Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE ROOTS OF THIS BOOK REACH BACK FAR BEFORE I EVER DREAMED THERE was such a writer as Stevens. The reading of Stevens that follows is based on the sense—even the sensation—that Stevens' poems and prose are written in a language that at first sight seems opaque even to the native speaker of English like myself. This is something we tend to forget as we read and come to create hypothetical landscapes and narratives from Stevens' poems. This book could not have been written without the conviction that it is possible to enter into an understanding of such a work while resisting the temptation of totally domesticating it. It means accepting both the enrichment of the encounter and the difference that makes the poetry other. This conviction may be linked to my own pleasure in the possibilities of encounter that exist more generally across languages and cultures and among academic disciplines. I am thankful to a number of teachers who fostered this sense, among them, in chronological order, my teachers of French literature at Brown, Harvard, and Lausanne who instilled in me the love of the difficult and the "other," Patrick Hanan who taught me that Quintilian could be respectfully used to elucidate twentieth-century Chinese literature, and James Schroeter and Manfred Gsteiger who encouraged me to read eclectically.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND NOTE ON SOURCES

CP	*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954)
Letters	*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966)
NA	*The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1951)
OP	*Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates. Revised, enlarged, and corrected edition (New York: Knopf, 1989)
Palm	*The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1972)

The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (*CP*) has been used as the source for all the poems collected in it.

In block quotations from certain long poems like "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the inclusion of a roman numeral at the head of a quotation indicates that the stanza or section is quoted in full.

INTRODUCTION

All poetry is experimental poetry.

—*Adagia* (*OP* 87)

Readers of Wallace Stevens have for years been struck by the way his poetry invites probing behind its metaphorical surfaces to call up the poet's ideas about our place in the world and about the role of language in our sense of being. The poet's lectures, collected in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, have also seemed to legitimize such a search in the sense that Stevens depicts poetry and philosophy as pursuing the same reality through different means. Calling philosophy "the official view of being" that uses "reason" to "approach truth," he goes on to call poetry "an unofficial view of being" and to argue that poetry may even be superior to philosophy because the poet "finds a sanction for life in poetry that satisfies the imagination" (*NA* 40–41, 43). Thus, although Wallace Stevens did not use the terms epistemology or ontology, his readers have done so, untrained though most of us are in the rigors of philosophical argumentation. And critics schooled in what we call the humanist tradition of criticism have sought access to the philosophical "meaning" of Stevens' poetry through the academic disciplines that have passed down to us a selection of the writings of Plato or Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, to mention a few.

In the mid-sixties, when ten years had passed since Stevens' death and his *Letters* were being edited by his daughter, this sensitivity produced the first great wave of works on Stevens. It reflected Stevens' own

stated concerns about expanding our sense of "reality." Many took up Stevens' own dualistic framework—"reality" and "imagination"—to apply them to the poetry itself. Thus J. Hillis Miller devoted a chapter of his *Poets of Reality*[1] to Stevens and accorded him the highest honor of being considered the only American modernist poet, along with Williams, to have created a new relationship between human consciousness and "reality." Miller's emphasis on consciousness or the mind takes into account an analysis of modern man finding himself alone in the universe, divested of divine support. If not all critics shared Miller's phenomenological focus on the mind, the question of the subject-object dichotomy in a secularized world was nonetheless foremost in the discourse of many of the principal writers on Stevens.[2]

Poetry then was seen by critics, as it was by Stevens himself, to enact a reaching out to a new world in which the transcendent order was reduced to a myth that no longer had relevance. The self therefore had a heightened responsibility in establishing its place in the given order—or disorder—of the outside world. The poet's poetry, it was felt, attempted to create new collective meanings by integrating the subject into this new world and binding the whole together, through language, to create a fiction of being.[3] Miller would see this task as unachievable, except insofar as the late poems, he says, "affirm themselves neither as imagination nor as reality but as both together."[4] Riddel would be persuaded of the reconciliation of tensions existing between self and world through poetry and would say about his book on Stevens, though guardedly: "My thesis, if I may claim one, is that Stevens' total work constitutes metaphysically the act of creating oneself (always, of course, within naturalistic possibility) and living (figuratively, but in a very real sense, actually) in poetry."[5]

Such preponderantly humanistic views of the function of poetry and of the attendant "meaningfulness" of language have continued to inform innumerable studies that display otherwise widely divergent orientations. At the risk of tremendous reduction, the great variety of existent approaches can be suggested by mentioning a few of them. Bloom's reading has put Freudian and kabbalistic thinking to bear upon the poet's struggle with his poetic forefathers and the rhetoricity of his own discourse.[6] Benamou searched in alchemical treatises a way of illuminating Stevens' holistic tendency.[7] Lentricchia and Leggett's literary historical approaches have shown the affinities or influences linking Stevens' ideas with those of William James or Charles Mauron and Henri Focillon.[8] Vendler's reading has elucidated parallels between Stevens and Keats, for

