in easily understandable symbols which carry a profound effect (120). Stevens, then, feels similar to Lytton Strachey, who knows that "The understanding of heaven, would be bliss, / If anything would be bliss" (Opus 38). His is the desire of all men: to know of heaven, to be assured in one's belief, is perhaps the desire which rises above all others as a primary motivational force in the ordering and living of life. And Stevens' examination of this desire reveals a surprisingly workable system for leading man to an adequate belief, a system which refuses to look outside of life for rewards and satisfactions, opting instead to incorporate the particular needs and desires of the human mind.

Stevens approaches the problem of an adequate belief early, exploring the deficiency of popular religious dogmas in his often anthologized "Sunday Morning." Dougherty explains that in this poem Stevens was "perhaps unconsciously, replacing the supernaturalism of Christianity with a religion of reality" (101), and a brief examination of the poem leads one to agree. On this Sunday morning the female in the poem takes part in no "holy hush of ancient

sacrifice" (CP 67); instead, her day begins in a "sunny chair," where she reflects on "that old catastrophe" as she brunches on "coffee and oranges." One assumes that the catastrophe she dreams about is the death of Christ and the possibilities this event opens to her. The stage is set, and her thoughts carry her "to silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulchre" (CP 67).

Though, as Smith suggests, the images of the first stanza begin to pull the reader from the harshness of "Death, sepulchres, darkness and catastrophes" and move him toward the "more cheerful scenario" of "Sunny mornings, coffee, oranges and beautiful birds" (261), Stevens' second stanza sets up the two arguments of the poem: as Smith explains, the first argument takes issue with the Christian doctrines of immortality and the existence of God; the second supports a religion of nature, or at least recognizes the divinity in nature (255). Presenting the arguments, the poet asks, "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" If one can only experience divinity through "silent shadows and in dreams," then why indeed should she place all of her faith there? Perhaps, the poet suggests, divinity can be found elsewhere:

Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,  
 In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else  
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,  
 Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?  
 (CP 67)

Why look to some outside force or being when divinity



originates within? As the poem explains, the soul, unlikely to be satisfied by an inadequate belief, will find all the glory it needs and desires by simply opening itself to life on earth. To get rid of God is to notice the divinity in other things (Stevens says "Good!"): "All pleasures and all pains"--indeed, all life--are the measures through which divinity surfaces.

The third stanza continues this line of thought, stressing the feebleness of an inhuman God. Morris accurately describes this stanza as a tracing of "man's progressive assumption of his full humanity," adding that here one observes the woman as she poises herself between an age in which the belief in God was possible (long since past) and an age in which the heroes of mankind become fully human, an age "tantalizing in its potentiality" (48-9). Will human blood fail or become divine? Will the earth provide an adequate paradise? These are the questions the lady must consider as she wavers at the end of one era and the beginning of a new one.

Considering these essential questions in the fourth stanza, the female in the poem admits that she is content in the beauties of life; however, she asks, where is paradise when the birds are gone or when the warmth of summer gives way to the barrenness of winter? The speaker in the poem answers, claiming that the earth's beauty has outlasted all conceptions of heaven:

There is not any haunt of prophecy,  
Nor any old chimera of the grave,

Neither the golden underground, nor isle  
 Melodious, where spirits gat them home,  
 Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm  
 Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured  
 As April's green endures. (CP 68)

In part, the woman is even responsible for the enduring paradise of earth: her power of memory and her desire for the beauties of summer give life to her world.

Even so, the female claims in the fifth stanza, some "imperishable bliss" seems necessary. This, the poet counters, borders on selfish egotism. Why not accept and appreciate the fact that when one dies, one is dead? The woman should look upon death as something beautiful, a benefactor of sorts. For Stevens, a rising from the grave has no place in a new religion of the earth: "Death is the mother of beauty," and without her "sure obliteration" one feels no need to "pile new plums and pears"; without death, the pressure which stirs one to enjoy life vanishes. Death is the final fulfillment and should be hallowed, not abhorred.

The sixth stanza continues the discussion of death by poking fun at Christian conceptions of paradise. Does nothing die in paradise? The implication suggests that a true paradise could hardly exist without death: What pleasure can be found in a wave that never breaks upon the shore or a plum that never falls from the tree? The poet once again stresses that death brings life to fruition.

