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POESIS:

THE THEME OF POETRY.
MAKING IN THE POETRY OF
WALLACE STEVENS AND
PAUL VALÉRY

Thesis for the Degree of Ph.D.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

MARILYN MONTGOMERY YEARGERS

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Marilyn Montgomery Yeagers

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ABSTRACT

POESIS:

THE THEME OF POETRY-MAKING IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS AND PAUL VALÉRY

By

Marilyn Montgomery Yeagers

This is a study of poesis, or the creative process, based on the poetry of Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry, who devoted their lives in art to disclosures of poesis both in prose and poems. Workers in diverse fields have described the creative process in similar terms: in addition, the pattern of stimulation, frustration, and insight is strikingly similar to the birth-death-rebirth pattern of myth and literature. Herbert Weisinger¹ postulates that myth is the mind's mode of perceiving itself in action. In order to answer the question, how does the creative process figure forth thematically in poetry, Stevens and Valéry are studied, first separately and then comparatively.

Wallace Stevens' poetry can be read as an entity, the story of a lifelong quest in which the imagination endlessly seeks an encounter with reality. Poetry is the result of such an encounter; but the poet's quest for the complete, central poem is an endless cycle. The end of The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens is barren rock, nearly devoid of the poet's imaginative tincture, but the cycle begins again, as spring follows winter.

For Valéry, the creative process is a voyage into the self; La Jeune Parque is a paradigm of this voyage, in which a being shuts

out the world of others for a phase of withdrawal, but finally bursts out of inner darkness to face day and life. This "autobiography in form" is reflected in Valéry's other major poems as well.

"Le Cimetière marin" and "Sunday Morning" are both meditations on death and time. Stevens' persona yearns for some permanence in a world of flux. Valéry, on the other hand, is transfixed by static noon; death for him is fixity, while the living are gnawed by anguish. For both poets, poetry and creation are the answer to the problem of man's mortality.

In Stevens' "Esthétique du Mal" and Valéry's Narcissus cycle, the two poets are seen applying, each in his way, the poetry-making faculty to questions which are ultimately unanswerable. "Esthétique du Mal" is Stevens' attempt to find the meaning of the existence of evil; evil as an encounter between man and the world is an analogue of poetry, the encounter between the imagination and reality. Narcissus represents Valéry's devotion to himself, but Narcissus is shown to be unfruitful and unnatural; his death is a suicide and at the same time a release for Valéry's productive powers. Both poems are examples of creative blocks, but they are dealt with in very different ways.

Poesis for Stevens is a quest in which the imagination seeks a reality separate from the poet. For Valéry, the creative process is an inward search for his deepest origins. But for both, poetry is the end and goal of the process. Paradoxically, for both the true aim of the creative life lies beyond language, in the muteness of that which

can be expressed only in art.

The creative process was a way of life for Stevens and Valéry; for them, each experience of poesis fed back into the poetry, as materia poetica. Thus the poetic process figures forth thematically in poetry. As the poet creates he is created.

¹Herbert Weisinger, "The Mythic Origins of the Creative Process," in The Agony and the Triumph: Papers on the Use and Abuse of Myth. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1964.

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Marilyn Montgomery Yeagers

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study is an attempt to arrive at some general conclusions about the nature of the process by which poetry is made, and how the process figures forth thematically in the poetry itself. As material for the study I have chosen the works of two poets of recognized stature, Paul Valéry and Wallace Stevens. Although some use has been made of prose writings as evidence for the arguments and as introduction to the poems, it is the poetic work which is the primary source. As an additional limitation, only the final, published form of the poetry has been utilized. Many germane conclusions about the creative process can be drawn from studies of rough drafts and subsequent manuscripts of poems, but that kind of inquiry is not within the scope of this study. Furthermore, poesis has been taken as a theme, and a form. Mention will naturally be made of poetic devices, but prosody and the poet's struggles with prosody are not my major concern.

Because the topic--poesis, or the creative process--under investigation is of a general nature, it would not be sufficient to study only one poet, because his ideas about poetry-making might be eccentric. But if two poets seemed to agree at some point, or even disagree in a meaningful manner, then the conclusions might have some claim on universality. (Admittedly, two poets might be considered to be too few; in fact, the more artists who are studied in

this manner, the more will be known about creativity.) This is, of course, the value of the comparative method: to explore the possibilities of a theme without regard--as much as possible--to biases of specific culture and/or language. Here again there are methodological limitations; I am an American, and my view of French poetry is of necessity not the same as a Frenchman's view. There will be allusions, references, innovations in thought and style that no American can perceive. But there are limitations to every method; an American studying only American poets would be less justified in drawing broad conclusions about poetry in general.

It was necessary, as I mentioned above, to choose poets of recognized stature, because it had to be assumed at the outset that they had actually succeeded in carrying out the creative process, that is, had found or made or constructed a poem and thus had genuine first-hand knowledge of the subject. There are other poets who have written poetry about poetry; but none has concentrated more and written more prolifically on this topic than Wallace Stevens. And Paul Valéry is a legend of self-analysis; his poems are "autobiographies in form," autobiographies of Valéry the seeker and creator. Thus the choice of these two poets: Both Stevens and Valéry had made creativity and poesis the central focus of their mental lives.

As for structural organization, a number of alternative approaches could have been chosen. One way would be to begin with a theory of creativity, and ask whether or not the two poets could be fit to it. But (as will be discussed below) even though my initial interest in the project was indeed aroused by a certain theory of creativity, I preferred to cast aside this hypothesis and approach the material inductively. Another approach would have begun with single

poems dealing with the creative process, and comparisons on the level of the individual poem might well have led to the same general theories of creativity which were eventually evolved. In the sense that a poet's life-work is made up of individual poems, I did, of course, begin this way. But the first item on my agenda was to trace the whole curve of each poet's work. In the case of Stevens this meant subsuming the whole of The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens under a single thesis which would be the organic form for Stevens. In contrast, the body of Valéry's poetic work is less an entity; I took the long poem La Jeune Parque as a paradigm for Valéry. To take the whole book of Stevens and discuss it almost as one might a novel and then on the other hand to use one poem of Valéry's as indicative of the whole body of work may seem inconsistent. But my aim was to draw true conclusions, and to let the poetry dictate to me its treatment, rather than deterministically to impose my own preconceptions on the material. This was the guiding methodological principle; and the method was allowed to dictate the structure of the study as finally presented.

Thus, the chapters are arranged as follows: First there is an overview of the poetry of Wallace Stevens, making mention of his prose writings which are related to definitions of poetry, the role of the poet, etc. Based on a reading of the entire volume of the Collected Poems from his first book, Harmonium, to the final section entitled "The Rock," I concluded that poetry-making for Stevens was a quest in which the imagination endlessly sought an encounter and a union with reality. Next is a chapter on Paul Valéry; the form of his creativeness was not like Stevens' questing in a world

external to the poet. His was a kind of quest, yes, but marked by inwardness, as though the beam of a lighthouse had been turned to the inside.

Only after the poets have been treated separately are the comparisons begun. In the chapter comparing "Le Cimetière marin" and "Sunday Morning," the two poets are shown to approach the question of death and time in very different ways. And yet, out of their separate meditations on this subject, both arrive at poetry as a pathway out of death's finality, poetry as a solution to the dark problem posed by death. Next the major poem-cycles Narcisse and "Esthétique du Mal" are compared. They represent crises of creativity, which are dealt with in different ways by the two poets. Thus, the first of the comparative chapters (Chapter IV) shows Valéry and Stevens arriving at strikingly similar motives for poetry-making when they had begun with quite different attitudes toward man's mortality. On the other hand, Chapter V, also a comparison, shows Valéry and Stevens in a radical divergence. Finally, in chapter VI a general overall conclusion is reached, in which poetry, the verbal art, is shown to lie in a realm beyond words where somehow a structure of pure verballity finds its meaning in muteness.

How, then, does the poetic process "figure forth thematically" in the poems of these two men? The answer cannot be simple, for if it is general, or abstract, enough to contain both poets, it must at the same time consider their individualities. Perhaps the clearest way to say it is this: As the poet (Valéry or Stevens) wrote his poems, he discovered himself, and lived a life in poetry. This poet's

life became, in turn, the material of the poem. For example, the form of Stevens' quest for poetry is shown to dominate his thinking in "Sunday Morning," where the problem of a search for reality in the form of eschatological truth is solved by the creation of an orgiastic chant, foreshadowing the lifetime form of the poetic quest, where a verbal structure becomes a bridge over the gap between man and the world, between the imagination and reality. Again in "Esthétique du Mal" this pattern directs the search for an aesthetic of this world of evil and pain. As another encounter between man and his world, poetry parallels the existence of pain.

For Valéry too the form of poetry-making served as paradigm for all his mental activity. His pattern is a search within the depths of his own mind for his earliest origins, first memory-traces. In addition, the story is often marked by a crisis, a creative block which must be overcome in order that the poetry and the poet may live. Thus, each of these writers had found patterns for poetry in the story of himself as creator. If the two stories are radically different, they do have the one feature of poetry itself in common. But that was, of course, the sine qua non of the study--that the two poets had written about poetry. What would not have been foreseen is the striking manner in which, at the end of the process, their individual differences (caused perhaps by conditions as unwitting as physiology or the circumstances of life) diminish. The true end of the creative life becomes apparent; it is the muteness of that which can only be expressed in art. Poetry, the verbal art, is shown to lie in a realm beyond words. But because they are poets, Valéry and Stevens have succeeded in reaching this state of artistic expressiveness only

through the medium of language.

As I stated above, this thesis is an inquiry into the nature of the poetic process. But can it be said that a study based on the work of the two poets Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry has claims on general truths? To begin to answer this question, we must turn to general theories of literature, and also to the point where the study actually began. For I have learned from Paul Valéry that a piece of writing is either meaningless or dishonest if somehow its genesis is not contained within it. Thus, I think a measure of coherence may be added to this thesis by describing the initial stimuli which led to my interest in the creative process.

If the student is interested in inquiring into the origins of literature, he may find the method of literary history unsuited to his purposes. Even though he may fix in his mind every important text from Beowulf to, say, T. S. Eliot, he has done no more than memorize a few surface sparkles from the enormous sea of the mythopoetic imagination. But add in another language or culture, even one as closely related to his own as French, and he will begin to perceive that the refractions from the sea that are texts written in the English language look slightly different viewed under another angle of the sun. Which is more fascinating and enlightening, the similarities or the differences between the Romanticisms found in England, France, and Germany? This is the value of comparative literature: to understand what is basic and what is quirk in a literary culture. For now, it may be sufficient for an American to read French poetry to experience cross-cultural shock. But as Europe, England, and North America continue to merge culturally,

it will become necessary to go farther and farther afield for data on what is foreign.

