

WALLACE STEVENS
AND
JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD'S POSTMODERN SUBLIME

by

James R. Covey

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
September, 1997

© Copyright by James R. Covey, 1997



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-24821-6

Canada

dedicated to

KEN SNYDER

who suggested a thesis topic
and much more

Table of Contents

Abstract	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One. Problematics of a Postmodern Sublime	12
Chapter Two. The Mind at the Limits of Summer	39
Chapter Three. A Comedian as Indeterminate C (and Comedic Indeterminacy)	51
Chapter Four. Someone Puts an Ego Together: The Giant on the Horizon and the Man on the Dump	66
Chapter Five. Four Moments of an Evening in New Haven: The Ordinary and the Avant-Garde	77
Notes	92
Works Cited	96

Abstract

French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's writings on the aesthetic of the sublime constitute a postmodern revision of classic theories of the sublime such as those of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. For Lyotard, postmodern sublimity is constituted by the inexpressibility of an artwork or text as event.

It is argued that the poetry of Wallace Stevens embodies this postmodern sublime in several ways. Five "problematics" of Lyotard's postmodern sublime are presented: the sublime and the beautiful, imagination and reality, indeterminacy and nostalgia, sublime excess and ego construction, and the sublime and the avant-garde. Several of Stevens' poems are read with attention to these problematics, with special attention to "Credences of Summer," "The Comedian as the Letter C," "A Primitive Like an Orb," "The Man on the Dump," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due first and foremost to my supervisor, Dr. Victor Li, for patiently nurturing this project over five years. I am grateful also to my readers, Dr. Len Diepeveen and Dr. Anthony Stewart, for their time and efforts.

For unforeseen but invaluable research assistance, as well as constant encouragement, I am deeply indebted to Terri Watson.

I wish to thank Doug and Jane Porter for supporting this effort in many ways, with extra thanks to Doug for pointing me to Renato Poggioli. As well, I am grateful to Milo Stening-Riding for the loan of books and the gift of encouraging words.

I wouldn't have brought this project to its conclusion without the support of my parents, Russell and Jean Covey, and my many good friends. Thank you all. As well, I want to thank the instructors who have taught and inspired me since I began my university education eleven years ago, especially Bruce Greenfield, J. Russell Perkin, and Ken Snyder, to whom this thesis is dedicated.

Last but not least, a special thanks to Meg Walker for a kingly, ghostly rabbit-rendering that became as much of a conversation piece as this long-delayed thesis.

Introduction

The sublime has been discursively figured since Longinus as a transcendence, a “going beyond.” The two best-known texts on the sublime from the eighteenth century, the period during which interest in the sublime was at its peak, are the classic writings of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. Kant’s “Analytic of the Sublime” defines the sublime as that which is “great beyond all comparison” [Kant, 86]. Kant’s series of explanatory formulas concerning the sublime includes this remark, “The sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense” [89]. This “going beyond” engenders a feeling of pain in the individual, a pain at being deprived of an object by which to measure the magnitude of this greatness. Burke writes not only of pain, but also of terror. For him, the experience of the sublime is inextricably linked to a mixture of fear and pleasure: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful” [Burke, 310].

Jean-François Lyotard brings together both of these topologies in his own analysis of the sublime. Following on the Kantian notion of the sublime as “privation” (a loss or absence of something), he suggests that the modern sublime is that which is deprived of full determinacy. The indeterminate, in other words, is the source of the modern sublime. The sublime, in Lyotard’s

analysis, is still, as in Burke, an experience of fear, and Lyotard concentrates on what he claims is the “major stake” of Burkean aesthetics: “The sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening” [*The Inhuman*, 99]. For Lyotard, the sublime has always had the task of bearing “witness to the inexpressible” [93]. Modern sublimity, however, can be distinguished from Burke’s sublime, in that the “inexpressible” that it bears witness to “does not reside in an over there, in other words, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens” [93]. To paraphrase Lyotard slightly, the sublime of the poetic text arises with the realization that here and now is this text, “rather than nothing, and that’s what is sublime” [93].

For Lyotard, “postmodernism” is a part of the modern. In what he calls a “mechanistic” sense, it is simply nascent modernism, the constant questioning of the received. Lyotard writes that “the postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms” [*The Postmodern Condition*, 81]. A nostalgic modernism takes this “solace in good forms,” even when the forms have been emptied of content, allowing a “nostalgia for the unattainable.” The goal of new forms of presentation for postmodern art would not be to enjoy those forms for their own sake, but rather to do a better job of rendering the presentation itself unrepresentable. If the modern retains a “nostalgia for the unattainable,” the postmodern sublime repudiates nostalgia for the risks of invention and turns away from the unattainable real to

celebrate the play of fictions.

Despite Wallace Stevens' evident "good form," his poetry often subverts this form at a deeper level in the effort to present this unrepresentable, the question "Does it happen?" In "The Man on the Dump," the concluding line reads, "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the." But what brings us to this point is a subversion and stripping away of traditional notions of good form: repetition of banal verbs, flippant references to that venerable poetic symbol, flowers, and so on. While many of his other poems do not contain such obvious violations of form, they argue specifically against the nostalgic use of forms, and in this sense conform to Lyotard's notion of the postmodern. Form is subordinated to the program of foregrounding the unrepresentable, the "force that traverses a shade" of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," or the "extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme of the unknown" in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome."

Lyotard's figuring of the postmodern sublime depicts "good form" as a "solace," a manifestation of dependence on "consensus" opposed to the postmodern search for "new presentations" [PC, 81]. But Lyotard's distinction cannot be seen as an absolute opposition; for Lyotard, the postmodern is "undoubtedly a part of the modern" [79]. In fact, it can be construed as "not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant." In his introductory paragraph describing the postmodern, Lyotard describes the contemporary social state of affairs much as Wallace Stevens had described

his own, thirty-seven years earlier:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives ... The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable. [PC, xxiv]

This paragraph reads like an elaboration of Stevens' comment from the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence" [NA, 17]. In this piece, Stevens attempts to deal with the loss of the old metanarratives in the face of the World Wars; he engages the issue of the contemporaneity of the poet, a demand that he says "is as old as Longinus and I dare say older" [NA, 27]. The essay is, in fact, an argument that there can be such a thing as a twentieth-century poet of the sublime.

The pressure that is put upon any attempt at a sublime in the context of

the modern is the pressure of “reality,” or the sense that any “transport,” any apparent transcendence of the human condition, that might come about through art must be, a priori, a deception. The modern wants “honesty.” Stevens responds to this pressure consciously and deliberately. For Stevens, “resisting or evading the pressure of ... reality” [NA, 27] is exactly the point. Stevens defends this view later in the essay:

My own remarks about resisting or evading the pressure of reality mean escapism, if analyzed. Escapism has a pejorative sense, which it cannot be supposed that I include in the sense in which I use the word. The pejorative sense applies where the poet is not attached to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental. [31]

Is this self-contradiction, or is there a complicating factor? What does Stevens mean by “reality”? In his essay, “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” Stevens portrays modern society as a generation in search of a metanarrative, a “supremely acceptable fiction.” Moreover, Stevens portrays this search as a fundamentally noble enterprise, one in which we are not to expect “the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers” [NA, 175]. Does Stevens fall victim to the contentless form syndrome outlined by Lyotard? Does the good form of his poetry serve any purpose other than nostalgia? Is it nothing more than an attempt to find solace after the loss of ultimate meaning? In other words, can Stevens’ elegant blank verse be said

to foreground the unrepresentable in a way that invokes what Lyotard might call a *postmodern* sublime? Any adequate answer to that question must deal with his poetry in some detail, as this thesis intends, but for now we might consider Stevens' own statement, "The greatest truth that we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything" [NA, 175]. The loss of a divine "final resolution of everything," then, is not something that Stevens mourns, or seeks solace from. Instead he offers an enthusiastic affirmation of the finality of the human. This finality of human reality is itself an unrepresentable abstraction, one which may be invoked by metaphors such as the "supreme fiction." Instead of mourning a lost content, Stevens chooses to celebrate the ways in which human beings are able to generate new meanings. Modern reality is, according to Stevens, "a reality of decreation" (or "making pass from the created to the uncreated," as opposed to "destruction" or "making pass from the created to nothingness") [NA, 175]. Stevens charts an intellectual landscape of the un(re)presentable as possible.

In his poem "The American Sublime," Stevens makes reference to the statue of General Jackson, which he views as a work lacking in imagination. For Stevens, the statue shows "not the slightest trace of imagination" [NA, 11]. Furthermore, it is "neither of the imagination nor of reality." He contrasts a depiction of a "hilarious" scene from a carnival which he describes as "wholly favorable to what is real." The carnival is able to inspire approval

because of its realistic depiction, whereas the statue of the noble hero is nothing more than the symbol of an archaic myth -- anachronistic and unmasked. From Stevens' perspective it has lost its ability to inspire awe, and so he raises the question, "How does one stand / To behold the sublime, / To confront the mockers, / The mickey mockers / And plated pairs?" [PEM, 114]. The question of whether a sublime aesthetic is possible after the advent of modern skepticism is implicitly compared here to the challenge of striking a serious, heroic pose, like General Jackson, while all around one is surrounded by a carnival.

The stanzas that follow his question clearly mark Stevens' conception of the sublime both as post-romantic and post-Christian. First, he comments that "one grows used to the weather, / The landscape and that," implying that a sublime linked too closely to the natural is bound to collapse into monotony. So the romantic sublime, which is inextricably connected to the natural landscape, is an exhausted aesthetic for Stevens. Second, Stevens poses the key questions, "What wine does one drink?" and "What bread does one eat?," implying that the sacrament of Communion is in some way broken, or no longer has its former significance. Before the onset of modernity, the romantic movement had appropriated sacramentalism as a way of relating to nature. Within the romantic sublime, the subject experienced nature, or various specific phenomena of nature, as sacramental symbols that mediated a transcendent, unspeakable, spiritual reality. Both

orthodox religious belief, and the parallel sacramentalism of romanticism, are put under duress by modern skepticism.

The discourse of the sublime, though, had begun in earnest before the onset of romanticism. The catalyst for the eighteenth-century European discourse on the sublime was the translation into French, and then English, of Longinus' "On The Sublime," an essay on rhetorical style. Samuel Monk's history of the Longinian tradition in England characterizes Longinus' text as being concerned with rhetoric only on its surface, but having a deeper dimension that eventually became formative with respect to the well-formed aesthetics of the sublime of Burke and Kant. Monk's theory of the sublime is thus overdetermined in favour of romanticism: "The abiding interest of Longinus for the eighteenth century, and consequently for us, lay in his conception of the sublime that underlies sublimity of style and that is an expression of a quality of mind and of experience" [12]. For Monk, the history of the sublime is one of a natural growth from a description of a rhetorical practice to the psychology of a particular state of mind, a state of mind that is related to the environment that generates it by means of an aesthetics.

With this narrative in hand, the sublime is easily polarized in terms of an origin and a telos. It finds its origins in a discourse of ethics and rhetoric, and its destination in a discourse of aesthetics and psychology. From such a perspective, the psychology of sublimity is the latent, essential truth about the sublime, previously concealed within the classical discourse of aesthetics.

This, crudely put, is the distinction between the sublime's classical origins and romantic appropriation.

What would constitute a postmodern sublime, if there is such a thing, is certainly an open question. In an attempt to understand something of what is at stake in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, I propose here to employ, for the most part, Lyotard's way of opening that question of the sublime. Lyotard's conception of the sublime is paradoxical: "It's still the sublime in the sense that Burke and Kant described and yet it isn't their sublime anymore" [*Inhuman*, 93]. In other words, the postmodern sublime is not *anti-romantic*; it is not the opposite of Burke and Kant's sublime. Rather, the sublime that Lyotard describes is *post-romantic*. Going beyond romanticism implies going beyond the subjective psychologism characteristic of Kant, whose conception of the sublime as purely subjective is well-summarized by Jacques Derrida:

One cannot say of a natural object ... that it is contrary to finality. All we can say is that the natural object in question can be proper, apt for the "presentation of a sublimity." Of a sublimity which, for its part, can be encountered as such only in the mind and on the side of the subject. [Derrida, 131]

But postmodern sublimity does not entail a simple rejection of subjectivism or any consequent valorization of the object. The postmodern perspective refuses to absolutize either phenomenological subjectivity or ontological objectivity. In this spirit, Lyotard's analysis of Kant seeks to move beyond the

Kantian perspective by calling attention to the fact that even the radically subjective Kant needs to make room for the “object” in his description of the sublime. Thus Lyotard stresses that in Kant’s analysis, “there is an object that gives rise to the sublime, if not a sublime object” [LAS, 232].

Lyotard’s theory of the postmodern sublime thus goes beyond, but is still rooted in Burke’s and (“to a lesser degree”) Kant’s analyses, which “outlined a world of possibilities for artistic experiments in which the avant-gardes would later trace out their paths” [*Inhuman*, 101]. For Lyotard, in the realm of aesthetics, avant-gardism and postmodernism are inseparable, because they both are about putting form itself in question. So we need to ask, to what extent can we characterize Wallace Stevens as an “avant-gardist”? From our contemporary point of view it seems strange to characterize the refined poetry of Wallace Stevens in this way. But I would like to argue that Stevens’ relationship to romanticism is the same, by Lyotard’s description, as that of the avant-gardists. The most important statement on this question comes in Lyotard’s “Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable”:

The avant-gardes in painting fulfil romanticism, i.e. modernity, which in its strong and recurring sense, is the failure of stable regulation between the sensible and the intelligible. But at the same time they are a way out of romantic nostalgia because they do not try to find the unrepresentable at a great distance, as a lost

origin or end, to be represented in the subject of the picture, but in what is closest, in the very matter of artistic work. [*Inhuman*, 126]

Stevens' poetry does not seek a sublime of lost origins or lost contents, and it is in this way that Stevens can be considered, in the Lyotardian sense, "avant-garde." By reading Wallace Stevens' poetry in terms of a postmodern sublime, then, it is not my intention to "prove" his poetry to be "ahead of its time." Rather, I mean to depict Stevens' poetry as a non-nostalgic response to the pressures of modernity. Nostalgia, where it is present in Stevens' poetry, is always relativized in terms of that aforementioned unrepresentable -- indeterminacy. That is to say, Stevens' poetry does not play into or feed off nostalgia, but rather runs counter to it. The good form, as I am calling it, of Stevens' poetry, is not a melancholy echo of lost certainties. Rather, it constitutes a provisional, self-erasing, presentation of indeterminacy, of the unrepresentable. Rather than form in place of what is missing, his poetry offers forms in search of what will suffice. His poems puzzle over and celebrate the unfixability, the immateriality and the indeterminacy of the work of art itself, the poem itself. The indeterminacy of the poem makes each poetic image a potential site for sublimity:

It is when I said,
 "There is no such thing as the truth,"
 That the grapes seemed fatter.

The fox ran out of his hole.