instance, to draw a message out of the evolution of Stevens' style.[9] Gelpi and Perloff have inferred Stevens' conceptual stance in the contrastive light of poems by other modernists like William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound.[10] A reflection on gender has been used by Nyquist to open up new perspectives on the expression of desire in Stevens' poetry.[11] Halliday's study of the way other people are acknowledged in the poems shows Stevens' persona to be deficient in intimacy.[12] Illuminating as such studies are, they seem to gravitate around the search for finding at least a kernel of stateable "meaning" in the poems. This kernel may be of many orders: that Stevens shows he "has evaded confronting the true center of being" in "The Motive for Metaphor";[13] that the supposed solipsism of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" is sterile; or that the "demand that the reader reanalyze" made in "The Snow Man" "is inseparable from the realization that [a pure] perception is forever unavailable," for instance.[14] Underlying these studies both old and new are assumptions about language that resemble those that many critics attribute to Stevens himself—that the prime task of language is to represent thought, perception, or imagination or, more subtly, something about poetry itself; that language is the human subject's way of making sense of the world and his or her complex relation to it. Yet the resistance Stevens' poetry presents to our understanding impels us to look at that part of language that stands before any stable translation and that has to do with the necessities of English itself.

Language-oriented "deconstructionist" discussions of poetry have pondered what happens to the function of language when it is seen to have lost its ground. Riddel, one of the first to adopt a deconstructionist view of literature, considered that modern poets and critics alike were placed in a dilemma in inheriting a "language of Being or presence." This conception of language, writes Riddel, stands "at the authoritative center of our thinking, and the varieties of dualism emanating from it compose the manifold of what was up to Nietzsche an unbroken western tradition."[15] If language then comes to be seen as fundamentally groundless and self-undermining, it is condemned to sign its own de-centeredness or its inability ever to name the absence that replaces the center. In criticism it seems to me that American versions of deconstructionist perspectives like Derrida's[16] (and even some parts of Derrida's work itself[17]) sometimes "fall" into the development of a "theory" that indeed cannot overcome this dilemma, for the theory still relies on a reality principle that is no longer a theological but an ontological one, by focusing as it does on the loss of a "center."[18]

All readers recognize that Stevens' language is ambiguous and multi-layered. The pleasure of exegetical sleuthing is unlimited for anyone who wants to pick apart grammatical constructions, mine etymologies, or exploit the secondary denotations of words given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (as Stevens reportedly did). This pleasure, however, comes laden with a danger, a danger like the one Derrida identified in "White Mythology" as seeking in semantic depth an originary, historical, hard-and-fast reality behind the word. But as R. P. Blackmur intimated decades ago,[19] Stevens' poetry provides two kinds of pleasure, of which the search for a solid semantic basis may be only one. Along with the more austere pleasure of trying to root out sayable cognitive meanings, Stevens' work provides in large measure the more sensuous and nonconceptual pleasure of the direct apprehension of patterns, which we can call aesthetic pleasure. Observing this lends credence to a statement like the following, made by Stevens in a letter to one of his commentators in 1952: "My object is to write esthetically valid poetry. I am not so much concerned with philosophic validity."[20] Thus it may be possible to adopt an extra-ontological approach in which the philosophically oriented rhetoric of subject-object and language-object dualism is banished or at least attenuated.[21]

The patterns formed by the words and the grammar of Stevens' poetry then become an inexhaustible field for another kind of exploration. A number of critics have explored the aesthetic dimension of Stevens' poetry through its rhetorical structures, its figures of speech (metaphor, simile, etc.) and tropic patterns (anaphora, praeteritio, etc.). Like the work of the New Critics in the 1940s and 1950s, their studies focus less on ideas than on the materiality of the poems themselves, while remaining confident in the ability of language to construct a world view that is adequate to one's sense of it. To the extent that they can be grouped together, the works of Bloom, Vendler, and Cook,[22] for instance, all do this while reminding us of the poetic heritage Stevens is building on, be it Whitman and Emerson, Keats and the Romantics, or Dante, among others. As early as 1965, among the essays collected in *The Act of the Mind*, Helen Vendler and Mac Hammond[23] provided us with precious insights about Stevens' grammatical forms. Among the numerous textual surface features they noticed are the mitigations of modals (*might, may*), the "timeless, unqualified nature of infinitives," the frequent use of *as if*,[24] grammatical shifts when a word is repeated.[25] In those days, such features

were read by Vendler as signs of what happens in "the poet's mind"; for Hammond they remained a repertory of what he called "metapoetry." These seminal essays showed the difference that exists between taking statements made in poems as stable entities and noticing how "qualified" Stevens has made them, how resistant to definition they are. Yet most close readers have subordinated their insights to defining Stevens' thought, mind, or even desires—whether in the mode of humanist criticism centered on notions of the "self," or deconstructive criticism centered on finding an implicit theory of language in Stevens' poems. Even Rosu's recent work, which approaches Stevens' language as something other than representational, cannot avoid seeing ideas or cognition as somehow, though not represented, "enacted" in the sound patterns it produces.[26]

