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Eleanor Cook: A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens

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Biography

Individual poets, whatever their imperfections may be, are driven all their lives by that inner companion of the conscience which is, after all, the genius of poetry in their hearts and minds. I speak of a companion of the conscience because to every faithful poet, the faithful poem is an act of conscience. (OP 253, LOA 834, 1951)

Wallace Stevens lived from 1879 to 1955. He was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, of chiefly Dutch and German ancestry. He recognized family traits in himself. “The Dutch are all like that,” he once wrote, “as weird as the weather”—a simile that bears watching (L 146, 1909). He recommended studying one’s family tree as a way of becoming absorbed in American history, and he spent time and money studying his own in his later years. He took pride in “being one of these hard-working and faithful people” (L 782, 1953). (The word “faithful” turns up more than once when Stevens talks about his own art.) He remained deeply interested in the language and habits and beliefs of his ancestors, including the fact they saw visions. In a book where the writer’s original spelling had been retained, Stevens found the word for “pork” spelled “borck,” recognized it as “pure Pennsylvania German,” and stayed up reading the book “night after night, wild with interest” (L 521, 1946). He thanked a friend for “super-duper” baroque postcards from Munich and Geneva, which reminded him of his mother’s side of the family. “Pennsylvania Germans have visions during their work with the greatest regularity,” he told her (L 842–43, 1954).

Stevens’s father was a lawyer and businessman, involved in civic affairs and turning his hand to verse occasionally. His health became troubled in 1901, he lost a good deal of money in 1907, and he died in 1911 at sixty-three, feeling defeated by life, as his son later surmised (L 458, 1943). A few of his letters, arch and admonitory by turns, are printed in Stevens’s *Letters*. (“You are not out on a pic-nic—but really preparing for the campaign of life” [L 18, 1898]. “I am convinced from the Poetry (?) that you write your Mother that the afflatus is not serious—and does not interfere with some real hard work” [L 23, 1899].)

Stevens's mother, Margaretha Catharine Zeller, was cheerful, active, and devout; she read to her children from the Bible each night, and she died in her faith. Stevens remembered the freshness of her person in "everything she wore," and her vigor and sense of being alive (L 172, 1912). She was the kind of mother to whom a fifteen-year-old son could sign a letter, "with love to yourself—yourself's partner and you and your partner's remaining assets I myself am as ever, Yours truly, Wallace Stevens" (L 7, 1895). (The remaining assets were his two sisters, at home.) Or, aged sixteen: "Forever with supernal affection, thy rosy-lipped arch-angelic jeune" (L 10, 1896). A few of her letters survive, in the fine hand of those taught penmanship in school. She teased her daughter about courting. ("No doubt you and Mr. Stone will do some *meandering*" [18 April 1909, Huntington Library].) She encouraged her to travel. ("I wish you might go to Europe; *borrow* the money and pay it back when you start teaching. I say go if you can" [18 May 1909, *ibid.*].) Stevens would write in the same vein to his future wife. And his mother loved birds, as did Stevens, at least for a while. "I have seen them [robins] and welcome them," she wrote when ill (29 March 1912, *ibid.*). Four months later she was dead, and Stevens had lost both parents within a year and a day. Stevens's account of his mother's last days is very moving (L 172–74, 1912). She was about sixty-four, and when he himself had passed that age, by that time the last living member of his family, memories of her came back (see "The Auroras of Autumn" III).

There were five children, three sons and two daughters, Wallace Stevens being the second oldest. The youngest, Mary Katharine, died at thirty on 21 May 1919 while nursing in France after World War I, and Stevens took the death hard. He had to turn away, overcome with emotion, at the sight of war-mothers in a Memorial Day parade, each carrying a gold-star flag; it was because of "my present state of mind on account of [K]atharine" (WAS 2014, 31 May 1919).

From 1897 to 1900, Stevens attended Harvard as a special student, then briefly tried journalism in New York, before opting for law school; he went on to work in insurance law. As a fledgling lawyer he lived in a boarding house in New York. The acquisition of a small table in his room was an event. He could write on it, "instead of [on] a suit-case on my knee," he told his fiancée in 1909 (WAS 1839, 28 April). Presumably he was saving money during his long engagement. In 1900, he had bought a small copy of the Psalms, signed it, "W. Stevens N. York December 13—1900," then couldn't resist adding the price, "4 cents!" He knew what it was to be short of money and he was careful with it. In 1916 he joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, where he became a vice-president in the home office in 1934. He lived in Hartford for the rest of his life. In 1909 he married Elsie Kachel Moll from Reading, after a long-distance courtship of five years; they had one child, a daughter Holly, born in 1924.

Stevens was a vice-president who, aged sixty-three, sometimes washed the dinner dishes and scrubbed the kitchen floor, among other household chores. ("Floor scrubbing" could even engender poetry [L 450, 1943].) He learned about dust in the first year of his marriage when his new wife was away: "a huge matter. It settles . . . continuously, as . . . one learns day by day things unsuspected and amazing!" He signed the letter, "Your—learner—and student of dust" (WAS 1911, 7 June 1910). He had an instinct for domesticity. A reticent man, needing times of quiet and isolation, he also needed to center himself in a home and a family. At twenty-four, a few months before he met Elsie, he found himself wildly lonely, in a "Black Hole," and he knew very well why: "The very animal in me cries out for a lair. I want to see somebody, hear somebody speak to me, look at somebody, speak to somebody in turn. I want companions. I want more than my work, than the nods of acquaintances, than this little room. . . . Yet I dare not say what I do want. It is such a simple thing. I'm like that fool poet in [Shaw's] 'Candida.' Horrors!" (L 69, 1904). This is from the journal Stevens kept when young, a journal mostly given up when he began writing regularly to his future wife. The journal is candid and often uncertain; it records doubts and fears and resolutions and emotions. It records observations, sometimes of New York City, sometimes of the countryside. A few paragraphs read like exercises, set-pieces that Stevens may have thought of expanding or editing had he remained a journalist. He talked to himself, testing thoughts and moods. In 1906, he could not "make head or tail of Life." He was, he complained, as boring on this topic as "a German student or a French poet, or an English socialist!" Why weren't things "definite—both human and divine"? Then, choosing jobs where things are certainly definite, he wrote that he might "enjoy being an executioner, or a Russian policeman" (L 86–87).

The letters to Elsie Kachel Moll form a class in themselves, extending over the five-year period of their courtship and engagement, and later. (Long engagements were not unusual in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and understandable, given middle-class financial and child-bearing habits.) She later destroyed a number of letters, saving only extracts. What we have shows an amorous, sportive, fantastical Stevens, sometime talking as much to himself as to his lady. But he does reach out to her: recalling times together, telling her of his desires, reassuring her about being a wife or about religious matters or about family background. (He came from an established Reading family; she did not, and Stevens's family disapproved of the match. She joined the church, but he had no intention of doing so, though he liked the idea of the church's existence.) He sometimes addressed her as "Bud" and signed himself "Your Buddy," a term of endearment between lovers at the time. She reciprocated. He cavorted before her as Pierrot, as Tom Folio, as Ariel. It was part of his "antic disposition." (See, for example, L 114, 1908.) As with Yeats's jester in "Cap and Bells," these were displays of love. A young woman

inclined to worries and melancholy was being diverted and made to laugh. “Wallace is crazy. Don’t mind him,” she wrote to her parents on her honeymoon, in a postscript to an exuberant card from Stevens (SP 246). There were other selves too: his bewigged self (WAS 1830, 9 July 1909) or the Tireless Historian, the Devil of Sermons within me, the Giant.

The union would prove very troubled in its middle years. For over ten years at the start, there are touching signs of the ways Stevens worked at his marriage. Nonetheless, signs of estrangement began in the early 1920s, subsided with the birth of a child in 1924, then returned by the early thirties. The estrangement became serious and prolonged. Stevens remained reticent about it, though he allowed himself a few bitter poems in the early thirties, poems he never collected. His wife’s difficulties can only be surmised. Henry Church, one of the very few close friends to whom Stevens spoke of his marital problems, wrote to him about his wife’s virtues (WAS 3413, 27 March 1943) and later teased him about being a domestic tyrant (WAS 3426, 24 August 1943). This time Stevens did answer directly, defending himself (L 453).