["On the Road Home," PEM, 164]

Chapter One

Problematics of a Postmodern Sublime

The theory of a postmodern sublime, as presented here, is divided into five "problematics," beginning with an introduction to Kant's famous aesthetic distinction, "The Sublime and the Beautiful," and continuing with four more sections that serve as theoretical bases for the chapters of poetic readings that follow. "Imagination and Reality" introduces the theme of thought at its limits, continued in Chapter Two with special attention to Stevens' "Credences of Summer." "Indeterminacy and Nostalgia," a central concern in Lyotard's distinction between "modern" and "postmodern," provides the framework for Chapter Three's treatment of "The Comedian as the Letter C." The same problematic is reiterated in somewhat different terms in the latter half of Chapter Four. "Sublime Excess" interrogates the sublime aesthetic with regard to the role of the human ego. Stevens' hesitant constructions of the ego are further discussed in Chapter Four, with special attention to "A Primitive Like An Orb" and "The Man on the Dump." Finally, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" asks to what extent we can call Stevens' aesthetic "avant-garde," given that, for Lyotard, the postmodernist aesthetic is inescapably avant-gardist. This is elaborated later in Chapter Five's analysis of "An Ordinary Evening In New Haven."

The Sublime and the Beautiful

“The beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having definite boundaries,” Kant tells us in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, as he attempts to distinguish the sublime from the “beautiful” [Kant, 82]. In Lyotard’s view, this aesthetic of the beautiful, an aesthetic of definite boundaries, is complicit with the totalizing tendencies of Kantian philosophy. Lyotard thus goes to great pains in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* to stress the radical discontinuities between the aesthetics of the sublime and the beautiful in Kant. In his view, the aesthetic of the sublime, given its proper due, is precisely what subverts the “project of philosophical unification that inscribes the whole of the [Critique of Judgment]” [52]. But even as Lyotard draws a most significant distinction between “modern” and “postmodern” without setting them in mutual opposition, so must we not suppose that by portraying the beautiful and the sublime as radically discontinuous that Lyotard simply considers them opposites. In fact, he acknowledges certain important points of continuity: “The kinship between the two aesthetic feelings -- which does not exclude a reading attentive to the differences, a reading of discontinuity -- permits a reading of continuity, which would emphasize the ‘tension’ and the instability that characterize both feelings” [LAS, 73]. Derrida, similarly, writes:

One can hardly speak of an opposition between the beautiful and the sublime. An opposition could only arise between two

determinate objects, having their contours, their edges, their finitude. But if the difference between the beautiful and the sublime does not amount to an opposition, it is precisely because the presence of a limit is what gives form to the beautiful. [TIP, 127]

That is to say, both the sublime and the beautiful find themselves in relation to a limit. The beautiful receives its form from a limit, whereas the sublime receives its impetus to go beyond. "There cannot, it seems, be a *parergon* for the sublime," Derrida writes. Among the various senses of *parergon* developed in this text of Derrida's are the ideas of a framing and an encapsulation. One can't "boil down" the sublime to an essence, or mark off its limits. Potentially, wherever there is a genuine "going beyond" a limit, there is a sublime experience. So the question is, how "postmodern" does one have to be to be "postmodern" enough in Lyotard's terms? It is no doubt obvious that one can only deviate from "traditional norms" of a genre so far before an artistic creation is no longer recognizable in terms of that genre. Modernity can be said to be dependent on history in this sense. In other words, just as modernity implies a going beyond a certain historical point, so the sublime, as a going beyond limits, requires some residual notion of limits. In Derrida's description of the Kantian sublime he writes, "A concept can be big, almost too big for presentation" [125]. The ensuing discussion elaborates on the "almost too" in that sentence. "Where, then, do we cut off?" Derrida

asks [126]. “Where are we to delimit the trait of the *almost too*?” For Derrida, the sublime comes down to that very paradox of the limit. The “double trait” of a “cise” (or “cut” or “break”) “which limits and unlimits at the same time” [144] is the sublime.

Imagination and Reality (Thought at Its Limits)

It is characteristic of discourses of the sublime that a state of mind may be understood paradoxically both as dissonant and final. In the sublime experience, as Kant describes it, it is “dissonance and not its resolution [which] attests to a finality” [LAS, 149]. It is that inability to resolve itself that is final. In his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Lyotard addresses this point most directly in his discussion of “heterogeneity”:

If ... we accept along with Kant that ... dissonance and not its resolution attests to a finality, a supreme consonance of thought with itself, then we have to conclude that it is essential for thought to feel reflexively its own heterogeneity when it brings itself to its own limits ... It can do one thing and its opposite, present an object in a finite way and conceive of an object as actually infinite. [LAS, 149-50]

The poetry of Wallace Stevens repeatedly bears witness to this split, notably in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” which opens, “On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street / Become the figures of heaven” [PEM, 371].

The entire poem consists of a recitation of exemplars of this split: the “newsboys’ muttering” which “becomes another murmuring,” the “things” which are “beyond the eye / Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond.” Lyotard writes that the intellectual split resulting from the conflicting claims of skeptical empiricism and the drive to ground the ego in the absolute is actually a *source* of the sublime experience. In the sublime experience, he argues, the subject is suspended outside, “above or apart from” [LAS, 150] these two modes of thought: “ordinary empiricism that draws from the split a lesson of wisdom in deception, and speculative idealism that uses the split as a pretext to authorize a delirium in the absolute.” Stevens expresses this sublime suspension in a simple phrase: “total grandeur at the end.” This perspective, which expresses both an empirical finality and an idealistic transcendence, necessarily locates itself outside both modes of thought in order to keep both in view. Stevens’ sublime refuses a simply reductive perspective but also eschews “delirium” -- “With every visible thing enlarged and yet / No more than a bed, a chair, and moving nuns” [PEM, 373].

In “Stevens and the Two Sublimes,” Paul Endo puts forward a dichotomized model of the sublime in Stevens, in an attempt to explain how the aesthetic of the sublime can indeed pull the subject simultaneously “outside of” the empirical and transcendental modes of thought (to use Lyotard’s categories), or to put it another way, to explain how the subject can get beyond the apparent antagonism of reality and imagination (to use

Stevens' own terminology). Endo refers to recent studies of the sublime in the context of contemporary/postmodern theory, writing that "the burden of discussion has been on demystifying the transcendental content of the sublime while preserving the undeniable power of its affect" [36]. According to Endo, "reality and imagination, 'no' and 'yes', must be treated not as independent, antagonistic poles, but as points along a single trajectory." Endo states that theoreticians of the sublime, such as Thomas Weiskel and Harold Bloom, do not try to isolate a precise point or time of the sublime. By contrast, Endo claims that for Stevens there are two specific points along the "single trajectory" of the sublime that his poetry is concerned with. These he refers to as the "emergent" and the "dialectical" sublimes [37].

Whether or not it represents an actual advance in theoretical understanding (beyond Weiskel and Bloom) of the sublime in Stevens, Endo's distinction is at least an insightful classification of Stevens' sublime tropes. First, there is the "emergent" sublime. In Lyotard's scheme, this would correspond most closely to the aspect of ontological threat, the initial "is it happening?" In Stevens' poetry, we see this moment in the emergence of the created (or recreated) from the "decreated." A recurring term in Stevens is the "flick," which "connotes the first influx of life." A significant use of this word can be found in "Prologues to What Is Possible" (the very name of this poem invokes the emergent), in Canto II: "The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick...A flick which added to what was real" [PEM,

378]. The word “flick” has the double connotation of an instantaneous action and one that is never a cause but an effect. It refers implicitly to an unrepresentable cause. So this emergent phase of the sublime is the point at which comprehension is defied, is presented with its own failure.

In the “dialectical” moment of the sublime, to follow Endo’s scheme further, “comprehension is approached but the self remains disciplined, held in check by a still unassimilated remainder” [Endo, 42]. The object, whatever it is, that invokes the sublime reaction, resists complete assimilation by the subject. It is in this dialectical tension that the sublime takes place. The dialectic of reality and imagination is, for Stevens, constitutive of the sublime. This is exemplified in the second stanza of “To an Old Philosopher in Rome”:

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.

[PEM, 371]

Here the first “Rome” is that of reality and the “more merciful Rome” is that of imagination. The dialectical sublime moment here consists in the simultaneous comprehension of these two poles on the part of the subject.

And so:

It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

The “unassimilated remainder,” in Endo’s terms, would be the apparent contradiction between the two perspectives, the extent to which the paradox cannot be finally resolved by sublime experience. It is that which the poem describes as “beyond the eye, / Not of its sphere,” yet, thanks to a sublime comprehension, “not far beyond.”

Endo’s “emergent” and “dialectical” moments of the sublime recall Lyotard’s description of the postmodern sublime as a kind of intensity, an intensity that is “associated with an ontological dislocation” [*Inhuman*, 101], which describes the Stevens aesthetic very effectively. In “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” he writes, in a quintessential presentation of a sublime moment as a realization of an unrepresentable, indeterminate potential:

We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
 A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.
 [PEM, 368]

Stevens’ delineation of “The human end in the spirit’s greatest reach / The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme of the unknown” exemplifies Lyotard’s definition of the “sublime feeling”:

The sublime feeling...is the subjective state critical thought must feel in being carried to its limits (therefore beyond them) and its resistance to this impetus, or conversely, what it must feel in its passion to determine and in its resistance to this passion... it is a

faithfulness *par excellence* to the philosophical feeling, "brooding melancholy," as Kant suggested... The absolute is never there, ever given in a presentation, but it is always "present" as a call to think beyond the "there." Ungraspable, but unforgettable. Never restored, never abandoned. [LAS, 150]

In "Newman: The Instant," Lyotard writes that "what is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over" [*Inhuman*, 84]. In the modern era, art as a site for the sublime experience becomes reflexive – the "is it happening?," as Lyotard defines the sublime, can be asked concerning artistic innovation. From this point, a detour into an agonistics of poetic influence (as in Harold Bloom) would be possible. But I am more interested here in the extent to which Stevens' poetry fits the profile of Lyotard's "postmodern sublime," than in a debate on the extent of Stevens' technical innovation. "The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher," Lyotard tells us [81]. In Stevens' poetry, the chief narrative voice, or subject position, is indeed that of the skeptical philosopher. In these texts, the relation of the signifier to an abstract indeterminate is constantly foregrounded. It is along this line that I would like to broach the question of a postmodern sublime.

Indeterminacy and Nostalgia

In the essay "What Is Postmodernism?," Jean-François Lyotard argues his distinction between the modern and the postmodern in terms of an aesthetics of the sublime. Lyotard makes his distinctions in terms of aesthetic criteria rather than solely in terms of historic periodization. Thus, Lyotard implies in his essay that whereas Proust would be a "modern," Lyotard's aesthetic criteria authorize the classification of Joyce as "postmodern."

For Lyotard, the difference between the modern and postmodern is that "between regret and assay" [PMC, 80]. The postmodern would be, on this account, "not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" [79]. Once continued innovation is allowed to lapse into "the consensus of a taste" [81], the governing aesthetic is one of nostalgia (from this point of view, Lyotard's postmodernity seems equivalent to de Man's modernity¹, since no art of nostalgic sensibility could be called "modern" by de Man's reckoning). If the sublime is a combination of pleasure and pain, then the tendency toward this modern, nostalgic aesthetic might be understood as an attempt to lessen the pain while preserving the pleasure. It is with this in mind that Lyotard describes the aesthetics of Jurgen Habermas [PMC, 79] as that of the beautiful rather than the sublime -- the sublime experience is found in a disunity of consciousness, in referential breakdown (as in Thomas Weiskel's account of the sublime), and not in the unified pleasurable whole (as in Habermasian aesthetics). Habermas' emphasis on

“communicative rationality” keeps him “bound to the logic of beauty, a logic of illusion that does not recognize itself in its non-identical other” [Bernstein, 247].

If the ideal site for the postmodern sublime is a text in which indeterminacy is foregrounded in the signifier itself, as Lyotard would claim, then how much “foregrounding” is enough? Where does indeterminacy cross the line into indecipherability, and on whose terms? These are key questions in the context of Wallace Stevens’ poetry, which exhibits a kind of well-defined form and yet also consistently refuses determinacy. If we are to use Lyotard’s touchstone of “nostalgia” in a reading of Stevens, then nostalgia itself emerges as a limit at which the question of the postmodern sublime might open. Such an approach must specify what kinds of nostalgia a text may be susceptible to (quest for lost origins, meaning, etc.), and then read the text closely, observing what kinds of resistances it offers to possible “nostalgic” and “non-nostalgic” readings.

Rob Wilson claims to encounter “a transcendentalist nostalgia for the natural sublime” [217] in Stevens’ poetry, but the question of whether Stevens is nostalgic or simply historically aware is a debatable one. Stevens defends his own stance as a poet in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” without resorting to portraying the poet as committed to a particular political agenda. He takes issue with the word “escapism,” saying that the word does not need to be interpreted in a pejorative sense: “The pejorative sense applies

where the poet is not attached to reality, where the imagination does not adhere to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental" [NA, 31].

Stevens describes poetry as a means of coping with, rather than conveniently evading, "reality."

Stevens' poetry embodies "a disenchanted modernist viewpoint which recognizes that the sublime has existed in the past but realizes that American society is fast rendering the natural sublime unavailable to ordinary experience, except as a poetic diction infused with nostalgia" [Wilson, 194]. For Stevens, as for Lyotard, nostalgia is an artistic pitfall, something to be avoided, although how this is to be accomplished is also an open question:

How does one stand
To behold the sublime,
To confront the mockers,
The mickey mockers
And plated pairs? [PEM, 114]

These opening lines of "The American Sublime" suggest that a Disneyized commodity-rich culture simply cannot take the would-be sublime work of art seriously (of course, one's interpretation of this poem may be coloured by Stevens' argument in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" [NA, 10] that it is the statue that is at fault, not its reception). However one reads this stanza, it is clear that Stevens' aesthetic is significantly different from that of his predecessor, Walt Whitman. In Stevens, Whitman's celebration of

colonialism and free enterprise comes up (albeit indirectly) against the doubt and skepticism of the modern.

Stevens' sublime is an aesthetic chastened by the advent of modernity, or what he would call "the pressure of reality." He poses the questions "What wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?" and this might lead the reader to (false) conclusions as to Stevens' view of the relationship between the sublime and the religious. I think that it is helpful here to see the bread and wine as metaphors for the relativization of the transcendental by the material. That which was formerly assumed to be sacramental becomes open to doubt and question, but more fundamentally, choice. The (post)modern subject is a consumer who must choose from a wide-ranging "menu" of "sacraments." Can that "bread" and "wine" retain their status in the face of that bewildering array of cultural choices? Stevens takes a skeptical, doubtful stance here. I would like to argue that the use of these symbols in "The American Sublime" is hardly nostalgic. Yet the poem is sublime, or more correctly, as Derrida says, "apt for the presentation of a sublimity," by virtue of the idea presented, that is, by virtue of the presentation of the unrepresentability of an idea.