In the seventh stanza the poet increases his argument in favor of worship of the earth. Smith



accurately reads this portion of the poem as an appeal against the "blood and sepulchre" and in favor of the humanistic worship of the ring of chanting men, explaining that Stevens has remained constant throughout his career in his opinion that "variety and the ability to please" are essential components of an adequate belief (255). In this stanza the reader views a ring of men chanting their "boisterous devotion" to the sun. Their chant, and thus their worship, rises from within as they view the sun "Not as a god, but as a god might be," and their chapel resembles no staunch building, but rather the whole earth, where their choir resounds from the lakes, trees, and hills. The worship of the men echoes, intense and rewarding, for they realize their own mortality, knowing well "the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish and of summer morn." Like the singer on the beach in "The Idea of Order at Key West" who was "the single artificer of the world / In which she sang" (CP 98), the chanting men, whose worship stems from within, founded firmly on the sensual earth, view divinity in their native land.

The final stanza of the poem brings both arguments to conclusion. Still contemplating her own devotion, the female hears a voice crying,

"The tomb in Palestine  
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.  
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay." (CP 70)

The voice--that of Major Man, Stevens' conception of humanity fully realized--explains that Christ is dead,

no longer able to satisfy the the needs and desires of humankind. Christ, like other gods, simply "came to nothing" (Opus 206) and no man cries out for his return. As a result of this certain demolition of religious belief, one now lives in "an old chaos of the sun," that point between the death of the gods and the formulation of a new adequate belief in which to place faith. The poet's replacement? The wonderful, spontaneous, beautiful earth, the deer walking in the mountains, the quail whistling above, ripe berries, and the slow, majestic gliding of pigeons sinking "on extended wings."

Though Smith claims that Stevens' argument never explains the benefit of substituting a religion of the earth for the old religious sensibilities (259), the benefits seem quite clear. As Johnson proclaims, nature offers the essential balance "between pain and pleasure, and between death and desire" (36) that makes it more appropriate as a source of human belief; thus, Stevens' religion draws upon basic human needs and desires, issues often neglected by the orthodoxy of the church. Amid the chaos resulting from the departure of the gods, the church refused to change to continue meeting human desire; as a result, its effectiveness diminished. Morris explains:

Amidst this chaos, the church had only rigidified. New realities mocked and perverted the old ceremonies, turning the once miraculous into the freakish. The church had become a "deaf-mute": unable to sense the new realities, unable to voice the old integrations. . . . it shifted with relief



from the spirit to the letter, from the radiance of life giving fiction to the silly restrictiveness of a policeman or pride. (45-6)

Stevens maintains, then, that the old religion, no longer satisfactory, must be replaced with a belief adequate for the present age. And, because the glory of a system of belief is "the fundamental glory of men and women, who being in need of it create it" (Opus 208), the new religion must stem from man and provide for human needs and desires.

However, while Stevens cannot accept the traditional notion of God, neither will he totally reject everything that Christianity has to offer. Some of the needs once met by traditional Christianity are everlasting; as William McMahon states, These experiences should be retained: "the religious response to the eternal, to the holy, to the high, to the superhuman, to purification, to worship, to rebirth" must all be included in a new religion, circling back and preserving the best of a past institution. In short, Stevens' task is formidable: "creat[ing] something as valid as the idea of God has been" (Doud 482).

Stevens lays the groundwork for his task in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," painstakingly devising three necessary tenets for a conception of an adequate system of belief. A summary of this poem consequently provides an excellent view of his restructured and resurrected religion which will fulfill human needs and

desires.

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" consists of three groups of ten poems, each group examining an essential aspect of supreme fictions. In a surprisingly straightforward move, Stevens directly states his tenets in the subtitles of each major section of the poem. The first section, "It Must Be Abstract," accordingly elaborates on the first of the three characteristics examined in the poem. The crux of poem I lies in the line "The death of one god is the death of all" (CP 381). This death of all gods frees the human imagination, allowing it to consider other possibilities; Giomo expresses the importance of this loss of the gods:

The annihilation of God is thus the starting point in Stevens' system of thought as well as in his poetry; it is actually a human gift in disguise, placing the freedom of resolution in the individual consciousness of man. Although this spiritual vacuum releases man into an uncertain present and an unknown future, it empowers his imaginative self, so that the principle of order resides within, rather than being imposed from without. (36)

"The loss of faith is growth," Stevens muses (Opus 172), and this death of the gods presents the necessary ground work to acknowledging a new fiction. As a result of the disappearance of former deities, one must begin to think in abstractions and carry both himself and the world into these abstractions. Objects which readily represent our world, such as the mighty sun, must be considered beyond their objectivity: one must see past the reality of the sun and view the idea of



"sun," not giving credit to one great mind for the invention of this idea and, therefore, not trying to conceptualize a master or great omnipotent mind.