What is fundamental and what is variation? The data on myths have given answers and conclusions of the farthest-reaching consequences for literary study. Studies such as The Golden Bough, The Myth of the Birth of the Hero, Jessie L. Weston's From Ritual to Romance, Ernest Jones' Hamlet and Oedipus all show the existence of patterns, both in myths and well-developed pieces of literature, which have striking similarities to the myths of countries which are geographically far apart, too wide-spread to have participated in dissemination of stories by means of influence or imitation. All this is well-known; the facts and the texts are well-established.

But what is the explanation? The Jungian view is that there is a "collective unconscious," a "racial memory." Freud's explanation is more plausible: that an actual event such as father-murder actually occurred once, or many times. But we must still ask why some events seem more significant than others. Primitive men must experience many impressive events, but some have been transformed into myth and others have not. Some rituals, such as initiations, still have power over modern man. Thus it may be well to take a look at the mind of the beholder, and ask what he likes to behold.

In an essay entitled "The Mythic Origins of the Creative Process," (which might well have been called "The Creative Origins of Myth") Herbert Weisinger discusses literature as a "social phenomenon, not as a thing in itself, the poem on the printed page, but rather as a relationship set up between the writer and the

reader. . . ."1 Myth, with its ritualistic origins, is of course a social phenomenon as well. Now the creative process is something that all of us have experienced. Anyone who has ever attempted to put an idea into words has groped, been blocked, and then (if he is capable of carrying through the process) succeeded at last. There are certain definable stages to the creative process which can be found in any introductory psychology textbook. I offer Krech and Crutchfield: "Not only the psychologist, but all creative workers have been interested in the description of the problem-solving process. Each one brings somewhat different testimony, but one descriptive schema appears again and again. This is the classical four stages of creative thought: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification."2 The process begins with an irritant, in the mind or outside it, which produces a tension in the creator. A question begs to be answered, something is both wrong and right. A grain of sand in the shell of the total being demands to be covered with a protective buffer of nacre. Already, within this first irritant phase the second phase of the battle against it is contained. And so the first attempts begin, but like as not they are doomed to failure. Always the tension is growing, but nothing can succeed in eliminating the source of the annoyance, the tantalizing sense that there is a goal to be reached--but what is it?

¹Herbert Weisinger, The Agony and the Triumph: Papers on the Use and Abuse of Myth (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1964), p. 261.

²David Krech and Richard S. Crutchfield, Elements of Psychology, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 395.

There comes a time when it seems that the project is dead; there is no answer to the question, and no way of resolving the tension. Despondently, the thinker sinks his head into his hands. (Sometimes this is the end; there are after all insoluble problems, even in art.) But then, just at the darkest moment, just when it seemed that all was lost, most importantly, just when the creator may have decided to abandon the project, the climactic moment occurs: the flash of insight. Suddenly it all seems clear, even easy, even obvious. A great leap from nothingness into being, from perplexity into understanding, has occurred. The artist feels a shock of pleasure, and a glow of euphoria permeates his perception of the entire world. This reward, this hedonic response, is so great that it enables him to begin the final stages where drudgery ensues. He must work out his perception--write it down, get it into form, communicate it to others, collect data, or do whatever is necessary to produce what must be produced. In this phase, the rocky shallows of actual production, an infinity of creative projects have been wrecked. (It is important to note that the process I have been describing may go on once when, say, a novelist conceives the whole outline of a novel, and then again and again when he struggles with a nuance of expression, a paragraph, a single sentence, a single word that will be just the right metaphor.) But finally the thing is finished; there is something new under the sun. The creator rests, the mind resumes its accustomed calm. But it is a different kind of peace; he rests on a higher level of wisdom and understanding. He knows more than he knew before. He is more.

Weisinger's essay, which gives a similar description of the

creative process divided into eight stages from stimulus to "the attainment of order and shape and integration,"³ then draws together myth and creativity in two paragraphs which I offer in their entirety:

You will have noticed, I am sure, that I have had to describe the creative process dramatistically, in the form of an action whose plot is that of birth, death, and rebirth. But this is the very same plot of the action called myth, a drama in which the divine king in his own person engages in combat with an opposing force, suffers, is defeated, dies, is reborn triumphantly, celebrates his victory by the action of creation in the divine marriage and by the sacred procession, and grants the fruits of that victory in the settling of destinies in which the people, for whom and with whom he undergoes his suffering, death, and rebirth, are raised to a new and higher stage of understanding and justice. To be sure, the order of acts in the drama is not everywhere the same, nor are all the scenes necessarily enacted; with the passage of time some scenes are subordinated to others, some given increased prominence, while others are eliminated altogether, but whatever changes have been made, the shape and intent of the pattern remain the same: the depiction of the triumph of light, life, and good through suffering over dark, death, and evil. Thus it would appear that on the conscious level the creative process is a parallel re-enactment of the myth and ritual pattern and draws its force and vitality from it.

But this is to think of the myth and ritual pattern as fundamental and anterior to the creative process, at which point we would have to call a halt to our excavations, as it were, since no further penetration below would be possible. If, however, we reverse the positions of myth and creation, we are able to continue our digging so as to open up even deeper layers than we have so far managed to probe. As far as creativity is concerned, its mode of operation is common to all its manifestations, varied only by their predisposition as to purpose and form. We may liken the creative process to a long tunnel through which all cars must pass in a single lane, turning only as they emerge into different exists [sic] taking them to different destinations. Seen from this point of view, the myth and ritual pattern now becomes the symbolic representation of the creative process, that is to say, the mind's figuring forth of itself. So that what I have been calling the creative process appears to be nothing less than the mode of operation of the mind itself.⁴

³Weisinger, "The Mythic Origins of the Creative Process," in The Agony and the Triumph, p. 245.

⁴Ibid., pp. 249-50.

Of course there are many questions to be answered here, enough to found a new school of literary criticism, it seems to me. Does the mind behave this way for physiological reasons having to do with structures in the brain? Is it something like the progress of a disease, which inexorably produces fever one day and spots the next? Or do we somehow learn to behave this way?

Most interesting for me was a series of questions that ran something like this: The mythopoetic pattern really fits drama, with its rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement, best of all the literary forms. The novel, especially of the nineteenth century, comes next in order of fit to the pattern. But with poetry, the work of art was getting farther and farther away from the general pattern. It was difficult to think of poems that fit the myth and ritual pattern, unless they were poems with a sort of plot, like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or the Divine Comedy. Nevertheless, many poets, especially of the contemporary period, have spent a great proportion of their creative energies writing about poetry and the process by which poetry is made. (Conversely, it is difficult to think of a drama which actually deals explicitly with the creative process.) It seemed to me that it was time to detach the creative process from myth and ritual and try to look at this genre of poetry on its own terms. I wanted to see what sort or sorts of patterns could be found in poetry, and to answer the question raised above: how does the poetic process figure forth thematically in some actual poems?

It seemed to me that there would be real value in choosing the poets from two different cultures, in order to achieve a

certain detachment from literary traditions. In addition, I hoped that if I did find something of significance in common between the two poets, it would not be a matter of influence, but something basic to the creative process. It would be partially true to say that this is not strictly speaking a work of literary criticism, since my chief aim was not to explicate the poetry itself, but rather to disclose something about the creative process as it might be written in poetry. Nevertheless, neither is this a psychological study. I approached the poetry as made up of themes and forms, not disguised autobiography.

I have been describing my own gradual discovery of the creative process as an approach to literary study, from the general discipline of comparative literature, to comparative myths, to the creative process as the structurer of myth and literature. But it should not be inferred that poesis as a vantage point for the analysis of poetry is dependent on myth-theory, even as an antecedent. Because I think there is much promise of fruitfulness in this kind of study, I shall offer two other rationales--one involving reader psychology, and another based on Cassirer's view of the role of art in culture.

At the outset of this study I determined myself not to make a Procrustean bed of what I already knew about the creative process. But as the work progressed it became obvious that this would have been difficult in any case, if not impossible. If Paul Valéry and Wallace Stevens were aware that they were supposed to be undergoing a definable process including "preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification," they never revealed it to me. For example, I quote here a short poem of Valéry's in its entirety:

LE VIN PERDU

J'ai, quelque jour, dans l'Océan,
 (Mais je ne sais plus sous quels cieux)
 Jeté, comme offrande au néant,
 Tout un peu de vin précieux...

Qui voulut ta perte, ô liqueur?
 J'obéis peut-être au devin?
 Peut-être au souci de mon coeur,
 Songeant au sang, versant le vin?

Sa transparence accoutumée
 Après une rose fumée
 Reprit aussi pure la mer...

Perdu ce vin, ivres les ondes!...
 J'ai vu bondir dans l'air amer
 Les figures les plus profondes...

Clearly this is a poem about artistic creation. But only by perversion can it be fitted into the given mold. There is, on the other hand, a valid way of fitting such a poem into the pattern: The poem itself is the stimulus which begins a cycle of the creative process in the reader. As a reader experiences the difficulties, the questions raised in all the toughness of their concrete evocation, gradually overcomes the difficulties and blocks of the poem, achieves insight, and finally understanding, all within the framework of a single poem, he is experiencing perhaps a vicarious form of the creative process, but nevertheless a form of it. The poem viewed in this manner performs a function which really transcends social phenomena in the ordinary sense. In undergoing the creative process mind-to-mind with the artist, a kind of communication occurs between reader and poet that does not occur between two individuals in any other verbal situation. But all this could be said of any poem. It is the content of "Le Vin perdu" that is about an imaginative experience, but it would be necessary to read the whole of Valéry's poetic work

to discover how to interpret this poem through Valéry's version of the creative process. ("Le Vin perdu" will be taken up again in Chapter III.)

Now this fact of the presence of creativity in the reading of the poem as well as in the making of it is one approach to the creative process as a way of looking at literature. Who, we must ask, can form the audience for difficult poets such as Valéry and Stevens? It is surely a small group; only a small fraction even of educated Americans can recognize the name of Wallace Stevens. The only possible readers of such poetry are those who are most serious about literature and the arts. These are people who do not shy from what is difficult in art; indeed, they may take a pleasure in the very difficulty of a work. (Conversely, if a work of art is too immediately apprehensible, the most advanced readers may dismiss it as trivial.) The irritation of the difficult work, the tension felt, the insight suddenly gained, add up to an imitation of the creative process. One way or another, art lovers are those who know and enjoy the creative process. Very often, our critics are poets themselves, a distinguished line including Coleridge and T. S. Eliot. Their central concern is poetry, the writing of it, the proper reading of it, the existent form of it. Thus the subject matter of their poetry often is poetry itself. Robert Penn Warren, another creative writer who is also a critic, has promoted reader involvement into a criterion of value. The "good poem," he says, "must, in some way, involve the resistances; it must carry something of the context of its own creation; . . . This is another way of saying that a good poem involves the participation of the reader;

it must, as Coleridge puts it, make the reader into 'an active creative being.'⁵ In poetry as in all the arts, meaning must gradually emerge out of a direct experience of the work of art--its content, its form, its structure.

A similar conclusion with regard to art is reached by the modern philosopher Ernst Cassirer, in An Essay on Man. In the concluding chapter, Cassirer asks the question: Is human culture characterized only by discontinuity and heterogeneity, or can it be said that there is an underlying unity? The answer is found in the closing lines.

Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power--the power to build up a world of his own, an "ideal" world.⁶

Art, moreover, is a sort of paradigm for this basic principle, this tension between the conservative and the productive powers, between old and new forms, between (in Eliot's phrase) tradition and the individual talent. In Cassirer's view our very perceptions of the world are formed and transformed by the great epoch-making artists such as Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe, and our languages kept alive and in a state of change by the innovations of the poets.

Ultimately, then, the cultural role of art is to modify and clarify our perceptions of things. Here is Cassirer's description of the aesthetic mode of thought.

⁵Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry" in Critiques and Essays in Criticism, Selected by Robert Wooster Stallman, (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), p. 102.

⁶Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 162.

The organic beauty of a landscape is not the same as that aesthetic beauty which we feel in the works of the great landscape painters. Even we, the spectators, are fully aware of this difference. I may walk through a landscape and feel its charms. I may enjoy the mildness of the air, the freshness of the meadows, the variety and cheerfulness of the coloring, and the fragrant odor of the flowers. But I may then experience a sudden change in my frame of mind. Thereupon I see the landscape with an artist's eye--I begin to form a picture of it. I have now entered a new realm--the realm not of living things but of "living forms." No longer in the immediate reality of things, I live now in the rhythm of spatial forms, in the harmony and contrast of colors, in the balance of light and shadow. In such absorption in the dynamic aspect of form consists the aesthetic experience.⁷

But we do not understand the living forms of art simply by their being presented to us. "The sense of beauty is the susceptibility to the dynamic life of forms, and this life cannot be apprehended except by a corresponding dynamic process in ourselves." And, "In order to feel beauty one must cooperate with the artist. One must not only sympathize with the artist's feelings but also enter into his creative activity."⁸ Thus Cassirer's view of art comes into line with an approach through the creative process.

Throughout this discussion the existence of the creative individual has simply been taken for granted. But the motives of this curious creature may well be called into question. Later it will be time to wonder why a man writes a poem, and thereby is called a poet. For now the more general form of the question should be posed: Why does a person choose to undergo the creative process? Too many of the descriptions give the impression that it is a distinctly unpleasurable experience throughout much of its length, much like having a minor toothache relieved by an unanesthetized extraction. Let us follow

⁷Ibid., p. 151-2.

⁸Ibid., p. 151 and p. 162.

the argument in Arthur Koestler's chapter on motivation in The Act of Creation. He begins with the statement,

Future historians will probably regard it as significant that throughout the first half of the twentieth century the dominant schools of psychology--even schools as far apart as behaviourism and psychoanalysis--recognized only one basic type of motivation, and that a negative one: the reduction of biological needs and drives, the diminution of tension, escape from anxiety.⁹

Freud too saw psychic activity as being the result of unpleasurable tension, mental activity of whatever kind being undertaken only in order to reduce tension. But Koestler points out that there is "a whole class of experiences to which we commonly refer as 'pleasurable excitement.'"¹⁰ In Koestler's view, man is motivated only partly by need-reduction; man is a creature who begins his greatest explorations when his stomach is full and he is free from restraint. There is a whole class of activities which are self-rewarding.

It is part of the nature of man to explore, to experiment, to play, and to create. Creativity may well be a bodily function, made pleasurable by evolutionary processes. Man being what he is, he cannot avoid having his curiosity aroused; thus the first stage of the creative process is involuntary, universal, and normal. Artists and scientists and creative thinkers of all kinds experience a loving pleasure in the tension of the second stage; they feel most alive in just these states of pleasurable tension. If the phase of doubt and despair then intervenes, then that is the price that must be paid. Experienced creators know that the end in wisdom and elevation of the spirit is worth the pain.

⁹Arthur Koestler, The Act of Creation, a Laurel Edition, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1967), p. 495

¹⁰Ibid., p. 496.

CHAPTER II

WALLACE STEVENS: THE QUEST FOR REALITY

Wallace Stevens devoted his entire artistic life, his work as a poet, to his search for poetry. Stated thus, it is a tautology. For Stevens was a poet, and does not every poet devote himself to poetry? But the difference between Stevens and most other poets is that for him poetry became the subject of many a poem. Poetry and the making or discovering of the poem were Stevens' major theme. Indeed, when his version of poesis is properly understood, it becomes clear that all of his poetry deals with the quest for poetry, because poetry is Stevens' paradigm, symbol, metaphor, pattern--call it what you will--for the great problem of man's existence in a world essentially separate from himself.

This gap is, of course, purely perceptual; if it is not perceived, it is not a problem. And the first effect of this perceived separateness is a question: What do I know? Is what I perceive "true"? Does my knowledge of this world correspond in some way to the reality which is not myself? This desire to know is man's felix culpa, his lucky flaw. It is the beginning of the creative process and of human culture. Stevens would call it "the first idea."¹

¹Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 381. Henceforth references to Stevens' Collected Poems will be cited in text as CP. Likewise,

That Wallace Stevens dwelt long and hard on this dualistic nature of the world, and on bridging the gap between the parts of the dualism, is the first key to any understanding of Stevens. His words for the two parts of the world are "imagination" and "reality." His theory is largely a matter of defining and describing these two concepts, his poetry a matter of bridging the gap or of penetrating an independently existing reality with the poet's faculty of imagination.

Thus, Stevens' theme is the imagination's quest for reality; when the encounter is made, poetry is the result. If this quest is a theme, it is also a form: Throughout the Collected Poems a certain pattern is discernible, in the shape of a giant striding toward an ever-receding horizon ("The Plot Against the Giant," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"), or a man on a voyage to unknown shores ("The Comedian as the Letter C," "Prologues to What is Possible"), or a thinker outwardly sitting still but inwardly pursuing the quest ("Sunday Morning," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "Esthetique du Mal," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"). It is in these latter poems that the theme of poesis becomes most explicit, perhaps because Stevens, and most poets, experience their quests in this sedentary way.

In this chapter I will attempt to establish Wallace Stevens' theory of poetry as an encounter between the imagination and reality, and the poetic process as the quest for reality. In my view, the Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens may be read as an entity, the

NA refers to Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel, a Vintage book, (New York: Random House, n. d.); OP refers to Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).

story of this quest. It will develop that this quest is in one sense never-ending, that is, the poet does not eventually find the one true reality and then come to rest; this fact is reflected in the cyclic form of the Collected Poems. The end is also a beginning. On the other hand, neither could it be said that the imagination never succeeds in bridging the gap, for each poem is an example of a successful encounter. For Stevens, the ultimate truth of reality may be that there are many realities.

My primary concern is with disclosures of the creative process in the poetry of Wallace Stevens. But the prose essays of Stevens are a prime key to Stevens' ideas, especially where the basic elements of the imagination and reality are concerned. Indeed, although Stevens' poetry itself will be the best definition of his poetry, the reader may also profitably turn to the essays for definitions of poetry. Thus the preliminary discussion, in which the terms "imagination," "reality," and "poetry" are defined, will draw on Stevens' prose. It will be seen that it is nearly impossible to find Stevens in the act of defining any one of these three terms, "imagination," "reality," and "poetry," singly, that is, without making reference to the other two. Nevertheless, it is instructive to separate the three, one from the others.

Critics are continually discovering ambiguities, both unresolved and integrated, in Stevens. The meaning of reality is one of these areas where there is more than one definition to be found. On the one hand Stevens tells us that each age has its own version of reality (NA, 9) and even that each person has his own individual reality (NA, 94). On the other hand, the reader is aware that

there is a Reality--a world pre-existent and independent of any observer, indeed, a priori to all observers. Donald Sheehan, for example, finds unresolved dualisms both in Stevens' theory of metaphor, and Stevens' view of reality. Sheehan finds that there are two poles in Stevens' thought, one in which the perceiver and the thing perceived coalesce in metaphor, and another in which reality is a thing, ultimately unknowable and unapproachable by either reason or imagination. Usually, however, Stevens rejects both of these extremes, for "Stevens constantly pulls back from absolute statements. This attitude is irritating to the literary theorist. . . ."2 But Stevens' refusal to resolve the dualism is " . . . not (as Frye and others would have it) intellectual muddiness but a key to Stevens' real vitality. Stevens' profound distrust of 'the lunatic of one idea / In a world of ideas' (CP, 325) is what lies immediately behind this."3 "Intellectual muddiness?" Or a distrust of dogmatism? In my view, the seeming confusion in Stevens' use of philosophical ideas is part of a habit of mind that would allow him to haggle back and forth endlessly between the two halves of a dialectic both in poems (such as "Esthetique du Mal") and in prose. Stevens was capable of holding two minds on many questions, and could say in a poem

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds. (CP, 92)

Stevens always remembers, intellectually recognizes, that reality

²Donald Sheehan, "Wallace Stevens' Theory of Metaphor," Papers on Language and Literature, II, 59.

³Ibid., 61.

is a thing, as he would say, a "veritable ding-an-sich." But most of the time, when Stevens uses the word "reality" he is talking about his materia poetica, the world as he sees it, the world informed by the poetic imagination, and thus a world of reality embellished, understood, abstracted, above all, a reality imagined.

A passage of central importance for any definition of the word reality in Stevens is found in the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

The subject-matter of poetry is not that "collection of solid, static objects extended in space" but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are: (NA, 25).

"Things as they are"--this phrase, also found repeatedly in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," is sometimes taken by critics to mean just that world of pre-existing reality meant by the more exact term "things in themselves." But the quoted paragraph should show that "things as they are" are not "things in themselves." Rather, we should take the verb to be here in its existential sense rather than its essential sense. Things as they are are things this year, right here, to us. Stevens' reality is in constant flux, no sooner captured in metaphor or perception than it changes and disappears. Reality is knowable, but only for an instant; thus we are reminded that we do not create reality--it is a ding-an-sich--but we create the only version of it that we can ever know.

It is this fluctuating and evolving view of reality that leads one critic to place Stevens within a new poetic, " . . . peculiarly suited," as he says, "to Darwin's reality of process, and not to Plato's reality of fixed ideas." For Frank Lentricchia, Stevens'

modernity lies in his version of the world as a Darwinian universe of flux and process. Stevens is a naturalist. "In a naturalistic view of epistemology, and in a naturalistic world of materialistic process, how then is the poetic imagination framed? The answer is implicit in the question. The modern imagination feeds on empirical reality just as Wordsworth's fed on infinity."⁴ Empirical reality, then, is Stevens' materia poetica, and the very concept of an empirical reality goes far toward resolving the disjunction in Stevens' thought between an unreachable reality "out there" and a reality which never exists outside our perceptions of it. Empirical knowledge is based on experience; Stevens said that reality is "the life that is lived."

In this discussion we are primarily concerned with the aspects of reality that are significant for the creative process, or that might be the subjects of poems by Wallace Stevens. But in keeping with Stevens' dialectic habit of mind, we can find disclosures of undesirable forms of reality that shed as much light on the question as revelations of its more attractive aspects. Indeed, there is an important form of reality that must be resisted by the poet at all costs, for his very identity as a poet depends on resistance of "the pressure of reality," a concept of vital importance in Stevens' theory of poetry and the poet.