Rob Wilson writes, "Employing tactics of modernist decreation, Wallace Stevens struggled both to demolish and to extend the idealism and metaphors inhabiting the 'deep wonderment' and overreach of an American sublime" [171]. Neither demolishing nor extending are tropes of nostalgia,

and if we accept Wilson's characterizations, these are the two major moves made by Stevens' verse. Wilson articulates the worst-case scenario of the sublime, the threat of a naive Romantic sublime: "a fictive experience of self-empowerment which changes nothing but the self-image of the ego before a vast totality ('nature') which eludes the critique of subjective representation, or, consequently, the possibility of collective change" [211]. Wilson argues that a truly postmodern sublime must be one that never suppresses social responsibility. A sublime that is nothing more than permission for an ego to derive pleasure from powerlessness is a guarantee of social conformity and political passivity. He writes, "Such a [postmodern] sublime does not come naturally, however, but must be brought to literature through social forces encountered, resistances overcome, codes challenged and decreed" [212]. This is another distinction that cannot be understood as an absolute opposition -- it is impossible to imagine a sublime that does not include passivity with respect to something. For his part, Lyotard specifies that the passivity of the postmodern sublime is felt with respect to *time* [*Inhuman*, 107]. In contrast, the drive for technological mastery, and the "cynicism of innovation," are for Lyotard the affirmation of the will's "hegemony over time." Constant innovation, then, stifles the "Is it happening?" with the unbroken assurance that something is indeed happening, whereas the sublime feeling is a privation of this assurance, that reintroduces the "Is it happening?" *as a question*. In this way the sublime

aesthetic can be seen as an instrument of destabilization and resistance to determinacy. I have already mentioned the “decreative” aspects of poems such as “The Man on the Dump” and “The American Sublime.” But would this postmodern sublime be entirely coopted by a discourse of sociopolitical morality or agency? Wilson would argue the contrary, characterizing the postmodern sublime as “not so much a moral admonition as a trans-social force of premonition unleashed in the subject as nodal point in a discursive movement” [214]. Put in simpler terms, in the sublime aesthetic one may experience the consequences of moral and political choices at an aesthetic distance – an experience which can enrich and inform those choices.

Literature is thereby understood as a textual site in which society is called to account for its actions and where the revision of social convention is made possible: “This sublime is driven towards formal and social liberation: the postmodern sublime is enlisted as a symbolic praxis destabilizing reigning ideas of ‘order’ and ‘beauty’ which collective narratives of the self assume as limit, form, decorum, and history” [Wilson, 214].

Lyotard states that the avant-garde, or postmodern “art-object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unrepresentable; it no longer imitates nature, but is, in Burke, the actualization of a figure potentially there in language” [*Inhuman*, 101]. Indeterminacy can be thematized either as loss or as potential – this is where Lyotard draws his distinction between modern and postmodern sublimines.

Stevens chooses the non-nostalgic, “postmodern” option of indeterminacy as potential for de/re/creation.

Lyotard divides aesthetics into two poles: “a figural aesthetic of the ‘much too much’ that defies the concept, and an abstract or minimal aesthetic of the ‘almost nothing’ that defies form” [LAS, 76]. Why does Lyotard say that this sublime minimalism “defies form”? Lyotard writes that Kant’s aesthetic of the sublime is “qualified” by the “seriousness” of the imagination engaged in the sublime experience, describing this mood as “the seriousness of melancholy, the suffering of an irreparable lack, an absolute nostalgia for form’s only always being form, that is, limitation” [LAS, 75]. It is this lack, this failure, that is both registered and defied in Wallace Stevens’ careful, ironic language that refuses to give way to melancholic nostalgia. It is in this context, that of a revised “postmodern sublime,” that the poetic tradition can be understood both as a tradition to be respected and appropriated, and as a garbage dump heaped with dead flowers.

Sublime Excess (and the De/Constructed Ego)

In a comment cited in my introduction, Lyotard asserts, in effect, that the avant-gardist enacts the postmodern sublime by finding the unrepresentable in the “very matter of artistic work.” It is with respect to this aesthetic drive, which within the artistic discipline of poetry is characterized by a reflexivity of language, that one finds the most direct correlation between

the postmodern sublime of Lyotard and the postromantic sublime of Stevens. In the context of Stevens' sublime, a poem might indeed take the place of a mountain. Like his "Man on the Dump," Stevens cries "Stanza my stone," proclaiming the supplanting or supplementing of a natural sublime by a textual one, the fictive creation of an imaginary world where the poet or the reader might find "The exact rock where his inexactnesses / Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged" [PEM, 374]. "The image must be of the nature of its creator," Stevens writes in the ironically titled "A Mythology Reflects Its Region" [PEM, 398]. The ego-affirmation that takes place in Stevens' sublime is provisional rather than final -- it is the result of the ego finding "what will suffice" to relate itself imaginatively to reality, and the constant decreation and reshaping of its reality through that process.

The play between imagination and understanding is what produces the "delight," in Kant's sense, of the beautiful. Yet what happens when imagination begins to exceed understanding, in such a way that the object of beauty is no longer graspable by the understanding, is that those "definite boundaries" are transgressed in a way that produces not the delight of the beautiful but the pleasure of the sublime. In this instance, "as a result of the productive imagination in taste and genius, a proliferation of representations grafted upon a single given such that the conceptual consciousness that is supposed to make these representations 'recognizable,' that is, to situate them in one singular series of apprehensions of reproductions of the manifold, is

missing" [LAS, 74]. This is a description of the sublime as "excess," an example of discourse producing an "excess it cannot control" [De Bolla, 19]. It is a poet's sublime, in Weiskel's terminology, an excess or proliferation of meanings, as in Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" [PEM, 20]. The various stanzas of this poem describe a blackbird in ways that range from the starkly physical ("The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs") to the grandly metaphysical ("I know, too, / that the blackbird is involved / In what I know"). The statements about the blackbird that read as empirical observations generate the irony of the poem, the tension between imagination and understanding that is broken by the overwhelming power of imagination, the imagination which can image the blackbird thirteen different ways.

But Stevens does not have the gleeful inventories of material goods and natural riches that characterize Whitman's triumphalist sublime. Even his "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" are presented with ironic understatement. In general, Stevens' poetry is not characterized by an overabundance of images, and his repetitions are more often ironic than celebratory. So in comparison to Whitman's aesthetic, Stevens' is a chastened one, stripped-down and decreative. Stevens' verbosity, such as it is, takes pleasure in the signifier itself, in the actual sounds of the words.

Stevens' detached and ironic use of language bespeaks an intellectual hesitation in the face of excess. The very titles of his poems are well-known

for their simultaneously serious and ironic intention: "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," "Anything is Beautiful if You Say It Is," "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain." His "ironic sublime" paradoxically invokes the sublime experience while simultaneously subverting the grandiose claims of traditional discourses of the sublime. This aesthetic is exemplified by such poems as "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," where the subject of the sublime experience is a fictive rabbit, a rabbit whose role the reader is thrust into by direct address – "you" are the rabbit. The poem's presentation of the sublime is very deliberately appealing – "The trees around are for you / the whole of the wideness of night is for you / A self that touches all edges" [PEM, 151] – but the outcome of this evening of sublimity is that "you" have become a fat, happy bunny, enormously larger than the self-satisfied competitor, the "little green cat." You may have had your ego affirmed in the most blissful circumstances possible, but at the end of the day, you're a big, obnoxious rabbit! If a deconstructive sublime is possible, this is it. Stevens' infinitely expanding rabbit makes a striking exemplar for the hesitation between the "empirical" and the "absolute," although a superficial reading of this poem might interpret it as an argument in favor of the strictly empirical mode of thought.

This hesitation, then, is the source of Stevens' sublime, and differentiates itself from a Whitmanic sublime of technological mastery. It is this very hesitation that destabilizes any simple-minded readings of poems

such as “Anecdote of the Jar” that would reduce them to nothing more than allegories of colonialism². Any “supreme fiction” that will measure up to Stevens’ standards must open itself to “decreation,” reinvention, and change. A postromantic sublime need not be a simple panacea for frustrated desire, or an affirmation of political passivity. Rather, it may open thought to previously unconsidered possibilities. The subject of the sublime experience, in Stevens, is always “jolted from habitual perception” [Wilson, 172].

As “The Man on the Dump” suggests, the Romantic sublime calls out to be deconstructed. The overwhelming forces of God, Nature, and Capital, as Wilson puts it [211] “converge” all too easily in the construction of the political subject. If the experience of the sublime is to be seen in a postmodern context as more than a crypto-discourse of political subjugation, then it needs to be an experience that does not exclude political awareness. The onus is on the postmodern artist to create a politically destabilizing text as a possible site for the sublime experience. As Wilson puts it, “The spell the idealist sublime puts upon nature as a subjugating force should not remain the spell society puts upon the self-aggrandizing subject as always-already unfree; it should betoken, as symbolic practice, a premonition of freedom” [212]. The sublime that Lyotard describes is offered as an alternative ideal, one that is in certain ways contiguous with the Romantic sublime, and in some ways not. Wilson calls Lyotard’s description of the sublime “the latent dynamic of the avant-garde” [214], and that is a fairly accurate description,

although what Lyotard describes is a sort of ideal of the avant-garde in such a generalized form that it can be applied as a paradigm for most contemporary art, and for much that is pre-contemporary. If such a sublime is possible, then the sublime experience is still accessible and open to the politically aware reader. In the best-case scenario, "the sublime can become a vocabulary of resistance *and* accommodation," or so Wilson writes [216]. He contends that through the articulation of the sublime experience in the poetic text, forces that would otherwise render the postmodern subject passively mute can be articulated, making way for conscious analysis of, and response to, those forces.

Lyotard seems to think that the questioning of the received is an essential part of any postmodern sublime. His notion of the sublime calls for texts that creatively destabilize. On this point some valid questions might be raised as to the extent to which Stevens' poetry accomplishes this. Again, Stevens' stripped-down aesthetic offers a sharp contrast to Whitman's unapologetic technomastery, but on the other hand, how are we to read "Anecdote of the Jar"? Wilson claims to find a progression in Stevens' poetry -- a decrease in self-assuredness, a process of chastening. And he points out that "'Rock' and 'ice' are not, finally, the sublime for Stevens; they are the natural *ground* or locus of spirit upon which a sublime art in tune with American ideology could be reclaimed" [178]. "Stevens," he says, "projected an origin of 'nothingness' which he needed to keep positing in order to

construct the 'great mansion' or '*mundo*' of sublime art." To what extent Stevens' aesthetic is an egotistical one is once again a debatable point, but to reduce Stevens' textual sublimity to an expression of pure will to power seems too hasty. Such an approach would ignore equally important alternative facets of his aesthetic. As for the "Anecdote of the Jar," it "enacted the will to take American dominion, but was countered in such poems as 'Nomad Exquisite' by an equally compelling will to let go, to become self-dispossessed, to merge ego-voice into shapes, sounds, and influx of natural grandeur" [Wilson, 179]. As Wilson would argue, Stevens' poetry enacts a tension between the egotistical and the non-egotistical, a tension which could be articulated in psychoanalytic³ terms. Lyotard's analysis of the sublime, however, constructs it as an avant-gardist aesthetic, and is therefore concerned with articulating a consciously agenda-driven artistic practice (modern poetry, according to Stevens, "has a reason for everything" [NA, 167]), rather than unconscious drives or repressed knowledge. This leads him to bracket the psychoanalytic perspective: "Burke's analyses can easily, as you will have guessed, be resumed and elaborated in a Freudian-Lacanian problematic ... But I recall them in a different spirit, the one my subject – the avant-garde -- demands" [*Inhuman*, 101]).

The Sublime and the Avant-Garde

For Lyotard, avant-gardism is the very phenomenon that has defined

what the sublime is today. The postmodern sublime is constituted by the “difference between romanticism and the ‘modern’ avant-garde” [*Inhuman*, 93]. If we are to read the poetry of Wallace Stevens as exemplifying Lyotard’s postmodern sublime aesthetic, then, the extent to which his corpus can be referred to as “avant-garde” needs to be determined. Although Stevens’ poetry, as stated earlier, might not be what the contemporary reader would think of as “avant-garde,” it seems clear that he has long been considered an avant-gardist. Harry T. Moore, in his introduction to John J. Enck’s *Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments* (1964), certainly has no reservation about referring to him as an “avant-garde poet.”

“It is in the aesthetic of the sublime,” Lyotard writes, “that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of the avant-gardes finds its axioms” [PMC, 77]. Lyotard uses “modern” here in a sense which includes the postmodern -- recall that for Lyotard, postmodernism is simply modernism in its nascent state, and so the philosopher who wrote “Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without a discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities” must have the unceasing invention of “other realities” in mind when he refers to the “postmodern.” There could be no better characterization of Wallace Stevens, the poet who wrote that “Realism is a corruption of reality.” But in what sense does Lyotard use the term “avant-garde”? Further, can Stevens be said to be an “avant-gardist” in

Lyotard's sense?

Any treatment of Stevens as an avant-gardist assumes, as Lyotard does in his writings on aesthetics, a rather broad definition of the avant-garde movement. Peter Bürger, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, insists on a much more narrowly defined and specifically historicized concept of the avant-garde. In his view, the avant-garde movement was strictly an early-twentieth-century attack on the institution of art that successfully raised to consciousness the ways in which art functions in society, and which was over as soon as its own gestures began to be successfully institutionalized. Bürger attempts to clearly mark off the avant-garde from the more general phenomenon of modernism: "The historical avant-garde movements not only intend a break with the traditional representational system but the total abolition of the institution that is art" [63].

Lyotard refers to the same originators of the artistic avant-garde as Bürger: Manet, Cézanne, Braque, Picasso. And both Lyotard and Bürger see Duchamp as a touchstone of avant-gardism. But Lyotard takes the minimalist painter Barnett Newman as his point of departure for two essays on the postmodern sublime. In the first one, "Newman: The Instant," he asserts that Newman's work distinguishes itself "from the corpus of the 'avant-gardes'" [Inhuman, 78], but follows this remark with a point-by-point stylistic comparison with Duchamp, which concludes with the assertion that Newman's efforts were a continuation of the "central concern of avant-garde

research" [81]. In "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" (1983) he begins with Newman and goes further, asserting in effect that the "avant-gardist task" is an ongoing project characterized by the sublime aesthetic [*Inhuman*, 107]. Thus he implicitly rejects the claim that the avant-gardist project is a historically closed one, as posited by Bürger, who asserts that "The neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions" [58].

Bürger's dramatic distinction between avant-gardism and the rest of modernism is also not observed by Lyotard, for whom the aesthetic of the sublime inextricably links the "impetus" of "modern art" and "the logic of the avant-gardes." In this way, Lyotard's assumptions on this question are much closer to those of the earlier theorist Renato Poggioli, who translated some of Stevens' poetry into Italian, than to Peter Bürger. "Although Poggioli's name is now rarely mentioned, the influence of his approach can still be seen in the most recent discussions of modernism, post-modernism, and the avant-garde," writes Jochen Schulte-Sasse, in his foreword to Bürger's text [vii]. He goes on to remark somewhat dismissively that Poggioli's approach is "At least... highly compatible with the discussion, at present largely determined by post-structuralist premises." Schulte-Sasse does not go on to elucidate this claim, but it certainly seems to apply in the case of Lyotard. For Poggioli, as with Lyotard, the boundary between avant-gardism and the rest of modernism is not so definite.

Lyotard's comparison of Newman and Duchamp is instructive. He does not raise the question of the institutional function of their respective works. "There are two differences between Newman and Duchamp," he writes, "one 'poetic', so to speak, and the other thematic" [*Inhuman*, 79]. Lyotard sticks closely to the question of artistic form, that is, the avant-gardist attack on formal conventions (Duchamp's "attempt to outwit the gaze," Newman's presentation that presents nothing), which resulted in the postmodern condition of the privation of form as a given. For Bürger, by contrast, what was avant-garde about Duchamp was precisely the "radical negation of the category of individual creation" [51] which was an anti-institutional function of his art that can never be authentically replicated.