Johnson elaborates:

Once the poet has stripped his imagination of its own inventions--myths, value systems, conceptions of the divine--the imagination will conceive nature, the sun, not as Phoebe, its personification, but as itself. Although it must remain an image in the mind, it is also recognized as alien, 'remote'; its very inconceivability is conceived in the mind. Once seen without its illusions, nature reveals its own mythic truths, its 'fictive covering,' the supreme fiction. (32)

Viewed as such, absent from man and his invented images, the sun is a clear, pure idea. Let the gods remain dead; the sun, and man's ability to see the sun as a pure idea, has persisted through the inventions and annihilations of many gods.

In the second poem, Stevens concedes the natural tendency to be drawn toward the first idea, an idea as abstract as the invention of the sun. However, to reach an end in the search is to reach a stifling ennui. The truth must be allusive, abstract, and thus continue to stimulate human interest. Stevens focuses on the desire to possess what one does not have, in this case the truth, the idea of the invention of the sun. Alluding to the cyclical pattern of desire and fulfillment inherent in the changing seasons, Stevens stresses that the same ancient process which mandates seasonal change feeds human aspiration as well.

Poem III draws a parallel between the imagination and the necessity of inventing an abstract fiction. In

this stanza, the poet explains that poetry calls upon the power of the imagination and thus purifies all it dwells upon. Through poetry, an imaginative medium, one may sometimes approach the first abstraction and sense a beginning unsoiled by false fictions.

Unimpeded by the weight of apparent reality, one also views the unsoiled end, seeing, then, both poles, the original purity of the first truth and the many manifestations still present. The truth of these manifestations, one's own imagination, is an immaculate power. The final nine lines illustrate this power: the sights and sounds of the world at night, the sounds of a wood-dove, and the sounds of the ocean waves seem different, yet the imagination finds similarities in all three. The "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how" of the imagined Arabian, the "hoobla-hoo" of the wood-dove, and the "howls-hoo" of the ocean's rising and falling: these phrases seem nonsensical, but the power of the imagination groups them together, finding resemblances during the act of perception.

Stevens suggests in poem IV that an abstract fiction would necessarily precede man's existence. Earth, the first idea, and even the clouds existed in form before any man came along to proclaim their existence; even more important, their existence was equal to the magnitude of their present existence. The world, however, does not satisfy man's desire merely because it exists. In fact, the reality of the world



is harsh, and without a means of dealing with the pressures of this reality man feels alienated. Thus the poem springs (the poem which Stevens refers to not only as an act of creating art, but also a way of life), allowing the imagination to envelop the world in particular perceptions: the very air becomes a board on which one might carve his own images to believe, and on these boards of light and dark, the feeble images show the meanings of one's perceptions of the world of reality.

Stevens will not let just any perception suffice, however, and poem V testifies to the dismal situation of those who do not make full use of their imaginative powers to explore the possibilities of life. The world provides grand experiences, illustrated by powerful images of natural adjustment to reality represented by the defiant lion, the magnificent elephant, and the ponderous bear. Yet, as the acute observer recognizes, most of society, "unable to find a proper voice" (Beckett 143), and guided by forces outside of their own imagination, stifle the possibilities--"lash[ing] the lion, / Caparison[ing] elephants, teach[ing] bears to juggle" (CP 385).

In contrast to the preceding poem, poem VI suggests that an imagination well-used can leave one satisfied. Franz Halz is a landscape painter, and just as his brush makes changes upon his landscapes, so the imagination can change the earth's landscape:

transformed through the imagination, even the fragrance of the magnolias seem to approach closer to the ideal. One constantly revises his perceptions of the reality of the world by continually combining and contrasting the seen and unseen, the visible and the invisible, the imaginative ideal and the reality seen by the reason. This evaluation is beneficial: the weather--even the mere air--is an abstraction, yet, as in the case of the air, the abstraction is solidified by the knowledge of its presence. Likewise with man: thought is an abstraction, yet we are certain of its effect on our world.

