WALLACE STEVENS AND THE ROCK

Not Ideas about Nobility
but the Thing Itself

Union of the weakest develops strength
Not wisdom. Can all men, together, avenge
One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?
But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow.

But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow. This is how Stevens concludes "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," the longest piece in Ideas of Order (1936), his second collection of poems. An icy pronouncement, this declaration suggests the shape and strategy of the hero that emerges eighteen years later in Stevens' last book of poems, The Rock. As prophecy, these lines promise more than Stevens could ever deliver or later desired: that the master builder construct a citadel of belief for the modern age. This would have been a supreme fiction, an act of defiant will. But what the hero could not do for Western culture, Stevens learned in the years between Ideas of Order and The Rock, a man could do for himself in a different mood, a variant key. It comes to this: the wise man faces mortality, the human condition (or what is perhaps the same thing for Stevens, the death of belief), on its own ground: alone, old, he makes his home in the wasteland, in winter, in the extreme of the unknown. By facing death and living within it, not fighting it, the hero, the "impossible possible philosophers' man," develops what in old age Stevens understood as wisdom. Not power, but an acceptance of the possibility of congruence between a man's meditative life and the inhuman meditation of the world ("the leaves that have fallen in autumn"). The hero of The Rock—and for the abstract-minded Stevens this is the highest achievement—is no longer a theoretical construct or more than human. He is a man who does not take possession of the world by intellectual storm, the act of the mind, but rather lives in harmony with it.

If the concluding lines of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"
point toward what Stevens achieves in his last book of poems, they also reveal what he could never accept. Unlike Eliot, Pound, or Williams, Stevens was never passionately concerned with the quest for community. In the *Pisan Cantos*, the union of the weakest—the social bond forged by imprisonment—does foster wisdom. But for Pound, wisdom entails affection and humility, personal virtues, ultimately social virtues, which Stevens never believed essential to the hero. Of the four Moderns considered here, Stevens was the only one who never thought in terms of an ideal society or a utopia, but only in terms of a hero, *the* hero, the solitary mind. Only the Stevens hero stands alone and apart. Stevens posed questions of culture, certainly, but in epistemological, not political or social, terms. And it is perhaps as a result of this that we find his work, so elegant, so perfect, so deeply satisfying, yet so often chilly and curiously removed from the problems of twentieth-century industrial society. Because Stevens basically ignored such questions, in this chapter I look more closely at the individual poems. In order to put the achievement of *The Rock* in perspective, I begin by looking at Stevens’ earlier versions of the hero and then turn to his treatment of death in earlier poems.

### 1. CONCEPT ART: ABSTRACTION AS HERO

The major abstraction is the idea of man  
And major man is its exponent, abler  
In the abstract than in his singular,  

More fecund as principle than particle  
“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”

As we have seen in the last lines of “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,” at that point in his life Stevens wished to taunt death and the “search for a tranquil belief” called for earlier in the poem. This contradiction in the poem is contained within its last line. We expect it to read: “The wise man builds his city in snow,” and in our misreading we uncover the tension between the figure of the hero as youthful avenger and Stevens’ well-kept, persistent desire for the ascetic wisdom of tranquility. This contradiction haunts much of Stevens’ work until *The Rock*. 
We understand, only in retrospect possibly, that his hero was always too young, too vigorously grandiose, too abstract, or too barbarous for Stevens' basically peaceful purposes. The problem was this. He recognized, as we all know too well (this has become a banality of criticism, a truth difficult to revive), that we live in an era of man, not of gods, and he believed that we need an image of man in which to locate belief. But until The Rock, Stevens refused to accept an image of a man in the world as hero. In mixing the proportions between reality and the imagination, Stevens continually erred on the side of the imagination. Over and over he repeated the mistake he had cautioned against in "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War"—that the hero "be not conceived, being real."

His images of the hero were fabrications, projections, extrapolations, abstractions beyond man, preposterous shimmers or muscular giants, bare constructions in language that we certainly (to use Stevens' terms) do not recognize, much less realize, respond to, or accept. His art was conceptual; the idea, and the problem it reflected, often had more interest than the thing itself; the illustration of the definition was often less convincing than the formulation of the definition. For the irresistible transcendental pull was there. But this is not an Emersonian transcendentalism. It is the courage, hubris, and naivete of a radical humanism. As Stevens put it in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," he desired something "beyond us, yet ourselves." Beyond. Yet even in this poem, one of the earliest to deal with the hero, the emphasis is on reality, on the hero as a means by which to reach man, a hero who could and would have been made of man, if possible:

I cannot bring a world quite round,
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye
and bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man.

After "The Man with the Blue Guitar," however, the hero becomes even less man and more god.
Stevens revealed his "prejudices" against man in a letter about "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." "The trouble with humanism," he wrote in 1943, "is that man as God remains man, but there is an extension of man, the leaner being, in fiction, a possibly more than human human, a composite human." This is both a nostalgic notion of humanism and a desire for something more: the postulate that "man is god" is not enough, and that itself was one of our great fictions. In his extravagant optimism and equally radical doubt, Stevens wished to be the American Mallarmé, the creator of something beyond the real. But he also wanted the hero to be part of the real, not separate and autonomous from it. He wanted the best of these two possible worlds—both reality and the imagination—and this, we realize, was not possible. He wanted both "an extension of reality," as he put it in a slightly earlier letter, and a fiction, not the thing itself.

Thus his early images of the hero are equivalent to theoretical propositions. In "Asides on the Oboe" (the title itself suggests that the hero will be off center), he proposed the dewy "impossible possible philosophers' man" and in "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," the dreamy eminence of dark blue glass, the shadowed mountain with muscular shoulders and luminous flesh. And there is also the "large-sculptured, platonic person, free from time" in "The Pure Good of Theory," the science-fiction meta-men in "The Bouquet," and the "still angelic" giant assembled part by part on the horizon:

Here, then, is an abstraction given head,
A giant on the horizon, given arms,
A massive body and long legs, stretched out,
A definition with an illustration, not
Too exactly labelled, a large among the smalls
Of it, a close, parental magnitude,
At the center on the horizon, concentrum, grave
And prodigious person, patron of origins.

"A Primitive Like an Orb"

Stevens was as fancifully lavish in his period of the imagination as he was in the Harmonium period of reality, as we have come to call it. All these figures of the hero are constructions of the act of the mind, the
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will of the imagination, the determination of theory. None of them yielded the satisfactions of belief; they only testified to the desire of the mind for what was missing, absent.