Given that unlikelihood that anything like a "total abolition" of cultural institutions was intended by Wallace Stevens, his work probably does not count as avant-garde in the most narrow sense that Bürger articulates. Bürger does devote a chapter of his study to formal features of avant-garde art, and it is not impossible that much of what he says about avant-gardism's formal aspects could be applied to Stevens' poetry. But here I am chiefly concerned with the extent to which Stevens is an avant-gardist in *Lyotard's* sense, and with demonstrating the compatibility of his work with Lyotard's postmodern sublime. Thus, Chapter Five's anatomy of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in avant-gardist categories employs Poggioli's more general scheme of "moments of the avant-garde."

In Lyotard's terms, Stevens emerges as an avant-garde poet when situated with respect to his historical context. It follows that his sublime be characterized as the multivalent postmodern, rather than the nostalgic-because-emptied modern. His relationship to romanticism is that of the avant-gardist, because he does indeed find the unrepresentable in the "very matter of artistic work," which in his case is the "fluent mundo" of words. Stevens' "poetic obscurity," to use Poggioli's phrase, does indeed "aim at creating a treasure trove of new meanings within the poverty of common language, a game of multiple, diverse, and opposing meanings" [38]. As we shall see, this is the antagonistic program of the avant-gardist, for Poggioli, and the "search for new presentations" ("in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable") of the postmodernist, for Lyotard [PMC, 81].

Chapter Two

The Mind at the Limits of Summer

The dialectic of imagination and reality is a well-worn theme in Stevens criticism. I resume it here not only to make use of a familiar starting point, but also, because of the various problematics of the sublime that I am elaborating, it is the one best described as the conscious, constantly recurring, main theme of Stevens' poetry, from such early poems as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Metaphors of a Magnifico," through to such late poems as "Credences of Summer" and "Of Mere Being."

I begin at the end, with "The palm at the end of the mind" that opens "Of Mere Being" [PEM, 398]. The fictive tableau of decor, palm, and bird that gives rise to philosophical reflection in this poem is used as a model for acts of decreation and subsequent creation by the imagination. The opening stanza recalls Derrida's description of the "cise" that simultaneously limits and unlimits -- the palm is both *thought* ("at the end of the mind") and *unthought* ("Beyond the last thought"). This paradox leads to a break, or discontinuity, in perception -- the imagination is frustrated in the attempt to domicile its own creation, because there is a privation of "human meaning" and "human feeling." The bird sings "a foreign song" rather than a beautiful song (that is to say, in the Kantian sense, one that would conform to the boundaries of expectation). In Endo's classification, this moment corresponds

to the “emergent” sublime, where comprehension is presented with its own failure.

In Endo’s second phase, the “dialectical” sublime, the subject begins to approach comprehension. In the poem this phase begins with its single insight – the independence or freedom of the imagination with respect to that which it attempts to comprehend: “You know then that it is not the reason / that makes us happy or unhappy.” The control of the human imagination over its own productions is here reasserted. Yet, there is still what Endo calls the “unassimilated remainder” [Endo, 42]. Simple statements like – “The bird sings. Its feathers shine.” – imply a simplified order of perception in which the object of reflection is stripped of extraneous meaning or purpose. Unlike the egotistical summer night of “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts,” in which “everything is meant for you” and “you become a self that fills the four corners of the night” [PEM, 151], here the palm, the wind, and the bird have no presentable purpose. Rather than being absorbed into the imagining mind, or reincorporated in a total synthesis, the palm remains “on the edge of space.” Thus the fundamental tension is not resolved. The same tension is first experienced as privation, and then as gift. Only the subject’s attitude toward this unresolvability has been modified.

Frank Lentricchia characterizes the Stevens sublime in markedly postromantic terms, contrasting his own view with Harold Bloom’s presentation of Stevens as a logical culmination of romanticism. For

Lentricchia, the Stevensian subject can never experience the closure of the romantic ideal: "The confrontation of imagination and reality, Stevens' great themes, cannot produce a coherent reciprocity of mind and matter as it can, theoretically, for a romantic idealist -- because the two worlds (mind and matter) exist in a dualism, not in preestablished harmony" [Lentricchia, 285]. This incoherence, or failure of reciprocity is what gives rise to the sublime in Stevens. As Lyotard says, in the sublime feeling, "the relation of thinking to the object presented breaks down" [LAS, 52].

A much earlier example, "Metaphors of a Magnifico" [PEM, 35], presents some basic questions of perspective as unresolvable. Are the men crossing the bridge each hermetically sealed inside their own reality ("twenty men crossing twenty bridges," or "one man / Crossing a single bridge"), or can the subject return to a possibly naive faith in perception's ability to reliably mediate objective reality ("Twenty men crossing a bridge ... Are / Twenty men crossing a bridge")? The intrusion of the details of the crossing ("The boots of the men clump / On the boards," "The first white wall," "fruit-trees") suggests that by entering into the world of the particular, these questions of meaning can be escaped. This is the movement toward comprehension, but then the train of thought itself is lost, "So the meaning escapes." That escaped meaning is, in this case, the unassimilated remainder of sublime contemplation.

Even Stevens' most affirmative attempts to reconstruct belief do not

attempt to resolve or extinguish completely this unassimilated remainder. For an extended case in point, I turn to the post-war "Credences of Summer." In the world of Stevens' poetry, summer is the time when belief is at its strongest. In Northrop Frye's terms, it is the "summer vision" (as opposed to the "autumn vision") which places its emphasis on the "subjective unreal element in the imagination," at the expense of "objective reality" [Frye, 66]. David Young points out that the tension between belief and skepticism is figured as cyclical in Stevens, in parallel with the cycle of the seasons. He summarizes, "The passing of summer into winter resembles the loss of dogma and preconception, and the movement from winter into summer the attempt to reconstruct value in new terms" [Young, 257].

"Credences of Summer" [PEM, 287-92] is a hymn to peace, a hard-won peace at the end of a terrible world war. It figures the movements of a mind attempting to find respite in certitude and completion. The mind "lays by its trouble and considers." At the outset of the poem, it is revealed that the day on which this meditation takes place is "midsummer," that is, the summer solstice: "This is the last day of a certain year." What is "certain" about the year is that it runs from solstice to solstice. The year understood in this way is identified closely with natural reality – it is far less arbitrary than the calendar year. So the solstice itself is one of the credences of summer. Yet the subject in the poem, desiring to believe that "there is nothing left of time" beyond the solstice, is confronted once again with the liminal. This is where a

reading of this poem, in the context of a sublime aesthetic, has great potential for confusion. By way of clarification from the outset, let me state that there are two kinds of “beyond” to consider in this poem. On the one hand, there is the desire to grasp an idealized moment of peace, belief, and completion in its essence, to fix it in eternity: “Joy of such permanence” [288]. This is the urge to escape beyond time, to transcend time itself. The other “beyond” is what constitutes the threat in this scene of sublime completion. It is the threat that this present ideal moment will evaporate, and the disorder that the world has so recently passed out of will return. Once the earth goes beyond the summer solstice, it begins the inevitable journey back into autumn and then winter. The winter vision, or “the terrors of winter,” as Frye puts it, is characterized by “the sense of a world disintegrating into chaos which we feel socially when we see the annihilation wars of our time, and individually when we face the fact of death in others or for ourselves” [Frye, 68].

The theme of completion is figured in several different interweaving ways, of which the most important are complete family, complete perception, and complete understanding. The complete family is presented in canto I, where the “fathers,” “mothers” and “lovers” all assume traditional poses. Here the threat is subtextual – this passage must be read in the context of a world war which claimed the lives of fathers and lovers who went off to fight and never came back. Later in canto III, the scene is expanded into a mythical domain where “mostly marriage-hymns” are sung. Canto V re-introduces

the familial theme, with a reminder of the past conflict, the “bristling soldier ... who looms / In the sunshine,” appearing first as a threat, until this threat is distanced by the assurance that the soldier is in fact a “filial form,” or part of this domain rather than a threat to it. Furthermore, he is a hero who no longer needs to be seen in the context of past tragedy in order to claim his heroic status. The “completed scene” (to borrow a phrase from Canto X) swallows up those bygone years, transfiguring the soldier into a pure essence of collective strength: “The youth, the vital son, the heroic power” [290]. This pure essence is possible only in the imagined reality that transcends time -- the ideal moment that captures the essences of many previous actual moments, and forestalls progress (or regress) into moments that might follow.

In the same way, the complete perception that the subject strives toward must “postpone the anatomy of summer” [canto II]; that is, the movement of the mind that would divide it against itself and re-introduce mental conflict between “the physical pine” and “the metaphysical pine.” In the privileged moment of the solstice, the subject wishes to “Exile desire / For what is not.” The kind of change and movement that implies a lack is to be cast out of this paradise (this theme is later expanded on in canto VII, which depicts the singers who “sang desiring an object that was near, / In face of which desire no longer moved” [291]). In the vision of “the very thing and nothing else,” the mind need no longer experience perception as a dialectic

between two poles. Rather, it experiences a complete perception of pure essence. The implied threat, just beyond the solstitial cusp, is that of a fall back into a world of chaos where perception reverts to its problematic status.

Thus the spatial metaphor for the ideal solstice, found in canto III, is the inverse of a fall – a rise to a great height, “the natural tower of all the world,” “a point of survey squatting like a throne, / Axis of everything.” Yet the view from the tower consciously excludes that which would threaten its vision of completion, and so this tower is “more precious than the view beyond.” Frye tells us that the colour green characterizes Stevens’ summer vision (as opposed to red for autumn) [Frye, 66-7]. The tower is described as “green’s green apogee” and again “green’s apogee,” which reinforces that this poem is not just an instance of the summer vision, but an idealization of it, a description of its pure essence (ultimate green, so to speak). This complete perception is accompanied by complete understanding, and thus the “old man standing on the tower ... reads no book.” He has “an understanding that fulfils his age,” and so there is no more complete understanding that he must move toward. He “is appeased.”

Helen Vendler’s reading of “Credences of Summer” proposes that, after the first three cantos, the poem’s idealization of the present moment steadily devolves to its conclusion. She states that the poem’s “initial impetus of praise and involvement, resolutely kept in the original moment, is maintained through the first three cantos, but from then on the oneness with

the here and now diminishes, until by the end of the poem Stevens is at an inhuman distance from his starting point" [*On Extended Wings*, 234]. In my reading, however, I don't find that the questions in canto V or the "unreal songs" of canto VII interrupt the overall momentum of the poem. I would argue here, to the contrary, that "Credences of Summer" represents a continuously expanding vision of a fully present moment, in every sense of the adjective "present," until the vision bursts in canto IX.

In cantos VI and VIII, the scope of the imagination's metaphorical regime is expanded once again with the introduction of religious/apocalyptic imagery and allusions. With regard to "the rock" in canto VI, Leonora Woodman makes the passing comment that it "expresses the parallels between earth and heaven in the image of the cosmic mountain 'half way green', while its counterpart, 'the other immeasurable half' dissolves into spirit, 'such rock / As placid air becomes'" [*Stanza My Stone*, 88]. Stevens makes his heaven an echo of the Judeo-Christian one by describing it as "the extremest light / Of sapphires flashing from the central sky, / As if twelve princes sat before a king" [PEM, 290]. The Old Testament books of Exodus and Ezekiel both contain sublime visions of God in heaven, in which heaven is depicted with a sapphire floor [Exod. 24; Ezek. 1]. As well, the twelve princes allude to the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles – the beloved (Israel, the church) in full celestial presence of her cosmic lover (cf. Rev. 21). Further, canto VIII with its "trumpet ... in the clouds" and "resounding cry" is

an echo of the Biblical vision of the rapture: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God" [1 Thess. 4:16]. In the poem, however, what is announced is not the gathering of saints into a celestial paradise, but rather, the finality of human imagination as "the successor of the invisible ... as what is possible / Replaces what is not." This is a humanist's apocalypse. In the last line of the last stanza, it is "man's mind" that is "grown venerable," or made sacred. There is nothing further beyond "what is possible," waiting to reveal itself, and thus what is announced is a full revelation.

But then what Stevens has called "the pressure of reality" returns to puncture this inflated humanist's paradise. What we might call the "bathetic canto" (IX) opens with a parody of the old man on the tower of canto III. In contrast to the man's stability and complete perspective, the flying bird connotes mobility of perspective. Instead of the old man's "ruddy ancientness" that compels respect, here is the insouciant bravado of a "cock bright." And rather than the "tower of all the world," the bird comes to land on a humble "bean pole." It is at this point that "a complex of emotions falls apart," that is, the complex of emotions built up to this point in the poem. And this "in an abandoned spot" -- we find ourselves in a new metaphorical region outside the scope of the seemingly ubiquitous presence of the preceding cantos. The mobile perspective of the bird is accompanied by the awareness that the pure solstitial moment is a figure of language, a construct.

And so the listener, attuned to the clarion call of the trumpet, is startled by the song of the "soft, civil" bird that itself can detect that which is "not / So soft, so civil." As with the bird in the palm at the end of the mind, the birdsong is unexpectedly foreign.

Joseph N. Riddel, in his deconstructive reading of the poem, finds the bird an appropriate figure for the constructed nature of reality. Referring back to canto III, he writes:

To burn everything away to one's pure sense of it is still to remain within the realm of "sense," and as Nietzsche has revealed, the realm of the sensory is always already metaphorical... We forget, Nietzsche says, "that the insect and the bird perceive a world different from our own" and the question of which perception is right or adequate is a "senseless one." [Riddel, 157]

The centre that the subject seeks cannot ultimately be fixed. In the end, the unassimilated remainder, the textuality of reality itself, comes home to roost. As Riddel says, "The play of imagination and reality in the poetic scene has long since begun ... which works to make us forget that its concepts are, in truth, tropes" [157-8]. The moment of the bird's appearance is the moment of unforgetting that disturbs the "right ignorance" of canto III. Once again comprehension is presented with its own failure.

In the wake of the emergent sublime, though, comes the dialectical

sublime, in which the tension is preserved while the second move toward comprehension is made. This is the final canto (X), which can be best understood in terms of its paradoxical colour code. Recall here that green symbolizes Stevens' summer vision; red, the autumnal vision which, according to Frye, "begins in the poet's own situation" and starts from the irony of the perception of "reality" as unattractive, "an irony deepened by the fact that other modes of perception are equally possible" [68]. Thus the "cock bright" in the abandoned garden, with its reddening breast, introduces the autumnal vision into the poem and represents (in one sense) the poet in the modern situation, as Lucy Beckett has noted [*Wallace Stevens*, 67].

Proceeding from the garden to the chastened pastoral of canto X, we are presented with a riot of colours, colours that are chosen not randomly but purposefully. In terms of Frye's classification, the setting has shifted from one aspect of the summer vision, the vision of the "golden lamp" (dominated by the sun), to the vision of the "green night," which is the "more contemplative vision" [Frye, 67]. In an inversion of the more totalizing sun-vision, we have the humble "gold bugs" instead of the "gold sun," and a "blue meadow" instead of the "whitened" blue sky. The characters in this scenario are content to mix summer's idealistic green and autumn's ironic red in their costumes, half and half. This is "appropriate habit for ... the manner of the time / Part of the mottled mood of summer's whole." Here the emphasis falls on the whole season rather than just its essential solstitial

moment -- summer's "moment" of freedom need no longer be frozen in its essence. It can be simply, freely experienced. Thus the final canto eschews what might be called the modernist will to power, with its "hegemony over time," and instead takes a passive stance with respect to time, a stance that characterizes Lyotard's postmodern sublime.