Though the reason provides a necessary balance with imagination, poem VII suggests that sometimes one pushes the reason to the side for a while and refreshes himself with a pure sense of nature. During these times a supreme being is not needed to reveal the truth. Rather, the truth shows itself through one's consideration of the objects of daily life. Natural experiences contain an inherent excellence based on a sense of balance nearing perfection. These balances, however, cannot be created by man; they occur as love occurs between a man and a woman, and man should strive to recognize this balance because glimpses of the truth may appear during moments of intense awareness.

Poem VIII suggests a relationship between the previous two poems by explaining that any man may approach the first idea through the proper blend of an



imaginative perception of the world and intellectual thought. "The first idea is an imagined thing," Stevens proclaims, and every man contributes to the search of both the truth and the thinker of the truth, Major Man. One of Stevens' strongest abstractions, this image of man as the thinker of the first idea asserts Stevens' conviction that a new fiction must be founded firmly within man's own needs and desires.

In poem IX Stevens further describes Major Man. The sentimental raving and lauding of the sense to see into something that is not actually there are natural characteristics of the process of raising something to the status of a god. The reason plays no part in this process, and Major Man does not originate in this manner. Free from excess sentimentality and partly a product of the reason's intense study, he is all thought; he is all men; he is all that is in the past. However, Major Man is not to be given an image; he is not to undergo an apotheosis. Man will know him without the falsification of concrete form. He is most real when felt in the heart.

In the final poem of this first third of the work, Major Man surfaces as an illustration of an abstract fiction adequate to satisfy human needs. Major Man represents the ideal status of man, which is the major abstraction, and he represents this best as an abstraction himself: more real in principle than in form, Major Man contains the greatest aspects of all

men. He is, then, the cumulation of every individual, the imaginative common person who rises above the individual; consequently, in this abstract fiction of common man one finds an adequate belief--not for any sentimental consolation, but as just one possible end to the search.

The first tenet for a belief adequate in fulfilling human desire and need claims that a fiction must be abstract; the second major division of this poem, however, exclaims that an adequate supreme fiction must also change. Life revolves around change, and because belief must focus on life, it too must change. In poem I, Stevens emphasizes change as essential to a satisfying life. Summarizing this poem, the reader finds that violets arrive every year with the same odor. Likewise, doves and bees return at their usual time, and young girls decorate their hair with flowers, just as their mothers did and their daughters will do. As winter changes to spring, the scenery changes from barrenness to liveliness, filled with violets, dove, bees, and young girls: this seasonal change illustrates the change inherent in life. All things that do not change are inconstancies in this universe of constant change; thus, man feels a need for change, and dissatisfaction often springs from things which remain the same: as with an erotic perfume long accustomed to, the effect is blunted when one knows what to expect.



The order of the world, then, is change, as poems II and III apparently suggest. Poem II throws a back-handed slap at man-induced systems of order--such as the political system--that tries to supersede the natural course of nature. In a similar fashion, poem III also encourages change by illustrating the consequences of time. Though the image of the mighty general in the poem has been preserved in bronze, the values he represents no longer carry much force. The general seems less in the minds of modern men in comparison to how he seemed to his own age. Now, the lawyer doubts whether such a man could have really existed; however, as the doctor points out, he merely belongs to another time.

Continuing this examination of change, poem IV equates change and the harmonious balance of opposites: one would never be content with constant morning, continual silence, or never-ending spring. Pleasure grows from the changes that occur in life: morning breaking from night, music bursting upon silence, and spring following winter. The influence of change is positive, and man desires this influence.

The following poem, like Stevens' fiction, is abstract. While man's institutions are subject to decay, the mind exists in a higher plane, the desirable mountain-like island with banana trees. The perceptions of this higher plane change, and this change, along with its consequences in this world, adds vitality to

life. In contrast, poem VI describes a scene void of the imaginative power necessary to continue to evaluate the real against the ideal. In this poem the sparrow, wren, jay, and robin all sing in a glade their continuous "granite monotony" (CP 394). This combination of song strikes one as the song of an idiot, yet with so many taking part, the many songs rise like one great production--one great voice singing one great song. However, the song never changes, and while the song brings to mind an imagined singer, it is a singer who merely sees and never closes his eye to dream. This minstrel lacks something--the imagination and thus change.