Stevens was aware of this, of course. In more than one poem he acknowledges that these conceptions of the hero—these heroic conceptions—are ephemeral and unstable. In “A Thought Revolved,” for example, the poet’s search for the leader who will reconcile all opposites is qualified by an overly determined rhetorical and romantic catalogue of attributes:

The pine, the pillar and the priest,
The voice, the book, the hidden well,
The faster’s feast and heavy-fruitied star,
The father, the beater of the rigid drums,

He that at midnight touches the guitar,
The solitude, the barrier, the Pole
In Paris, celui qui chante et pleure,
Winter devising summer in its breast,

Summer assaulted, thundering, illumed,
Shelter yet thrower of the summer spear
With all his attributes no god but man
Of men whose heaven is in themselves.

We know that it will not work: to devise summer in the midst of winter is a contrivance of the mind, the inbred turning of thought. As Stevens further implies in the poem, this language is the product of wish-fulfillment, longed for by the poet, just as the braceletted, expiring lady of the poem’s first section yearns to float off to death on the tranquilizers of Christianity.

In a much misunderstood poem which appears at the end of Parts of a World (1942), “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” Stevens also calls into doubt the two major ideas (are they figures really?) of the hero which he presents: the barbarous hero, like Xenophon, who captures the unthinking allegiance of the wartime masses, and the meditative hero who abstracts himself from war. “Examination of the Hero” (the word “examination” implies a clinical inspection of appropriate qualifications, a rigorous investigation into the symptoms of
the hero, who, we read again, we are to "Devise, devise") is best understood when read with "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," an essay also published in 1942. In both pieces, Stevens asserts that nobility is a feeling, a force, and cannot be grasped in terms of an image or person (how far we are from Eliot's notion of an objective correlative). By this, however, Stevens does not mean that there cannot be an appropriate embodiment of nobility; he understands intellectual history well enough to know that every age has its heroes and that they are real heroes for their time only. But given the unthinkable brutality of the Second World War, Stevens feared it was impossible for a man, a hero, to be adequate to his time. As described in the essay, the hero would be potent and vital, possess authority, and represent an equilibrium between the imagination and reality (we are not surprised to learn that at this point in his life, the equilibrium favored the imagination).

If Stevens could do no more than list qualities in "The Noble Rider," in "Examination of the Hero" he scrutinizes the masses cheering worn-out images of nobility, worshipping the power, not the authority, of a brutish emblem of the "hero," which is larger than human but less than civilized:

If the hero is not a person, the emblem
Of him, even if Xenophon, seems
To stand taller than a person stands, has
A wider brow, large and less human
Eyes and bruted ears: the man-like body
Of a primitive.

From this profanity, which turns into a macabre frivolity ("the tigers / In trombones roaring for the children"), the uncommon man, the scholar and poet, withdraws, preserving his freedom by abstracting himself from the unreal world of war heroes into a mental space where, as Stevens puts it in "A Thought Revolved," he can walk freely and sing the idea of the highest man. To use the terms in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the uncommon man resists the pressure of reality with an equal and opposite force of the imagination.

Although this idea is a monumental and noble one, the meditative hero limned in the poem is indulgent. In sections XIV and XV of
"Examination," Stevens heralds this hero and, just as in "A Thought Revolved," subverts his credibility through outrageous rhetoric, the glamorous flourishes which precede him:

A thousand crystals' chiming voices,
Like the shiddow-shaddow of lights revolving
To momentary ones, are blended,
In hymns, through iridescent changes,
Of the apprehending of the hero.

And in the next section, we learn that so overwhelming is the meditative bliss of the poet (and his pastime is a mere domestic one—to study "the paper / On the wall, the lemons on the table") that the "highest man" ("self of the hero, the solar single, / Man-sun, man-moon, man-earth, man-ocean"—this is too much) emerges from it strong enough to devise the "man-man." A presumptuous result, too quickly achieved. Like Xenophon, this hero does not command our respect. In the midst of war, his meditations on wallpaper or the "syllable fa" seem frivolous also. His withdrawal, his abstraction, his preoccupation with "the petty gildings on February" seem inexcusable distractions, which have taken him too far from the reality of war.

Stevens is right to say earlier in the poem:

The hero is a feeling, a man seen
As if the eye was an emotion,
As if in seeing we saw our feeling
In the object seen and saved that mystic
Against the sight, the penetrating,
Pure eye. Instead of allegory,
We have and are the man, capable
Of his brave quickenings, the human
Accelerations that seem inhuman.

Neither Xenophon nor the solipsistic poet (who has "nothing higher / Than himself, his self...") are capable of quickening us to bravery. The figures collapse to allegories. The meditation fades. In the last section of the poem, Stevens calls in the seasons and nostalgia, the reality principle on the one hand and the "truth" of the past on the other:
Each false thing ends. The bouquet of summer
Turns blue and on its empty table
It is stale and the water is discolored.
True autumn stands then in the doorway.
After the hero, the familiar
Man makes the hero artificial.
But was the summer false? The hero?

The dazzling hero did exist, Stevens insists, but only for a moment. But is the appearance of the hero like the moment "of flickering mobility," which astute critics of Stevens read as the way he reconciles the imagination and reality, thereby creating a poetry of being? I do not think so. First, it is not the reality of experience which is questioned (that is given), but the possibility of belief. Belief entails continuity, and Stevens' belief is not sustained and neither is ours. For even if we assume that the meditative hero of "Examination," the blue Chocorua, or the horizontal giant work for a moment—as long as their language lives while we read their poems—they do not give us what Stevens required of poetry in an age of disbelief: the "satisfactions of belief."

I would argue further that these heroic images of the hero do not in fact work, even for a moment; they are theoretical constructions, not moments of perception. No, the summer was not false, but the analogy between the eternal return of the seasons and the life of the hero is false. Stevens' questions are both plaintive and shrill: "But was the summer false? The hero?" We have not yet encountered in the poem the dazzling hero of whom he speaks, and the poem's last lines, which aim to conflate the hero with summer, are overdressed, in bad taste:

Summer, jangling the savagest diamonds and
Dressed in its azure-doubled crimsons,
May truly bear its heroic fortunes
For the large, the solitary figure.