The final canto incorporates both the tension between the summer and autumn visions, and the attempt to comprehend them both. It does not give up the insight that reality is constructed, and represents this idea with the trope of an "inhuman author," who writes the parts that the characters of summer speak. But it reaches once again for an ideal -- this time a chastened, humbled ideal of a freely chosen fiction of completion.

Chapter Three

A Comedian as Indeterminate C (and Comedic Indeterminacy)

Recall here Lyotard's characterization of the modern sublime as a nostalgic presentation of the unrepresentable, contrasted with the postmodern sublime as an affirmative aesthetic which seeks new presentations. Earlier (in Chapter One) I recast the representable/unrepresentable distinction as a contrast between determinate and indeterminate meaning, stating that indeterminacy can be thematized either as loss (as in nostalgic modernism) or as potential (as in affirmative postmodernism). For an extended example of Wallace Stevens' aesthetic of affirmation, I turn now to the difficult and confusing capstone to *Harmonium*, "A Comedian as the Letter C" [PEM, 58-75].

An interesting critical challenge is posed by the choice of title: that of explaining why the poem is called "A Comedian as the Letter C" rather than "From the Journal of Crispin" (an alternate title used for an earlier version of the poem which appears in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*) or some other similarly obvious alternative. R.P. Blackmur's famous early (1932) explication of Stevens tells us that the letter C is Crispin, pointing out that "merest minuscule," a phrase describing Crispin's small size relative to the sublime immensity of nature, plays on the alternate definition of a minuscule as a small letter. Blackmur also points out that "like a letter he

stands for something -- his colony, cabin, and children -- as a comedian" [Blackmur, 86]. Other early critics -- those who are more interested than Blackmur in emphasizing those aspects of the poem that allegorize psychological development -- tend to remain either silent (like J.V. Cunningham) or passive (like Yvor Winters, who writes "the significance of the title, I regret to say, escapes both my learning and my ingenuity" [Winters, 127]) with regard to this question. Later critics make reference to Stevens' own comment that the poem plays on the various sounds of the letter C throughout, and that because of "all its shades" it may be said that "the letter C is a comedian" [Ehrenpreis, 104]. With the advent of deconstructive criticism, it began to be possible to read this poem of the letter C, and of the alter-ego poet/comedian Crispin, as an allegory for the free play of the signifier (as with, for example, Michael Beehler). From a deconstructive point of view, Crispin's inability to stabilize or finally ground his self-identity is simply an instance of what Derrida calls *differance*, the endless differing/deferring of meaning in the chain of substitution. In this context the identification of the comedian subject of the poem with a letter of the alphabet seems most apt, adding new dimensions to Blackmur's observation that Crispin needs to be understood as a signifier.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that "Crispin" is, in fact, Latin for "curly." The letter C is, of course, a curl. The first stanza implies that Crispin wears a ridiculous (presumably unkempt, curly?) wig -- the

coinage “nincompated” can be unpacked as “with the pate of a nincompoop.” Crispin observes porpoises that “dibbled” the waves, which implies that they were leaping out of the water and arching back into it, curling their bodies in the process. And then the waves themselves are “mustachios,” curly “inscrutable hair.” Both Crispin and the world he observes are inscribed, or poetically identified, with the letter C.

Any translator or linguist will tell you that the letter C is an “extra” letter in the English alphabet. Its two possible sounds can be unambiguously represented by S and K. The letter C, then, can be called a “supplement” to the English language in both senses in which Derrida uses the word: substitute and surplus. This is one sense in which the letter C can be said to be *in motion* in this poem, in the “movement of *supplementarity*” [*Writing and Difference*, 289] which precludes totalization.

Once deconstructive criticism began to take hold of Stevens’ poetry, it emphasized the self-reflexive and philosophical aspects of the poems, in a way which led Joseph Riddel to criticize what he saw as reductive readings of poems, the pursuit of “a dialectical line that will make the poem comment coherently upon itself” [“The Climate of Our Poems,” 154]. Riddel’s description of the dynamic of Stevens criticism is all the more interesting when specifically applied to readings of “The Comedian as the Letter C” because in this poem we find a textual surface so densely packed with coinages and other exotic and unfamiliar diction, that the task of establishing

a coherent meaning seems destined to be frustrated. It is one of the best examples in Stevens of the theme of indeterminacy being raised at the level of the signifier itself. According to Riddel, "The question of reading Stevens for most of his critics has been a question of finding the adequate method to define the play between a language of sounds without meaning, or what he called 'life's nonsense' which 'pierces us with strange relation,' and those aphoristic and quasi-philosophical metaphors about metaphor, language, poetry, and the like" [154]. Riddel emphasizes the role of deconstruction in reminding the reader that "such closures belong not to the poems, which are readings themselves, but to the readings of the poems which have grown tired of Stevens' challenge to, if not lack of, seriousness." Stevens' "Comedian" was his most resolute "challenge to seriousness" in the *Harmonium* collection. It has been seen by some as a response to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (first suggested, apparently, by R. H. Pearce⁴), but James Longenbach points out that "Comedian" was actually finished before Stevens read *The Waste Land* in the summer of 1922 [*Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, 90]. Despite this, Longenbach does contend that "Comedian" does, in fact, "offer a kind of carnivalization of the common understanding of Eliot's work," and constitutes a response to the "apocalyptic sensibility apparently embodied in *The Waste Land*" which was "a cultural commodity long before 1922" [91].

It is this "apocalyptic sensibility" that for Lyotard epitomizes the

modernist aesthetic. It is that sensibility that, faced with indeterminacy of meaning, mourns the loss of certitudes. "The Comedian" offers a sharp contrast to this sensibility. Crispin's inability to totalize reality or find a sure ground is presented in this poem with comic effect, rather than for nostalgic or melancholic purposes.

Given that the sea that Crispin sets sail on is a sea (C?) of indeterminacy ("Crispin at sea / created, in his day, a touch of doubt" [PEM, 58]), what are we to make of his "observant progress"? It is interesting to note, in the context of deconstructive concepts such as play and supplementarity, that the famous lecture in which Derrida introduced these ideas to American academics, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (published in *Writing and Difference*), takes as its "guiding thread" the deconstruction of the conceptual opposition of nature and culture. This is also the guiding thread for "The Comedian" -- the two *notas* which Crispin begins from at different stages of his journey. He begins from the assumption that "man is the intelligence of his soil" until this belief in the absolute power of subjectivity or imagination is dismantled by an experience of the natural sublime in the face of the immensity of the ocean: "Crispin was washed away by magnitude" [59]. Later Crispin begins again from the *nota* "his soil is man's intelligence," asserting the power of natural reality over the imagination. But the rest of the poem unsettles the notion that there is in fact a total, natural reality "there" to be accommodated. In the

words of Michael Beehler:

Stevens writes Crispin's romantic quest for poetry's insoluble *ding an sich* only to parasitize it, only, that is, to interrupt it and deploy it as a problem... Crispin always finds another land in "The Comedian as the Letter C," but those lands ... echo the polyphonic difference that washes over and dissolves their literal identity. [Beehler, 100]

Beehler is contrasting "polyphonic difference" here with what he later calls "reconciling identity and univocality" [101]. The former is what Crispin keeps discovering in place of the latter. In other words, the indeterminacy that Crispin finds in place of the literality that he seeks is never finalized or resolved. In Derrida's terms, "the nature of the field" of language "excludes totalization" [W&D, 289].

This inability of Crispin to totalize reality is obvious from the start in the ironic way in which he is portrayed. The "nincompated pedagogue," the "lutanist of fleas" is obviously not the master of his reality that he would like to be. The "polyphony" of the sea is "beyond his baton's thrust" to control. In stanza 3 of canto I, the way in which Crispin's mythology of self is emptied out by his experience of nature is paralleled with the demythologizing of Triton, a minor sea-god. There is "nothing left of" Triton "Except in faint, memorial gesturings," and similarly "Just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved." The poem alludes to Triton's horn ("something in the rise and

fall of wind / That seemed hallucinating horn") which in mythology is said to have had the power to calm the seas. Triton's horn seems to me to be the key element in the analogy, because it mythologically figures the way in which Crispin would, if he could, "stem verbosity in the sea," relying on his faith in man as "the intelligence of his soil" (or in this case, his waters). Ironically, it is Crispin's own verbosity, his own spouting principia, his "pipping sounds" that are metaphorically silenced by a horn: "a trumpet cried / Celestial sneering boisterously."

Crispin's self-demythologizing experience is brought about by this experience of the natural sublime that dismantles his ego: "The last distortion of romance / Forsook the insatiable egotist." Here the sense of "romance" is that of the trivial and delusory, what Coleridge might call "fancy," and what Stevens calls "the ruses that were shattered by the large." It is not romance in the sense of "romanticism" or the romantic sublime; in fact, here the romantic sublime is the very agent that strips Crispin's identity of "romance." Crispin's sublime experience presents his imagination with an unquestionable, totalized, univocal reality that recreates his subjectivity in its own image:

Here was no help before reality.

Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new.

The imagination, here, could not evade,

In poems of plums, the strict austerity

Of one vast, subjugating, final tone.

The results of this experience unfold through canto II. Crispin finds that having awakened to nature, his new state of mind is a two-edged sword. His capacity for "apprehension" has been greatly enlarged, but so too has his need for new and authentic experience. He becomes "intricate / In moody rucks, and difficult and strange / In all desires." This is "his destitution's mark," or in R.S. Thomas' phrase, "the wound of knowledge" [Thomas, 354] that has been opened in his imagination by his experience of sublimity. His attempt to capture his enlarged sense of reality in verse leads him to discover "a new reality in parrot-squawks." With this discordant turn of phrase, Stevens interrupts Crispin's grandiose aestheticizing of his new surroundings, and underscores the irony of how the self that is at first humbled by the natural sublime can become more obsessed with "aggrandizement" than the "sleepers halfway waking" who are blissfully ignorant of the transcendent experience. In front of the cathedral, Crispin hears the approaching thunderstorm and takes shelter inside, assuming the humble kneeling position "with the rest," but still convinced of the superiority of his enlarged perspective, "aware of exquisite thought." The repetition of the natural sublime here subverts the authenticity of the experience -- it fails to shake or newly recreate Crispin's once-reconstructed self, but instead is experienced by him as pure ego-affirmation. Stevens undercuts this would-be second sublime episode by explaining Crispin's flight

into shelter as having more to do with common sense than genuine terror: "An annotator has his scruples, too." The original source of Crispin's sublime experience has been left behind, to the west, and all that comes to Crispin's ear are echoes of the original thunder, "gigantic quavers of its voice." In Beehler's terminology, what was once apparent univocality is now revealed to be polyphony.

Canto III, "Approaching Carolina," sets out some of the familiar mythopoeic elements of the Stevens poetic universe. Once again there is the association of winter cold with skeptical, reductive thinking and summer heat with belief and satiation. Crispin conceives America as the home of intellectual skepticism -- a winter-country ("America was always north to him") where spring "in clinking pannicles / Of half-dissolving frost" fails effectively to dispel the winter, and summer "not ripening" never reaches its full potential. There is also the contrast of day and its demythologized reality with the night and its imaginative "indulgences." This is extended into a contrast (Crispin at this point is able to conceive "his voyaging to be / An up and down between two elements") between the "flourishing tropic" or "abundant zone" that Crispin "required / For his refreshment," the "Carolina of old time," and the present-day reality of Carolina, "the visible, circumspect presentment drawn / From what he saw across his vessel's prow" as he sailed upriver into the interior.

Now Crispin sets aside the beauty of tropical exotica for the vulgar and

the crude, the “essential prose” that exposes beauty as “falsified.” This is what brings him to the second *nota* that reverses the first: “his soil is man’s intelligence.” Canto IV, “The Idea of a Colony,” opens with this new *nota* underscored by stage directions to his previous excesses of belief, or “mental moonlight,” telling them all to leave his mental stage: “exit lex, / rex, and principium, exit the whole / Shebang. Exeunt omnes.” Crispin’s revised aesthetic project is to “make a new intelligence prevail,” and so he sets out to write his realist’s manifesto, the “prolegomena” that sets out Crispin’s latest aesthetic dogma. The prolegomena insists on its dogma that art is inescapably a product of its geographical locale, that “the natives of the rain are rainy men” and so even if they paint bright blue lakes and white and pink hillsides, “Their azure has a cloudy edge.” The circularity of Crispin’s new realist’s principium is already evident, as is the fact that it too is a constructed myth. Rather than myths of the past, like Triton or the “Carolina of old time,” his new “collation” is a set of myths of the future, “bland excursions into time to come” which “contained in their afflatus the reproach / That first drove Crispin to his wandering,” and so cannot be seen as any more capable of finality than the assumptions that they replaced.

So it is that at the beginning of canto V, Crispin finds himself intellectually cornered (not to mention “confined,” “cosseted,” and “condoned”). The realist’s stance that he has taken becomes unbelievable to him when he attempts to realize it in language. It is as if his credo is a

prelinguistic text which can only be heard in language as distorted echoes. This same intellectual quandary or inherent contradiction is described by Derrida as the dream of “deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile” [W&D, 292]. And so, “preferring (original) text to gloss,” Crispin chooses intellectual passivity: “For realist, what is is what should be.” This choice, however, is the first intellectual reorientation for Crispin that is not brought on by a crisis. He slides “from his continent by slow recess,” progressively changing from his need to totalize reality a continent at a time, and beginning to prefer instead the local scope of “things within his actual eye.” His will to seek “a matinal continent,” or in other words, a realm of pure potential, is “infected” by the blue sky, by the peacefulness of his surroundings. His observation that “The plum survives its poems” only confirms that any further attempt to find an aesthetic project that he can believe in is doomed to failure by language: “The words of things entangle and confuse.” But as Beehler observes, “the phenomenal *is* – the ‘plum that survives the poem’ – appears both as a description of a reality beyond rhetoric and as a rhetorical prescription, since ‘shall or ought to be’ echo in the *is*” [106]. This echo becomes louder as the final stanza of the poem is approached.

The second stanza of canto V expands on how rhetoric has failed for Crispin, and it is the same stanza that has been seen as a response to *The Waste Land*, or to the apocalyptic mood of its times. No longer can Crispin

find the will to “bray this in profoundest brass,” or “scrawl a tragedian’s testament.” He cannot believe in another prolegomena that he now recognizes would be nothing more than his own relativized identity writ large. Instead, Crispin has only a skeptic’s questions:

Should he lay by the personal and make
 Of his own fate an instance of all fate?
 What is one man among so many men?
 What are so many men in such a world?
 Can one man think one thing and think it long?
 Can one man be one thing and be it long?

But rather than retreating to isolation, to a lonely, defeated fate, Crispin “subverts his poetic energy into his children,” as Longenbach puts it [93]. Stevens refuses to depict Crispin’s fate as a tragedy. He avoids casting his comedian in the role of Prometheus Bound. By doing so, he refuses the kind of personal apocalyptic ending that would inaugurate a “new world with a new vision.” Instead, his concluding canto VI, “And Daughters with Curls,” is characterized by affirmation of social integration, “the return to social nature,” and the return of the world as enigma that escapes the realist’s grasp.