In their later years, things eased, and there is a new tone to Stevens’s remarks about his wife. A three-week holiday in Hershey proved to be “one of the happiest holidays we have ever had” (L 534, 1946). Confined to home after a fall on the ice, Stevens wrote that his wife “was a true angel” and that staying “at home with her . . . was a happy time” (L 663, 1950). Returning from trips to New York, he found “the house full of the good smell of fresh cookies” (L 743, 1952) or “a newly-baked loaf of bread, round and swelling and sweet to smell” (L 854, 1954). And he was enjoying his grandson, Peter, who would sit in his lap while Stevens invented stories about animals—including “one about an elephant with two trunks, one tenor, one bass” (L 744, 1952).

Stevens’s early letters move quickly, but his mature letters should be read slowly; the later the date, the slower the pace. Otherwise it is possible to miss his pithy, sometimes tongue-in-cheek sentences in which a lot is implied. He loved aphorisms and his style shows it. Stevens, like any poet, also knew the arts of precision and of silence. (“It might occur to you that I should like to review this book. I should not.”) There are a fair number of letters up to his marriage in 1909, just before his thirtieth birthday. There is also the early journal. In Stevens’s middle years, from 1909 to 1934 (age thirty to fifty-five), the letters fall off. But for the last twenty years of his life, we have a large number of letters. It is this latter group that requires a reader to slow down.

Stevens was not a chatty letter-writer. He never suffered from a loose tongue: the opposite, if anything. (He referred to his “own stubbornnesses and taciturn eras” as coming “straight out of Holland” and impossible to change. But, he wrote, he always tried to undo any damage he might have done [L 422, 1942].) On paper, he showed little sustained interest in the gossip, minor self-displays, leisurely detail, and openness that make for a good

letter-writer as usually conceived. When Stevens does unburden himself, the glimpses are all the more affecting. Congratulating a friend on the birth of a second child, he added (the only such remark I recall seeing), that there was nothing he would have liked more, “but I was afraid of it” (L 321, 1937). (His wife was thirty-eight when she bore her first child.) In his pleas with his daughter that she stay at Vassar during the war and complete her studies, he spoke as he rarely did about living “the good in your heart” and devoting her life to it, even if she never spoke of it. The agitation of the time—military, political, and social—“acquires all its force, all its sanction, from one thing only and that is the love of the good” (L 426, 1942). His daughter decided to leave Vassar nonetheless. About 1907, his own father had apologized to Stevens’s sister, Elizabeth, because he had not managed his finances well enough to send her to college: “thus my dream of Vassar for you went to nought!” (Bates, 10). An ironic memory for Stevens, though he did not mention it.

The early letters and journal show a great fullness of response: from the senses, from the feelings, of thought. Aged nineteen, he recorded a walk through the garden “with Sally in a half enchantment over the flowers” (L 28, 1899). He distinguished scents. (Bergamot has a “spicey smell,” and mignonette a “dry, old-fashioned goodness of smell.”) He saw shapes. (Snapdragon “reproduces a man in the moon or rather the profile of a Flemish smoker.”) His love of flowers stayed with him all his life, and an interest in flowers remained a bond between him and his wife. He loved his food, as we might infer from his poetry, and that too remained a bond with his wife, who was a good cook. “Generally speaking, grocery stores have considerable interest for me,” he told a friend (LFR 384, 1920). His friends sent him fruit from Florida or different teas from abroad or told him of various honeys. Or he himself ordered items from Paris (see “Forces, the Will & the Weather”) or elsewhere.

Shortly after his parents’ death in 1911–12, Stevens began to write remarkable poetry, fresh, striking, with a voice of its own, technically impressive. He had been writing poetry for at least fifteen years, but the early work is conventional and only mildly interesting. Suddenly, in a leap much like Keats’s inexplicable leap, he started to publish extraordinary poems: “Sunday Morning,” “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” “Domination of Black.” Stevens’s fellow craftsmen recognized a new presence in their midst. “Have you given the poems of Wallace Stevens in the Oct. *Poetry* any attention,” Hart Crane asked in 1919. “There is a man whose work makes most of the rest of us quail. His technical subtleties alone provide a great amount of interest. Note the novel rhyme and rhythm effects” (*O My Land, My Friends: The Selected Letters of Hart Crane*, ed. Hammer and Weber [1997], 26). (For the poems, see the head note to “The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage.”) At the same time, Stevens said little to his business associates about this passion. In

1923, he published his first collection of poems, *Harmonium*, with Alfred A. Knopf. He would remain with Knopf for the rest of his life, in all publishing six collections before his *Collected Poems* in 1954. With Knopf's permission, he also published initial limited runs of poems with small presses whose designers and printers he admired. *Harmonium* made its way only slowly. Stevens was not a literary polemicist like Pound and Eliot, nor was he widely active in the literary world. (Pound was impressed enough with his work to invite him to contribute some writing in 1927, but Stevens declined. By this time he had a new baby and had entered a silent period [letter to William Carlos Williams, 7 Sept. 1927, Beinecke Library]. Pound later had second thoughts [Filreis (1994), 147].) In mid-1924, he received royalties of \$6.70. "I shall have to charter a boat and take my friends around the world," he commented (L 243).

Stevens would later find it a struggle to persuade people that there was nothing really peculiar in his combination of activities. Chaucer was a senior civil servant in various capacities, Shakespeare a successful theater manager, Milton from 1649 to 1660 the Secretary for Foreign Languages, Eliot for some years an executive with Lloyds Bank, and Williams a medical doctor. Yet critics tended to stereotype businessmen, Stevens complained, so that someone in business who writes poetry seems "queer." He had supposed this to be an "American attitude," only to discover it in French and Belgian critics too (L 562, 1947). In 1951, he reflected on how hard it seemed "for people to take poetry and poets naturally. One is either tripe or the Aga Khan of letters" (L 716). Late in life, he suggested to an interviewer that "poetry and surety claims aren't as unlikely a combination as they seem. There's nothing perfunctory about them for each case is different" (Lewis Nichols, *New York Times*, 3 Oct. 1954).

Stevens must have found his other life energizing or he could not have started over again at the end of a working day, reading or writing. In fact, he commonly started the day by reading a few pages. He was an early riser and loved the dawn, especially just before sunrise. (There are poems on that magical time of day, such as "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself.") He pursued his reading like a born scholar (see below, on the figure of the rabbi). Even when occupied with a new baby, he managed to read a book from time to time, "for, as the Chinese say, two or three days without study and life loses its savor" (L 245, 1925). Sometimes he concentrated on an area that interested him: "My hobby just now is the 17th century" (L 176, 1912).

Art and insurance, his vocation and profession, could clash. In 1935, an acquaintance, a printer, was touring nearby

on foot and *in shorts* . . . and promised to call on me. The office here is a solemn affair of granite, with a portico resting on five of the grimmest possible columns. The idea of Mr. Ney and his wife toddling up the

front steps and asking for me made me suggest that they might like to stop at some nearby rest-house and change to something more bourgeois. This is merely one of the hilarious possibilities of being in the insurance business. After all, why should one worry? (L 283)

But then, Stevens had just become a vice-president, and this was the 1930s, long before the 1960s relaxed the attitude toward dress.