Thus, although critics have taken into account various linguistic tactics that prevent Stevens' poems from coalescing into stable statements, few have focused on the material body of the poems' trajectories or taken a hard look at the non- or extra-ontological implications of his particular uses of English lexis and syntax. Yet if Stevens is an "introspective voyager," he is also a voyager through a landscape of language, an artist who pays attention to its minutest details before choosing and adjusting the elements of his composition. These details are not only the denotative and connotative possibilities of the English vocabulary, although the semantic foundation of the signifier-signified bond is richly modulated through Stevens' metaphors, from inherited metaphors like the sun to new ones like the pineapple. Nor are they only suggestive words, like the title of "Somnambulisma" (*CP* 304), or resonant combinations of common words, like the "reader leaning late" in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (*CP* 359). But often the signs of Stevens' work are integrated into a surface texture—the material body of language—that prevents a stable apprehension of hypothetical landscapes, narratives, arguments, or "ideas." What is more, Stevens explores the linguistic terrain through visibly foregrounding the functional possibilities of English—the articles *the* and *a*, prepositions, prefixes, and the verb *to be*—and disrupting reference among succeeding statements. While creating a referential opacity, Stevens' linear surfaces also bare the artifice of their own construction. It is the surface texture of Stevens' English that will be propelled into the foreground in the present book.

The chapters that follow therefore recognize the representational

function of language—explored in various ways by phenomenological, rhetorical, deconstructionist, and historical critics—while emphasizing the ongoing linguistic adjustments made by the poems' speakers. Part I of this book attempts to modulate the traditional approach to Stevens' poems. It deals with the readjustments Stevens makes in relation to metaphor. We see that in the lyrics of *Harmonium* Stevens struggles with inherited theological and ontological metaphors, protesting against them or inverting their hierarchy. In a few poems in *Parts of a World*, on the other hand, the struggle "against" is superseded by one of Stevens' most exhilarating forms of exploration, the disruptive movement of appositional metaphors. Part II forages into linguistics to examine another kind of disruption, one effected by the seemingly banal and rigid use of the copula with *to be*. Here an extended reading of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" serves as a prime example of the creative "artifice" that is made possible through copular relations. Through Stevens' baring of the functional core of language, English becomes a place for extra-ontological (as well as ontological) speculation. Part III is more patently exploratory. It examines "The Man with the Blue Guitar," a poem I consider to exemplify Stevens' ambivalent use of metaphor and his foregrounding of the functional core of English in the most daring way. The poem first gives a voice to an audience that is nostalgic for the outdated dream dealt with in Stevens' earlier poetry, the dream of a stable space of knowing and being that is speakable in language. The audience's demands provide a foil for the performer, who counterbalances this paradigm, not so much by contradicting it as by developing strategies that emphasize the instability of reference in language. Chapter 5 looks at tactics such as the way the performer encrypts topical events in the poem so as to reveal their linguistic precarity. Chapter 6 draws an inference from the music metaphor to demonstrate how the poem becomes an exercise in temporal, perishable ongoingness through its insistent making and unmaking of its own surface patterns.

Although it is undeniable that there is a general development in Stevens' poetry from visual to philosophical themes, for instance, the poet's experimentation with metaphor, syntax, and ongoingness does not follow a straight line. Rather, there is a movement back and forth among different approaches that are already present in the early poetry. The Epilogue of my book, then, reminds us that even in the poems of old age, which define the poet's own death as their horizon, the poetic texture exploits the lessons learned in the earlier poetry and continues to look forward in language, rather than backward toward causality.

This book does not trace the development of Stevens' strategies through his career but looks in depth at a few examples of his most radical and original experiments. Thus the sequence of chapters does not follow the chronology of Stevens' poems except insofar as the first poems discussed are from *Harmonium*, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" occupies Part III, and the last poems discussed are from *The Rock*. Rather, the chapters follow a methodological itinerary from a consideration of the referential value of metaphor, to a consideration of the extra-ontological possibilities of language; from concepts used in literature and philosophy, to those utilized in linguistics, and finally to some borrowed from the aesthetics of music; from an approach that responds to half a century of Stevens criticism, to a more free and experimental one; from the narrow field of Anglo-American literature, to a broader field of language in which English is one language among many and literature is an art form in some ways analogous to music. The itinerary followed thus might be said to move, in the words of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," from "the lion locked in stone" to "the lion in the lute."

Part I

1

Wormy Metaphors and Poems of Againstness

> The twilight overfull
> Of wormy metaphors.
>
> —"Delightful Evening" (CP 162)

Metaphors and the Relation of Resemblance

Both Stevens' poetry and early commentaries on it were haunted by the shades of Wordsworth and Coleridge and the English poets who followed them. Stevens inherited a world conceived of in terms of interrelations between "imagination" and "reality." In such a world, the subject-self is seen as an agent of imaginative powers and of "speculative inquiry" confronted with the object-world that is "perceived immediately."[1] At the same time, the inherited object-world is also imbued with transcendent powers to which both literature and religion pay homage. The world with man in it can be seen as a harmonious and uplifting whole, such as the one Emerson evokes in "Nature" when he writes: "The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression when the mind is open to their influence."[2] Similarly, in the world represented in Wordsworth's poetry, nature is the force that is "universally active" and reveals herself in the phenomena that the poet depicts.[3] God is the other force.