The following poem returns to the emphasis of "Sunday Morning":

After a lustre of the moon, we say  
 We have not the need of any paradise,  
 We have not the need of any seducing hymn.  
 (CP 394)

Many worthy passions stir in the earth, passions that are always available to one who will seek them. Because of our "earthy birth" these pleasures, easy and accessible, heighten existence, yet without change, our bliss would quickly turn to eternal ennui.

The next poem is difficult; however, one might agree with Beckett, who states that

Here, in the most haunting form that Stevens ever found for it, is, again, the central dilemma of 'Notes', the poet's temptation to name directly something of which it is only certain that it cannot be named directly, and the poet's victory over this temptation. (153)



In poem IX the reader examines the role of the poet as the acute observer of man and earth. His work springs from the communal; he is the voice that rises above the accumulating murmurings of the masses. As a result of his acute nature, the poet conceives the image of Major Man on the bench in poem X: sitting near a lake, the man sees things which seem unreal, and the imagination changes the objects he sees; as he realizes that the renewals of nature "must be met by human renewals" (Beckett 159), the swans become seraphs and saints. In seeing these objects and transforming them in his mind, Major Man illustrates a will to change: the freshness of the world resides in change; therefore, the sensible man invites the one constant, the assurance of change.

"It Must Give Pleasure" (CP 398) is Stevens' final tenet for maintaining an adequate belief, and in the first poem of this final part of the poem the reader finds the ease with which pleasure may be sought. To sing joyously, to join one's voice with the one great voice of a multitude of singers is a natural and joyful act; in fact, to join with the common voice thrusts one to a higher plane. From this seemingly irrational moment of pure joy one recognizes that bliss is beyond the rational; perceiving and feeling the experience, one waits until later to let the reason weigh the feeling.

The act of remembering provides another experience

particularly pleasurable for humans. Memory, recalling things which are dear, allows one to review and re-experience the past, and thus is valuable in its influence on the present: the woman at the window in poem II does not change what she sees through her imagination; the "argentines" are not "cold silver" and the "clouds" are not "foamy waves." The blossoms carry no sexual meaning, and in the heat of the summer night, she does not dream. This woman merely remembers, and is sufficiently fulfilled.

Poem III describes the fate of a belief which ceases to sufficiently satisfy the believer's desire for pleasure. The stone-faced idol (stone-faced, perhaps, to illustrate the religion's inability to change in order to meet the desires of its followers) once provided an aged and dignified belief to a people. Now, however, the idol stands neglected, "a little rusty, a little rouged," and no longer acts as the divine image which once satisfied the sheperds and children who scattered flowers in worship. The poet here implies that objects which bring pleasure in one age cannot necessarily satisfy a new age of seekers.

Pleasure in the physical earth receives attention in the following poem, emphasized by the marriage ceremony which serves as a metaphor for man's coming to terms with his environment: the marriage of the Captain and Bawda goes well because of the love shared for the wedding place, the physical world. In



contrast, poem V illustrates a situation of complete lack of pleasure. Morris links the Canon Aspirin's sister with other "ordinary women" in Stevens' "High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "A Thought Revolved," noting that each reflects characteristics which Stevens attributes to the "church and its sycophants":

dreary asceticism, mechanical ritualism,  
 Puritanical primness, and an attenuated  
 ghostliness which makes them seem to drift rather  
 than stride, to exist rather than live. (51)

Indeed, the Canon Aspirin's sister seems to fit the mold. Staunchly protecting her children from the world and their dreams, she provides a life which is barely any life at all; the only relief, the only small pleasure, is sleep. Though the Canon Aspirin sees his sister's plight as "sensible ecstasy" during the day, at night, when the regularity of day has passed, the Canon views his sister's world differently, as poem VI suggests. At night, his learning put aside, the true material of his mind (that which he does not readily see or hear) comes to the surface. In his dream, he has wings, and he descends to the children's beds; in his dream, in this irrational realm, he realizes the need for more in the lives of these children and their mother.