Not that Stevens was a worshipper at the business shrine. “The only other people I see are contractors and lawyers and similar blood-curdling people” (WAS 2024, 12 June 1920). In 1953, he attended a national insurance convention “of our principal men,” and reported sitting “in a smoke-ball (of cigars, pipes, cigarettes) day after day, listening to platitudes propounded as if they were head-splitting perceptions” (L 804). But he was very good at his day job, and he clearly wanted to do it well. (See LOA 792–99, 1937 and 1938, for two short articles Stevens wrote about his profession.) Eventually he earned a reputation as “the most outstanding surety-claims man in the business” (Brazeau, 77), “the dean of surety-claims men in the whole country” (ibid., 67). Once, when the Hartford president asked his vice-presidents to identify problem areas in their departments, Stevens stood up and replied, “The surety-claims department has no problem,” and then sat down. Nobody challenged him (ibid., 59). Stevens’s salary, incidentally, was nothing like today’s salaries for top executives. In 1944, he was paid \$20,000, and his salary never reached \$25,000 (Sharpe, 3); using the wages and benefits index, \$20,000 in 1944 is worth about \$500,000 today (2006).

Like all of us, Stevens was conditioned by his time and place and occupation. He drank too much and told off-color jokes on occasion, including a Harvard occasion (probably in order to relax things). One Harvard professor reacted with high dudgeon, another with amused understanding. Perhaps “slightly risqué,” was Harry Levin’s judgment (Brazeau, 171). He was capable of isolated anti-Semitic remarks, though some of these sound a matter of class as much as anything. At the same time, he took his daughter to a synagogue to hear a rabbi (a “wise man”) speak (*WSJ* 16 [1992]: 212), while the rabbi is a constant exemplary figure in his poems. Similarly, the isolated remarks about African-Americans sound largely about class, though certainly not invariably.

He grew up before houses and streets were lit by electricity, and he loved the effects of light and shade and dark all his life. During his last illness, at home between hospital stays, he lay on his back in the garden, watching the sky. The enchantments of the night sky went back decades. “A half-misty Fantin-La Tourish night” (L 92, 1906); “Our moon returns. Dear Elsie, hark! / Once more we whisper in the dark” (L 107, 1907–8); “So let us call that golden, misty moon rising over Picardy [in a painting] our own” (L 135, 1909). But Stevens was a devotee of sun more than moon. “Thursday morning sat in

a shaft of light in Livg's [Livingood's] office—he read Milton's *Paradise Lost* to me.—The sun was better than the poetry—but both were heavenly things” (L 46, 1900). The sun one fall was “almost a September sun (I know them all)” (L 158, 1909). As for color, “God! What a thing blue is!” (L 72, 1904). A hyacinthine macaw interested him chiefly because he could then “see what color hyacinthine really is!” (L 184, 1915).

He loved the touch of air and water on his skin. Florida air was “pulpy,” he wrote (L 192, 1916). And he cherished memories of swimming all day long, a memory shared with other North American children, and not just North American (see Wordsworth, “Oh, many a time . . .,” *Prelude* 1850, l.288). He swam morning, noon, and night, “for hours without resting and, in fact, can still.” He and his friends lay on the walls of the locks, baked themselves, and then rolled into the water to cool off (L 125, 1909). Years later, he could still recall the warmth and the laziness. In 1906, he returned; he floated underwater, looking at “the blue and brown colors there and I *shouted* when I came up” (L 98, 1907). Even without these letters, we could guess that “A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream” was written by someone who loved to swim, to come up from under the water and look through it, to float in it, head above the water-line or below it.

When he was young, he longed to travel, and he spoke of his dreams to his fiancée. He looked over a map of eastern Canada for half an hour one evening, following the rivers and lakes, and referring to steamship lines. What appealed were Quebec, the St. Lawrence River, and especially the Bay of Fundy (“where the tide falls seventy-five feet and people get off boats by ladders”). He dreamed of spending a few months there, “in real woods, hunting and fishing.” But that would be after seeing London with his future wife (SP 237–38, 1909). Most of these dreams came to nothing. First money, then war, then the Depression and another war intervened. There came a time when Stevens preferred not to travel after all, partly because his wife suffered from motion sickness (Holly Stevens, “Bits of Remembered Time,” 657). They did manage a long trip south through the Panama Canal in 1923. And Stevens traveled on business early in his career, though time to take in his surroundings was limited. All his life he nourished an imaginative life in favorite spots he had never seen: Paris, Lausanne, Basel, for example. He would always remember an early camping trip to the interior of British Columbia. “In the last few weeks before his death,” his daughter wrote, “he spoke of the trip frequently to me” (SP 117). It was in August 1903; Stevens was twenty-three years old. He went across Canada by train, then spent a month at a hunting camp in the Rockies. “Wrapped in my Hudson Bay blanket, I look like a loaf of bread by the fire” (L 65). A Hudson Bay blanket (in production since at least 1798) is made of white wool with one or more bright stripes at the end. Stevens's white blanket is, of course, an *unbaked* loaf, set in a warm spot by the campfire to rise. He came from a time familiar with the baking of bread.

Given his susceptibility to light and color, Stevens was bound to like paintings. He had firm views about them from the start, looking for what he later called “force.” The same word was a test for other kinds of art. When he had enough money to buy paintings, he did so, acquiring a number through a Paris dealer, Anatole Vidal, and later through his daughter Paule Vidal, so that he did not see them before they arrived. He had to know something about the artist’s work (he read art magazines with care); and the painting had to please his dealer, on whose taste he relied (L 777, 1953). He could do better this way than by purchasing them in New York. People who think of art objects as decorations or commodities will not understand the need that impelled Stevens. He was aware of what surrounded him. He was not interested in displaying works of art; he wanted them in order “to do me good” (L 280, 1935). “I feed on these things,” he wrote (L 548, 1947). A gift from China of a carved wooden god-like figure delighted him (see the description, L 230–31 [1922], and pictures in Qian, *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art* [2003], 158). Studying him, said Stevens, was “as good as a jovial psalm”; among his benedictions, he told Stevens “not to mind one’s bad poems” (*ibid.*). In buying contemporary art, Stevens was also encouraging artists whose work he liked—similarly with buying books from good small presses, or having his favorite books specially bound by an outstanding binder.

Like any good writer, Stevens was a prodigious reader. He “read left and right when young,” and he remembered what he read. Reading was simply a natural habit, so natural that Stevens recorded a couple of weekends when he did *not* read, or write either (L 561 and 744, 1947 and 1952). As he said in 1954, “It adds tremendously to the leisure and space of life not to pick up a book every time one sits down” (L 845). He was nearly seventy-five and working full time as vice-president of the Hartford.

A list of Stevens’s reading in his teens and twenties compiled from his journal and his letters is extraordinary. What did he read? Poetry, of course, and fiction and essays. He read a large number of periodicals, later subscribing to many, including various foreign ones. He read French periodicals and books, and French became in effect his second language. He also read German, though more easily when young (L 758, 1952). He taught himself some Spanish, and he had enough Latin to pursue things written in that language; in 1953 he bought Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi* in Latin (L 766). He read travel literature, philosophy, and so on. We can discover his favorite writers without much trouble. Goethe was an early and lasting favorite (L 22, 1899; L 457, 1943). Turgenev was “special” to him (L 509, 1945); he would reread Hardy if he had his copies nearby (L 147, 1909); “one of my early idols was Thomas More . . . the sense of his civility” (L 409, 1942). We can also tell something of his favorites through the echoes of them in his poetry.

Paradoxically, Stevens was aware of the danger of too much reading. The desire to read is insatiable, he said to his young Cuban friend, the writer José

Rodríguez Feo. “Nevertheless, you must also think” (L 513, 1945). It is possible for those who do not read much to know more than those who do. Take, for instance, Rodríguez Feo’s mother. “She wanted to name a newly born colt Platon,” her son wrote, “but I told her that the name was too precious and she said that it was musical and went well with his languid eyes” (L 602, 1948). “How much more this mother knows than her son who reads Milosz and Svevo,” Stevens commented to his good friend, Barbara Church (ibid.).

When Stevens began to write, American literature was hardly respectable and the British command of writing in English was overwhelming. How to write poetry in the English language in a country very unlike England in its landscape, fauna, and flora? A writer may add all kinds of novel birds and beasts, but if the mindset and the forms come from overseas, then American or African or Australian or Canadian or Caribbean or Indian poetry in English will still sound British. Stevens’s task was to find the idiom that was his own, and of his own time and place. If he could do this, he would thereby create an American poetry. He did not start from any nationalist sentiments (see OP 309–10, LOA 803, 1939; also OP 315–16, LOA 828–29, 1950).