The pressure of reality has been one of the most conspicuous features of our own time, and, one must believe, one of the greatest difficulties for Stevens as a poet. He defines it very clearly:

⁴Frank Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 163.

By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation. The definition ought to be exact and, as it is, may be merely pretentious. But when one is trying to think of a whole generation and of a world at war, and trying at the same time to see what is happening to the imagination, particularly if one believes that that is what matters most, the plainest statement of what is happening can easily appear to be an affectation. (NA, 20, my italics).

Reality is thus revealed as a force, and moreover, a force which must be combatted by the poet. For this reality which changes in every age is the factor which determines more than any other the artistic character of an era (NA, 22). It is the poet's great duty to society to defend his fellows, when necessary and when possible, against this pressure from reality. For the poet is our representative of the equally great force of the imagination.

At this point it becomes necessary to discuss directly Stevens' concept of the imagination. But first I will sum up Stevens' definition of the term "reality." There is no single definition of reality in Stevens that applies to every poem, every discussion of the topic. But that is part of the meaning of the word, not merely an "unresolved dualism," or "intellectual muddiness." For Stevens' reality is not a reality of ideals or essences, but a reality of things that exist, and thus are subject to the laws of flux and process found in all of nature, even the rocks that symbolize reality in Stevens' poetry. Reality does exist as a realm apart from the poet, and Stevens' ideas about it depend on this realization. But always there is the proviso that for us, reality is what we abstract into the mind. Our version of reality is of necessity partial and momentary.

If there are seeming contradictions in Stevens' theorizing

about reality, and in his statements about the nature of poetry as well, the concept of the imagination at least seems to be all of a piece. The imagination, one feels, is something that Stevens understands very well. On the other hand, it is difficult to find any direct description of the imagination; it may be that Stevens stood too close to be objective about it. We find the imagination described in terms of analogies, according to the things that it is not (not reason, not belief), in terms of what it does, in terms of its attributes, and even in terms of that to which it must stand in direct opposition (the pressure of reality), but never do we find a simple direct definition of the imagination. The broadest generalization that can accurately be made about Stevens' idea of the imagination is that it is the poet's particular way of looking at the world. Stated another way, the imagination is the poet's own power or faculty. Such statements do not, of course, describe the imagination directly. They only relate to its functioning. In the thought of Stevens the concept of the imagination remains at bottom a mystery, seen only in its effects.

The literary theorist always thinks of Coleridge in connection with definitions of the imagination, and Stevens himself brings the name of Coleridge into the discussion, in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet." Nevertheless, Coleridge is brought up only to be dismissed, first as "un philosophe," (NA, 41) when we have just been informed that there is a fundamental difference between poets and philosophers, and second as "a man who may be said to have been defining poetry all his life in definitions that are valid enough but which no longer impress us primarily by their validity" (NA, 41).

Coleridge's famous description of the imagination is, in brief, as a creative power, "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (Biographia Literaria, I). It seems likely that a knowledge of Coleridge stands behind this passage in which Stevens describes imagination as a process.

And having ceased to be metaphysicians, even though we have acquired something from them as from all men, and standing in the radiant and productive atmosphere, and examining first one detail of that world, one particular, and then another, as we find them by chance, and observing many things that seem to be poetry without any intervention on our part, as, for example, the blue sky, and noting, in any case, that the imagination never brings anything into the world, but that on the contrary, like the personality of the poet in the act of creating, it is no more than a process, and desiring with all the power of our desire not to write falsely, do we not begin to think of the possibility that poetry is only reality, after all, and that poetic truth is a factual truth, seen, it may be, by those whose range in the perception of fact--that is, whose sensibility--is greater than our own? (NA, 59, my italics).

The imagination does not create anything; it is like light, which adds nothing to a scene--except itself, Stevens added (NA, 61).

Another important point contained in the sentence quoted above is the distinction that Stevens makes between metaphysicians, or philosophers, and poets. His thesis about the poet and his faculty of imagination depends heavily on antitheses about other kinds of thinkers. To distill what is spread out over several essays, imagination is to the poet as reason is to the philosopher and as belief is to the priest. Reason is not applicable to poetic truth (even though the perfect poem would, incidentally, satisfy the reason along with the imagination). But even as Stevens makes the point that the imagination is not the same as reason or belief, it is clear that these other faculties are similar to the imagination in important ways. Indeed, it is their similarities that make them available as analogies. Basically the poetic faculty of the imagination resembles the philosophic power of reason and the

religious power of belief in that all of them have an inherent drive toward an object. Thus to Stevens' analogies we may add a third term: As the philosopher drives toward truth with his reason, as the priest reaches out for God with belief, so does the poet strive toward reality with his imagination. This tendency of the imagination is like a hunger. Elsewhere Stevens says "A poet looks at the world as a man looks at a woman" (OP, 165). If imagination is a process, it is a process with a teleology.

While it is difficult to say what the Stevensian imagination is, it is much easier to see what it does. In the discussion of reality, above, we saw that the poet had a kind of duty to his fellow men to defend them and himself against "the pressure of reality." The faculty or power which enables him to accomplish this task is none other than the imagination. An additional function performed by the poet on behalf of his age is to provide a substitute for our lost faiths and beliefs.

The paramount relation between poetry and painting today, between modern man and modern art is simply this: that in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince (NA, 170-71).

Another great poet of the skeptical twentieth century, T. S. Eliot, tried to furnish new beliefs out of other cultures as substitutes for our lost gods; the result was certainly a great poetry, but probably not a viable religion. Stevens' approach to belief is through credible fictions, always with the awareness that our fictions are just that.

This happy creature--It is he that invented the Gods.
It is he that put into their mouths the only words they have
ever spoken! (OP, 167).

Stevens' poetry does not even require a willing suspension of disbelief, for disbelief is one of its foundations. Faith, in Stevens, has been replaced by the imagination.

I have said that Stevens attempts to describe the imagination through the use of antitheses and analogies. Just as the faith of the past is discharged from duty in favor of the modern imagination, so is any conception of "inspiration" in creativity. Gone is the "mystic muse, sister of the Minotaur" (NA, 60, 67). Here in its place is the imagination, power of living poets and real earthly men. But if the Stevensian imagination is mysterious, even to him, this is not the same as saying that it is mystical. It may be, says Stevens, "that the imagination is a miracle of logic." "The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them" (NA, 154).

When it comes to definitions of poetry, we find Stevens at his most self-contradictory, at one moment describing poetry in terms of the imagination, at another saying that poetry is the same as reality, and yet again saying that poetry is metaphor or metamorphosis. Stevens' quest for poetry is not, at its heart, a matter of writing poems, and all his struggles for a central poem are something other than a matter of composing a structure of words. Among his Adagia, we find aphorisms such as these:

The collecting of poetry from one's experience as one goes along is not the same thing as merely writing poetry (OP, 159).

The poet comes to words as nature comes to dry sticks (OP, 171). On the other hand, he also pointed out that " . . . above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds." (NA, 32). The question is, does poetry exist as

ideas, as things that lie in the world, or as words? Stevens supplies the answer in a couple of his Adagia:

Poetry is a poetic conception, however expressed. A poem is poetry expressed in words. But in a poem there is a poetry of words. Obviously, a poem may consist of several poetries (OP, 163).

Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea within the poem of the words (OP, 174).

Thus, for Stevens poetry may mean either the words of a poem, or the subject of the poem. But it would be a mistake to try to pin Stevens' theory of poetry down to any narrow conception of poetry as text. The Stevensian imagination on its mighty quest for poetic truth is concerned with something more universal.

The concept of metaphor is of prime importance in defining Stevens' concept of poetry, but even here he does not intend for metaphor to be understood only as a figure of speech. Metaphor in the thought of Stevens represents a rare opportunity for the processes of the poet to parallel the structure of reality, for metaphor relies on resemblances, and resemblance, Stevens tells us, is part of the structure of reality. In reality, things resemble each other, as "each man resembles all other men, each woman resembles all other women, this year resembles last year" (NA, 72). In the case of metaphor (and analogy) one term is found in reality, and the second term is supplied by the imagination of the poet. In the second part of "Three Academic Pieces," Stevens allows the reader to witness him in the act of metaphorizing, or metamorphosing, a pineapple placed on a table. For example:

1. The hut stands by itself beneath the palms.
2. Out of their bottle the green geni come.
3. A vine has climbed the other side of the wall.

(NA, 86)

Is this kind of thing anything more than an exquisite exercise? In "Effects of Analogy," Stevens admits that if analogy is considered only as figures of speech, poetry is little more than a trick. But analogy has in addition a social function; better, it fulfills a human need.

The venerable, the fundamental books of the human spirit are vast collections of such analogies and it is the analogies that have helped to make these books what they are. The pictorializations of poetry include much more than figures of speech. We have not been studying images, but however crudely, analogies, of which images are merely a part. Analogies are much the larger subject. . . . In any case, these are the pictorializations of men, for whom the world exists as a world and for whom life exists as life, the objects of their passions, the objects before which they come and speak, with intense choosing, words that we remember and make our own (NA, 129-30).

We must infer that these men of whom Stevens speaks are our poets.

Their words have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence. It is a transcendence achieved by means of the minor effects of figurations and the major effects of the poet's sense of the world and of the motive music of his poems and it is the imaginative dynamism of all these analogies together. Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense (NA, 130, *my italics*).

I pointed out above that to construct a metaphor, the poet takes a first term from, let us say, reality or his subject matter (the pineapple on the table), and supplies a second term from his imagination ("The hut stands by itself beneath the palms."). In this metamorphosis of a pineapple into a hut beneath palm fronds, imagination and reality have come together; poetry has been created.

It is important to Stevens that imagination and reality come together to form poetry. Ideally, in fact, poetry would be an interdependence of imagination and reality as equals (NA, 27). The kind of conceit represented in "Three Academic Pieces" comes to seem artificial

in comparison with the definition of poetry found in the passage which follows, a definition which, it will be obvious, also involves an encounter between the imagination and reality.

Poetry is the imagination of life. A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it (NA, 65, my italics).

Poetry, then, is "a transcendent analogue," a thing in the world that has been metamorphosed by the power of poetic imagination, and thus the poet's approach to reality. The things of poetry exist only in poems. "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" (NA, 32).

But Stevens is at his best when his poetry is allowed to stand as its own definition. There remains one aspect of the interdependence of imagination, poetry, and reality that has not been contained in this divided treatment: the joy of creativity. I said above that metamorphosis is part of Stevens' concept of poetry, a kind of transformation of a thing in nature into a thing of poetry. But another metamorphosis occurs at the same time: the transformation of the poet into a pure, almost godlike being, when he has achieved the gnostic moment of creativeness.

The way a poet feels when he is writing, or after he has written, a poem that completely accomplishes his purpose is evidence of the personal nature of his activity. To describe it by exaggerating it, he shares the transformation, not to say apotheosis, accomplished by the poem (NA, 49).