Why do these fabrications of the hero not work? Because, ironically, Stevens believed too much in the radical ability of man's imagination to create full-blown a set of myths by which to live. Stevens understood that the hero had to be transparent (we find this image throughout
his work), but he did not grasp the real reasons why. For him the hero had to be beyond reality, more than man, and yet reflect reality, act as a glass through which reality could be more clearly and accurately seen.

An age does not perceive its own myths as "myth," as beyond reality, but as a part of reality; they are perceived not as fiction but as actuality. As Eliot put it, "Understanding involves an area more extensive than that of which one can be conscious; one cannot be outside and inside at the same time." The Greek gods were not painted fragments of the imagination or mere mythology to the Greeks, but part of the living structure of their world. In every age there is a fiction which fits, a fiction which we believe not as fiction but as truth. Thus Stevens was asking the impossible when he required that we consent to his fictions of the hero as both fiction and reality. Here I am not suggesting that we should not act with courage of mind, as if something were possible when we know full well it is not. But Stevens' images of the hero do not allow us to suspend even a fraction of that disbelief. Until The Rock, his poetry of the hero fails, although his poetics do not. But it is not only a question of poetic failure. It is also a symptom of the twentieth-century obsession with, and over-evaluation of, doubt. What Stevens did not understand is that to succeed the hero had to be transparent not because the idea of him is abstract or because he reflects reality, but because he must be indistinguishable from reality, part of it. This demands a passion, perhaps a blind passion, which Stevens did not possess.

Myths think themselves out through men and without men's knowledge, although we strive to see our historical position as clearly as we can. And similarly, the ultimate realization of the Stevens hero thought itself out through Stevens' poems without his conscious knowledge.

Michel Benamou has read the body of Stevens' work in terms of the Jungian model of individuation, arguing that the world of reality in Harmonium corresponds to the personality's domination by the forces of the unconscious (the feminine principle, the earth), that the world of imagination in Parts of a World corresponds to the personality's domination by the forces of the conscious (the masculine hero, the intellect, the virile hero), and, finally, that the union of the two in later poems
corresponds to the mature self. This third stage is characterized neither by a lavish attachment to the world of reality, nor by the ascetic, heroic, masculine act of the mind, but instead by a mode of being that tempers the two impulses, which, I would argue, are only facets of the same inclination: a tenacity of mind. I agree with Helen Vendler’s suggestion that in his earlier poems, Stevens seems to have “felt obliged to pretend an instinct for the fertility of the earth, when his instinct was for its austerities and dilapidations.” In Harmonium Stevens seems to will himself to embrace the “green vine angering for life,” to resolve against his nature to lead a nomadic life. The poems of Harmonium do not so much represent the forces of the unconscious as they do Stevens’ intense discipline; they are another form of the rigorous act of the mind.

Toward the end of his life and in his later poems, the “normality of the normal” and “pure being” replace, displace, the act of the mind. The pure good of theory is challenged. As Stevens explained in a letter in early 1953:

I wanted to stay in bed and make for myself a week-end world far more extraordinary than the one that most people make for themselves. But the habitual, customary, has become, at my age, such a pleasure in itself that it is coming to be that that pleasure is at least as great as any. It is a large part of the normality of the normal. And, I suppose, that projecting this idea to its ultimate extension, the time will arrive when just to be will take in everything without the least doing since even the least doing is irrelevant to pure being.

Just to be will yield everything, “take in everything”; “doing is irrelevant.” By 1954 the Stevens hero is older and wiser. He no longer takes up arms against reality and no longer is figured as beyond reality.

This hero is foreshadowed in “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” in which the mind and the text of the world become one:

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:  
The access of perfection to the page.

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

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself  
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.
But the text still mediates the world. In "Credences of Summer," however, the "old man" stands at the center (which is not the center, but a center which has been posited in the mind's eye) and sees not ideas about the thing, but the thing itself. Or more accurately, the old man is the thing itself:

It is the old man standing on the tower,
Who reads no book. His ruddy ancientness
Absorbs the ruddy summer and is appeased,
By an understanding that fulfills his age,
By a feeling capable of nothing more.

The text is no longer necessary. He reads no book. Interpretation and mediation are irrelevant to pure being. His nature ("his ruddy ancientness") corresponds to the nature of the world ("the ruddy summer"), or at least one of the seasons. Satisfactions are complete: his age is fulfilled. The old man is an eloquent image of man made in the image of Stevens himself; we respond to it deeply, as we never could to the meta-men or the abstruse impossible possible philosophers' man (here the language of contradiction stops us, we must consider the image as if it were an idea, logically). In The Rock the Stevens hero is part of reality and its rhythms. A wise old man, the hero of American Modernism, he is no longer a representation of something else, the imperfect exemplar of an abstraction. Nor does he live, as does the old man in "Credences of Summer," in a warm world, in "green's green apogee." In "Credences of Summer," the image of the old man is "fixed" by an act of the mind:

Fix it in an eternal foliage
And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
Of such change possible.

In The Rock, the old man builds his city in snow.

II. ARGUMENTS AGAINST DEATH: "SUNDAY MORNING"
AND "THE OWL IN THE SARCOPHAGUS"

In a world without heaven to follow, the stops
Would be endings, more poignant than partings, profounder,
And that would be saying farewell, repeating farewell,
Just to be there and just to behold.

"Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu"

Stevens had always struggled "to suppress the merely personal." To use Gertrude Stein's distinction, he struggled to speak the voice of the Human Mind, not Human Nature. That would be a voice articulated in the act of writing, not talking, a voice capable of objectivity, of living in the present and seeing things as entities, not identities, of leaving events and memories and such emotions as fear and disappointment behind, of being concerned with the weather, not personalities, of accepting death, the death of an age, the death of others, the death of the self. "Human nature," explains Stein, "can not say yes, how can human nature say yes, human nature does what it does but it cannot say yes." But the Human Mind can, it can say yes.

But saying yes was for Stevens no easy achievement. If the death of the gods (and with them they took belief) was for him the cultural crisis of his age, it was also a profoundly personal problem: in it, he felt keenly the shadow of his own mortality. Stevens had always known that death could not be ignored or obliterated and that we cannot take refuge in memory. But it is not until The Rock that he confronts the fact that his own memories are an illusion, for they are no longer a part of a felt reality. Gertrude Stein put this realization in the following brisk way: "What is the use of being a little boy if you are to grow up to be a man." And in his thoughtful slower way, Stevens opens "The Rock" with:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of air.