Given Stevens’s response to the outdoors, it is not surprising that his poetry often walks us around the skies, through a day, through the seasons, pausing here or there at one object or one place. We could make a fine seasonal anthology from Stevens’ poems, including one on “deep January” (“No Possum, No Sop, No Taters”) and a favorite of mine on February (“Poesie Abrutie”). The place may be New England or Florida (in the earlier poetry) or Europe or unspecified. Yet if this is “nature poetry” (to go by an old term), it does not sound anything like Wordsworth or Frost. “Nature poetry” is a poor term, in fact, because “nature” is a hydra-headed word. What *is* nature? Nature can be “Pretty Scenery” or Nature can be “the whole Goddam Machinery,” as Frost puts it in “Lucretius versus the Lake Poets.” (The best rule of thumb for dealing with this hydra-head comes from C. S. Lewis [*Studies in Words* (1960), 43]. In any given context, ask what is the implied contrary of “natural.” For example, is it “unnatural” or “artificial” or “supernatural” or “civil”? The same rule of thumb is useful for large words like “freedom,” “order,” or “elite.”) Stevens’s poems sometimes offer a strange take on nature. Yet they are not usually fanciful. In fact, he claimed in 1935 that every Florida poem of his had “an actual background,” adding that the world as perceived by a man of imagination might well appear to be “an imaginative construction” (L 289).

When talking about his work, Stevens regularly used the terms “reality” and “imagination” and the “interactions” between them. He liked this last term especially, and it turns up in various forms (“interdependence,” et cetera). “Reality” and “imagination” are such huge terms that they are not very helpful. Stevens defined them variously, explicitly or implicitly, on a sliding scale of meaning, and he clearly liked this flexibility. He talked more about reality and the imagination in his earlier years, and more about interaction as he

developed his art. (Toward the end of his life, he looked back and decided that his “imagination-reality” concern was “marginal to [his] central theme,” which he defined as “the possibility of a supreme fiction” [L 820, 1954].) Imagination for Stevens is one of the great human powers. Not by itself, though. He had little time for an imagination that tried to ignore reality. It is “fundamental,” he wrote in a 1942 essay, for the poet to be “attached to reality” and for the imagination to “adhere to reality” (NA 31, LOA 662). That is why his late “necessary angel” says, “I am the angel of reality” rather than “I am the angel of imagination” (“Angel Surrounded by Paysans”). To be sure, it is “the world within us” that keeps the outside world from being “desolate.” But there is an “interchange between these two worlds . . . migratory passings to and fro, quickenings, Promethean liberations and discoveries” (NA 169, LOA 747, 1951). The process is two-way.

By my count, Stevens had two subjects, plus an abandoned third. From the start he wanted to write poetry of the earth, poetry of its place, especially poetry of the natural world. The way that he conceived it, however, changed over the years. His other, and finally main, subject was what he called a “supreme fiction.” His abandoned subject was love poetry. He began to write it early, developed it, published it in *Harmonium*, then said good-bye to it in “Farewell to Florida,” though in some ways he never left it. Of course there are other subjects too. But the other subjects tend to gravitate toward Stevens’s main interests.

“O quam te memorem virgo?” (“What name should I call you by, O maiden?”) asks Aeneas (*Aeneid* I.237). In *Harmonium*, “The sea of spuming thought foists up again / The radiant bubble that she was” (“Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”). It is Venus, in both writers. In Virgil it is the goddess herself, though her son does not recognize her. In Stevens, it is Venus remembered, especially through Botticelli’s famous painting of the birth of Venus. Stevens’s relation with the goddess, so intense at the beginning and so differently intense at the end, was troubled in his middle years. He was born to be a love poet, and to give us what high Modernism too often lacks: a poetry of eros. Stevens had the makings of a Ben Jonson, a love poet of a most interesting kind: of shades of love after the rose-colored glasses of first youth begin to make out shade. It is eros that draws Stevens. “In Stevens, sexuality is never an act; it is a state, a condition,” Richard Howard once remarked (seminar, 1990). Just so.

If sex were all, then every trembling hand
Could make us squeak, like dolls. . . .

Stevens is smiling, groaning, acting out his Dutch-uncle role, and his French-uncle role too, in this aftermath to a lovers’ quarrel, “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” He is musing over the forms of love in a crowded, demanding, and moving love-poem. The poem was written early (1918) when Stevens was still discovering how difficult a goddess Venus could be.

Was his wife, after all, his muse, but in an unexpected way? Stevens's first major work is marked by a new honesty about Venus, as also about religious matters. Reality had intervened to challenge the erotic and other platitudes that fill Stevens's early work.

"Peter Quince at the Clavier" appeared in 1915. The title implies that Shakespeare's comic rustic, Peter Quince, may be speaking, but the story is of Susanna and the Elders. The point of view is far from simple. Stevens, in some ways the subtlest of men, liked to play the role of a bumbler, especially in matters of love. (Perhaps he was, sometimes.) Peter Quince is only one of several unexpected personae such as Crispin the Comedian. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Peter Quince solemnly directs a comical play-within-a-play where two separated lovers communicate through a chink in the wall, until they finally meet, only to die. What can this comical play have in common with the story of Susanna and the Elders? One answer is: walls and private places, and their effects on love and lust, and death too. As if this is not enough complication, Stevens begins by sounding as if his own persona is speaking: "Just as my fingers on these keys / Make music. . . ." Whether Stevens ever played a clavier except in a fiction, I do not know. He did play a piano, one that he bought with great pride for his wife in 1913, for she was a good pianist. He records playing jigs on it during her absence in the summer (WAS 1950, 28 Aug. 1913). Stevens's poem refers only obliquely, in musical metaphors, to the famous trial of the Elders and their execution ("Death's ironic scraping," "viol"). At the end, his language becomes Miltonic or biblical. His layering of voices and stories suggests a very complex response by a man to a woman's beauty, ending with a dominant response of praise. Stevens was capable of all this in 1915, just as he began to write major poetry. It was the same year that Eliot published "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where the final response is certainly not one of praise. These two complex responses to female figures by two New England men bear comparison. There are more straightforward passages of erotic force, for example, in "Gray Room" (1917), which Stevens did not collect, and in "The Plot against the Giant" (1917), which he did.

Stevens's engagement with poetry of the natural world and love poetry came together when he visited Florida, with which he had a virtual love affair. He was attracted from the beginning. The Stevens who whimsically cast himself as an erotic bumbler had found something different: a climate of erotic force, crude and vital. It affected him like a woman of erotic force, crude and vital. At first, as in "Nomad Exquisite," one force inspires another. But Florida's sensuality could be excessive, "lasciviously tormenting, insatiable." Stevens spoke of eros "fluttering" at the end of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" in 1918. But Florida's eros did not flutter, and Stevens was drawn to it. It was time to say farewell to "seem" and turn to actual being: "Let be be finale of seem" ("The Emperor of Ice Cream"). Though this poem specifies no setting, Elizabeth Bishop thought it was set in Cuba. It was time to celebrate actual dreams ("Hymn from a

Watermelon Pavilion"). Banana flowers had their own erotic force, "Darting out of their purple craws / Their musky and tingling tongues" ("Floral Decorations for Bananas"). The fruit of the banana tree used to be called "muse" (OED, last recorded use, 1602). She might come in this guise too.

These are poems written from 1919 to 1922. Over a decade later, Stevens announced a divorce, and the break was painful. Florida had not been easy: "Her home, not mine . . . / I hated the vivid blooms / Curled over the shadowless hut, the rust and bones." Nonetheless "I loved her once . . . Farewell. Go on, high ship" ("Farewell to Florida"). This is no tourist talk. Stevens is saying good-bye to his erotic muse and to love poetry. He was fifty-six years old, and his love poems had turned too merely personal and bitter to be good poetry. Staying with this subject threatened to eat away at his poetic world, his own gifts. ("She can corrode your world, if never you," "Good Man, Bad Woman" [OP 65, LOA 558–59, 1932].) His own place was New England, after all.