Three times in the same essay, this delightful experience is described. We find the poet "still in the ecstasy of the poem that completely accomplished his purpose, . . . uttering the hymns of joy that followed his creation" (NA, 51). And, " . . . the moment of exaltation that the poet experiences when he writes a poem that completely accomplishes his

purpose, is a moment of victory over the incredible . . ." (NA, 53). Clearly the poetic process to Stevens is a pleasure that transcends most earthly delights; along with many other creative people, Stevens can easily be pictured as a kind of addict of the creative process. Interestingly, Ronald Sukenick has hypothesized a "radical experience" in those moments when there is an encounter between the imagination and reality for Stevens

Though we exist in reality we are bound by the mind, and thus it is not the nature of reality that matters so much as our sense of it, the sense of it that the imagination gives us. However, the favorable sense of reality that the imagination can produce, the "agreement with reality," is momentary:

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

The thinking of god is smoky dew. (CP, 168)

These moments are for Stevens a radical experience⁵ which, it would not be too much to say, all his theoretical poetry merely tries to recapture.⁶

Perhaps this kind of hedonism is the true motive for creativity.

Stevens held with incredible tenacity to his quest for true encounters with reality, for genuine poems; perhaps such a life's work requires a joyousness. (Later, in Chapter V, we will see Stevens near the end of a long poem on the subject of pain and evil, declaring, "This is the thesis scribbled in delight, . . .") When Stevens speaks of the "radiant and productive atmosphere" which surrounds the young and virile poet, we can imagine that this powerful poet is himself.

⁵In a footnote, Sukenick acknowledges J. V. Cunningham, "Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens," Poetry, LXXV, 148-165.

⁶Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure; Readings and Interpretations and a Guide to the Collected Poetry, (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 28.

In sum, then, poetry is a way of encountering the world; all Stevens' poems are different ways of perceiving reality. For every poetic analogue of the world there has been an act of the mind, an act in which the demands of reality and the demands of imagination have each been met as fully as possible. Poetry is both the recording of the process and the instrument of it.

The reader will be wondering in what particulars Stevens' poetry corresponds to his theory. This is not an easy question to answer, for while it seems only reasonable to assume that there must be connections, it is difficult to assert that Stevens' theory of poetry tells us anything very important about his own poetry. Perhaps the main value of the philosophical writings is not in their details, but in the broad outline--the idea of poetry as man's willful attempt to penetrate a hard reality with his imagination. As such, the poetry can be seen as a quest for reality through poetry. Stevens' poetry, then, is about this poetic self, told by means of his own version of the creative process, just as any story of a quest is not about the goal, but the seeker.

Quest is process, and thus plot. Let us say that Stevens' book, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, is the story of this man's life not in its externals, which are after all not the reality of his life as a poet, but the inner life, the life of the mind. As epigraph to "The World as Meditation" Stevens chose the following quotation:

J'ai passé trop de temps à travailler mon violon, à voyager.
Mais l'exercice essentiel du compositeur--la méditation--rien
ne l'a jamais suspendu en moi . . . Je vis un rêve permanent,
qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour (CP, 520).

That unending meditation and permanent dream are the poet's life.

It is perhaps a comfort to choose a cyclical thing as a metaphor for life: if death is like a sunset, then we can infer that there will be something to correspond to the next morning's sunrise. Likewise, if an individual lifetime proceeds as though from spring to winter then there may be hope of renewed warmth after all. Whether Stevens planned at the outset to write a life's book which proceeded from spring through all the seasons to winter, or not, I do not know. But the titles of the separate books and of the poems within outline a plot. Harmonium, the first book, is a springtime in a virgin country, fertile and green. The Collected Poems progress through a single year, ending with Transport to Summer, The Auroras of Autumn, and The Rock--in nature, static fulfillment, deciduousness, and then barrenness.⁷

There must be few books of poetry in the English language as strikingly individual, rich, and varied as Wallace Stevens' Harmonium. In it we find everything from the most incredible grotesqueries of language to the most straightforward blunt declarations. Harmonium is at once the beginning of Stevens' life-quest for poetry (The Rock marking the end of the book and the quest), and a preview of the whole quest. We can see the young poet in arrogant possession of his power, confident of his ability, as in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds", and in lines such as these from "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;

(CP, 94)

⁷Without making mention of the annual cycle represented by Stevens' work as a consecutive entity, Donald Sheehan discusses Stevens' use of the seasons as part of his theory of metaphor. "Stevens' seasons are states of imaginative perception, moving from summer, when reality is metaphor, to winter, when reality is unknowable thing, with autumn and spring partaking of both realities." "Wallace Stevens' Theory of Metaphor," 61.

But that same strophe in its last three lines contains the antithesis which is also part of Harmonium.

But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

(CP, 94)

And we remember that Stevens was, after all, forty-four years old on the publication of this first book, already percipient of the dimensions of the quest he had set for himself. Harmonium foreshadows Stevens' life-quest, his extraordinary use of the linguistic medium, and even the final ambivalence of failure within success found in The Rock. Harmonium is a world of contraries: a craving for winter in the midst of paeans to spring, nihilistic dreaming among sensual affluence, sterile age and potent youth, futility and arrogance.

"Sea Surface Full of Clouds," the parade of power and the disgust for power, is a paradigm of this ambivalence. Meanwhile it can also be taken as an illustration of the multiple-endedness of the poetic process. The poet is aware that there is a plurality of ways of looking at--and thus of writing about--his poetic object. The sophistication of poetry lies in the skillful poet's management of pluralistic meaning; the true poem of a truly poetic object will be multisignificant. The final arrangement of tone, imagery, and color is a matter of a choice among possibilities, even though it may seem to the poet that the chosen one is the only one. "Sea Surface" figures forth all these ideals in a virtuoso performance, indeed, a prodigious performance, at once self-confident and ostentatious. For any one of the five sections could be considered sufficient poem; the five together are a display. It is something like Monet's sixteen paintings of Waterloo Bridge, perceptions of the subtle changes of that surface under

the changes of light, except that Monet's exercise is almost humble under the realities of the scene before him. If Monet had been arrogant enough to paint instead of the perceptions the mind that is capable of such perception, then we would have had something more closely analogous to the sea surfaces of Stevens--a parade of powers.

In his essay entitled "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting" Stevens discusses the way in which a line of poetry is like a line in painting, in that they both take on their meaning in the context of the whole composition. Poets and painters reconstruct and reform their experience, making something new out of the familiar materials of the senses. Thus,

Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything. Poets and painters alike today make that assumption and this is what gives them the validity and serious dignity that become them as among those that seek wisdom, seek understanding. (NA, 175).

"Sea Surface" begins conventionally enough in a boat in the Pacific "off Tehuantepec." While lake water may lap, here the sea sounds like "slopping," until one night it grew still, "And in the morning summer hued the deck." We can imagine the ocean lying so still that reflections of the clouds in the sky are visible in the water. It is provocative to know that the clouds really originate in the sea, and are simply a metamorphosis of sea water. The clouds seem far below the surface of the water, and they remind the poet of flowers. "Who, then, evolved the sea blooms from the clouds / Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?" he asks. And the answer, an echo from Baudelaire, but still innocuous in this first poem, "C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme." He is asking, by what process came the clouds to be

"sea-blooms?" Who is responsible for this transformation? The answer points to a second self--the creative self that perceives the world as significant forms, and analogues. Thus the question of the origin of metaphor is raised, and the answer is appropriate for the static world of this first poem. Stable in time, it ends with a verb in an imperfect past tense: "And sometimes the sea / Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue" (CP, 99). Stevens has furnished a motif on which he will play his own variations.

In the second poem, placidity is transformed into malevolence and fakery. "At breakfast jelly yellow streaked the deck" (CP, 99). In "jelly yellow" sound and sense combine to produce a sense of ignobility. Where before the ocean lay "like limpid water," now it lies "in sinister flatness." Now the reflected clouds seem macabre; "sea-blooms" have metamorphosed into "water-glooms." Here the vision is chased away by a storm; the real clouds rain in "crystalline pendentives on the sea," and the reflected clouds disappear (CP, 100).

Morning never comes in the third poem; sibilants, and a palette of silver and white produce an effect of moonlight and dreams. A seductive vision, there is "milk within the saltiest spurge" (CP, 100). Its origin? "C'était mon extase et mon amour" (CP, 100). In this atmosphere of love and darkness, shadows are shrouds, and "The shrouding shadows made the petals black" (CP, 100) and then blue as "the rainy hyacinth," and "sapphire blue" (CP, 101). With love and death, hyacinth and the sea, Stevens seems to be toying with the idea of tapping into the reservoir of mythopoeic archetypes. From time to time, even in later poems (as, "The Countryman," and

"Metaphor as Degeneration") this voice can be heard, but it is really not characteristic of Stevens. Poem four moves on into an animistic sea-scape with the beginnings of mythic figures--"Salt masks of beard and mouths of bellowing" (CP, 101). The source of this outlook was faith. But he throws off this point of view quickly, and the figures become flowers ("mallows") again.

Poem V in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" might actually be read as self-criticism, it is so apt a description of Stevens in one of his most characteristic personae. "Bowling and voluble," this time day comes on the deck as a "Good clown . . ." (CP, 101-2). The crucial question is phrased and answered:

What pistache one, ingenious and droll,
Beheld the sovereign clouds as jugglery

And the sea as turquoise-turbaned Sambo, neat
At tossing saucers--cloudy-conjuring sea?
C'était mon esprit bâtard, l'ignominie. (CP, 102)

In the end the attitude is ambivalent. Was it unfitting for the poet to behold "the sovereign clouds" as tricks, drôleries for a playful mind? Finally there is a trumpet call for "loyal conjuration," providing the perfect balance of truth, loyalty to reality, and poetic legerdemain. Then the real possibilities of the scene open up--"fresh transfigurings of freshest blue" come from the scene more than from the poet's invention (CP, 102).

Can this set of exercises in poetic expression be said to be an entity; is it five poems, or one poem? The question is important because if there is no link between the first and fifth poems, no development, and in short no progress into depth, then the poet's powers have been very limited. The poet's show of strength will have been a falsification. But Stevens has considered this possible failure

of power in the last poem; he is ready to condemn himself--or part of himself--for trifling with sovereign reality. Francophile Stevens finds just the right word for the faculty which took this conjurer's attitude: esprit, the word for reason, and wit. And how he despises it! The answer to the difficulty, if it can be called an answer, fore-shadows the late, reality-oriented Stevens. The "sovereign clouds"--the real beginnings of the whole fantastic structure--"come clustering." Conjunction is still in the picture, but it must be "loyal conjunction." In the end, the sea and the heaven achieve atonement. Metamorphosis--"fresh transfigurings"--does occur, but it is in reality; the poet's inventive powers are feeble compared to the power of true reality-perceiving (CP, 102).