The World, as he writes in "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," is "always beginning, over and over." Thus the continuity of the self was perhaps itself a myth, the last one that Stevens discarded. With it he discarded his former selves, but not his nature, and in their place he found satisfactions of being. As Harold Bloom has pointed out, by the end of "The Rock" "the self cites its own tranquility as means of proof, at the rock, where by opposition the mind [I would say the self] and the external realm are brought together."
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Death preoccupied Stevens his entire poetic life. As early as the gaudy Harmonium we find Stevens writing about the death of the body and sex (of course he had never really believed in the body) in the most graphic of terms:

Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.

These lines are from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," written when he was thirty-nine and published as the eleventh poem in his Collected Poems, and Stevens never got any younger. But it not so much the death of the body as the death of the mind that he feared. Time is the inescapable enemy, not just because death is irrevocable, but because insistent reminders of it are everywhere—in the familiar sounds of evening, in one’s heartbeat, in the rapid walk of a person going down the street:

It is time that beats in the breast and it is time
That batters against the mind, silent and proud,
The mind that knows it is destroyed by time.

"The Pure Good of Theory"

How did a man so obsessed with death face it in his seventies and write the poems of The Rock? If we can answer this question, we may also better understand how Stevens reached (or discovered) the balance between the imagination and reality which he had called for in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words."

To see just how far Stevens has come in The Rock, and particularly in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," I begin by taking a rather lengthy detour through two of his earlier poems which deal with death: first, "Sunday Morning," which I call the argument for reality, and secondly, "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," the argument for the imagination. Both arguments fail.

Although "Sunday Morning" is not in the familiar meditative mode of Stevens’ poetry, its form and purpose are similar; it is a drama, to adopt Louis Martz’s excellent definition, between a projected part of the self and the whole self (or mind, whose aim is to find what will
Basically "Sunday Morning" is a dialogue between a brooding woman (a Jamesian character enfolded in the indolent luxuries of fine lingerie and a lazy morning) and the more articulate mind which suggests answers to her objections and questions. The poem is well known and has been much and ably discussed, so I will only summarize here. The situation is this: her agreeable musings in the midst of "bounty" are interrupted by thoughts of sacrifice and death, an expected text of a traditional American Sunday morning. And the problem is this: where on earth will she find "Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven."

Three attempts are made to answer this question. First, in section IV, it is argued that the natural world is in fact more permanent than the world of religious imagination. The cyclical view of natural history is contrasted with the Christian linear view of religious history. Her memories and anticipation of the seasons, the myth of the eternal return, the myth of continuity through change—these are stronger and more durable, it is argued, than any vague promises of a final heaven:

There is not any haunt of prophecy,  
Nor any 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; or will endure  
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,  
Of her desire for June and evening, tipped  
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

But she objects that the contentment nature provides her is not enough. She wants more, desiring not relative permanence but permanence absolute—"some imperishable bliss." And so in sections V and VI another argument is advanced, a more subtle and sophisticated variation of the first.

Death is personified as female, as mother. Stevens' text is that Death taketh away but first, she giveth; Death is "the mother of beauty," beauty the source of all fulfillment, indeed consummation. This strained conclusion is reached by identifying death with change, an
awkward equation which results in the awkward line: "Is there no change of death in paradise?" The logical result of this identity is not only that death emerges as the Prime Mover, but heaven is rendered static and motionless, as the tomb containing the urn whose lovers never kiss. The conclusion is that our mortal earth is the true paradise.

This reasoning also is not persuasive. The woman, presumably, is beautiful and alone. Lovers who never embrace are not satisfactory. Thus Stevens turns to another argument, escalating the tone. A shrill, sexy vision of wild young men, chanting their worship of mortality, is offered:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be
Naked among them, like a savage source.

This religious rite of "heavenly fellowship," it is implied, is possible if the mortal world is acceptable as paradise—an argument which certainly seems calculated to stir at least the interest, if not the desire, of this languid woman. In fact all three arguments seem pointedly aimed at quelling her complaining and querulous tone. But none of them works. At each stage the level of rhetoric has to be heightened, increased from sweet persuasions to romantic sophistry and finally to wild imaginings.

But in the last section of the poem Stevens returns us to quieter language, acknowledging that we live not in paradise but in "island solitude, unsponsored, free / Of that wide water, inescapable." Man is alone, and the haunting idea of death returns, echoing the poem's first section. In "Sunday Morning" Stevens does not so much confront death as he illustrates an unsuccessful attempt to reason it away (or evaporate it by metaphor) by concentrating on the essence of life and living—change. The panacea "Death is the mother of beauty" creates an illusion for only a moment. In fact there are, we see, not two voices in the poem but three: that of the discontented woman, the devil's advocate for reality, and the more mature, resigned mind who speaks the poem's last section with tones invoking a lost American landscape:
Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

For a moment the urban (or suburban) Sunday morning is displaced by
the broad evening spaces of the American frontier, which, in reality,
had closed years before. But given the argumentative structure of the
poem, it is clear that this ending is not a resolution but a further appeal
on the basis of the comforting, seductive mood of elegy.

If “Sunday Morning” presents the argument for reality, “The Owl
in the Sarcophagus,” a much later poem collected in The Auroras of
Autumn (1950), presents the argument for the imagination. Written
following the death of one of his closest friends, it is unlike any other
Stevens poem. In no other piece does Stevens explore the domain of
allegory, unfortunately perhaps, because this long poem is splendid.
Above all a man of affirmation (Stevens once said that he stopped
reading Shaw because “he had nothing affirmative in him and, also,
because his noes were indiscriminate”19), Stevens offers a consoling,
elegant dream, a sleepy and sublime “mythology of modern death,”
no Bosch-like visions, no Dantesque hell, no grim reaper, in short, no
suffering. The allegorical figures are a mirror of Stevens’ will:

The children of a desire that is the will,
Even of death, the beings of the mind
In the light-bound space of the mind, the floreate flare.

Not a poem which hymns the idea of the hero, “The Owl” presents
what the hero might imagine, and thus is rare in the Stevens canon.