There are several ways in which the four daughters imply a return to the beginning of a cycle. There is the obvious theme of birth and rebirth, as the four daughters reflect various aspects or phases of the development of Crispin’s character (the mystical, the fearful, the poet of chastened rhetoric,

the overblown rhetorician/pedagogue). Stevens uses the word "personae," suggesting that they too, like Crispin, are comedians, but by highlighting their differences he complicates the picture once again. It is as if he is making the point that in depicting life as cyclical he does not mean to insist that there is only one possible cycle of personal growth with defined starting and ending points -- a textual resistance to the subsuming of indeterminacy by a determined fate. Then there is also the return of the world as a "turnip" or "insoluble lump" (at the risk of mixing metaphors it might be said that at the outset of the poem, the world was a nut that the "nincompated pedagogue" thought himself more than capable of cracking). It returns with his children, "reproduced" as an enigma, and so the "chits" are a sign that there can be no finalized vision of the world. Even though they bring to the world they inhabit ("their inherent sphere") their own "seraphic proclamations of the pure," these are, like Crispin's own rhetoric of years past, "delivered with a deluging onwardness." Here Stevens uses a phrase that thematizes (watery) indeterminacy as "portentous"/comic rather than abysmal/tragic.

There is one more twist to this presentation. Stevens, in the final stanza, dares to raise the question: what if this aestheticization of Crispin's daughters is simply one more instance of "glozing his life" with "variable, obscure" and otherwise questionable interpretations of "plain and common things"? To such a potential accusation (which would seem to parallel past characterizations of Stevens as dandy, dilettante, or aesthete) Stevens can only

answer that in the reduced version of reality implied by this question, the ending would still not be tragic because of Crispin's good-natured, unmalignant life. In other words, an existence that is so stripped by such decreative cynicism that it loses its transcendent dimension can hope for no more than to end "benignly." It is from such a perspective that one can expect no more from life, and that is what makes Stevens' concluding line, "So may the relation of each man be clipped," a comic ending. This comic conclusion again eschews finalization -- Stevens' choice of the word "clipped" simultaneously connotes and enacts the arbitrary selection of a termination point. The poem ends at a cutoff rather than a summation or ultimate realization.

This kind of affirmation, an acceptance both of the cyclical hypothesis or model of reality, or the attempt to simultaneously grasp inevitability and possibility, cannot help but remind one of Nietzsche's eternal return. The "sounds of music" of Crispin's daughters are played in a Nietzschean key, one might say. In this connection, the concluding canto, and the poem as a whole, are in turn reminiscent of Derrida's analysis of Levi-Strauss.

As is Crispin -- at sea, or as a "c" -- Derrida's "supplement" is a "floating" one [W&D, 289]. And like Lyotard, Derrida outlines two possible responses to the realization of indeterminacy: "Turned toward the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this ... thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty ... side of the

thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" [W&D, 292]. It is the same difference which distinguishes Steven's portentous, purple turnip from Eliot's bleak, blanched wasteland. Stevens' fluent mundo, Crispin's world of signs, is without fault because benign, without truth because insoluble, and without origin because reproduced. It refuses nostalgia in its presentation of the unrepresentable, and so embodies Lyotard's postmodern aesthetic. In Lyotard's own words:

It would be false to imagine that the cure could end on a reconciliation of consciousness with the unconscious. It is interminable because the dispossession of the subject, its subjection to a heteronomy, is constitutive for it. [*Inhuman*, 33]

Chapter Four

Someone Puts an Ego Together:

The Giant on the Horizon and the Man on the Dump

The fundamental orientation of the ideal subject constructed by Stevens' poetry, with respect to sublime excess, or in Weiskel's terminology, the "poet's sublime," is that of *intellectual hesitation*. This hesitation is the rhythm in his poetry of continual decreation and re-creation of reality through the poetic imagination. It interrupts, questions and refines each construction of his poetic, imaginative world. The "pressure of reality" always intervenes to arrest the momentum of ego-affirmation.

The problematic of sublime excess in Stevens resumes, from a different perspective, the problematic of reality and imagination, or the examination of thought at its limits, that was elaborated in Chapter Two. As with that discussion, a reading of one of the "summer vision" poems shows that Stevens, even at his most credulous, still displays his characteristic intellectual hesitation. In this case, I begin with "A Primitive Like an Orb" [PEM, 317].

Beginning by positing an "essential poem at the centre of things" that fills some basic human need, something inherent in the "cast-iron" of our lives and works, Stevens moves quickly to the observation that this basic process may lie beyond our understanding – it is a "difficult apperception,"

the existence of which “we do not prove.” In stanza II we are presented with language reminiscent of the “puissant flick” – in this case the “instant of speech” exemplifies both the emergence of the created from the decreed, as well as its tenuous ontological status: “The breadth of an *accelerando* moves, / Captives the being, widens – and was there.”

Consistent with the credulousness of the summer vision, though, most of “A Primitive Like an Orb” is an itemizing of that which would *reinforce* the theory of the central poem. The elements of the summer vision, familiar to the reader of “Credences of Summer,” are reiterated here. There is the “utmost repose” together with “that which in an altitude would soar” (stanza VIII), reminiscent of the man in the green tower. We are presented here with the *daytime* summer vision, representing the central poem as “essential gold” (I), and finding its setting in “each morning, each long afternoon” (VI). In stanzas III and VII, there is also the repetition of greens and blues in their familiar meanings; green once again suggests the sufficiency of the present moment, and blue once again invokes a celestial order, or what we might call Stevens’ revised concept of transcendence.

The dominating images of this poem exist in a kind of continuum, in the sense that they are implicitly equated with one another – the sun, the “essential gold,” abstracted into the “orb” of the title, the “central poem,” the “poem of the composition of the whole” [318], as well as the companion image of the “glistening” giant “on the horizon” (VIII) “that is evolved” and

who “Imposes power by the power of his form” (X). The figure of the giant, like that of the sun, is also abstracted – it is a recognizable trope of the natural sublime, but refashioned as a metaphor for a textual sublime.

In Derrida’s *The Truth In Painting*, the discussion of the sublime features two of Goya’s *Colossus* paintings [130, 141], which, like Stevens’ poem, present “a giant on the horizon” (XI) with a “massive body and long legs.” Goya’s figures differ from Stevens’ in that they are figures of pathos and terror, respectively, whereas Stevens’ giant is a kind of benevolent patriarch. Derrida’s essay (“The Colossal”) redefines the sublime as what he calls the “double trait” of the limit, “the dividing line upon which a colossus comes to cise itself, incise itself without cise” [144]. With Stevens’ giant, the limit which fails to limit is also what enables the presentation of the colossus as a sublime figure. The giant cannot be framed by “virtue” (here the connotation is of small-minded moralizing, or the “conventional” in its pejorative sense, a sense of the beautiful that cannot acknowledge what passes beyond its own limits) “as in a signed photograph on a mantelpiece” (X). Like Derrida, who speaks of the limit as “cise,” Stevens presents it as “snips” and “cuts.” But the liminal giant, “still on the horizon” (X), “elongates his cuts,” a curious phrase which can perhaps be understood in terms of Derrida’s concept of the “cise which limits and unlimits at one and the same time” [144].

Both Derrida and Stevens are presenting a transition from a natural to

a textual sublime, as a consequence of modernity. The feature of modern consciousness which Derrida ends his presentation with is our modern awareness of the potential limitlessness of the universe. Our discovery of "galactic" and larger proportions sound the "death knell" [146] of the colossus. All notions of representable scale (the limit necessary in order to go beyond) are threatened with a vastness that is an "abyss," that can "swallow" every notion of scale. But language is itself the "cise" that can always "both limit and unlimit" (in stanza II's characterization of the central poem, "It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is") and so Stevens' textual giant can remain "still on the horizon," despite the "pressure of reality." Or so this poem might be said to argue, in defense of the theory of the "central poem."

"A Primitive Like an Orb" traces this "cise" by veering from one side ("repose," "fulfillment," and self-sufficiency) to the other (the "still more" and the "ever changing"). The last two lines of stanza IV, for instance, begin with "The fulfillment of fulfillments, in opulent, / Last terms, the largest," and yet conclude with "bulging still with more." The giant encompasses both that which has gone before, and that which is yet beyond; both "familiar fire" and "unfamiliar escapes" (IX). As an abstraction he is a "definition with an illustration" and yet "not / Too exactly labelled" (XI). The central poem is a totalizing force, and yet it escapes totalization.

Even so, in *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, James Longenbach classifies "A Primitive Like an Orb" as one of Stevens'

“totalizing” poems [Longenbach, 301]. For Longenbach, the abstract aspect of Stevens’ aesthetic had lost the political relevance that had shaped it earlier. For him, this poem was corrupted by a misplaced post-war optimism, a too-easily-won coherence. For Longenbach, 1948’s “Primitive” lacks the historical engagement of 1937’s “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” which he says, by contrast, “was made in dialogue with historical conditions, conceiving poetry’s relationship to those conditions differently; it is not part of an attempt to build a world from poetry but to build poetry a place in the world” [280]. For Longenbach, the guitarist’s insistence that “Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar” [PEM, 133], amounts to a daring insistence on the lack of an easy correspondence between political events and the responsible portrayal of them in art. Further, he finds that Stevens’ central aesthetic consists in a hard-won refusal of both the certainty that “all’s right with the world to come” and, on the other hand, the “black-blooded philosopher who is certain all is wrong with the world he sees” [Longenbach, 190]. He concludes that Stevens’ aesthetic of the abstract “was achieved under the stress of the Second World War, but when the stress slackened, the aesthetic was strong enough to perpetuate itself on its own terms” [280].

Longenbach seems to side with Stevens against those who would insist that a certain kind of poetry must be written given a certain set of historical circumstances. His analysis of Stevens’ poetry, and the context in which it emerged, brilliantly illuminates the relationship of that poetry to Stevens’ life

and times, while striving to remain wholly sympathetic to Stevens' struggle to resist cultural "certainties." To some extent, though, he falls prey to the same mode of thinking that characterizes historicisms less nuanced than his own -- he rates the merits of Stevens' poems according to his perception of their degree of "historical engagement." For example, he contends that Stevens' 1949 poetic synthesis, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," simply "rehearses the achieved vision of" 1942's "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," while "refining it, but forgoing its historical weight" [290]. Unsurprisingly, Longenbach's extended analysis of "Notes" features an insistence that even the cantos that seem "distant from the historical world that provoked them" need to be interpreted in terms of the poem's coda, which "restores us to that reality" [270].

For his part, Lyotard locates the possibility of political responsibility, with respect to a postmodern sublime, rather differently. "As for a politics of the sublime, there is no such thing," he writes, "It could only be terror" [*The Postmodern Explained*, 71]. Later in the same essay ("Postscript to Terror and the Sublime"), Lyotard qualifies his sweeping assertion. He defends his concept of postmodernism against the charge of "irrationalism":

I've struggled in different ways against capitalism's regime of pseudorationality and erformativity. I've emphasized the importance of the moment of dissent in the process of constructing knowledge, lying at the heart of the community of

thought. Thus its avant-gardism... [73]

Lyotard has not cut the sublime aesthetic free from political engagement. Although he contends that no politics can find a *basis* in the sublime aesthetic, sublime art is still a politically engaged and destabilizing force precisely because of its refusals, its "moments of dissent," or what Poggioli would call its *activism* and its *antagonism*. In Lyotard's view, the antagonism of the avant-garde is directed toward "the presumption of the mind with respect to time" that accompanies the "cynicism" that presides over relentless technological innovation [*Inhuman*, 106-7]. For Lyotard, the privation of this presumption is precisely what the avant-gardist is attempting, and this privation is the (postmodern) sublime feeling.

In the next chapter, I will discuss this problematic of the sublime and the avant-garde in more detail. For now, I simply propose that the intellectual hesitation of Stevens' poetry represents precisely one of these "moments of dissent," and further, that this quality of hesitation, despite Longenbach's emphasis to the contrary, can be found even in the peacetime poems. That is why I have emphasized here those qualities of "A Primitive Like an Orb" that resist the totalizing tendency. It is important to note that the giant who incarnates the "central poem" resists, in various ways, any kind of finalization. He is both creator and created – "patron of origins" (XI) who "imposes power" (X), and yet a creature that "is evolved" (X), "an abstraction given head" (XI). He is both "utmost repose" (VIII) and yet "ever changing,

living in change" (XII). And each individual player who has a part in this poem of the centre is by definition *eccentric*: "The lover writes, the believer hears, / The poet mumbles and the painter sees, / Each on his fated eccentricity" (XII). These are the paradoxes of a theory of a central poem, a theory that can never be finalized or proven.

If "A Primitive Like an Orb" represents the summer vision, or Stevens' vision at its most affirmative (or totalizing -- the state of mind in which "man is the intelligence of his soil"), it is still located within the total vision, or total structure, of Stevens' poetry, within which each season of the year seems to unmask the necessary fictions of the previous seasons. In the poems of the autumnal vision, such as "Lebensweisheitspielerei" [PEM, 383] (to choose a later example), we find we have moved from the "glistening" giant with his "bright excellence" to the sunlight that is "weaker and weaker" as it "falls / In the afternoon." This poem speaks of "the poverty / Of autumnal space" in which the "letters, prophecies, and perceptions" [320] are annihilated by skepticism, leaving nothing but "A look, a few words spoken" [384]. In the winter vision of "The Plain Sense of Things," even skepticism itself is unmasked as a fiction: "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" [383]. Similarly, in the early winter poem "The Snow Man" [54], the subject with a "mind of winter" does not find "misery in the sound of the wind" -- that kind of misery more properly belongs to the autumnal vision, with its falling leaves and crumbling truths (although autumnal nihilism has

its pleasures, too, exemplified by such poems as "On the Road Home" [164]).

With each season comes a different epistemological orientation toward poetic signification: summer is the season of a happy conjunction of signifier with signified; in autumn, the relationship breaks down; winter celebrates the full emergence of the natural reality which escapes poetic signification, "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" [54]; and in spring, attention is turned back to the signifier, to a kind of state of referential promise where the signifier bespeaks renewal because it is not yet fixed on the signified. This is the "small howling" of "The Dove in Spring" [385], which has no signified to settle on – it is "too far / For daylight and too near for sleep." It is a question without an answer, "like a man / Who keeps seeking out his identity."

The connection between spring and the question of signification in Stevens is strikingly exemplified by 1938's "The Man on the Dump" [PEM, 163]. This poem begins with two stanzas' worth of what might at first seem to be a depiction of autumnal decay, but which turns out to be an inventory of the wreckage that the recently-receded destructive forces of winter have left in their wake (in "The Realistic Oriole," Frye says that this poem belongs to the "autumnal vision" [Frye, 68], but it is actually set "in the time of spring"). What is distilled in these lines is the essential moment of spring, the "philosopher's honeymoon" as the last stanza calls it -- the birth of the concept, the interval before it ossifies. It articulates a model of creative work

that begins with the “purifying change” that occurs when one “rejects the trash.”