Stevens can be seen as sharing a modern discomfort toward inherited understanding of these forces. J. Hillis Miller was one of the first to

review this discomfort systematically in turn-of-the-century Anglophone poets. In his early phenomenological study, *Poets of Reality*, he postulates that (as concerns his roster of major poets) by the later nineteenth century God had disappeared not only from the human subject's heart but from the object-world of nature. Miller, relying on Stevens' own prose writings in part, relates Stevens' "version of the death of the gods" to this transformed world view and goes so far as to say that the "vanishing of the gods . . . is the basis of all Stevens' thought and poetry."[4] By the 1950s when Stevens wrote "Metaphor as Degeneration" (*CP* 444–445) and "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" (*CP* 533), the "transcendent realm, above and beyond what men can see," Miller contends, is replaced by that which is "within things as they are, revealed in the glistening of the steeple at Farmington, in the flowing of time, in the presence of things in the moment, in the interior fons of man."[5]

In the course of his poetic career, Stevens reiterated, though with decreasing frequency, the idea that not only had the transcendent order disappeared from our visible world but the figures through which it had been represented were now outworn. Typically, as late as 1940, in "Asides of the Oboe," he enumerates three of them as "That obsolete fiction of the wide river in / An empty land; the gods that Boucher killed; / And the metal heroes that time granulates—" (*CP* 250). Thus he not only reconfirms the obsolescence of the divine order and the model it provided for erecting human heroes; he also unmasks those hierarchical constructs as having depended on, even having lived on, figures and forms elaborated by artists, such figures and forms as those represented metonymically here by fiction, painting, and bronze sculpture. Throughout his life, Stevens had an acute sense that history, as Vico remarked, is a history of the "progressive mental states" of humankind, and he extended his perception of these "mental states" to include the figures that are their outward expression. This is illustrated in the lecture "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," for instance, in which he discusses Plato's figure of the soul as a charioteer driving his winged horses across heaven. Plato's figure, Stevens claims, has become "antiquated and rustic," but not only because "the soul no longer exists." It is "antiquated and rustic" because the grounding of this figure in imagination rather than in reality no longer speaks to us.[6] We can only "understand" but not "participate in it" (*NA* 3–4) because the process of selecting and creating the figure no longer corresponds to ours.

The primary figure for Stevens was metaphor. Metaphor, by whatever name, has made possible much of our most moving poetry, from lyrics composed during the time of disorder between the Tang and Song dynasties in China, to Shakespearean sonnets six centuries later, to the poems of Wallace Stevens. Traditionally, Western writers have considered metaphor as a trope of resemblance.[7] The common denominator of resemblance merits attention because of its prevalence from Aristotle to Stevens and because of its capacity to bind together tropes such as metaphor, simile, personification, and prosopopoeia.[8] Before considering the properly linguistic issues attached to metaphor, I would like in this chapter to examine how Stevens tried to reconcile his skepticism toward traditional tropes with the presupposition that the resemblance between referents is the basis for the poet's work of metaphor.

Chapter 22 of Aristotle's *Poetics* has been translated diversely as saying that good metaphor is "the token of genius" because it "means an eye for resemblances," or that it implies "an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars."[9] The presence of "dissimilars" implies that part of the task involved in metaphor-making depends on the metaphor-maker's ability to discriminate:[10] we find analogies in our environment by sifting the similar from the dissimilar. Aristotle's injunction that a good metaphor implies "an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" was marked in pencil by Stevens in the edition of the *Poetics* he probably read before he wrote his essay on "resemblance" (*NA* 71–82) in 1946 as part of "Three Academic Pieces."[11] In separating the "similar" from the "dissimilar," or "resemblance" from "difference," we implicitly refer to categories upon which resemblance and difference (inclusion and exclusion) can be founded. Thus in nature, a young girl's lips "resemble" cherries in respect to the category of color, and her youth "resembles" the spring of the year in respect to its freshness and promise. Resemblance here is a strategy for grouping objects or ideas within an implicit frame of reference, for assembling certain qualities or properties and not others, for sorting them according to certain criteria and not others.

Along with this sorting function, resemblance enables relations to be made. Suzanne Juhasz usefully stresses that metaphor is a transfer in which each term is significant but in which it is the total relationship that is primordial.[12] Thus metaphorical resemblance brings together separate realms within one sphere. Stevens also shared assumptions held by his contemporaries Williams and Pound that the power of metaphor as a "language form" is to "indicate relations that are at the core of [their] poetic concerns," and that metaphor can bridge the "gap" they were so

aware of between subject and object, inner and outer.[13] On the highest level of empirical generality, the perception or conception of analogies allows us to establish patterns in our picture of the world according to selected—but often tacit—criteria. In Western narrative and poetry, figurations of divine and natural ontology have established structural bonds that integrate otherwise disparate things into a pattern. Such figurations, from Acheron and apple to Zeus and zodiac, bind our ordinary understanding of human life and speech to a supposed ground of meaning. The scheme of difference and resemblance becomes the tacit, a priori foundation for producing further metaphors of a divinely ordained order that situates man in nature with heaven above.