Stevens sets up the allegory within familiar conventions. A man
visits the land of the dead and there meets the forms of his own thought
and “dark desire.” These “beings of the mind” resemble, of course,
the forms of reality; the difference between them is musical and re­
leases melancholy reverberations of remembrance and return to the
Other:
And, if of substance, a likeness of the earth,
That by resemblance twanged him through and through,
Releasing an abysmal melody,
A meeting, an emerging in the light,
A dazzle of remembrance and of sight.

High sleep is a giant, characterized by the luminous revolvings of the earth, the hypnosis of a "fulfilling air," the involutions of meaning, the white of sheets, and the "ultimate intellect." Less expected and more opaque is the description of his brother Peace, who proclaims a state of peace, his authority shining in the sparkling accretions of his robes adorned with ancient, indecipherable texts:

Its brightness burned the way good solace seethes.
This was peace after death, the brother of sleep,
The inhuman brother so much like, so near,
Yet vested in a foreign absolute,
Adorned with cryptic stones and sliding shines,
An immaculate personage in nothingness,
With the whole spirit sparkling in its cloth,
Generations of the imagination piled
In the manner of its stitchings, of its thread,
In the weaving round the wonder of its need,
And by the first flowers upon it, an alphabet
By which to spell out holy doom and end,
A bee for the remembering of happiness.

Yet is the third figure who speaks most deeply to Stevens: "she that says good-by losing in self / The sense of self." Strong, desirable, and graceful, speaking not with language but the slight "backward gestures of her hand," she is not an allegorical figure (she has no name) but a "self" who has passed beyond self-consciousness. Possessing sure and inner knowledge, she speaks for those who "cannot say good-by themselves." Unlike her two brothers who represent life after death, she incarnates the moment on the edge of death, the passage between life and death. She exists in the syllable (there is no grammar here, no language that can represent this) separating the two domains:
At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing

She was a self that knew, an inner thing,
Subtler than look’s declaiming, although she moved
With sad splendor, beyond artifice,
Impassioned by the knowledge that she had,
There on the edge of oblivion.

But just as the last section of "Sunday Morning" calls into question all that went before, so the last three lines of "The Owl" confess the limits of the imagination. The regal rhetoric of thought, the sublime but much-too-comforting mythology, yield to a simpler tone. The mind which invented these figures harbors a childlike desire for the "pure perfections of parental space":

It is a child that sings itself to sleep,
The mind, among the creatures that it makes,
The people, those by which it lives and dies.

The story is a bedtime tale, a fantasy which has no real authority. The myth is a fiction which is not subject to final belief. The allegory falls under the pressure of time.20

Stevens had warned against the problems of allegory in "Effects of Analogy." In that essay, what troubles him about Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress is exactly what troubles us in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." As we read Bunyan’s story, Stevens maintains, "we are distracted by the double sense of the analogy and we are rather less engaged by the symbols than we are by what is symbolized."21 And as we read the Stevens poem we are only too aware that it is just what the final stanza announces it is—a self-conscious mythology. The imagination, to use Stevens’ own measure, does not adhere to reality. And if we take a look at the structure of the poem, we see that as an act of the mind as Stevens would define it, it falls flat. For Stevens bases his notion of the act of the mind on the principle of the transformation of reality. But in this poem, although each of the three figures is in itself a splendid example of the power of the imagination, the organization as a whole is so bald as to preclude the desired effect of analogy; in the words of "Effects of Analogy," the parts "do not combine, inter-act, so that one influences the other and produces an effect similar in kind to the prismatic formations that occur about us in nature in the case of reflections and refractions."22
The poem is organized in orderly outline fashion. It is, to transpose a phrase from a Stevens poem, merely posed. In section I Stevens introduces his three allegorical characters; in section II he introduces his human character; in sections III–V he tidily describes each allegorical figure in turn; and in section VI he offers a summary and conclusion. Imagination, in other words, collapses in this poem to framework fantasy. This is not the successful, transformative act of the mind we find in such short poems as “On the Road Home” and “The Candle a Saint” or in a larger open-ended poem such as “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” The argument for the imagination, we find, is no more successful in dealing with the problem of death than is the argument for reality in “Sunday Morning.”

III. IT MUST BE HUMAN

Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,

As when the cock crows on the left and all
Is well, incalculable balances,
At which a kind of Swiss perfection comes

And a familiar music of the machine
Sets up its Schwärmerei, not balances
That we achieve but balances that happen,

As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.
Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist.

“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”

In 1954, the year of the publication of his Collected Poems, Stevens wrote that he had “thought of adding other sections to the NOTES and one in particular: It Must Be Human.” The Rock might be called that section, for, as many have pointed out, it is the most personal and perfect group of poems which Stevens ever wrote. Poems of a wise old man, they have, as Harold Bloom has written, “an uncanny intensity and originality that surpass nearly all his previous work at middle length or shorter.” As Joseph Riddel has said, they are “sharply
etched in Stevens' personal style, stoic and tough in the face of age's pressing questions, yet tender and knowing. 26 Stevens wrote in "Man and Winter," an earlier poem, that the "mind is the great poem of winter." In The Rock it is rather the poem which is the great mind of winter. Best illustrated by the perfections of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," this meditative mind unites the self with the world. In Santayana, sheltered in the Roman convent of the Blue Nuns, we have a man, not a phantasm, as hero. In this poem, there are no questions asked, as there were in "Sunday Morning." There are no stunning acts of the imagination, as in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." Nor is there a last-minute stanza which qualifies the hypothesis of the poem. The tone is consistently that of serene calm, deep assurance, an eloquent poise.

What is the meditative mode for Stevens? The act of the mind? The act of the imagination? Speaking generally, it would seem reasonable to call all of Stevens' poems meditative, for it was Stevens' temperament to revolve an idea in his mind, to pursue it, muse on it. But Martz cautions, and rightfully so, that we must distinguish between imagination and meditation. "Meditation," he says, "is the essential exercise which, constantly practiced, brings the imagination into play." As I pointed out earlier, Martz defines meditation as "a deliberate act of choice," "a calculated effort of the mind," "a constructive power of deliberate choice," "an attentive thought repeated or voluntarily maintained in the mind, to arouse the will to holy and wholesome affections and resolutions." It is, he says, best represented by "tightly argued, tightly ordered meditations on a theme." 27

If we reverse (altering slightly) Martz's distinctions between meditation and imagination, defining the imagination as the heroic act of will and meditation as a state of mind, an ease of mind, an easing of mind, a mode of being which is sought after for its own sake, we can more clearly grasp the meditative mode of the last poems. As we recall, in "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" Stevens describes the "highest self" this way:

These are the works and pastimes
Of the highest self: he studies the paper
On the wall, the lemons on the table.
This is his day. With nothing lost,
He arrives at the man-man as he wanted.
This is his night and meditation.