Poem VII changes the emphasis to encompass the discovery of a supreme fiction. The poet stresses that one must discover and not impose order upon the world. One may easily think of an order and impose it upon existence, but the only way to the truth requires an

act of perceiving what has always been, much as the seasons have always been. By discovery, tracing the processes of life back to their origins, one finds a supreme fiction:

The real will from its crude compoundings come,  
 Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,  
 Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,  
 To be stripped of every fiction except one,  
 The fiction of an absolute. (CP 404)

Continuing this line of thought, the poet examines two possibilities of belief in poem VIII. The poem first asks, "Can one be satisfied by creating his own fiction, neglecting the search for a true, supreme fiction?" On the other hand, the poet also queries, can one forget invented images of glory and obtain fulfillment from "an hour / Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have / No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand," from a "majesty [which] is a mirror of the self" (CP 404-5)? The answer seems to suggest that yes, one can be happy with a belief that stems from within with no outside influence to impose upon the individual.

The next poem reinforces the idea that pleasure stems from within the self. Because of his ability to create major fictions, man has the power of both men and angels--the power to originate, to perceive, and to enjoy the good. And virtually anything "final in itself" can be a good: the songs of birds, for example. The pleasure alone can be a thing final in



itself, as can the search for the good; in fact, as men at the table in the wood take pleasure from a falling leaf, they illustrate that experience itself constitutes a final thing and, therefore, a good.

Stevens marks the culmination of all three major parts of the poem in poem X. The poet points out that a supreme fiction, as a change not quite complete, continually evolves. Although the rational mind wants to evoke a quick change, wants to impose some name or form upon the fiction, the truth evades such rational intent. An adequate fiction remains abstract, illiciting pleasure only as long as it remains an "irrational distortion" resulting from feeling. Thus, the reader understands what the supreme fiction must be: abstract, willing to change, and pleasurable. Anything less (or more) means the death of belief.

To complete his poem, Stevens attaches an explanation of his ability to suggest supreme fictions. In this final poem, Stevens elaborates upon the "war between the mind and sky," the ability to make sense of the world of reality through the transforming imagination. The poet's work, Stevens explains, is equivalent to the battle each individual must face as reality exerts its pressure. However, it is the poet, the keen observer, who recognizes and records the important battles in the war; it is the poet who points to the heroes, the supreme fictions, rising above the chaos.

Through the course of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the devotion to the powers of human desire accumulate into a system of belief for Stevens. As chapter one of this study indicated, the human mind acts upon the world of reality to create a world in which man resides as the center; thus, man also retains the ability to create fictions of belief. O'Connor states that Stevens felt a necessity for order in the world of reality; however, "order is not possible . . . if there is no large, controlling and informing belief" (94). Vendler also agrees that Stevens ordains man with the ability to create abstract fictions of belief:

Anyone who singles out, by desire, some one man or woman as a singular valued object, creates by that act a fiction, an idealized image in which desire finds, thinks to find, its satisfaction. Anyone who has ever believed in a cause or in a God creates in the same way an idealized image--the perfect state, the Messiah, Paradise. . . . (29)

Man can create beliefs, yet, Stevens explains, no belief will satisfy forever. Reality does not remain constant in the world where "A great disorder is an order" (CP 215), and because realities change, the beliefs man creates must also change. A belief which does not allow for new desires, new needs, and new orders fails to fulfill, and consequently its glory fades. This failure, though, takes its place as a necessary downswing of the cycle, and Giomo explains that a belief's value rests chiefly in its death:

The failure of a fictive thing, though evoking despair over the insignificance and futility of human effort, is at the same time the necessity of poetic existence. Its value lies precisely in



death, a requisite for freedom. . . . Freedom enables the imagination to regularly purge itself of its past so as to creatively apprehend the immediate presence of reality. (44)

The poet's role, continues Giomo, is to generously suggest possibly adequate fictions through an awakening provided by the poem (44), and this is where Stevens' system comes to its opened end. Stevens offers his supreme fictions as suggestions only,<sup>4</sup> opting instead for providing "notes" toward a framework for the creation of an adequate belief for present-day man. In addition to the guidelines provided in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" ("It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," and "It Must Give Pleasure"), a new belief cannot totally disregard the past; through memory, one must recycle the ideas of the past in order to incorporate the things which satisfy never-ending desires and needs. Morris accurately points out that while the Supreme Fiction "overthrew the Supreme Being, it assumed many of the accoutrements of traditional religion" (4).