Thus the five poems are brought together. Each successive posture is a wrong approach, a poetic dead end. But it is also a complete poem, and thus must be considered per se as a right approach. Each poem leaves the poet's true goal unreached, and so leads to the next poem. But the complexity of the search, and thus the multi-significance of the ultimate poem have been molded in.

I have been using "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" as a paradigm for the kind of questing for poetry found in Harmonium, where again and again the poet leads a fresh assault on his goal of true expression, genuine meetings with reality. To say that "Sea Surface" is not the ultimate answer to Stevens' quest is not to belittle the poem: rather, it is to magnify the importance of Stevens' ambition. Now Harmonium as a whole contains the theme and the complex of attitudes which persist throughout the book of the Collected Poems. Stevens wanted to call this latter book The Whole of Harmonium, and it is true that even in the last pages

the goal of the quest is still as far away as ever, still as important and desirable as ever. The youthful mood of arrogance has abated somewhat, but there remains a consciousness of special powers. The cynicism and despair also function in the end. What has occurred is a progress in depth. The repeated attacks do not solve the problem; on the contrary, they increase its difficulty. The poet's growing awareness of the magnitude of the search causes the search to be so augmented that its goal becomes more remote--and at the same time more worthy of the gigantic effort. The quest theme has not changed, it has enlarged, swelled. The Collected Poems are "The Whole of Harmonium."

To demonstrate the point, I offer the late poem, "Prologues to What is Possible." As in "Sea Surface," the poet is on a boat--apt symbol for the quest motif--but the scene is very different. "There was an ease of mind that was like being alone in a boat at sea," he begins. The poet is passive, a passenger. Nevertheless, he is alert, he is standing up, "leaning and looking before him." The imagery with which Stevens describes this boat is awesome: it is brilliant, made of stones that have lost their weight, its symbol is a "speculum of fire on its prow," and it glides over the water on "glass-like sides" (CP, 515-516).

As he traveled alone, like a man lured on by a syllable
without any meaning,
A syllable of which he felt, with an appointed sureness,
That it contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter,
A meaning which, as he entered it, would shatter the boat
and leave the oarsmen quiet
As at a point of central arrival, an instant moment,
much or little,
Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and
needing none. (CP, 516)

Stevens has produced a metaphor for his life in poetry, and it stirs his fear, for he himself does not understand it. Like the dream of a Biblical prophet, it could be explicated indefinitely: the speculum,

symbol of the boat, is loaded, of course. A speculum is a mirror, also an instrument for medical examination, also a compendium of knowledge. In part II, lines 1 and 2, Stevens almost seems to be warning the critics away from his creature. He knows he is nearing the end of his life in poetry, and he speculates on some possible self within himself which has not been loosed, something "Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread" (CP, 516). This would be like the sudden perception of an entirely new color, never seen before, a powerful flick, even if from the smallest lamp. It is only an indication of the vast universe of possibilities for poetry, but nevertheless a genuine indication of something that is really there, like the first sighting of a star in the evening sky. The quest begins again.

Such is the access to the central poem: just as one star proves the existence of possible other universes, so one poem leads to all the poems and to the one great poem. This proof, though, is not the proof of logic, it is the proof of imagination. In "A Primitive Like an Orb,"

One poem proves another and the whole,
For the clairvoyant men that need no proof:
The lover, the believer and the poet. (CP, 441)

The central poem is the "poem of the whole, / The poem of the composition of the whole" (CP, 442), a final form, or an order which underlies everything. The central poem attracts the poet as the beloved attracts a lover, as God attracts the believer. The resemblance between lover, believer, and poet is taken up again in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" where Stevens shows how the analogy breaks down. For now, though, the point is made that the quest for poetry is a drive toward a goal, and the poet is enabled to continue by the partial glimpses he has gotten in lesser poems. Still, even though the poems are lesser, poetry

is there, a "huge, high harmony" that sings out briefly.

In the instant of speech,
The breadth of an accelerando moves,
Captives the being, widens--and was there. (CP, 440)

And thus he believes that there is a central poem. His metaphor for it is a giant on the horizon, a giant invested with every kind of flashy adornment, brightly stirring enough for children, and yet majestically serious, with something for the ear and something for the eye. The catch is that though in reality the giant is at the center of things, yet that center will always be the horizon for us. His location is "the centre on the horizon, concentrum . . ." (CP, 443). He is "patron of origins." What does it mean, then? At the end of the poem, lover, believer, poet, and painter are assembled again, each to grope toward the giant as best he can. Each one is always changing, and the giant is always changing. In fine, he is unapproachable; he is "the giant of nothingness" (CP, 443).

Stevens' nihilism cannot be called disillusion, for it was pre-figured in Harmonium. It is not even pessimism, for we know that death, change, and nothingness are the begetters of beauty (e. g., "Sunday Morning") and thus poetry. I believe it is the product of his desperate struggle with the idea of reality. The central poem is reality, or the poet's final penetration into reality. But after all his striving he could not penetrate this mystery. All he has seen is surface, reflections from the sun. Is the answer, then, that beneath the surface, beneath appearance, lies only nothing? But he must try again, for while he has still not approached any nearer to the giant, who remains on the horizon, he has had a glimpse, and if he has not yet created the one central poem, still he has made a genuine, if lesser, poem. And after all, it may be

that the idea of a horizon itself is a key: no matter where on earth one stands, one is no nearer the horizon, but on the other hand it is always there.

The giant appears as a character in this picaresque poetry from the beginning. The first occurrence is on page 6, "The Plot against the Giant." He also appears as a symbol in regard to the "supreme fiction," something different from, but related to the central poem. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the giant is "A thinker of the first idea" (CP, 386), and as such he is at the center and source of things, the "myth before the myth began" (CP, 383). In the same poem he is also connected with the idea of "major man," an important aspect of poetry's task. The "idea of man," in fact, is the poet's responsibility to the other men of the planet, it being his duty to explain his generation to themselves.

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," another of the major quest poems, and also one in which the giant appears, the poet's compulsion to seek comes not so much from himself as from those others of his generation. The guitarist is a man among men, separated from the others by the simple fact of his possession of the blue guitar. The others approach the poet, demanding that he play for them "things exactly as they are." He explains that on his instrument things are changed; the day, for example, is not blue like the guitar, but green. Furthermore, his song is not of ordinary man, but of a hero, a composite which can never be or re-create a single real man. Exact reproduction of reality is an unapproachable limit; whatever is played on the blue guitar is unavoidably affected by the instrument. But even though he knows his limitation he cannot give up the struggle. The guitarist is the poet of

course; the blue guitar is language and its music is poetry. Much later in the poem he refers to the struggle in terms of a "giant that fought / Against the murderous alphabet . . ." (CP, 179). Although the giant, here, "man number one" (CP, 166) is the poet's goal, and in fact is what he does manage to play, the giant is not reality. Since the problem of belief is a major theme of this poem, the giant can be taken as an anthropomorphic god or godlike man, something created by the poet not so much in answer to the people's demand for "a tune . . . / Of things exactly as they are," (CP, 165) but because the shadowless and thus seemingly flat others need a substitute for the historical myths.

Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,
Even in the chattering of your guitar. (CP, 167)

Left without religion, the people still crave some one thing that is final, beyond change. An aesthetic object might just be a viable icon. The problem is to form not an ersatz religion, something otherworldly, but a way of looking at and living in the real world, especially for Stevens the physical world. Thus, ultimately the quest is still a quest for reality. In canto VIII he proposes laudatory couplets--"The vivid, florid, turgid sky, / The drenching thunder rolling by" (CP, 169), and so on, but then stops to offer an aside.

I know my lazy, leaden twang
Is like the reason in a storm;

And yet it brings the storm to bear.
I twang it out and leave it there. (CP, 169)

Like the jar in Tennessee, the guitarist's tune is an artifact. Once made, it simply occupies a place among all the other existing objects,

just one more inaccessible ding-an-sich. And yet somehow it does pertain. It brings the poet at least, one step closer to reality, because the poet is "The maker of a thing." Know reality by adding a tiny part to it? There is a suggestion of this. The poet is "The maker of a thing yet to be made" (CP, 169); in the creative process the thing being made, the instrument or medium, and the maker all are one for a time.

Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar
And I are one. (CP, 171)

Strumming, guitar, and guitarist are an entity. The poem in process is the poet; once made, the poem becomes a part of reality, and in this sense the poet achieves atonement with reality.

Canto XXII I shall quote in its entirety because it is so germane to the whole question of the relation of poetry to reality.

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse. (CP, 176-7)

He is saying that the poetic process is cyclical; the poem begins with an aesthetic insight into something in the world, and the end must be in reality too. The question is, what happens in between? Apparently the middle phase is imaginative; the materials taken from the real world are shaped, arranged, and colored by the imagination. In the phase of most

imaginative tincture, reality's influence is least. And vice versa: the more reality holds sway, the less imagination contributes. The scheme is almost Yeatsian, even to the final line of Canto XXII.

And thus the poet's dilemma: insofar as he is reconciled with reality he has lost his imaginative faculty, that which first gave him his insight. But to draw back from reality is to impoverish oneself. The guitarist must have both: play real songs for real people or his art is worthless, form without content. On the other hand, plain reality is impossible on the guitar, for the guitar is imagination. The player must be skillful, and he must be tough.

In the end he speaks again of "That generation's dream" (CP, 183), their desire for a poetry exceeding the hymns of heaven, something that would show them things as they are. The man with the blue guitar has not created anything final, or anything to satisfy them. Thus they can only forget the dream, except at times in certain

. . . moments when we choose to play
The imagined pine, the imagined jay. (CP, 184)

Playing "major man," it seems, is not the way to the central poem.

The search continues; in The Auroras of Autumn, another major poem is devoted to the theme. This is "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," a full-scale attack, thirty-one cantos of six tercets each, on the problem of reality, and reality's appearance. As is customary in philosophical discussions of this type, the first question is what we see.

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,
The vulgate of experience. Of this,
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet--

As part of the never-ending meditation,
Part of the question that is a giant himself:
Of what is this house composed if not of the sun, . . .
(CP, 465)

The vulgate is the common tongue, the language that everybody speaks, or at least everybody except poets. Just so, their version of appearance, or experience, is different from the poets' version. The things they see are, for example, the houses in New Haven by the light of the sun. From this viewpoint, too, reality is an unapproachable giant on the horizon. Now for the poet, "a second giant kills the first;" the poet's giant is

A mythological form, a festival sphere,
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age. (CP, 466)

For the poet's point of view, there is a new sun on new houses. The light is the mind, and the houses are ourselves, or our selves, impalpable and nondimensional, "Without regard to time or where we are" (CP, 466). This is the reality of a poet, and "things-as-they-are" must lie somewhere in this realm; here he must find "The poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation" (CP, 471). He wants to see "without reflection," as though the eye might see a house without benefit of reflected light. Can he do it? It may be an impossible goal, and herein lies the difference between a poet and a lover (or believer). The lover desires ease and fulfillment. It is the same with the believer on his quest for God. But the poet's quest for reality is different in that it cannot possess. "It is desire . . . / Always in emptiness that would be filled" (CP, 467). The quest itself is the central poem, and the quest pattern is the pattern of Stevens' poetry.