What “The Man on the Dump” presents to us, despite its comic send-up of the poetic tradition as a heap of dead flowers and other trash, is an idealized moment: a world that has been purified of its excesses and is waiting to be invested once again with meaning. Completely original meanings are not possible, but the old meanings will have to be weeded and the trash thrown out. Thus “the moon comes up as the moon” but the interpretations that we give to the moon are not forgotten – “All its images are in the dump,” that is, waiting to be sorted through and thrown out or re-used in different ways. Even as the moon is a text that must be decreated and recreated, so is the human self; as with the moon, Stevens distinguishes between the essential man and the “image of a man.” Such an essential self, freed from “everything,” is a hypothesis only, a construct like the giant on the horizon. Stevens alludes to this by weakening the connection between “you” and “a man” by use of simile. “You see / As a man,” that is to say, like an essential self would see if there was an essential self there to see the moon.

Once again, Stevens here presents a sublime that is explicitly post-Romantic. The Romantic natural sublime is satirized -- “Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say / *Invisible priest*” -- and in its place is installed, hesitantly, a textual sublime. It is an affirmative aesthetic that looks for its basis in its own textuality rather than in nature. The “dump” of poetic

tradition takes the place of "Mont Blanc"; an ode to the definite article takes the place of the "Ode to a Nightingale." Instead of Ozymandias, whose ruined fragments mourn a missing content, there is Cornelius Nepos, who occupies his time on the dump by reading "this or that," by beating on the "old tin can" of meter and prosody, constructing his future from the elements of a deconstructed past.

"The Man on the Dump" embodies a hesitation between the determining impulse and determined meaning, enacted in its enigmatic concluding definite articles: "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the." As with Crispin the comedian, the multiplicity of meanings that confronts Cornelius Nepos is presented with comic effect. The dump is "not a wasteland," as Longenbach points out [206]. As with the "Comedian," the loss of old meanings is not presented as a modernist's tragedy (Longenbach suggests that "The Man on the Dump" can be read as "a grown up version of 'Sunday Morning'" [206]). Rather, it is contextualized once again within Stevens' metaphorical cycle of the seasons. Creative work is figured as ordinary routine, on this account; as with Stevens' life, it is another day at the office. In this postmodernist scenario, the sacred aspect of the poet's work is reduced (the poet "sits and beats an old tin can") but it is no less necessary for that ("That's what one wants to get near"). The revised, hesitant sublime presented here is invoked as a question, the rapidly reiterated "Is it?" Is it peace? Is it a philosopher's honeymoon? Is it to sit? Is it to hear? Is it to

eject? Is it happening?

Chapter Five

Four Moments of an Evening in New Haven:

The Ordinary and the Avant-Garde

We have already seen, as in the case of James Longenbach, that some critics regard "An Ordinary Evening In New Haven," the last of Stevens' long poems, as a late repetition of previously developed themes. Joseph Riddel, for example, observes that "Like so many later poems, it appeals to the body of images and symbols which have accrued with each successive volume and have come to have an immense import with each recurrence" [*The Clairvoyant Eye*, 263]. So this meandering, meditative text, which followed closely upon Stevens' seventieth birthday, may seem like an odd basis for a discussion of the avant-garde aspects of Stevens' poetry, but I turn to it now as an example that, by virtue of its status as summary statement, may shed some light on precisely those qualities of the entire Stevens corpus. Recalling here Lyotard's characterization of a postmodern sublime as an essentially avant-garde aesthetic, I follow here Renato Poggioli's four "moments of the avant-garde" as a way of anatomizing Stevens' aesthetic in avant-gardist terms.

The Activist Moment

Poggioli's description of the moment of *activism* in the avant-garde is quite skeptical of much that can be described by that term. For him, the

activist impulse can turn into an obsession with “physical dynamism” [Poggioli, 28] and with speed itself that constitutes a perversion of modernity into “modernism,” as he calls it – “The honest-to-goodness nemesis of modernity, it cheapens and vulgarizes modernity into... *modernolatry*: nothing but a blind adoration of the idols and fetishes of our time” [218]. This implicit critique of Italian Futurism, reminiscent of Lyotard’s pejorative characterization of modernism as a fetishization of form, indicates that Poggioli’s concept of “modernity” is very close to Lyotard’s concept of “postmodernism” – modernism in its nascent state.

Poggioli goes so far as to rate activism as the least characteristic moment of the avant-garde. But he calls attention to what he identifies as an outgrowth of the activist myth (which he defines as an adventurous attitude towards the exploration of “that difficult and unknown territory called no-man’s land” [28]) in the writings of Rimbaud: “the dream of poetry not simply as accompaniment or comment, but as the creation of a new reality” [29]. This alternative to the aesthetics of speed can be found in Stevens’ oft-repeated theme of reality as imagination (re)incarnated or (re)created in words, of which “An Ordinary Evening In New Haven” [PEM, 331 ff.] offers a striking example. Rather than an escape from the ordinary, Stevens’ new haven for humanity is a revisioning of the real, a “recent imagining of reality” [canto I], a radical reordering of the ordinary itself. In this reordered universe, the houses are “composed of ourselves” [II] and their boundaries

are no longer so fixed. They “become an impalpable town,” Stevens writes, using “impalpable” not only in the sense of transcending the material, but perhaps also in the less common sense of the imperceptibly divided, as when a rock is worn to an “impalpable” powder so finely atomized that no grains can be felt. With the blurring of divisions, the “crude collops” or folds of flesh coming together to form one “great bosom” [I], the houses become “transparent dwellings of the self” as formerly solid boundaries are reimagined as fully permeable.

An image of this new fluidity of reality that Stevens uses very prominently throughout the poem is that of *colours*. In thirty-one cantos, there are at least fifty references to colour. Here in the second canto, the “dwellings” are said to be “Impalpable habitations that seem to move / In the movement of the colors of the mind,” and this contrast of the “colors of the mind” with colours “of the sun” provides a powerful metaphor for the way in which ideas are experienced as distinct and yet related to one another, without fixed boundaries. In several passages, colours metamorphose from one shade to another: “Blue verdured into a damask’s lofty symbol” [XVII], “That which was public green turned private grey” [XIX], “Yellow and yellow” distinguished as “Yellow-blue, yellow-green” [XXIX]. In some such passages, neutral colours such as “effete green” and the “black” of the woman’s cassimere suit [XXIII] reference a lost fertility or fecundity that the effort of revisioning is directed toward recapturing. This is the aspect of the activist

impulse which Poggioli calls “the dream of a poetry of the future returning, like the Greek lyric, to the pure springs of being” [29].

The possibility of reality being reconstructed in words is opened at the point where not only the old reality but also its accompanying nostalgia are deconstructed, the point where “disillusion” itself is determined to be “the last illusion” [V], where reality is “Not that which is but that which is apprehended.” If indeed “The poem is... Part of the res itself and not about it” [XII], then, as Michael Beehler writes, the res (object) is “Both referent and reference, transcendent signified and poetic signifier... a site of difference in which presence and representation endlessly shift places” [Beehler, 172]. It is “as if” the “words of the world are the life of the world” [XII], Stevens writes. This spirit of activism, that wants to assemble its own textual reality, is the hypothesis which “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” attempts to demonstrate heuristically, rather than by a logically-ordered sequence of arguments. The request that we “Suppose” the impalpable town at the outset of canto II is the understood premise of all the subsequent stanzas. The reader is urged to consider/construct provisional alternative texts to the “vulgate of experience” [I] so that the canon of common sense can be freshly rewritten. The aphoristic assertions throughout the poem are bold attempts to propose “something certain” [XXIV] in the full realization that “We do not know what is real and what is not” [X].

In canto XXVIII, Stevens expands on the epistemological status of the

New Haven of the imagination. Subject and object cannot be separated; in “New Haven / Before and after one arrives” how can one isolate the “before” and “after” versions of New Haven? “It follows that / Real and unreal are two in one,” Stevens writes, and offers a series of analogies:

Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,
 Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes
 Or Paris in conversation at a café.

This sequence destabilizes any notion of an unmediated experience of any locale -- the Salzburg of first-hand perception in the daylight, for example, is countered by Rome at night; Bergamo is appropriated in text and in a picture, whereas Sweden is described in speech. Paris, too, is a linguistic construct here -- and the reference to a “café” suggests, but ambiguously, that the “conversation” could be taking place in Paris itself, an ambiguity that relativizes immediacy of perception. This inventory of exotic destinations implies that the “commonplace” New Haven is no less a construct of the imagination than these glamorous faraway places (that Stevens never visited). Stevens here offers a subtle “proof that the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life,” or in Poggioli’s terms, “the truly dynamic and progressive vision of poetry” [30].

The Antagonistic Moment

Poggioli’s second moment of the avant-garde is *antagonism*. This can

be divided into antagonism toward tradition, and antagonism toward the public. In Stevens' poetry, the antagonism toward tradition is expressed notably in some of the poems that I have already cited: the figuring of poetic tradition as a garbage heap in "The Man on the Dump," and the ridiculousness of the General Jackson statue in "The American Sublime." Once again it should be noted, though, that at the level of poetic style, Stevens' deformation of tradition is rather restrained and stops short of radicalism. On the other hand, if we consider antagonism toward the public, it must be said that Stevens' poetry is very dense, abstract, and self-referential, and exemplifies the hermetic tendency in its closed symbolic systems (especially evident in his use of the colours and seasons), in its esoteric, archaic diction (e.g. "alchemicana," "verdured," "finikin") and in its ambiguous modes of expression. Poggioli claims that new generations of avant-gardists oppose "the old generation, the academy and tradition, by means of a deliberate use of an idiom all its own, a quasi-private jargon...linguistic hermeticism, which is one of the avant-garde's most important characteristics of form and style, [can] be conceived of as both the cause and the effect of the antagonism between public and artist" [37]. This "linguistic hermeticism" is conventionally understood from the poet's or critic's point of view as a kind of cure for the malaise of flat, "impoverished," common idioms of speech. Here we have what Poggioli calls an "antinomy between metaphor and common language" [38], or what in Stevens' words is

a reaction against "The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X" [PEM, 240].

In "An Ordinary Evening," Stevens' linguistic hermeticism is deployed with the explicit purpose of enabling and enacting a renewed vision of reality. It is a protest against the common vision, and a manifesto of a revised one. In this way, it invokes the "antinomy" between poetic language and social language described by Poggioli:

The problem of obscurity in so much contemporary poetic language is furthermore understood... as the necessary reaction to the flat, opaque, and prosaic nature of our public speech... Poetic obscurity would then aim at creating a treasure trove of new meanings within the poverty of common language, a game of multiple, diverse, and opposing meanings. Poetry would then be by nature equivocal; its most authentic effect would be "ambiguity" [37-8].

It is such a language-game that is proposed and embodied in Stevens' text, a game of "indefinite, / Confused illuminations and sonorities" [II], where the poet utters "The cry that contains its converse in itself, / In which looks and feelings mingle" [VIII]. If indeed, as the poet writes, "We seek / the poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation," the irony is that reality includes not just "The solid, but the movable, the moment" [IX]. Paradoxically, the human spirit "resides / In a permanence composed of impermanence" [X].

The quest for multiple, diverse, and opposing meanings within what can still be considered as a unity, that is, a single text, is pushed further here than in many of Stevens' other poems, especially with its initially bewildering variation of content. These lead Joseph Riddel to assert that "'An Ordinary Evening' is not, I think, successful as a total poem" [263]. Some of the sections seem to present a unified structure, such as the description of the "ephebe" in canto XIII, and cantos XIV-XXII revolve around the character of Professor Eucalyptus, but to a widely varying degree. Certainly there is not the obvious overall thematic arrangement of "Credences of Summer," for example. Riddel also compares "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which he sees as showing more of a "continuity" which develops with a "mock-logic" [262]. "An Ordinary Evening," on the other hand, is said to progress in the manner of associative thought. Yet it seems to me that this is itself a deliberate structure, and one which foregrounds the multiplicity and diversity of thought itself. Poggioli speaks of a "regressive" [35] or "infantile" [37] aspect to avant-garde antagonism (finding its most extreme manifestation in dadaism) which he wishes to critique. In contrast, Stevens does not radically refuse the urge to synthesize. Rather, he subtly destabilizes it with his meandering discursiveness, and with ironic suggestion, as in the opening of canto IX, where the repetition of "coming back" undermines the surface meaning: "We keep coming back and coming back / To the real."

Poggioli observes that "Avant-garde art is, compared to romanticism,

unpopular" [45]. If the antagonistic impulse means that avant-garde art is content to be so, then what would it mean to create "A larger poem for a larger audience" [I]? It would be a mistake, I think, to interpret "large" as meaning "more general." Stevens seems to have in mind, rather, a poetics that can tolerate multiplicity and ambiguity, and people who can do the same. The "larger audience" is larger in its perspective, not necessarily larger in number, although that may be implied as well. It is an audience that is content to live in the "indefinite" [II]. Stevens isn't interested in a vision that is watered down for the masses. Rather, his vision reflects what Poggioli calls the "aristocratic disposition" [39] of the avant-garde spirit. He puts his cultural faith, in the solitary "ephebe," who is "A strong mind in a weak neighborhood" [XIII], and Professor Eucalyptus, who "preserves himself" [XV] and struggles to find a "paradisal parlance" [XIV] that will serve as "a corrective to the linguistic corruption characteristic of any mass culture," as Poggioli puts it [37].

In canto XIX, Stevens finds an inspiring example in the "Ecclesiast," also known as Koheleth, the author of the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, ascribed in classical tradition to Solomon. The case of Ecclesiastes provides an instructive, paradoxical analogy. On the one hand, it is a text "rugged and luminous" enough to have stood the test of time, to have been canonized and thereby widely accepted as authoritative and influential. At the same time, its "chants in the dark" are recited along with its observations that

human desires and achievements are ultimately “vanity” [Eccl. 1:2]. Despite being notoriously difficult for interpreters to assimilate to theological norms, it became central to the conception of wisdom in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and is itself “A text that is an answer, although obscure.” The Ecclesiast embodies Stevens’ optimism that the poet can be “a personage” whose “intelligence” becomes “the axis of his time,” defining “a sense in the changing sense / Of things.” The antagonistic moment of Stevens’ aesthetic, then, is marked by the characteristically ambivalent avant-gardist attitude toward the audience, one that eschews popularity (or easy comprehension) while simultaneously attempting to transform perception.

The Nihilist Moment

The moment of *nihilism* in the avant-garde is characterized by Poggioli as “the point of extreme tension reached by antagonism toward the public and tradition” [64], and it manifests itself as a driving force for a distinct cultural “revolt”:

The motivations for this revolt appear simultaneously under the different guises of reaction and escape: reaction against the modern debasement of art in mass culture and popular art; escape into a world very remote from that of the dominant cultural reality, from vulgar and common art, by dissolving art and culture into a new and paradoxical nirvana. [64]

To this end, canto XXI opposes modern realism to Romanticism, positing "another isle" that is "the opposite of Cythère." Cythère, the Romantic's paradise, is superseded by an "alternate romanza" that is the song of the here and now, "close to the senses," unlike the first romanza that is the song of the long ago and far away. Stevens deconstructs this opposition of the two songs by suggesting that "The distant and the near, / Are a single voice in the booha of the wind," and so the two visions of paradise do indeed dialectically form a "paradoxical nirvana."