Yet we could make a small anthology of Stevens's few erotic lines and poems. Say, an erotic-invitation poem, a twentieth-century variation on Herrick's "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may": "Unsnack your snood, madanna, for the stars / Are shining on all brows of Neversink" ("Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain"). The rest of the poem consists of lines that serve equally well for a human woman or for nature as a female form. So do others such as "The Woman in Sunshine." Sometimes Stevens writes with powerful yearning: "It is she that he wants, to look at directly, / Someone before him to see and to know" ("Bouquet of Belle Scavoir"). "The thought that he had found all this / Among men, in a woman—she caught his breath—" ("Yellow Afternoon"). Or there is his "blue woman" or personified spring weather, who remembers eros well, and does "not desire . . . that the sexual blossoms should repose / Without their fierce addictions" (NSF III.11). She achieves what is not achieved earlier: she holds the reality of actual sexual force and the imagination and beauty of it together and yet separate, in a living relation. The delicate and the sensual are not at odds, as in some of Stevens's early erotic poems. Strange as it may sound, all these lines were written after Stevens's ritual farewell to Florida-cum-Venus. In one sense, he never abandoned his erotic muse. She still lived in his memory, and she regularly reappeared in displaced forms.

Stevens's best-known poems still tend to come from his first collection, *Harmonium* (1923): "Sunday Morning," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "The Snow Man," "Domination of Black," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," the Florida poems, and more. They are extraordinary, yet Stevens was not satisfied. Something in him found these poems "outmoded and debilitated" by 1922. He wanted "to keep on dabbling and to be as obscure as possible until I have perfected an authentic and fluent speech for myself" (L 231). Younger poets like Hart Crane were already in awe of his technical ability. But Stevens put himself to school, lying low for the better part of a decade, while he and his work underwent a major change. As Yeats

and his work gradually did after Maud Gonne's marriage to someone else in 1903. As Eliot and his work did after he converted and was baptized in the Church of England in 1927. Yeats was thirty-eight and Eliot was thirty-nine. With Stevens, the major shift came in his fifties.

Harmonium is full of intelligence, passion, conviction, humor, and sense-effects. These often find expression in oblique ways, in strangely fabled ways, in cunningly modest ways. Stevens is largely a hidden poet, and by choice. Something still remains in this early Stevens of the dark rabbi, as in his 1918 description of a younger man who likes to observe "the nature of mankind, / In lordly study" ("Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"). The early enigmatic Stevens could be misread, for example, as simply a hedonist or a dandy. Yet it is true enough that if he had persisted in the range of subject and voice of the *Harmonium* poems, we would have had an accomplished poet, with a fierce but unfocused intelligence, an intricate and delicate and fastidious sensuousness, a sometimes idiosyncratic temperament, and a formidable technique. This would have been cause for gratitude; few poets attain so much. But Stevens was capable of more.

In Stevens's poems from about 1920 on, there is an increasing sense of something not getting out. It may be heard in some of the *Harmonium* poems—for example, "Banal Sojourn," with its thrice-repeated "malady" at the end. Stevens tried to exorcise this struggling spirit by retracing his poetic career to date, first in "From the Journal of Crispin" (OP 46–59, LOA 985–95, 1921), a genial poem submitted for a prize, then abandoned and consigned to a trash can. (The landlady fished it out; see Martz in Doggett and Buttell, 3–4.) Stevens then revised the poem as "The Comedian as the Letter C," a distinctly ungenial poem (not recommended for beginners). Stevens harrows his younger selves, the one who liked romance and the one who liked realism, the one who wanted an ideal mistress, the one who yearned for the sublime. His playful titles sometimes play over areas where he is vulnerable, as here or as with the erotic ("Le Monocle de Mon Oncle") or as with the sublime ("Tea at the Palaz of Hoon"). In 1921 Stevens wrote one of the best poems ever on what we call "writer's block," "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad": "I am too dumbly in my being pent."

After *Harmonium*, Stevens's next collection, *Ideas of Order* (1935, 1936), sounds oddly bare and oddly rough in places. Paradoxically the voice sounds stronger, though this book is half the length of *Harmonium* and has fewer remarkable poems for its size. There is a peculiar honesty to these poems. They sound less self-sufficient than earlier work, for they struggle with the self and with the times, whether private or public. Stevens had by now become a father, he had established himself in his profession, he had bought his first and only house, and he was among those financially secure even in the Depression. Nonetheless we hear something unexpected in his inner life: what he did not have and would not have, yet also what he did have. The trade

edition of 1936 opens with "Farewell to Florida" and closes with an evening poem, also a leave-taking, "Delightful Evening." The collection records loss, sometimes personal loss: "Farewell to Florida," "Ghosts as Cocoons," "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," "The Sun This March," "Autumn Refrain."

Stevens reflected on such changes in himself and in others. He had second thoughts about his earlier selves. He repeated his earlier words, as if talking to himself. The repetitions may be explicit ("Hoon" in "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz") or they may be glancing—footnotes to himself from an inveterate note-taker. Poets too change their minds, and poems need to be read in the context of a whole body of work. Stevens complained sometimes about being stereotyped and fixed at one stage of his writing. *Ideas of Order* is just that (unless we prefer Judge Powell's title, *Ordeals of Ida*). At a time of great social and economic disorder, at a time of new personal order, Stevens here steps back to meditate on ideas of order. Thinking about ideas of order is one way of confronting loss, of deciding how to live with changes that are not always welcome. Stevens's sense of loss was partly public (the misery of the Depression, and the dangerous volatility of political systems around the world), and it was partly private (erotic loss).

Demos, Mars, Clio; politics, war, history. Stevens's poetry has wide implications for all of these, and occasionally talks directly about them. Yet we do not return to his poems on these subjects as we return to Yeats's "Easter 1916" or "Meditations in a Time of Civil War" or "Remorse for Intemperate Speech." Or as we return to Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Strange Meeting," and "Dulce et Decorum." Or to W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" or T. S. Eliot's meditation in *Little Gidding* or Elizabeth Bishop's "Roosters."

As for his politics, in the 1900 election he "voted the Democrat ticket—Bryan," having turned twenty-one the month before (L 48). His later politics was conservative, though his political sympathies were wide. He admired Harold Laski (L 441, 1943) and Dwight Macdonald (L 486, 1945). He admired, or said he did, the aims of the left ("the most magnificent cause in the world") though not its various practices or its political philosophy (see L 287, 1935; L 620, 1948). (In order to judge Stevens's remarks, it is essential to know something about the political and economic struggles of the thirties in America and Europe.) He believed in "what Mr. Filene calls 'up-to-date capitalism'" (L 292, 1935). He believed in "social reform and not in social revolution" (L 309, 1936). His sympathies lay with the A. F. of L. rather than the C.I.O. He mused over these questions for some time, concluding that communism was "just a new romanticism." He said that he was no "revolutionist" even if he did "believe in doing everything practically possible to improve the condition of the workers," as well as supporting "education as a source of freedom and power," and regretting that "we have not experimented a little more extensively in public ownership of public utilities" (L 351, 1940).

He was divided in his view of Truman's victory in 1948. Personally, it meant more taxes, hence fewer savings and less security for himself and his family. But he admired "the vast altruism of the Truman party." If he regretted having to think twice about buying pictures, "still one could not enjoy books and pictures in a world menaced by poverty and enemies." "Enemies" meant the Russians—if they were enemies, that is. "One never knows. Perhaps they are merely undertakers" (L 623). (Presumably Stevens was enjoying a pun on the standard Marxist phrase "late capitalism.") In 1953, contemplating social upheavals, including the pressure of increasing population, he had the sense that "the time for speaking of birds has passed" (L 780). Yet he would go on to speak of birds. The earliest bird of the day and the year with its "scrawny cry" belongs to 1954 ("Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself"), and the "gold-feathered bird" at the edge of the mind belongs to 1955 ("Of Mere Being").