Reality is the beginning not the end,
Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,
Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals. (CP, 469)

The job of poetry is never done; the central poem is never reached. In a sense the world of beauty and poetry is as static as Keats' Grecian urn; in another sense it is eternal change, a never-ending fire.

The process of searching for poetry is poetry itself, for the poet as he undergoes the primary creative process and for the poet's audience pushing toward an understanding of the poetry.

This very realization is a kind of fulfillment of the quest, and a serenity descends over the poet. Now, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," autumn has passed, the last leaf has fallen, and barrenness comes over the land. The barrenness is not a matter of absence, though,

It is a coming on and a coming forth.
The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge,
Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks. (CP, 487)

Only air is left to cover the rocks, and it is all clarity, "A visibility of thought."

Just as winter provides a necessary resting time for the biological world, so the final barrenness of reality (the rock) is a renewal for poetry. Poetry will, and indeed must, renew itself in every generation. For poetry is "the nucleus of a time," "the growth of the mind / Of the world . . ." (CP, 446). As above, reality might be a force, perpetual but in constant need of renewal. Certainly the mind is a force, "the terriblest force in the world" (CP, 436). Only the mind can defend itself against itself. We are both at its mercy and dependent on it. It is mind that posits fictions and mind that believes them; but mind is the only thing that can guard against false beliefs. Thus the unending, perpetually renewing quest is the price of reality.

Reality is a rock (that is, rock is a metaphor for reality as we find it): solid, though this too is a metaphor, unchanging, impenetrable, and barren. As such, it is something of which we need to be cured. "The Rock" is the final section of the Collected Poems; unlike the other sections it was not published as a separate book. In the

yearbook of Stevens' life it is the end at winter and also the beginning of a new cycle. The first poems of "The Rock" show great age. (Stevens was 76 years old when the Collected Poems were published; he had been a poet for more than 40 years.) Death has been a part of the meditations from the beginning; now the poet thinks back to his forefathers, and "back to a parent before thought, before speech . . ." (CP, 501). In "The Plain Sense of Things" he tells that he has come to the end of imagination. It had to happen, but how he regrets it:

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house. (CP, 502)

The sunlight fades in "Lebensweisheitspielerei," and all the heroes are gone from the world. Only humans remain, "Natives of a dwindled sphere" (CP, 504). But the mood of regret shifts with "To an Old Philosopher in Rome." Meditating on an old man (Santayana) in a room in Rome he begins to see that "It is a kind of total grandeur at the end . . ." (CP, 510). Every visible object seems immense.

He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized. (CP, 511)

It is still winter, but it is March, the last month of winter. Now he can look ahead, in "Prologues to What is Possible." From the vantage point of a long life in poetry, he can say

... Wanderer, this is the pre-history of February.
The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun. (CP, 522)

The ambience of "The Rock," in general, is passivity, a willing submission to what is. The poet is not so much an active seeker as a witness. The poetic powers of adjective and metaphor which seemed so promising in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" have failed after all. For air, our element (and representative of our spiritual life) is "A thing

not planned for imagery or belief . . ." (CP, 518). Our thinking is as random as the shifting of the wind. All our poetic anthropomorphizing of the world was backward; in truth it is mind that resembles "the body of the world . . ." (CP, 519). Mind only mirrors the world; the mind's disorder is nature's disorder. On the other hand, nature has "blunt laws" (CP, 519), independent of man, existing not to be discovered by him, but only because they exist. Simple striving will not take the poet to knowledge of things as they are, but by being constantly receptive, like a mirror, he can be ready for knowledge when it comes.

Penelope waiting for Ulysses in "The World as Meditation" is Stevens' figure for this passive state of mind. Penelope has composed herself, and "mended the trees" in preparation for Ulysses' return. The sun on the eastern horizon is a "form of fire" that awakens Penelope's world of meditation. At first she thinks the warmth of the sun might be Ulysses himself. But "It was only day. / It was Ulysses and it was not" (CP, 521). The point is that Penelope by her faithfulness has kept her husband; by thinking the sun was Ulysses and welcoming him, she has in a sense come in contact with him. The rising of the sun is encouragement for her. In the myth she is rewarded. Similarly, the poet waits for his reunion with the sun, symbol of the world of reality, and thus true poetry.

In this final book the theme of age gives way to renewal, submissiveness metamorphoses into hope. In the poem "The Rock" barrenness is transformed back into fertility, winter to spring. An ultimate acceptance and atonement with barren reality would force the old poet to admit that "The sounds of the guitar / Were not and are not" (CP, 525).

But he finds this absurd. He remembers an embrace on the edge of a field at noon, "an embrace between one desperate clod / And another . . . / In a queer assertion of humanity" (CP, 525). His human pride and stubbornness are reviving.

There is something inherent in nothingness itself that desires to be covered. Even illusion is needed, it seems. Green leaves and lilacs cover the rock again every year; to be true to nature we must include its decorations--the leaves, the blooms, and their fruit. We must be cured of the barrenness of reality, and we can do it by eating the brightly colored fruit of the world. Now Stevens glosses his own parable: "The fiction of the leaves is the icon / Of the poem, . . . / And the icon is the man" (CP, 526). Poem, icon, man: all these combat the rock. The leaves of the world do not merely cover barrenness, they transform it. Leaves, blooms, and fruit represent the cyclical nature of the world, its promise to renew itself. The poem, man, and imagination are part of this endless cycling. It is poetry that makes meaning of the rock.

But the rock represents that which is always there, unchanging. It is the basic foundation upon which man must stand. Reality is the first step, and it is also the world we live in, "the habitation of the whole" (CP, 528). It is the beginning, and it is the end.

Finally, spring begins again. The last poem in the Collected Poems is "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself."

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind. (CP, 534)

But he knows that this sound is coming from outside, not from a dream. He likens the scrawny cry to the first note of one singer whose voice

precedes the choir. The note is part of the coming spring, part of the new day, part of the sun, much like the first sighting of the evening star in "Prologues to what is Possible."

It was like
A new knowledge of reality. (CP, 534)

* * * * * * * * *

In Stevens' mundo, there are many themes. Since it would be impossible to do final justice to Stevens' poetry in a chapter of this length, I have been concerned here with Stevens' treatment of the poetic process, aspects of his poetry which relate to his idea of poesis. There are several book-length studies of Stevens' poetry, and one book on Harmonium alone. The reader is referred to the section entitled Bibliography and List of General References.

We began with a discussion of Stevens' essays on the nature of imagination and reality, in which a series of propositions about poetry and the poet were developed. But it should not be inferred that Stevens' poetry was intended to illustrate these propositions; poetry is not of a propositional nature. It is probable that the essays were written out of Stevens' experiences as a poet, rather than vice versa. Stevens' ideas in poetry come to us by means of the images, ideas, and patterns of his poetry.

In tracing the curve of Stevens' work, we saw a change from a poem like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" in which the poetic powers of metaphor and metamorphosis were brought to bear on a single scene to a poem like "Prologues to What is Possible" in which the final mystery and impenetrability of reality was acknowledged. The comparison between these two poems shows the quest in microcosm, but so does each poem singly,

as well as other poems discussed, notably "The Man with the Blue Guitar." So barren, both in language and idea, did the end of the book appear, that it almost seemed that the poet had found his whole life to be a failure. But at last it was seen that the quest was a cycle after all. Once the end of the cycle had been met, the beginning was at hand. And thus the book was compared to the cycle of the seasons of the year, in which spring follows winter, and indeed depends on winter for its existence. There is a need for a period of cold and sleep and barrenness, in the mind as in nature.

What, then, is poesis to Wallace Stevens? It is joyful, and it is difficult, within his capabilities and yet impossible of final consummation, one of life's luxuries and yet a genuine necessity, both private and public. It is a paradox and a puzzle, like life itself, which comes to us unasked but yet must be lived out.

One poem proves another and the whole,
 For the clairvoyant men that need no proof:
 The lover, the believer and the poet.
 Their words are chosen out of their desire,
 The joy of language, when it is themselves.
 With these they celebrate the central poem, . . .

(CP, 441)

CHAPTER III

PAUL VALÉRY: THE VOYAGE INTO THE SELF

While in the preceding chapter we have seen that for Wallace Stevens poetry must be found in a relationship between the poet and the world, it will develop that for Valéry poetry--and indeed, all forms of creative endeavor--requires a phase of withdrawal from the world. Valéry's poetry is not really concerned with the world, except as setting for his meditation; his subject is always himself. Valéry said, "De quoi j'ai souffert le plus? Peut-être de l'habitude de développer toute ma pensée, d'aller jusqu'au bout en moi."¹ To go to the limit within oneself: In Valéry this process resulted finally in a loss of individuality, in a discovery of universality. Thus, although the paradigm of Valéry's thought is a voyage into the self, as in the long poem La Jeune Parque, the result is a renunciation of self and a freeing of the spirit from the narrow confines of selfishness. (Other aspects of self-renunciation will be shown in the succeeding chapters, ranging from a casting away of the life of pure contemplation in "Le Cimetière marin" all the way to suicide in the cycle of Narcissus.)

More than most poets, Valéry expended a great proportion of

¹Agathe Valéry Rouart, Paul Valéry, (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 167.

his creative energies on works other than poetry. His dialogues, letters, lectures, essays, the quasi-novel *Monsieur Teste* and its cycle, and above all the vast study which is the *Cahiers*: all this may come to be recognized as work equal to the more generally famous poems. In Valéry a kind of modern-day Montaigne is gradually emerging, for like Montaigne he was one of those universal minds who are able to apply themselves to various specific subjects because they are so well acquainted with the general workings of human intelligence. Whatever Valéry did, he did with rigor; his poems are prosodically flawless, for example, and he once wrote a dialogue to order of a given number of letters. Vague and loose writing and thinking were anathema to him. His very life was lived with rigor. As much as possible, he carried out his ideas to their logical conclusion, even to the point of refusing as a matter of principle to publish his poetry. Valéry was always striving toward that which was best in himself; his discipline was to exist deliberately on a plane equal to his best moments. Here is Valéry on the subject of his faith:

MOI. Il adore cette religion qui fait de la beauté un de ses dogmes, et de l'Art, le plus magnifique de ses apôtres. Il adore surtout son catholicisme à lui, un peu espagnol, beaucoup wagnérien et gothique.

Quant à la croyance pure! Voici ce qu'il en pense (voulant être avant tout franc, et, avant tout, l'être avec lui-même):

"La plus grossière des hypothèses est de croire que Dieu existe objectivement... Oui! Il existe et le Diable, mais en nous!

"Le culte que nous lui devons--c'est le respect que nous devons à nous-mêmes et il faut l'entendre: la recherche d'un Mieux par notre force dans la direction de nos aptitudes.