Poggioli describes numerous possible modes of expression of the nihilist impulse. Within the context of modern poetry, he refers to the form that he calls the "denigrating image" [64]. In the chapter "Aesthetics and Poetics," he writes "Modern poetry uses the derogatory or pejorative image not only as a vehicle for caricature and grotesque representation, but also as an instrument to disfigure, or transfigure, the object so as to produce a radical metamorphosis" [183]. For Stevens, the denigrating image is an essential form in his poetic program of decreation. Recall here the monstrous rabbit-king, the high-toned old Christian woman, and the ridiculous statue in "The American Sublime." In canto XII of "An Ordinary Evening," the "marble statues" are most authentically real when they fail to represent their intended objects, and become "like newspapers blown by the wind" until they go "back to be things about," back to their intended role as symbols. In canto XXIV, the statue of Jove is deformed into a figure of "repetition" in its pejorative sense -

- that which must be escaped from to permit "a happening." And in the final canto, we find that the grandeur of the emperor of Rome has been progressively diluted into the "photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank," the interchangeable leader of Any Company (perhaps the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company), U.S.A. This nihilistic reaction against debasement, though, leads not to nostalgia for a lost paradise but aims at a creation of the new within the flux of existence.

The Agonistic Moment

The fourth and final moment of the avant-garde, in Poggioli's scheme, is the moment of *agonism*, which he claims is a moment of "unlimited importance" [65]. Agonism is, for Poggioli, "a paradoxical and positive form of spiritual defeatism" [66] represented, in one aspect, by a tendency toward the sort of hyperbole that recognizes itself as a failing but noble attempt, a grand doomed gesture. Poggioli writes, "Nothing better demonstrates the presence of an agonistic mentality in the avant-garde aesthetic consciousness than the frequency in modern poetry of what we shall call the *hyperbolic image*" [66]. In "An Ordinary Evening," this kind of imagery recurs often, beginning with the "second giant" who encapsulates "a festival sphere, / A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age." It is seen again in canto XI's description of the imaginatively refashioned New Haven and its citizens, who are "Free from their majesty and yet in need / Of majesty," who need a

truth as reliable as the earth's regular rotation, "The brilliancy at the central of the earth." Here the quest for "essential reality" is figured as ultimately noble, even if it is destined from the start to fall short of its goal, like the woman's note that is destined to be torn up [XXXI].

According to Poggioli, this tendency of the avant-garde to turn doomed efforts into heroic ones was manifested most strongly in the tendency toward *futurism*. By the logic of futurism, the self-sacrificing heroic quest of avant-garde art is understood to be creating a new foundation for the artistic expression of future generations, and so "The author seems to conceive of his own art as a preparatory phase, as the study for or prelude to a future revolution in the arts" [72]. One of the most widely-manifested symptoms of this modern mentality is in the preoccupation of modern poetry with poetry itself, the insistence on discussing what poetry is, should, or could be -- "the cry of its occasion" [XII], for instance. As an aesthetic and philosophical manifesto, "An Ordinary Evening" articulates this promise of an emerging revelation in the quest of Professor Eucalyptus for "the essence not yet well perceived" [XIV]. Reality, in this vision, is "the beginning not the end" [VI], a beginning signaled by the "cock-cry" of "new mornings of new worlds" [VII]. In contrast to nostalgia for "what is absent," Stevens invokes a new "visibility of thought" that "is a coming on and a coming forth" [XXX], "a readiness for first bells, / An opening for outpouring" [XXIV]. If we take "shade" and "dust" in their archaic senses of "disembodied spirit" and "biological matter,"

than Stevens' final-stanza hypothesis that reality "may be a shade that traverses a dust," invites us to think of reality itself as creativity embodied, and his "force that traverses a shade" sounds the echo of difference that opens the possibility of a re-created future from an infinite number of beginnings.

In 1951, in an address at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Wallace Stevens remarked that modern artists had "helped to create a new reality, a modern reality... This reality is, also, the momentous world of poetry" [NA, 174]. In that speech, "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," reproduced in *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens draws a series of parallels between art and poetry, and more particularly, modern art and modern poetry. One of the essential characteristics that he claims for modern art and poetry is that it is "uncompromising" [167]. It does not make "concessions." This is the kernel of all four moments of the avant-garde. The activist spirit insists on the intentional, ongoing creation of reality, using, in Stevens' terms, the faculty of "imagination" rather than "the sensibility" or "feelings" [164]. The antagonistic moment is uncompromising toward popular modes of expression, insisting on its own hermetic formulations. The nihilistic impulse refuses to accept reality as a given, and insists on decreation. Finally, agonism and futurism orient themselves toward an idealized future rather than the past or present.

These four moments, that anatomize the "impetus" of modern art,

illustrate what Lyotard calls the "logic" and the "axioms" of the avant-gardes [PMC, 77], the essential elements of the sublime aesthetic. If a postmodern sublime is one that always puts form into question, it enacts the uncompromising spirit of the avant-garde by never ceasing to invent. It does not stop with the decreation of reality, but forges ahead, continuing to begin, recreating its own world as the momentous world of poetry, in the "intricate evasions of as" [XXVIII].

Notes

1. In Lyotard's analysis of aesthetics, there is the implicit claim that "modernity" or "postmodernity" can be qualities of literature rather than simply chronological or historical labels. It is instructive to compare Lyotard's theory with that of Paul de Man, who bases his own theory of modernity on a similar assumption. With respect to this question, the two key essays are the last two in *Blindness and Insight*. In "Literary History and Literary Modernity," de Man asserts that modernity "is a way of acting and behaving" [142]. In de Man's terms, "modernity" is "conceived of as a general and theoretical, rather than a historical theme" [167]. In "Lyric and Modernity," he describes the "ambivalent status of the term 'modernity', which is itself partly pragmatic and descriptive, partly conceptual and normative" [166]. I believe that there can be no question that for Lyotard, "modern" is a somewhat pejorative term, whereas "postmodern" is approbative. De Man claims to escape these "value-emphases" in his essays, but it soon becomes clear that his own favoured adjective is "modern," especially at the end of "Lyric and Modernity," where Wordsworth and Yeats are commended as "truly modern" [186]. As Lyotard sees the "postmodern" as a sort of conceptual subset of the "modern," de Man's description of lyric poetry as characteristically modern is especially productive for this discussion. De Man tells us that one can always allegorize a "representational" poem, and as well

that “all allegorical poetry must contain a representational element that invites and allows for understanding, only to discover that the understanding that it reaches is necessarily in error” [185]. Unlike the traditional understanding of allegory, where references invoke fixed one-to-one correspondences, De Man’s conception of allegory puts the determinacy of reference in doubt, and so the allegorical text invokes an unrepresentable, as does the artistic work in Lyotard’s post/modern sublime aesthetic.

2. For a reading of Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” as a metaphor for the (specifically) American colonizing impulse, see Frank Lentricchia’s *Ariel and the Police*.

3. At the margins of this discussion lies the nagging question of whether the entire aesthetic of the sublime itself needs more of a demystification than simply the relativization of its supposed transcendence. Is the supposed indeterminate that generates the sublime experience always truly unrepresentable, or is it simply an unconscious or repressed knowledge? It goes without saying that any discourse of the sublime is open to deconstruction, not only in political terms but also in the context of gender construction. Terry Eagleton sees both the Burkean and Kantian sublimines as rooted in gender stereotypes and static ideas of a phallic economy of power. Eagleton expresses Burke’s understanding of the sublime sentiment as a “phallic

'swelling'" [54], and summarizes Burke's division of the beautiful and sublime as heterogeneously female and male, and sketches out the relation between the female rule of the beautiful and the male force of the sublime psychoanalytically:

A law attractive enough to engage our intimate affections, and so hegemonically effective, will tend to inspire in us a benign contempt. On the other hand, a power which rouses our filial fear, and hence our submissive obedience, is likely to alienate our affections and so spur us to Oedipal resentment. [55]

On the one hand, as Eagleton would describe Burke, the sublime (phallic) force would seem to be experienced as pleasure by means of a kind of masochistic, or at least passive, subjective experience. As to the beautiful, "which wins our free consent, and beguiles us like a woman, [it] is based nevertheless on a kind of cunningly dissimulated law" [55]. This would seem to fit well with the archetypal notion of women as conveyors and purveyors of civilization. Eagleton finds many points of similarity in the Kantian sublime as well, mentioning that "Kant associates the sublime with the masculine and military" [90] and further, "the beautiful representation, like the body of the mother, is an idealized material form safely defused of sensuality and desire, with which, in a free play of its faculties, the subject can happily sport" [91]. When the terms of the sublime-beautiful relation are cast in this way, then in a typical understanding of a phallic economy of power,

the sublime becomes associated with the irresistible entry of reason. This leads Eagleton to term the sublime feeling an "anti-aesthetic" [91]. In such a sexualized theory of the sublime, we are likely to think of the struggle of the poet in the Oedipal terms that Harold Bloom has made famous with his theories of anxiety of influence.

4. Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, 1961), 424.

Works Cited

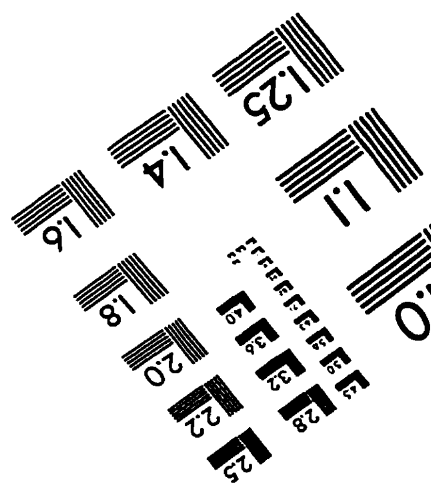
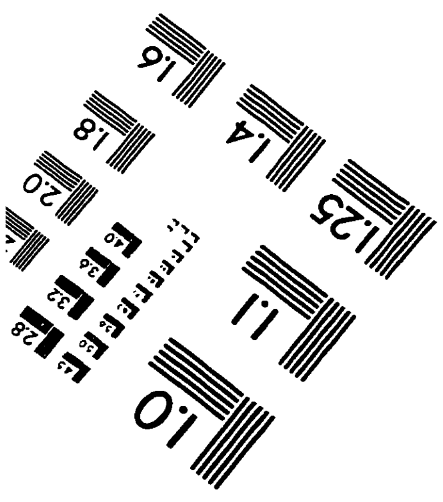
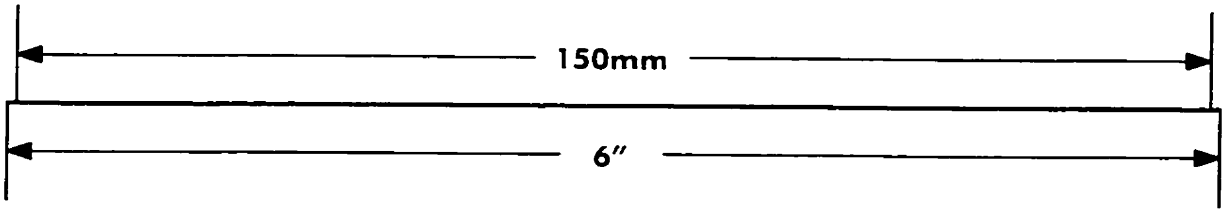
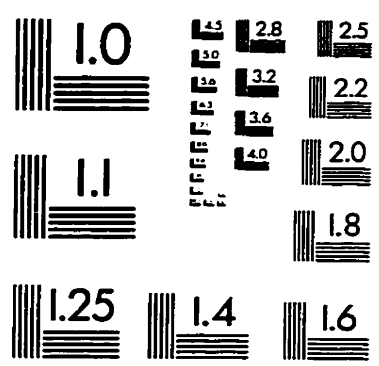
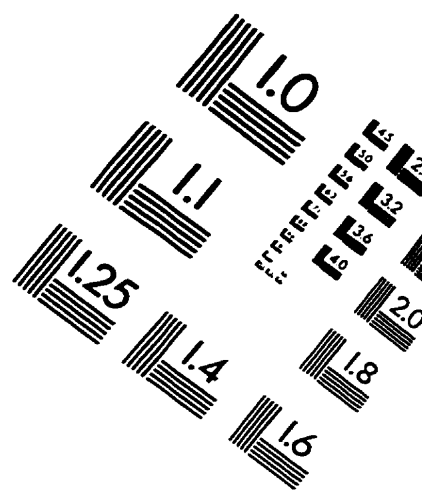
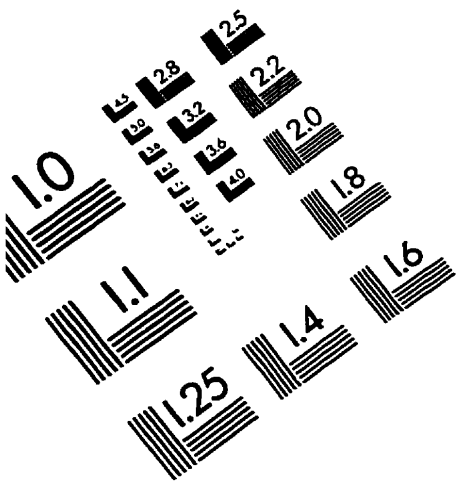
- Axelrod, Steven Gould, and Helen Deese, eds. Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988.
- Beckett, Lucy. Wallace Stevens. London: Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- Beehler, Michael. T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and the Discourses of Difference. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.
- Bernstein, J.M. The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.
- Blackmur, R.P. "Examples of Wallace Stevens." Ehrenpreis 59-86.
- Bürger, Peter. Theory of the Avant-Garde. Trans. Michael Shaw. Theory and History of Literature 4. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958.
- Cunningham, J.V. "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens." Ehrenpreis 182-98.
- De Bolla, Peter. The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- De Man, Paul. Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism. 2nd ed., rev. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

- Derrida, Jacques. The Truth in Painting. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- . Writing and Difference. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Eagleton, Terry. The Ideology of the Aesthetic. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Ehrenpreis, Irvin, ed. Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Endo, Paul. "Stevens and the Two Sublimes." Wallace Stevens Journal 19.1 (1995): 36-50.
- Frye, Northrup. "The Realistic Oriole." *Axelrod and Deese* 63-77.
- Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Judgment. Trans. J. H. Bernard. New York: Hafner Pub. Co., 1951.
- Lentricchia, Frank. Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.
- . "Wallace Stevens: The Ironic Eye." *Ehrenpreis* 276-88.
- Longenbach, James. Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Liotard, Jean-François. The Inhuman: Reflections on Time. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- . Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994.

- . The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- . The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985. Trans. Ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Moore, Harry T. Introduction. Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments. By John J. Enck. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964.
- Pearce, Roy Harvey. The Continuity of American Poetry. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Poggioli, Renato. The Theory of the Avant-Garde. Trans. Gerald Fitzgerald. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968.
- Riddel, Joseph N. The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965.
- . "The Climate of Our Poems." Axelrod and Deese 145-62.
- Schulte-Sasse, Jochen. "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde." Bürger vii-xlvii.
- Stevens, Wallace. The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination. New York: Vintage Books, 1951.

- . The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Thomas, R.S. Collected Poems 1945-1990. London: J.M. Dent, 1993.
- Vendler, Helen Hennessy. On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Wilson, Rob. The American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.
- Winters, Yvor. "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress." *Ehrenpreis* 120-42.
- Woodman, Leonora. Stanza My Stone: Wallace Stevens and the Hermetic Tradition. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1983.
- Young, David. "A Skeptical Music: Stevens and Santayana." *Ehrenpreis* 253-66.

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



APPLIED IMAGE, Inc
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989

© 1993, Applied Image, Inc., All Rights Reserved