At that point in his life, the meditative mode was inappropriate and inadequate, but in his seventies this grace of mind is the result and gift of a long life of the mind. "Sunday Morning" and "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" are self-conscious feints against death. "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," on the other hand, portrays Santayana, one of the great general thinkers, near death. Santayana is one of the whole men: "To be ruled by thought, in reality to govern ourselves by the truth or to be able to feel that we were being governed by the truth," writes Stevens in his late essay "The Whole Man: Perspectives, Horizons," "would be a great satisfaction. . . ."28

While Stevens was a student at Harvard, he met Santayana, but although he knew the philosopher personally, their relationship was never intimate. Stevens deeply admired Santayana as a man "of dynamic mind... and something of a scholar and very much of an original force."29 Stevens was probably attracted to him because the quality of their thinking was so similar: Santayana was a mirror for Stevens. Their minds both radiate more light than heat, tend toward balance rather than passion, and affirm the virtue of detachment rather than testify to the tragic. Santayana's idiosyncratic combination of naturalism and platonism finds its analogues in Stevens' notions of reality and the imagination. Both believed, in the words of Santayana, that poetry "adds a pure value to existence, the value of a liberal imaginative exercise."30 And both insisted that the world will be saved by those who believe that the real and the ideal, reality and the imagination, must be kept in vital and dynamic interconnection.

Santayana, feeling that people and possessions were likely to be distractions, living out the last eleven years of his life in a convent cell with only a bed and books, must have seemed to Stevens an ideal alter ego. In his essay "Imagination as Value," Stevens writes that Santayana is one of the few men in whose lives "the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art",31 that function is aesthetic.

"To an Old Philosopher in Rome" opens with a metaphor of trans-
formation which informs the entire poem. The beginning prepositional phrase is characteristically problematical:

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end—

"On the threshold of heaven" modifies two different nouns—the "Old Philosopher" of the poem's title and the "figures in the street" of the first line. Both perspectives are possible and taken together constitute a paradigm of the mode of being portrayed in the poem. By both participating in and yet remaining detached from experience, Santayana becomes a figure of heaven. He could be said to transcend himself, or in the words of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," to lose "in self / The sense of self." Here the most complete knowledge is possible: the "Extremes of the known in the presence of the extreme / Of the unknown."

The transformation of reality into something sweeter and more real occurs "easily," effortlessly. In the contact-boundary situation of death the simplest experiences of the senses are intensified and charged with aesthetic values. Harsh mutterings become "murmuring," the antiseptic smell of medicine, a fragrance. The concrete is invested with the spiritual, reality undergoes transubstantiation, and we pass from the real to the visionary with no sense of change. On the chair is a "portent," the nuns are a "moving transparency." Santayana sees the way Stevens imagined that the meta-men could see:

The infinite of the actual perceived
A freedom revealed, a realization touched,
The real made more acute by an unreal.

This transformation is possible not solely by virtue of being at the edge of death, "in snow." Dignity is also required. The extreme of the unknown must be approached with control, with the self composed, with a composition of the self. And if so, Stevens suggests, more than a transformation of the real into the imagined is possible. The two worlds—the real world and its heightened, imagined counterpart, a fiction—fuse:
The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

Just as two parallel lines can never meet in uncurved space, so these two Romes could never have met in an ordinary situation. But here they fuse, creating a perspective from which Santayana can both see and be seen. This is the same point we discover in another poem in The Rock, "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," the threshold from which one

Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

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

That home is the earth, the rock, the normality of the normal.

In the process of discovering that perspective toward which one had moved cautiously, perhaps throughout a lifetime, the figure of the self, "losing in self / The sense of self," paradoxically grows more distinct. The poem's structure parallels this process, progressively focusing our attention on the figure of Santayana. The poem has three parts: in the first (stanzas 1–6), Santayana does not appear; in the second (stanzas 7–11), Stevens points him out; and in the third (stanzas 12–16), Santayana dominates the field. The final lesson of the master is the belief that the whole of life can be the formation of a gestalt in time, the coherent course of a particular. As Santayana wrote in his preface to Realms of Being, "Our distinction and glory, as well as our sorrow, will have lain in being something in particular, and in knowing what that is."33

In the second section of the poem Stevens asks Santayana to be the man who can speak for all mankind—a moving and courageous request, for Stevens is demanding it of himself also:

So that we feel, in this illumined large,
The veritable small, so that each of us
Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
In yours, master and commiserable man.
Years before Stevens had said bluntly that the chief defect of humanism was that it concerned human beings. Now, accepting a man as both "master" and "commiserable" who in creating a "total edifice" composed a self, and who "says good-by by losing in self / The sense of self," Stevens writes that "It is poverty's speech which seeks us out most." If Pound's achievement, given his proud temperament, in the *Pisan Cantos* is humility, Stevens' achievement in *The Rock* is to move beyond the act of the mind into the integrated realm of being.

This realm of being has its own mode of meditation. Stevens describes Santayana as "half-asleep," both "dozing in the depths of wakefulness" and "intent," not "intent" in the sense of strenuous concentration but rather in the sense of absorption, fascination, interest. In "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" it is not speculation on a fiction that gives happiness and peace, but absorption in the particular, the smell of medicine, "the particles of nether-do." This is the poet's condition of "vague receptivity" which Stevens describes in his late essay "A Collect of Philosophy." It is the "vivid sleep" of "The Rock," and the "ease of the mind that was like being alone in a boat at sea" in "Prologues to What Is Possible." What is possible are "not balances / That we achieve but balances that happen," as he called such moments in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

Thus these poems of *The Rock* record Stevens' movement beyond the disciplined, deliberate act of the mind into a condition of receptivity to experience. As he wrote in a letter in 1950 about the privacy which Hartford offered him: "It seems easier to think here. Perhaps this is balanced by the possibility that one has less to think about or, rather, less occasion to think. Yet that does not seem possible. Then, too, it is not always easy to tell the difference between thinking and looking out of the window." This is an admission of immense proportions. This mode of being suspends doubt. Introspection and perception here merge for Stevens. The old Stevens problem of the subject-object split, the old problem of clearing away everything that comes between the perceiving mind and the world as perceived, has disappeared along with the problem of belief. In "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" the categories of subject and object cannot really be said to
exist. Instead we find an easy interpenetration between the outside and the inside. The sound of the bells drifts in.