The poem "Delightful Evening" schematically illustrates this definition of metaphor and its effects. Herr Doktor takes on a meditative pose, grieving before a landscape that does not satisfy him, although it satisfies the speaker. With the "twilight overfull / Of wormy metaphors," the word "twilight" fits the little evening scene represented in the poem. But by punning on the signifier "light" and creating a spurious relationship between the obviously ironic "delight" and the two lights of "twilight," the poet sees to it that both delight and twilight are contaminated by disappointment. "Twilight" can be taken as a metaphor or metaphorical vehicle indicating a time of sterile maturity, a moment of dulled consciousness, the decline of a civilization. It can also be a *Götterdämmerung*, the twilight of the gods who are no longer believed in. The "wormy metaphors" (like the "rotted names" in "The Man with the Blue Guitar") attach a metaphorical adjective to the word "metaphors" to connote something like "meaningless words" or "invalid fictions." Thus "twilight," the first metaphorical substitution, brings into a relation of resemblance the world of the represented evening and a crisis of (perhaps metaphysical) consciousness. It links two realms, an inhuman with a human one, such as the cycle of day and evening with the pursuit of philosophical questions or a metaphysical ground. At the same time, the "wormy metaphors" self-referentially speak of the desperate ambition of finding a language with which to express relations. Read allegorically, then, "Delightful Evening" affirms the centrality of the trope of metaphor in maintaining a life-sustaining concept of a larger order of things, while at the same time it claims that concept to be bankrupt.

Stevens gives us other clues about the difficulties the disappearance of this order creates for using traditional metaphors in poetry. One specific difficulty is clearly articulated toward the end of his career when

he returned to the theme in "The Course of a Particular" (*Palm* 367). In this lyric the leaves, which in an older day were emblematic of divinely imbued nature, do "not transcend themselves." They speak in a cry neither of "divine attention," nor of "puffed-out heroes," nor of human beings. They thus cry "without meaning more / Than they are in the final finding of the ear in the thing / Itself." This signifies that nature's sounds "mean" no more than the mere perception of them in the ear; more punningly, it also "means" that the cry "means" no more/no longer. The temporal dimension of the "course" lasts until the difference between the perceiver and the natural world translates as a feeling of indifference. "The Course of a Particular," a late poem (1951) that Stevens excluded from his *Collected Poems* in 1954, is an adieu to a hypothesis of natural and human vacuousness that had been ambiguously entertained in the early lyric "The Snow Man" (1921).

The contraction of meaning in "The Course of a Particular" is due to a change not in the leaves but in humankind. Lacking "fantasia," Stevens seems to be saying, modern observers may even lack the basic faculty Coleridge called "fancy," which Stevens interpreted as "an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed" (*NA* 10–11).[14] The vestiges of an old schema of resemblance or analogy only reveal the separateness of each part. What is lacking here is a *source* of metaphorical activity—that is, the subject's imagination or interpretive skill to create new resemblances. For in a realist conception of the world like Stevens', metaphors in stories and poems should be understood on the representational level as an active production of the human eye, mind, imagination, not as a mere deciphering of signs or signatures that are given.[15] In "Three Academic Pieces" he says most clearly, "Resemblance in metaphor is an activity of the imagination," and it should not derive from mere "imitation" or "identity manqué" (*NA* 73) but be the fruit of a creative vision. Thus Stevens himself, at least until the early 1940s, saw the "act of satisfying the desire for resemblance" as the central activity of poetry. The linguistic means of "enhanc[ing] the sense of reality" (*NA* 77) was the domain of metaphor in its broadest sense.

Two of the great challenges for Stevens throughout much of his career were, in this context, first, to work against and undo old metaphorical equivalences, and second, to devise ways of using metaphorical resemblance to open up compositional potential and development. The

younger Stevens wrote numerous short lyrics that grapple with the vestiges of those specific inherited metaphors that defined the place of human beings in the order of things natural and divine. Stevens' struggle is a struggle against the old "order" on which human purpose used to be founded, as has often been remarked. But it is one thing to brush away old notions of divinity with the comment, "And what's above is in the past / As sure as all the angels are" ("Evening without Angels," *CP* 136), or "She sang beyond the genius of the sea" ("The Idea of Order at Key West," *CP* 128). It is another thing to write liberated poetry in a *Götterdämmerung*, an "Evening without Angels" or a not so "Delightful Evening" that is a "Twilight overfull / Of wormy metaphors" (*CP* 162).