Stevens knew well what his subjects were. While he might be "on the right," he did not think "as, say, a prebendary of Chichester thinks" (L 351). Actually, Stevens went on, this talk of the right and the left was "most incidental" for him. His "direct interests" (a propos of the prebendary of Chichester) were quite different. "My direct interest is in telling the Archbishop of Canterbury to go jump off the end of the dock" (*ibid.*). It was 1940, and Stevens, increasingly absorbed by what he calls the "spiritual" role of the poet, was turning toward the subject of his great 1942 sequence, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."

Yet if Stevens's "direct interests are with something quite different," his indirect interests took a wide sweep. He could and did write on questions of politics and of war. A thirties politician turns up in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" x. Stevens's biblical language ("behold / The approach"), together with the word "pagan," help us to place this politician. He is a demagogue, proclaiming himself as the new savior. The people are fooled and yet not fooled. Individuals are skeptical, but in a crowd they accept what the crowd appears to believe. In 1946, Stevens was asked to identify the major problems facing the writer in the United States. The first, he responded, is that "all roles yield to that of the politician," and the politician wants everybody to be just as absorbed in politics "as he himself is absorbed." The poet must "maintain his freedom," as all individuals should (OP 311, LOA 814). Stevens's poet-figure in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" climbs a steeple and defies the slick, parading politician, "hooing."

Stevens knew the allure of the political dreams of the thirties: "Here is the bread of time to come." But: "Here is its actual stone" (MBG xxxiii). "What man is there of you, who if his son ask bread, will give him a stone?" asked Jesus. He also said: "Man shall not live by bread alone," when offered the chance to convert stones to bread. Bread and stone turn up together in different stories, well worth pondering in times like the thirties. "The Man with the Blue

Guitar” followed *Ideas of Order* at once, in 1937. It is a pivotal poem, its thirty-three sections simple in some ways, demanding in others, and packed with thought as Stevens positioned himself for the last quarter of his life. He ended the poem with a parable of bread and stone, and with a resolution that sounds like a covenant made with himself. From this time on, Stevens now wrote steadily until the end of his life.

Throughout Stevens’s work, we can find the theme of the individual as against the crowd. Or of the actual individual as against abstract logic. His sense of particulars and of exceptions to general rules is very strong: this peach, that eccentric, this hermit, the feel of rain. It is part of a long American heritage. In the mid-thirties especially, his mind was running on these questions. In 1937, he wrote a poem called “United Dames of America,” a blanket name for organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution. The poem asks all such organizations how they respond to the visions of a hermit or of the rare politician who is strong enough to think independently. Alas, such organizations tend to use words like “paradigm” and to think about groups, not individuals: “Never the naked politician taught / By the wise.” Stevens gave “United Dames of America” an epigraph from Jules Renard: “Je tâche, en restant exact, d’être poète” (I try, in staying precise, to be a poet). The word *exact* in French carries wider signification than in English, among others, that of “being true to reality.”

Stevens’s most effective form of political engagement in his poetry is the fable, and his favorite fable centers on abstract Utopian theory oblivious to everyday particulars and needs. Konstantinov, a member of the Soviet secret police, “would not be aware of the lake. / He would be the lunatic of one idea” (“Esthétique du Mal” xiv [1944]). Lenin by a lake does not see the lake except in terms of future power (“Description without Place” iv [1945]). Stevens, who desired a poetry of the earth, was wary of all Utopias, Marxist, Christian, or other. “The way through the world / Is more difficult to find than the way beyond it,” he wrote in 1950 (“Reply to Papini”). Nor was he interested in idealizing the poet as guide through the world. The poet is not “the nucleus of a time.” Rather, the poem is—“the poem, the growth of the mind // Of the world” (ibid.).

Stevens also wrote of war. How could he not? He lived through both world wars, as well as the Depression and the wars of the “dirty thirties.” Like Eliot he was moved by Eugène Emmanuel Lemerrier’s popular *Lettres d’un Soldat* (1916), translated as *A Soldier of France to His Mother: Letters from the Trenches on the Western Front* (1917); in 1918 he himself wrote a sequence, using Lemerrier’s title, “Lettres d’un soldat.” Only a few of its parts pleased him enough to collect, the best being retitled “Death of a Soldier” and shorn of its epigraph. Poems meditating on war continued, through the Spanish Civil War (“The Men That Are Falling”) to World War II. Stevens admired individual heroism, but not uncritically, as witness “Examination of the Hero in a

Time of War.” He detested the war-time melding of religious and patriotic fervor, and attacked it in “Dutch Graves in Bucks County.” He wrote a fifteen-part poem in response to a soldier’s call for a poetry of pain, “Esthétique du Mal.” Though uneven and sometimes cramped, it includes some of Stevens’s best work; its meditative, indirect approach to war is the one most congenial to Stevens.

Stevens’s letters testify to his horror of the war from 1939 onward. In 1940, he spoke of “the great evil that is being enacted today” (L 373) and of “the great disaster in which we are all involved” (L 381). This was before the United States went to war, but Americans were acutely aware of what was happening in Europe. In a lecture in May of 1941, Stevens mentioned how “we know of the bombings of London” and how “we should know of the bombings of Toronto or Montreal” (NA 21, LOA 655, published 1942); he knew that Canada had been at war since 1939. Occasionally his touch was off, and even admiring readers are uneasy. See, for example, the note on the epilogue to the 1942 poem “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” which addresses a soldier and draws a parallel between the poet’s war and the soldier’s war.

In 1942, Stevens published both the collection *Parts of a World* (1942) and the sequence *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, the latter in a limited edition by the Cummington Press. He judged these to be his best work so far (L 475, 1944; and cf. L 501, 1945). *Notes*, he said, meant more to him than *Parts of a World* (L 433, 1943). And not only to him. It is an extraordinary achievement. Stevens chose it to end his next collection, *Transport to Summer*. Still, *Parts of a World* shows Stevens moving from strength to strength, laying the groundwork for yet more powerful work to follow. Some poems like “The Poems of Our Climate” are major achievements. Some poems treat vividly the particulars of everyday life, often visually as if in a painting (“The Poems of Our Climate,” “Study of Two Pears”), sometimes also through taste or smell (“A Dish of Peaches in Russia”). A good deal of food appears (seed-cake, almonds, peaches, nougats), as does the trope of words as food. Stevens also begins work with the word “common,” moving along the full spectrum of its meaning and associations, work that will culminate in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” in 1949. Voices and themes in the poems show a poet more closely engaged with matters that concern him than in *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*. *Parts of a World* is also a collection filled with a sense of war, even though most of its poems were written before the United States declared war on the Axis powers in December 1941. Stevens demanded more of himself here. He was disappointed in most of the reviews, especially because nobody “seems to enjoy the poems” (ibid.). As too often, his kind of humor went unappreciated.

Stevens’s later meditations on history increasingly turn to the question of supreme fictions, notably of Judaeo-Christian belief. American history also engaged his attention, especially New England history. What drew him was

the history of ideas. How did it happen that Calvinism came to dominate a certain time and place, say, early New England? Calvinism may not be very close to the thinking of John Calvin, yet there he stands or there stands some mindset we call “Calvinist.” “Things are as they seemed to Calvin or to Anne / Of England, to Pablo Neruda in Ceylon,” or to Nietzsche or to Lenin (“Description without Place” III). Queen Anne was also a figure who gave a name to a style, an attitude. (And who once owned Greenwich Village, as Stevens notes in his 1907 description of the place [L 103].) The Queen Anne style is a considerable contrast to Calvinism, yet both found roots in North America once. Not now, of course, “An age believes / Or it denies.” “Description without Place” was written in April–June 1945, just as the war in Europe was ending. It was a time when discussion of the history of ideas was especially acute.