And now we understand exactly what Stevens means by the world as meditation. In the beautiful poem of that title, Penelope, waiting for Ulysses, composes a self—she does not postulate a supreme fiction—with which to meet and be in the world. With Penelope it is not an act of the mind that sustains her, but a confidence in her own strength and an acceptance of the “inhuman meditation of the world,” the round of time and the seasons. She waits, patiently. Her “barbarous energy” and her receptivity to the particulars of experience—to daybreak and spring—allow her to receive the rising sun as she would Ulysses, as if it were Ulysses. As in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” where the city of Rome and heaven become one, where the whole shape of Rome is repeated in the shape of the bed, in “The World as Meditation” her meditation parallels the “inhuman meditation.” The two come together:

The two kept beating together. It was only day.
It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
Friend and dear friend and a planet’s encouragement.
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.

And with it, the “inhuman meditation” becomes “a planet’s encouragement.” Penelope’s “barbarous strength” is not like the strength of mind which Nietzsche possessed. Of Nietzsche, Stevens had written, “In his mind one does not see the world more clearly . . . a strong mind distorts the world.” In their strength neither Penelope nor Santayana distort the world; they are in rhythm with it.

If in the second part of “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” Stevens asks Santayana to speak “Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead,” in the third section the figure of the philosopher becomes that orator “with accurate tongue / And without eloquence”:

And you—it is you that speak it, without speech,
The loftiest syllables among loftiest things,
The one invulnerable man among
Crude captains, the naked majesty, if you like,
Of bird-nest arches and of rain-stained vaults.
It is not simple speech which Santayana offers but the very elements of language—its syllables. "We say ourselves in syllables that rise," Stevens wrote in "The Creations of Sound," "from the floor, rising in speech we do not speak." The absolution Santayana grants is "unintelligible." The message is not the text he had composed but the man himself. These are "the immaculate syllables" Stevens spoke of in "The Men That Are Falling": "That he spoke only by doing what he did."

Stevens, we remember, once said that the simplest personification of the angel of reality would be the good man. If earlier in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" the figure of Santayana is "impatient for the grandeur" that he needs in "so much misery," now the desire to escape is replaced by a total commitment to the real: "The life of the city never lets go, nor do you / Ever want it to." Santayana is both alone and not alone. He is at one with the city just as Penelope is at one with the weather. Like the man in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "Life fixed him," always watching:

This sat beside his bed, with its guitar,
To keep him from forgetting, without a word,
A note or two disclosing who it was.

A temporary stay against death has been granted:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,
Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon his threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

The "total edifice" which stands as shelter is the self that he has composed through the act of writing. As Stevens says of himself in "The Planet on the Table" (and it applies to Santayana):
His self and the sun were one
And his poems, although makings of his self,
Were no less makings of the sun.

The flow and fear of time, the movement of the opening stanza, are stopped; Santayana lives completely within the present, "the normality of the normal." The poem's ending has the quality of apocalypse, of a monumental, visionary, and yet simple human poise. Stevens dramatizes what he had hoped for years before in "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

A tune beyond us as we are,
Yet nothing changed by the blue guitar;

Ourselves in the tune as if in space,
Yet nothing changed, except the place

Of things as they are and only the place
As you play them, on the blue guitar,

Placed, so, beyond the compass of change,
Perceived in a final atmosphere;

For a moment final, in the way
The thinking of art seems final when

The thinking of god is smoky dew.

But there is one important difference. In this much earlier poem all Stevens could hope for was that this "tune" would last for a "moment." And as we know, much of Stevens' poetry is a poetry of evanescence and epiphany. But in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" the still point is not a single heightened moment. It is a quiet state of being, it is a point of perspective on one's entire life. And this applies to the opening poem of The Rock, "An Old Man Asleep," just as it does to Stevens' final collection of poems as a whole. The mood is one of elegy and farewells in keeping with Stevens' "wintry temperament," as Helen Vendler has so aptly called it. But it is predominately that of quiet confidence, of Stevens' acceptance of what his life has been (the poems he has written—these, not memories—are the testaments to his life) and what his life could be now.
To review. In “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” we read how a man—Stevens—might live out the end of his life with nobility. The wise man, building his city in snow, must confront death rather than reason it away or lull himself to sleep with a “modern mythology.” Reality must be bared to its essentials, the luxury of peignoirs and green freedom of cockatoos rejected for the poverty of “No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns.” There must be a “dignity” won through “a solitude of the self,” as we read in “Things of August”:

When was it that the particles became
The whole man, that tempers and beliefs became
Temper and belief and that differences lost
Difference and were one? It had to be
In the presence of a solitude of the self,
An expanse and the abstraction of an expanse,
A zone of time without the ticking of clocks,
A color that moves us with forgetfulness.
Where was it that we heard the voice of union?

And finally, the dominating act of mind must yield to a mode of meditation, which is a mode of being, characterized by receptivity to experience.

“Poetry,” says Stevens in Adagia, “is health.” Of all his collections, The Rock is the only one which offers the satisfactions of health. For the problem of belief no longer concerned him with the same intensity. In his last poems we see Stevens content to meet the normal, the everyday, every day, as Penelope does in “The World as Meditation.” As he said in a letter in 1949:

... what one ought to find is normal life, insight into the commonplace, reconciliation with every-day reality. The things that it makes me happy to do are things of this sort... At the moment what I have in mind is a group of things which mean a good deal more than they sound like meaning: for instance, airing the house in the morning; the colors of sunlight on the side of the house; people in their familiar aspects. All this is difficult for me. It is possible that pages of insight and or reconciliation, etc. are merely pages of description. The trouble is that poetry is so largely a matter of transformation. To describe a cup of tea without changing it and without concerning oneself with some extreme aspect of it is not at all the easy thing that it seems to be.\(^9\)
The Rock moves closer and closer to the bone of the "normal life." Beginning with "An Old Man Asleep" (who not only can possess two worlds but does), moving unself-consciously to the myth before the myth began (the father, the rock at "the spirit's base" in "The Irish Cliffs of Moher"), and from there to the sad emptiness of "The Plain Sense of Things" and "Long and Sluggish Lines," The Rock ends with an unpretentious poem entitled "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." And Stevens means it.