As a poet of "againstness" from *Harmonium* to *Parts of a World*, Stevens struggled furiously against the confinements of the hierarchical underpinnings of metaphysical order inherent in the play of old metaphorical resemblances. Metaphors of transcendent authority, both divine and natural, were worked into poems that show dependence on this authority to be chastising and inhibiting to the modern poet's freedom. It is my contention that Stevens was implicitly working less against the idea of divinity and its immanence in nature per se than against the hierarchical patterning the idea imposes on human imaginative and linguistic development. This can be seen as an important if largely unstated challenge to Stevens.

Metaphors of Divine Order

Figurations of both divine and natural order are continually present in the poetry of Stevens' contemporaries, even though the decline of traditional belief had made the place of a transcendent force in individual destiny problematic, and the metaphors for them had started to seem "antiquated and rustic" to many. But whereas T. S. Eliot would reintroduce Christian doctrine into his poetry (and convert to Anglicanism), Stevens would keep up a poetic (and public) stance that contested the hegemony of Christian doctrine and generally treated the issue with less frequency and less urgency as he evolved. It is for this reason that most of the poems in this section on metaphors of divine and natural order are drawn from the earlier poetry, primarily from *Harmonium* (1923), with only a few incursions into *Parts of a World* (1942) for comparison or contrast.

The ontological-theological order that Stevens inherited is authorized by a hierarchical system that appears in the poetry as restrictive and deceptive. A number of poems in *Harmonium* indeed approach the problem of worn-out religion through its most restrictive avenue—the eschatological component of Christianity, a perspective that implies not only a hierarchy of power but also a merging of God's power over and purpose for us with our mortal end. As Montaigne punningly complained, the emphasis in Christian doctrine on the rewards of heaven confuses the *bout* of life, its final end or moment, with the *but*, a life's goal or purpose.[16]

A good deal of the explicit "againstness" we find in Stevens' early poetry satirizes the primacy that metaphysical tenets give to heavenly reward over earthly satisfactions. The second poem in *Harmonium*, "Invective against Swans" (*CP* 4),[17] attacks the eschatological pole of the theological doctrine by pitting an ironized "soul" against the "ganders" in the first and final couplets.

> The soul, O ganders, flies beyond the parks
> And far beyond the discords of the wind.

and

> And the soul, O ganders, being lonely, flies
> Beyond your chilly chariots, to the skies.

It is the time of year when the sun's "descending" announces the temporary death of nature, and the title's swans[18] decline with the sun: debunked in the title, they are further degraded to the rank of "ganders," evoking both geese and human dullards. These park-bound creatures are confined by domestication and surrounded by art that has been desecrated by crows' "dirt." The scene that fills the middle of the poem (and the parks) is particularly lifeless. Its own center is a simile of the "listless testament / Of golden quirks and Paphian caricatures" that bequeaths the ganders' "white feathers to the moon" and gives its "bland motions to the air." Its particular vacuity comes into sharp relief when compared to the celebratory fullness Emerson attributes to the work of the north wind in "The Snow-Storm":

> Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work
> So fanciful, so savage, nought cares he

For number or proportion. Mockingly,
On coop or kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;
A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn . . .

In Stevens' poem, the swans or ganders provide the criteria for what the soul is not. Although the soul is said to transcend the parks' confines, there is no suggestion as to what the soul's supposed metaphysical superiority might be. Further, the negative metaphor produces an ironic reversal; for although the ganders, those degraded swans, metaphorically "resemble" the body trapped in a physical enclosure, they also resemble the soul in whiteness and ability to fly. Thus the invisible, metaphysical soul is contaminated by its metaphorical resemblance to the physical ganders or swans, even as it is said to escape the birds' degenerated environment. The soul's metaphysical heaven is ironically reduced, like the "lonely" soul itself, to a lone "flies"/"skies" rhyme in the final couplet.

The emptying of the transcendent in this poem might be conveniently characterized as what Stevens would later call "evasion by . . . metaphor" ("Credences of Summer," *CP* 373). The "soul," by negative resemblance, may also have become a "mere" metaphor with no ground. It becomes fit to be used only ironically, because the arbitrariness of the authorizing structure is unacceptable. This is what is revealed in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (*CP* 59) in the injunction to "Take the moral law and make a nave of it / And from the nave build haunted heaven," and then "take / The opposing law" and build from it too. And although the speaker in "Christian Woman" proclaims the "supreme fiction" to be poetry as contrasted with the woman's "moral law," his satiric humor cannot mask the fact that his own problematic architecture springs from the metaphoric "nave" and "peristyle." Such poems are bereft of constructing other than negatively. As Kenneth Burke writes, any "'negative *idea* . . . also has about its edges the positive *image*' of what it negates."[19] When the poet protests absence in negative presence, even ironically, he is caught using the hierarchy of the system of values he debunks. Just as the parodic function of the "gander" and "swan" metaphor empties the word "soul" of eschatological transcendence in "Invective against Swans," Stevens' use of architectural contrast contaminates both sides of the resemblance.