Finally Stevens maintains that, in addition to gaining from the past, a new fiction must be founded on a firm human base. Traditional religions have failed, ignoring important human experiences: by failing to recognize the divinity of nature, the divinity of sexual union, and the freedom of individual thought, religions such as Christianity have faded from importance, leaving a void to be filled by the new creations of human imagination. Stevens "system"

points to a new theology, including essential experiences of the earth to satisfy man's intellectual, sensual, and spiritual desires.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Johnson also points out that Stevens places a higher value on the imagination as metaphysics than on the imaginative power to create art, adding that the use of the imagination to "penetrate life" is something done too unconsciously (30).

<sup>2</sup>Though Johnson appears to identify two distinct realities, it would appear more accurate to call "alien" a reality that has not been acted upon by the imagination and "tangible" the same reality after it has been "transformed" by the imagination. In any event, this type of elemental reduction of such a complex action seems simplistic.

<sup>3</sup>Given the emphasis Stevens places on the role of the poet, or man of imagination, it is interesting to examine his sketch of the figure of the poet:

- 1) The poet must have lived the last two thousand years and have instructed himself all along.
- 2) He will wonder at the huge imaginations of the dead of all ages and all places (imagination "in which what is remote becomes clear and what is dead lives with an intensity beyond any experience in life.")
- 3) His own measure as a poet will be his own ability to abstract himself and reality by placing them within his imagination.
- 4) He will realize that he cannot be "too noble of a rider."
- 5) He will find it necessary to make a choice regarding the imagination and reality, and he will realize that the only choice is that they are interdependent, equal, and inseparable.
- 6) He will have his own meaning for reality. (Reality is not the external scene but the life that is lived within it; it can be taken in three senses: the reality that is taken for granted, that is latent, and on the whole ignored; the reality that has ceased to be indifferent--a "vital reality," a reality that is tense, demanding action; and violent reality--this is the present state and represents the pressure of reality: physically violent for many and spiritually violent for all.)
- 7) The poet must be capable of resisting this last degree of the pressure of reality (knowing this present degree will become deadlier tomorrow).

<sup>4</sup>Recognizing one Supreme Fiction poses a problem for the reader of Stevens, and the reason probably stems from Stevens' own unwillingness to provide one absolute belief. Stevens, not unlike T. S. Eliot, realizes that the stability of the world, the stability of value and culture, has been based on religion. While Eliot suggests a return to the strong values of traditional religions, Stevens approves a move to replace the older religions with something new, something equally good or better. Though he may not suggest the adequate substitute, he does provide possibilities, however, and at least five possible Supreme Fictions gain the most attention:

- 1) **Nature** -- Especially in Harmonium, Stevens' praise of nature seems to near worship. Hassan writes that "In the end . . . Stevens' fictions dwell poetically in the earth" (6), and at times this does seem to be the case.
- 2) **Imagination** -- Morris states that for Stevens the imagination is "what men pretend God to be: the creating, ruling, and restoring force . . ." (109-10). An end in itself which helps man to order his world, the imagination could assume the role of deity.
- 3) **Poetry (Art)** -- In "High-Toned Old Christian Woman" Stevens proclaims that "Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame" (CP 59), and in his "Adagia" he often supports this view: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place in life's redemption" (OPUS 158), and:

The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but from what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give. (OPUS 159)

- 4) **Major Man** -- Stevens' Christ-like figure, Major Man is "an expression of man as he may come to be" (Morris 126). Stemming from the highest imaginings of the human mind, Major Man encompasses all that is human; rising above generations of men, Major Man becomes, for Stevens, a primary abstraction of perfected humanity. Major Man provides one of Stevens' better options for an obvious fiction which may replace outdated beliefs.
- 5) **The Search** -- One might suggest that Stevens views the search for an adequate belief as a final end itself. As ages and realities change, so must the way one perceives the world and satisfies desires. This process of change never ends, interpreting the past while preparing for the present and



future, and might provide the only absolute belief available for man:

If ever the search for a tranquil belief should  
end,  
The future might stop emerging out of the past,  
Out of what is full of us; yet the search  
And the future emerging out of us seem to be one.  
(CP 151)

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