The old man half asleep in the winter of The Rock wakes up in early March to the "scrawny cry" of the earliest bird. Like Penelope, he believes in the "inhuman meditation of the world," that the "chorister" would be followed by the "choir" of spring and that this was and would be enough. It is no longer a question of satisfying the mind. The triumph is that the cry is not "a sound in his mind," not willed into being by his dreaming imagination ("the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-mache"), but outside. The cry is reality, a song of fixed accord which will be heard every day, and each day will be "like / A new knowledge of reality."

This is what he wants—a quiet normal life, as he calls it in the title of one of his last poems—for "transcendent forms" have no more vitality for him, "but his actual candle blazed with artifice." This is what Stevens means in the long poem "The Rock." The fictive covering of reality is not enough, the poem as icon is not enough:

It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.
We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground
Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure

Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness.
And yet the leaves, if they broke into bud,
If they broke into bloom, if they bore fruit,

And if we ate the incipient colorings
Of their fresh culls might be a cure of the ground.

The world, Stevens knew and had known for a long time, was made by man in the image of man. But Stevens learned that it is not enough to recognize that fact. Man must live in the world, he must love the world, he must eat its fruit: "They bloom as a man loves, as he lives in
love / They bear their fruit so that the year is known." In "The Rock" reality is linked with singleness and grayness, and the imagination is linked with the potency of the diverse. In "Note on Moonlight" Stevens reverses similar terms: the "one moonlight" (the imagination, the sense of the poet) and "the various universe" (the rock, reality). But what is important in both these poems is not so much these distinctions between two aspects of the world, but the conclusion that the world is the source of tranquility and that the satisfactions of tranquility are at last so easily arrived at:

The one moonlight, the various universe, intended
So much just to be seen—a purpose, empty
Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,
Certain and ever more fresh. Ah! Certain, for sure...

1. As Helen Vendler observes in On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), the last line of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" is "a remark... not an accomplishment" (p. 67).

2. Stevens makes this distinction between "recognize" and "realize" in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York: Vintage, 1951); he says of Plato's figure for the soul, "We recognize it perfectly. We do not realize it. We understand the feeling of it, the robust feeling, clearly and fluently communicated. Yet we understand it rather than participate in it" (pp. 6-7).


4. Letter from Wallace Stevens to Henry Church, December 8, 1942, in Letters, p. 431.

5. This is the phrase of J. Hillis Miller. See his "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," in The Act of the Mind, eds. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), p. 240. See also Thomas G. Hines' The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), in which he argues that "the supreme fiction, for Stevens, was the Poetry of Being" (p. 141).


11. The change that occurs in Stevens’ poetry can be seen by comparing the apparent ease of achievement, simple language, and calm tone of this poem with the last section of “The Pure Good of Theory”:

   And yet remains the same, the beast of light
   Groaning in half-exploited gutturals
   The need of its element, the final need
   Of final access to its element—
   Of access like the page of a wiggy book,
   Touched suddenly by the universal flare
   For a moment, a moment in which we read and repeat
   The eloquence of light’s faculties.


14. Stevens, we should remember, was never able to obtain life insurance because his blood pressure was considered too high; he was once told by a doctor that he might be dead by the age of forty.

15. Explaining a portion of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens wrote to Hi Simons, January 12, 1943 (*Letters*, p. 434), “We cannot ignore or obliterate death, yet we do not live in memory. Life is always new; it is always beginning. The fiction is part of this beginning.”


18. See Martz’s *Poem of the Mind*.


20. Joseph Riddle (“Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens: Functions of a ‘Literatus,’” in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963], p. 36) argues that this “mythology” is persuasive: “the consolations of a poetry which celebrates death as fundamental with life’s rhythms, a final punctuation just as sleep and rest are intermediate punctuations, pauses relative to the sense of rhythm itself.” But this interpretation makes no logical sense: death cannot possibly exist both within life and at the same time be a “final punctuation.” But the fact that this is a logical impossibility would be irrelevant if the poem itself performed the necessary transformation to make the paradox convincing.


23. “Add This to Rhetoric.”
At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing

27. Various quotations from The Poem of the Mind.
31. The Necessary Angel, p. 147.
32. In the first case, the dying Santayana, looking down at the people in the street from his window (the favored Stevens’ position for a poet), perceives the buzz of reality as more meaningful to him than normal, larger than normal, heavenly. But it is a heaven that is receding from him, growing fainter, and finally fading. In the second case, everyone on the “threshold” of death, including Santayana, becomes greater (“figures of heaven”) and thus recedes from us; and although their absolution (of us) remains a mystery, the example of their “majestic movement” remains. I therefore disagree with Helen Vendler, who believes that only one or the other are possible at any moment. She writes, “The venerable mind belongs to what Stevens will call the Omega in man, peering forever into distances. Credences of summer are only possible when that aspect of the mind is suspended by an effort [in the late poems, I would say that no effort is involved], so that for a moment the present can suffice and the distant can ‘fail’ the normally clairvoyant eye” (On Extended Wings, p. 243).
33. The Development of American Philosophy, p. 463.
34. Letter from Wallace Stevens to Henry Church, May 18, 1943, in Letters, p. 449.
35. Opus Posthumous, p. 197.
36. Letter from Wallace Stevens to Barbara Church, February 1, 1950, in Letters, p. 664.
37. Letter from Wallace Stevens to Henry Church, December 8, 1942, in Letters, p. 431.
38. On Extended Wings, p. 47.
40. Here I must disagree with Helen Vendler in her epilogue to her excellent book On Extended Wings. Given the undisputed vitality of Wallace Stevens’ last poems, I find her comments surprising. She speaks of his “decrepitude” (p. 308), the “looseness,” “lack of forward motion,” and “ruminativeness” that characterize his old age and some of his poems (p. 309), and finally, the theme
of the man become child, which appears in his late poems ("his west touches his east," p. 310). Although we do encounter the image of the child in Stevens' last poems, I would like to see it considered more thoroughly before it is pronounced an image of second childhood, for Vendler's notion of old age in Stevens reflects too easily the negative stereotype of old age.