In Stevens' metaphors of againstness the use of traditional word-signifiers and concept-signifieds confirms their dominant place in a structure. The composition of metaphors in "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb" (*CP* 56) uses "heaven" (rather than "soul") to signify our mortal fate, to satirize the polarizing force of the spiritual versus material hierarchy. The terms of the title signify both the transcendent vault of heaven and the earthly vault of sepulchre. The "tomb of heaven" is then placed ironically in its implicit hierarchy as the tomb that lies above. It is a source of anxiety because the "darkened ghosts of our old comedy" may be condemned to continuously seeking "whatever it is they seek," or else may be stopped by "the one abysmal night." These two views of eternity's time are wittily brought together in the spatial metaphor of the "icy Elysée" that combines the characteristics of Christian heaven's "topmost distances" and earth's "gusty cold" with a reversal of Elysian sunshine as night and the Elysian underworld as upper sphere.[20] Eleanor Cook has also pointed out the reversal of the "standard" starry-sky topos as it appears at the end of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*.[21] These inherited tropes remain merely reversals, dependent upon the "positive image" of what they question. The double metaphor of the dead as actors and death as darkness fails to do even this much. In the "darkened ghosts of our old comedy" and the "dark comedians" we hear Macbeth's "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more" (*Macbeth*, 5.5.23–25). But we hear not even that here.

Patently satirical poems like "Invective against Swans" or "Of Heaven Considered As a Tomb" seem to invert the inherited hierarchy of values in order to play against the very hierarchicalness of the structure that had legitimized "wormy metaphors." In "Heaven Considered," the speaker is kept in a position of inferiority and impotence, shown by his recourse to "interpreters." The question, "What word have you . . .?" of the dead, besides familiarly meaning "Do you have any news?" also signals the gap between the word-world of the living and the inarticulate, possibly wordless world of the dead. This is confirmed when the interpreters are later enjoined merely to "Make hue" and "Halloo" to those who have gone to the heaven-tomb. Unlike the Interpreter in *Pilgrim's Progress*, whose capital role it is to explain allegories,[22] these interpreters are hollow men. The verticality of the scene and the hierarchization of word structures that represent it impede the formulation of new questions about life and death.

Even a more ambitious poem like "Sunday Morning" (*CP* 66–70),[23] though it rings with memorable language and sober reflection, belies an againstness that ironically inverts heaven's reward and earth's satisfac-

tions, the top and bottom of the hierarchy, rather than devising a new structuring principle. The poem's several subject positions all confront the divine and spiritual with the earthly and bodily. As Eleanor Cook has observed, "The arguments are obvious and stale. But the implicit homiletics: that is another matter. It is in the area of rhetoric that Stevens does battle, not in the area of dialectic."[24] In particular, Cook detects Stevens' challenge to the language of Milton and the Bible in sections I, V, and VIII. From my perspective here, considering the intensity of the younger Stevens' attempt to integrate metaphors of resemblance into new patterns, sections I, III, V, VI, and VII are particularly interesting. Not by accident, they deal pointedly with questions of theological hierarchy.

Section I illustrates the drift from an appreciation of the here and now to an eschatological-oriented belief. "Complacencies of the peignoir, and late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair" first instigate a metonymical and spatial movement. The epicurean woman's whole being is drawn toward another realm, as her "dreaming feet" lead her to the "silent Palestine" of Christ's sacrifice. The final "Dominion of the blood and sepulchre," however, can also be seen as the transformation of the opening coffee and oranges and "sunny chair" induced by the resemblances of metaphor.[25] The woman's sensuous comfort thus finds its analogue in a theological symbol that also has its origins in a bodily life—the wine-and-bread celebration of the Last Supper and the Son's interment.

Picking up the strand of Christ's "blood" and humanity, section III inserts Christ's birth into a double structure. On the one hand, it contains three implied narratives of each of the three divine engenderings. On the other hand, it is a condensed "history" of the evolution of religions: from Jove's motherless "inhuman birth," to the virgin birth of Christ and its "commingling" of our blood, to the possibility of a totally human version.

> Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
> The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
> Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
> The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
> A part of labor and a part of pain,
> And next in glory to enduring love,
> Not this dividing and indifferent blue. (III, 9–15)

On the surface one might say with Adelaide Kirby Morris that given this pattern, the woman "must then admit the possibility of evolution from 'the thought of heaven' to a divinity that 'must live within herself'" (*CP* 67) of section II.[26] Yet even Jove is measured by the "human" standard of the "king," the negation of "inhuman" and "no mother," and the pun in "Large-*man*nered" (reutilized in "The Man With the Blue Guitar" IV). The narrative of the evolution of religion depends on personification. In addition, the human "hinds" situate Jove hierarchically. They return to recognize the "commingling" (a seemingly nonhierarchical word) of human and divine that defines Christianity, and thus reinforce the hierarchy of earth and "virginal" blood below, and "star" and "heaven" above. The third stage projects an anthropomorphized paradise into the future, leaving "earth" and "sky" in an ambiguous relation.