In 1947, the collection *Transport to Summer* appeared. Beyond “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” it includes “Description without Place,” as well as two other remarkable sequences, “Esthétique du Mal” and “Credences of Summer.” The shorter poems are equally strong. All in all, the book represents five years of extraordinary creative power. It is as if writing “Notes” somehow released his full gift. The reviews were gratifying.

Stevens described himself in 1953 as a “dried-up Presbyterian” (L 792). He decided early that he belonged to no church, on which see “Sunday Morning.” And he retained all his life a mischievous, sometimes iconoclastic, polemical streak, especially noticeable when belligerent religious conformity threatened. For himself, the heavens were clearer when swept free of the old Christian inhabitants; he threw away an old Bible with evident relief when housecleaning in 1907 (L 102). During his mother’s bedtime reading from the Bible, “often, one or two of us fell asleep” (L 173, 1912). Stevens must have been among the sleepers, since he found himself having to consult the library in order to be sure who Saul was—“confound my ignorance” (L 176, 1912). Yet the same Stevens was quoting the Psalms in his journal (L 86, 1906), dropping into churches from time to time, holding on to his copies of Psalms and Proverbs. The English Bible was part of him, and he felt the force of the ancient words. In his fifties, Stevens turned back to reexamine his heritage in the light of this question, which absorbed him to the end of his life.

What happens when people stop believing in God? As with all such over-large questions, the answer depends on where we start. What does it mean to believe in God in the first place? What God is believed in? The question has force because the old authority of Christianity has now so widely dissolved in the Western world. Biblical stories and verses are fading from common knowledge. The doctrines of Christianity do not command the general assent they once did, nor are they often the focus of intense public interest. (Public religious focus on questions that are peripheral to Christian doctrine or unimportant in the Gospels only reinforces the point.) For many, religious observance has come to be ceremonial, marking the transition times of birth,

marriage, and death. (Not that ceremonial practice is without importance, on which see Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going.")

For all that Stevens is a major American poet, his idea of a supreme fiction has not been taken in much beyond classroom discussion. For him, as for others, Christianity was no longer compelling. Like many another, he mused on what might take its place as a force of authority. At first, he seemed to suppose, like Matthew Arnold, that poetry could take the place of religion, a vague humanist view of the kind that Eliot fought (see "Arnold and Pater" in his *Selected Essays*). Some such attitude lies behind Stevens's invention of the phrase "supreme fiction" in 1922 ("Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"). But the memorable phrase was not seriously explored until twenty years later in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." By that time, Stevens had also mused on humanism, though not to Eliot's conclusions. Stevens wanted a fully human belief that would include religious invention. "Notes" is organized around three notes that head the three sections: "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," "It Must Give Pleasure." At one stage, he planned a fourth note, "It Must Be Human," but in the end did not use it.

The sequence has a rounded spherical shape, with a clear sense of beginning and end. There are glancing references in canto 1 to biblical beginnings in Genesis, and, in the final canto, to biblical endings in the Book of Revelation. Throughout, Stevens engages with the great demanding debates of theology and metaphysics, in poetry and elsewhere, echoing the language of the English Bible, Dante, Milton, Coleridge, and more. His "magnificent agnostic faith" (in Geoffrey Hill's exact and just phrase [*The Lords of Limit* (1984), 16–17]) works from the premise that the human imagination has invented God. For him, the writers of the biblical books are among the great Western poets. He was convinced that we have not yet taken in the implications of such a view (NA 173–75; LOA 748–49, 1951). This emphatically does not imply a materialist or simple antireligious stance.

If the *sine qua non* of belief is the existence of a transcendent God beyond ourselves, then Stevens's supreme fiction will appear to be a contradiction in terms. Supreme being, yes. But a fiction is something invented by the human imagination; by definition, it cannot be supreme to a Christian believer. For Stevens, the human imagination has recorded and created and interpreted the history and law and hymns and prophetic sayings and wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures and Old Testament. And the gospels, apostolic acts, epistles, and apocalypse of the New Testament. His second premise is that people always believe in something, whether they are aware of it or not, and that we need to believe in something. If we possess "a will to believe . . . it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else." Some fictions, Stevens added, "are extensions of reality" (L 430, 1942). "The willing suspension of

disbelief”: this is Coleridge’s classic phrase for the way we respond to imaginative work such as his “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” works presenting “persons and characters supernatural” (*Biographia Literaria*, chap. 14). *The Will To Believe* is William James’s 1897 title. Stevens is combining the two.

If then, people need to believe in something and can no longer believe in a transcendent God, what are they to believe? Stevens’s answer is: a fiction, something fictive. If this meant that the idea of God was an illusion, he was not greatly troubled. For him, there were harmful illusions and benign illusions, and “the idea of God” was an example of “benign illusion” (L 402, 1942). Arnold’s simple substitution of poetry for religion has one great weakness: the obvious fact that poetry or imaginative literature simply did not have the force of religion in Victorian society, nor did it seem likely to attain such force. “Biblical imagination is one thing and the poetic imagination, inevitably, something else” (NA 144, LOA 731, 1948). Imagination, Stevens said late in life, is the *next greatest* power to faith. This important qualification needs to be remembered; it turns up in 1949: “next to holiness is the will thereto, / And next to love is the desire for love” (“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” III). And it turns up in 1951: “Men feel that the imagination is *the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince*” (NA 171, LOA 748, my italics). To be sure, Stevens’s phrase, “the reigning prince,” bears watching. A reigning prince is something more than a crown prince, though something less than a reigning king. Stevens is leaving open the question of eventual reign.

This was no casual matter for Stevens. His instincts were not secular, because the word “secular” defines itself in opposition to the sacred, and Stevens did not divide the world that way. He yearned fiercely for something sublime, something noble, to use an old-fashioned word. He was not prepared to invent or to endorse a supreme fiction himself. How this might come about, he could not foretell, though he could imagine how. In 1942, he imagined, not a supreme fiction, but the young writer who might do what he himself had not: find some story, some formulation, that would command allegiance and give fulfillment (“The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet”). For himself, in 1942, there were only notes about a supreme fiction, or rather, not “about” but “toward.” He did not have in mind the vagaries of fashion but rather the long-standing appeal of some systems of thought or belief, some viewpoints. He had no mystical notion of a zeitgeist, and he had no patience with cant or inflated formulations. He pretty clearly has in mind the parallels of Christianity’s beginning, as in the Incarnation and Christmas imagery in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” I.IX or the use of Constantine at the end of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.”

For Stevens, the desire for a supreme fiction (or for holiness or celestial love, as above) is a need of the human spirit so great that it amounts to a violence. In a well-known description, he spoke of nobility as “a force . . . a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination

pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation" (NA 35–36, LOA 665, 1942). Possibly he was too sanguine about the human spirit.

Late in life, Stevens commented on the rabbi that appears regularly throughout his poetry. He had always found "the figure of the rabbi . . . exceedingly attractive." Why? Because this is the figure of someone "devoted in the extreme to scholarship" and also using it "for human purposes" (L 786, 1953). Some figures in Stevens's work, like the rabbi and the scholar, are parts of his own self that act as mentors. He was touched when young by Chénier's poem, "La Flute," describing how a master tutors a young flute player, and he translated it (L 124, 1909). He could also laugh at his own tutoring self, the "Devil of sermons, within me"—this after hectoring his bride-to-be (L 124, 1909). Or at the Doctor of Geneva who finds that the ocean is nothing to sneeze at ("The Doctor of Geneva"). Or at the lecturer on "This Beautiful World of Ours" who "composes himself / And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe" ("The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract"). There is a whole rogues' gallery filled with preaching and professorial faces in Stevens's work.

But there are other, quieter, more secret, more congenial figures. They do not hector or chase down an audience. They are absorbed in some quest, like Stevens himself. Henry James talked about *mon bon*, his wonderful term for his "'guardian spirit' and figure of inspiration. When he used the term in conversation he would raise his hat" (*Complete Notebooks*, ed. Edel and Powers [1987], 87). Proust also spoke of a young man within him, one of his selves, alive only when he wrote ("Contre Saint-Beuve"). Stevens had more than one such figure.