The hierarchical bias of religious metaphors seems most confining, however, in the implied narrative of each divinity's engendering. These are clustered around the series of representations of human motherhood that ends by integrating "labor" and "pain" (of both working the land and giving birth) into the speaker's imagined "paradise." The vocabulary of this final vision is redolent with double registers that point to a metaphorical contamination of what Kirby calls the divine "within" by a concern with divine origin in the "sky" and "blue" (Mary's color) of heaven, and the "glory" of paradisal splendor. The semantic organization of the entire section keeps returning to the mutual imbrication of physical and divine, even as the section's statements tend to reject past versions of the birth of divine figures because of their vertical perspective. On the other hand, such verticality imbues the stanza's temporal logic. In the story of the expulsion from the earthly Garden of Eden, paradise is origin and first home, while in the promise of a return to God's presence, paradise is heaven but also end as purpose, not only Montaigne's *bout* but the *but* he disputed. The reverie of the eschatological "Dominion of blood and sacrifice" that closes section I foreshadows the absorption of the mothering metaphor of section III into a vision of end, in a final hope that the "sky will be much friendlier than now." The course of an individual human life, the fertile engendering by and of "our blood," is made subordinate to the eschatological "enduring love" to which it is compared but can no longer attain.

The palliative to "all our dreams / And our desires" is given by the

adage "Death is the mother of beauty" in section V. This formulation is so hypnotizing that it imposes the "need for some imperishable bliss" even on maidens' love, the prelude to mothering. Death "makes the willow shiver in the sun," mingling the promise of death with the maidens' love here on earth. When the phrase "Death is the mother of beauty" is taken up again to close section VI, it introduces another conceptual difficulty: death is a "mystical" mother "Within whose burning bosom we devise / Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly." Thus, although the section's image of paradise is an image of earth frozen in a stilled moment, the transcendent, not the earthly, is what preconditions the focus of our desires on the sensuous lives embodied in "Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly." If the personification of death as a mother is a "bosom"/matrix for actual ("earthly") mothers, it creates a vertical tautology equating death as mother of transformed versions of earth with the earth as the engenderer of stilled figurations of (death's) paradise. Each seems the superfluous mimesis of the other. Paradise is earth malformed just as "Malformed, the world was paradise malformed" ("The Pure Good of Theory" III, *CP* 332).

Neither do the dynamic relationships that follow in section VII seem to develop alternative metaphors or an alternative structure. Helen Vendler calls this section Stevens' "poem of the *Götterdämmerung*," a representation of "anachronistic primitivism" in which "prophecies of a new divinity are wistfully and even disbelievingly made."[27]

> 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.
> Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
> Out of their blood, returning to the sky; (VII, 1–7)

The archaism of the scene brings us back to our ancestral source as well as to a possible archetypal image of sun worship[28] (already latent in the "sunny chair" of section I). Although Harold Bloom praises this section for the "new order" created out of its "metaleptic reversals of the poem's prior figurations," an order in which followers of the Nietzschean god among man manifest both "origin and purpose,"[29] the "return" to the sky

can also be read as a repetition of the impeding structure of hierarchicalness found in Stevens' other religious metaphors. The chant denotes idolatry, the submissive worship of a "lord." Its figures are derivative of ancient myth and Judeo-Christian successors of it insofar as they enact stories of "blood," the blood of sacrifice in the chant "of paradise, / Out of their blood, returning to the sky," and the blood of reproductive transmission. Blood seems to be the "natural" but male metonymy of the sensuality and sensuousness of maternal "desire/s" of sections II and VI. The section is an ingrown expression of the larger poem's central figures. But the chief impediment to creating a new structure, it seems to me, is the tautological end implied in this disguised eschatology. Indeed, "returning to the sky" closes the circle of the chant's being "of" paradise—a chant about but also from paradise. For the returning chant originates in paradise as well as in the men's blood; it originates, in sum, in the metaphors men have constructed to form paradise.

Thus not only in minor poems but in this major work in *Harmonium* we find Stevens mining the old theological metaphors even as he tries to debunk them. This metaphor-making depends on "using religious forms to deny religious forms."[30] Stevens' figures rely on anthropomorphism since earth provides the analogues for the divine order. Attempts in "Sunday Morning" to give form to a human-centered vision of sensuous pleasure end up relating them to engendering and dying and to God-centered, transcendent value. The religious metaphors tend to merge the implicit life-narrative into a circle or tautology. Jove and paradise in section II and the return of "men that perish" in the sun's "summer morn" are products of our collective metaphor-making ability or our ability to create ensembles of resemblances. The earth's pleasures are imbricated in rhetorical substitutions that never form any independent pattern but can only deplete the divine by taking an ironic view of the earth as model, as in section VI, or by conceding domination to a metaphor of transcendent power that closes the trope in on itself, as in VII.

To sum up, the family of metaphors centering on motherhood and unfolding to include earth-birth and paradise-death itself illustrates the repeated linkage of questions of origin with questions of end. Sections III, V, and VI exploit metaphors of motherhood, but since the coherence is built on earthly and human figurations in relation to heavenly value, and since the poem's initial female dreamer desires yet doubts the adequacy of the earth, the value of the very concepts of earthly and