"Like a dark rabbi, I / Observed . . . In lordly study." Thus Stevens in 1918. Words of studying run all through "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and the poem closes on the figure of the rabbi, but this rabbi is not a mentor. In the thirties, figures of an interior mentor and an artistic conscience begin to appear in Stevens's work. They too have to do with ideas of order: "Oh! Rabbi, rabbi, fend my soul for me / And true savant of this dark nature be." So ends Stevens' 1930 poem, "The Sun This March," with a petition that is part of his rededication to poetic work. The rabbi clearly helped.

It is the rabbi as a scholar to whom Stevens cleaves. Not just any scholar, but a scholar whose spiritual life is centered on his study and whose practical life follows from what is gleaned there. Or the rabbi in the traditional sense as master or teacher. (Jesus is addressed in the Gospels as Rabbi, and twice as Rabboni, the highest such term.) "Poetry is the scholar's art," Stevens wrote ("Adagia," OP 193, LOA 906), and he knew the scholar's passion. (See above his remarks on reading, and the Chinese saying about study and life's savor [L 245, 1925].) Little wonder that the figure of the rabbi attracted him. The Protestant clergy, Stevens's own forebears, also used to be known for their devotion to the serious study of the Bible. It was to this kind of inner faithfulness

that Stevens appealed when asking his daughter to reconsider her decision to leave Vassar during the war years (L 426, 1942). The rabbi continued to appear in Stevens's work. In "The Auroras of Autumn" (1948), he is called upon to end the poem, and in "Things of August" (1949), he opens the poem as part of its wonderful first line: "We'll give the week-end to wisdom, to Weisheit, the rabbi." By this time (Stevens had just turned seventy), he can be playful, playful as in possible titles of the rabbi, playful as in the pleasures of studying with the rabbi.

Stevens also invented a "hidalgo," a "Spanish gentleman" (OED) and "a son of the lower Spanish nobility" (Webster). He was another of Stevens's own selves, again present from the start. At first, Stevens sometimes liked him and sometimes did not, as with the Spanish masks he assumed (Don this or that). Later he found a new role for this Don Quixote part of himself, the guitar-playing, courtly, witty, deeply feeling and finally artistic self: an idealized Picasso, say, or a Santayana. Not the role for a vice-president of a major United States insurance company. But then Stevens hardly thought his person should be defined by a job description. The hidalgo was a possible conscience for an artist, a figure "Who watched him, always, for unfaithful thought. . . . To keep him from forgetting" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" xxv). Stevens once wrote, in a comment on "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (xxix), "I desire my poem to mean as much, and as deeply, as a missal" (L 790, 1953). He did not compare his poetry with a missal or anything like a missal in *Harmonium*, nor are there mentors in *Harmonium*. By 1939, his sense of the future involved "a confidence in the spiritual role of the poet" (L 340).

Stevens's last collection before his *Collected Poems* (1954) appeared in 1949: *The Auroras of Autumn*. He reassured a correspondent that he was not writing a seasonal sequence, that is, an autumn volume following his 1947 *Transport to Summer*. He also said a little defensively (he was nearly seventy-one) that there was nothing "autobiographical about it" (L 636, 1949). He had a sense of not moving in "the circles of spaciousness" quite as grandly as in his younger days, but there is no falling-off in these poems. The remark speaks more to his ambition than his achievement (L 669, 1950). The collection includes three sequences, the title-poem, "The Auroras of Autumn"; the long sequence, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"; and the charming late-summer sequence, "Things of August." The closing poem, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," is one of Stevens's most memorable. *The Auroras of Autumn* won the National Book Award. Stevens would receive it once again in 1954 for his *Collected Poems*, which were also awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1946, Stevens asked to be remembered to his good friend, Barbara Church, who was returning for a stay at her house in France. Stevens thought of her "as of someone returning to a home long desired" (L 532). "Heureux qui comme Ulysse . . .": "Happy the man who, like Ulysses . . . / Is come . . . / To live among his kinsmen his remaining days!" Stevens translated du Bellay's

beautiful sonnet of 1558 when he was twenty-nine years old, living in a room in New York, and still thinking of Reading, Pennsylvania, with some nostalgia (L 150–51, 1909). When he was seventy, he spoke of the “exile at the bottom of the heart,” echoing the cry from the great psalm of exile, Psalm 137: “If I forget thee, Jerusalem—and then [a man] works for years at a task of this sort with all the cunning of his love” (L 681, 1950). He was speaking of a gifted printer and designer, and of himself. The language of exile, with occasional homecoming, runs quietly—or mostly quietly—all through Stevens’s poetry and prose. (It is not nostalgia for Reading, though Stevens remembered his native city and state vividly and affectionately, and referred to landmarks there in his later poetry.) In part, it is the condition of any artist. Marianne Moore, a good friend, wrote to Stevens, paraphrasing Auden:

I . . . would say with W. H. Auden, “writers are not passive recipients of good fortune, art is a vocation for which a price must be paid. In being a writer one leaves the family hearth. . . . Each must go his way alone, every step of it, learning for himself by painful trial and shaming error, never resting long, soon proceeding to risk total defeat in some new task.” (Garbled by me, but what I feel—plus the fun and exhilaration of one’s sundry experiments.) (WAS 62, 2 Mar. 1953)

In part, this was the condition of the American artist. “Our most disastrous lacks . . .,” said Randall Jarrell, “these things were the necessities of Stevens’ spirit.” Our most disastrous lacks, to follow Jarrell, were “delicacy, awe, order, natural magnificence and piety” (134). Have things changed?

Where might Stevens have found a home? First, in his family, and so it was at last, but not as he once imagined. Then too among friends, and so it was also at last, with the few friends he could talk with, though the talk came at intervals and sometimes on paper. And third, in his own country, after all, his own place: “I like to hold on to anything that seems to have a definite American past. . . . One is so homeless over here in such things and something really American is like meeting a beautiful cousin or, for that matter, even one’s mother for the first time” (L 626, 1948).

The lovely late poem “Credences of Summer,” includes a strong sense of homecoming and being at home. As with Keats’s “To Autumn,” time stops in a sense, or, as Stevens says, in one direction. This happens in Stevens’s natal state, Pennsylvania. Since things stop, “The directions stops and we accept what is / As good” (iv).

Homecoming is always peculiarly intense in Stevens’s poetry, and so is its contrary, exile or desolation. It was so for Eliot, himself a voluntary exile who filled *The Waste Land* with exiles, but at last found a home in his ancestral country. It was so for Elizabeth Bishop. “One dear perpetual place” is how Yeats felt. Stevens seems more rooted in one place than any of these writers except Yeats, yet he was just as susceptible in his own land to thoughts and

feelings of strangeness. In his small copy of the Psalms, which he read through in 1900 (to follow the dates inscribed at start and finish), he marked a good deal, but he copied out one text only. On the inside back cover, he wrote: "I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me," from Psalm 119. This formulation finds its way into Stevens's poetry.

Yet the late poetry also includes a sense of being at home on this earth, in Stevens's own part of it, New England. And loving it, as he once loved Florida—or rather, not that way, for the terms have changed. Asked in 1954 for a brief biographical note, Stevens replied that his work "suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfilment" (L 820). "Propose to themselves a fulfilment": Stevens's words are carefully chosen, and his poems and deeds stand by them. In work after 1942, he moved toward his always-desired poetry of the earth in a different way. A supreme fiction widely accepted, a communal supreme fiction, a new kind of religious adherence: this lay in the future, beyond his time. Meanwhile there was life to be lived here and now, and poems to be made. Yet the possibility of a supreme fiction informs his later work, so that the sense of an ordinary, everyday world is also extraordinary. His true subjects come together: a poetry of the natural world, a poetry of eros, a supreme fiction, all in one as poetry of the earth. Not one of these subjects exists the way it did at the start. And each one enriches the others.