"En deux mots: Dieu est notre idéal particulier. Satan ce qui tend à nous en détourner."²

Thus he was utterly self-centered, but in a detached way, thinking of

²Paul Valéry, *Lettres à quelques-uns*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 21-2.

the "self" as an object for speculation, perhaps even experimentation. He never sought fame or glory for himself; fame did come, and glory too, but Valéry was the most unwilling of all literary lions and he quickly grew to think of his reputation--when it suddenly sprang up, almost overnight--as something so separate from himself as to be almost unrecognizable. And yet his intellect was the greatest part of him, followed by the emotional man of family and friendship and last the practical man.

Now Valéry knew that a man is divided, uneven in his abilities, and above all, unable to sustain his capabilities for very long at a time. The fact of attention, its weakness and short life, how it might be improved, was a topic of interest to him. There came a certain time in Valéry's life when, as he says, he "was intoxicated with his will" and experienced "strange excesses of self-consciousness."

Je faisais donc ce que je pouvais pour augmenter un peu les durées de quelques pensées. Tout ce qui m'était facile m'était indifférent et presque ennemi. La sensation de l'effort me semblait devoir être recherchée, et je ne prisais pas les heureux résultats qui ne sont que les fruits naturels de nos vertus natives.³

And--always--the dominant theme of his life and work:

C'est dire que les résultats en général,--et par consequence, les oeuvres,--m'importaient beaucoup moins que l'énergie de l'ouvrier,-- substance des choses qu'il espère.⁴

For this reason, Valéry, the stationary thinker at his desk, liked to compare himself to dancers and athletes.

³Paul Valéry, Oeuvres, Édition établie et annotée par Jean Hytier, v. II, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 11. Henceforth abbreviated as Oeuvres II.

⁴Ibid.

L'acte me semble plus précieux que le résultat. L'athlète fait des mouvements inutiles, mais ses muscles pourront servir à l'occasion.⁵

But his ideal man, Edmond Teste, was a man much like himself--solitary, making a living at a mediocre futureless job, making a life out of his thoughts. Where Paul Valéry leaves off and the fictional Edmond Teste begins is in M. Teste's incredible ability to think, to seek his truth all the time. M. Teste is an impossible man, and as Valéry pointed out, this is what makes him interesting. For it is necessary to ask: why is M. Teste impossible? Every thinker contains a M. Teste for at least part of the time. But he never lives for more than minutes before we are distracted by some bodily need or practical thought or simply the natural fatigue that comes from the nervous system itself. Edmond Teste is an original and brilliant concept, and his Pensées (e. g., "Il faut entrer en soi-même armé jusqu'aux dents.") contain insights which illustrate Valéry's whole thought. For now, though, it will not be necessary to give a resume of the Teste cycle, for what matters is the basic concept: A figure made of one faculty of man, extended to its logical (though not realistic) conclusion, this being a man who was wholly concerned with his thoughts, with his research into the nature of mentality, and who had no concern with communicating his results to other men, who thought in fact that such communication would be positively harmful to the research. The fantastic Monsieur Teste is Paul Valéry's alter ego.

Valéry found it necessary to invent a Teste, but Leonardo da Vinci, in many ways a more fantastic being than Edmond Teste, was a real

⁵Lettres à Quelques-uns, 106.

person. Nevertheless, the Leonardo of Valéry's essay emerges as much as Teste from Valéry's self-analysis; Leonardo becomes a kind of vehicle for some of Valéry's ideas on intelligence. He begins with an exercise in criticizing the critic: certain problems arise when one mind tries to understand another, as for example, when Paul Valéry tries to understand and reproduce the thought of Leonardo da Vinci. What one is attempting is to furnish the law or laws of continuity among the diverse monuments which may remain from a career. What we actually do, perhaps, is to furnish our own kind of continuity.

Parmi les actes indifférents qui constituent l'extérieur de son existence, nous trouvons la même suite qu'entre les nôtres; nous en sommes le lien aussi bien que lui, et le cercle d'activité que son être suggère ne déborde pas de celui qui nous appartient.⁶

There is no way out of this difficulty; but it should be recognized. At any moment, the mind of the man who has gone before may surpass his critic's capabilities. If the one being scrutinized is excellent at one point only then perhaps only there will he exceed understanding, but if, like Leonardo, he is superior in many ways, the difficulty is increased, and the unity of the figure will tend to escape us. It may seem that there are huge distances between the things in the universe of a genius. In this case it is simply necessary to try harder, perhaps taking a different vantage point to get a better view of the landscape. Gradually a hypothesis will form. Characteristically, how this hypothesis comes into being is as much of interest to Valéry as the result. For it leads us to the heart of the matter: the generation of the work in question. No matter what one is seeking, he always finds the same thing: himself. This too is central to the work of Valéry.

⁶Oeuvres I, 1153.

Valéry's hypothesis on Leonardo simply drives back to the beginning of the problem: what makes Leonardo great (and it is the same principle that makes a Bonaparte as well) is that he can see relations between things whose law of continuity escapes us, things that do not fit into any pre-existing systems. A man like Leonardo sees things that we do not see because, for one thing, we tend not to acknowledge phenomena for which we have no name.

La plupart des gens y voient par l'intellect bien plus souvent que par les yeux. Au lieu d'espaces colorés, ils prennent connaissance de concepts. Une forme cubique, blanchâtre, en hauteur, et trouée de reflets de vitres est immédiatement une maison, pour eux: la Maison!

.
Et, comme ils rejettent à rien ce qui manque d'une appellation, le nombre de leurs impressions se trouve strictement fini d'avance!⁷

In a note to this section, Valéry added that this was an expression of his doubt as to the value of the words of the common language, for they shift meanings. The concept of language will come into focus as poems such as La Jeune Parque and La Pythie are discussed. For the essay on Leonardo the important point is that great thinkers have the power and the courage to step into unexplored territory.⁸ This is a definition too, of course. Somehow they must find the means of advancing further.

This, then, is the center of Valéry's life-work: rigorous thought, and self-analysis. Poetry, while not exactly peripheral, was only one of the fruits of his labor. To Valéry, poetry was a technique, and it was a kind of accident that poetry happened to be his

⁷Paul Valéry, Oeuvres, Édition établie et annotée par Jean Hytier, v. I, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 1165, 1166. Henceforth abbreviated as Oeuvres II.

⁸Edmond Teste had the same faculty. Madame Émilie Teste's priest said of M. Teste: "C'est une île déserte que son cœur... . Peut-être, certain jour, trouvera-t-il quelque empreinte sur le sable... Quelle Heureuse et sainte terreur, quelle épouvante salutaire, quand il connaîtra, à ce pur vertige de la grâce, que son île est mystérieusement habitée!..." (Oeuvres II, 34).

particular means of artistic expression. For another the natural technique might be music, painting, or architecture; these things are surface. What really matters is the foundation, the depths of the mentality. He was also to use poetry as a feedback system; setting himself tough rules of technique and choosing a difficult subject-matter, he would then observe himself in his struggles, thus adding to his store of knowledge of himself, and of human intelligence, and, incidentally, producing a poem.

There is not sufficient place in this brief chapter for a complete exposition of Valéry's poetics. Among the many studies available are Jean Hytier's,⁹ W. N. Ince's,¹⁰ and Herbert Read's introduction to Valéry's aesthetic texts.¹¹ My subject is the theme of poesis in Valéry's poetry. For this introductory chapter I shall rely chiefly on the landmark in Valéry's poetic life, his longest poem, La Jeune Parque.

No matter how much one knows about Valéry's life, (not that there is a great deal to know, Valéry being very nearly a man without a biography), no matter how much commentary on his poetry one may have read, the poetry still at last must be faced on its own. La Jeune Parque is notoriously obscure. It was four years in the writing, and its author is a man who was unstinting in his drive toward whatever

⁹Jean Hytier, La Poétique de Paul Valéry, (Paris: A. Colin, 1953).

¹⁰Walter Newcomb Ince, The Poetic Theory of Paul Valéry: Inspiration and Technique, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1961).

¹¹Herbert Read, Introduction to Paul Valéry, Aesthetics, translated by R. Manheim, Collected Works, v. 13, edited by Jackson Mathews, Bollingen Series, 45, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956).

goal of knowledge or creation he had set for himself. Its subject is as cerebral as any in the history of poetry, and its language and style as rarefied as any that can be imagined. Yet somehow it leads one on, rapidly acclimatizing the reader to its universe in the same way as a piece of music. This is a poem which one apprehends aesthetically long before arriving at a systematic understanding of it.

The dedication tells us nearly everything about the circumstances of the poem's composition. In brief, Valéry, having written and published several poems as a young man, abruptly renounced poetry-writing as a consequence of a night of mental crisis spent in Genoa, 1892. Some twenty years later André Gide broached the subject of a collection of his old poems. At first reluctant to involve himself in the process, Valéry found his poetic faculties awakening as he went over his poems, and he began composing a long work of which one gloss is the poet's own re-awakening. Four years later the poem was revealed. He dedicated it to André Gide: "Many years ago I abandoned the art of verse; trying to submit myself to it again, I made this exercise which I dedicate to you." After it was done, he called it an "autobiography in form."

Not too much should be made of the title, La Jeune Parque. Valéry had also considered entitling it "Psyché." Thus, the identity of the mythological figure, one of the sister Fates who spin the thread of man's destiny, is probably not of central importance in the poem. Jeune is probably a noun rather than an adjective (this on the authority of Alain, as well as the form of the capitalization). An appropriate English translation might be "The Fate as a Young Girl," but "The Young Fate" is not too far off.

The setting is typical for Valéry--a wild place. As in many of

his poems there is a suggestion of Eden-myth, in keeping with Valéry's mental habit of reasoning from first principles. The time is no historical time, but myth-time. Alain points out that it is a reversed time, a re-folded time.¹² I would describe it as a time that buckles.

Before dawn, when the stars are still shining contrastingly in the black sky, a Being arouses, stirred into fretful half-consciousness by what she thinks is the sound of weeping nearby. Who weeps? she demands. The question is the irritant that awakens her attention; awakening, she becomes aware of the sensual data of her consciousness. But in this simplified circumstance, there is nothing to see except the stars. Her disembodied hand explores her face, searching for the tear that might be there, but is not there. Already we see the strange dividedness of this spirit: the consciousness that demands "who cries?", can feel a hand (her own) feeling a face (also her own) and be uncertain whether it was she who wept. Where is the center of this consciousness? Thought cannot persist without some core of individuality.

Out of all her destinies, all her potential selves, one (le plus pur) crystallizes and reveals her broken heart. Now she is conscious. She has a center--like the grain of sand that irritates the oyster into forming a pearl, or the bit of matter that enables a rain-drop to form out of fog--and it is misery, a snake in the heart. She is alone in nature; the pain can have come only from herself. She wants to know:

J'interroge mon cœur quelle douleur l'éveille,
Quel crime par moi-même ou sur moi consommé?...

(Oeuvres I, 97)

¹²Paul Valéry, La Jeune Parque commentée par Alain, (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 60.

Now that body and consciousness are one, now awakened, the Fate wants to go back into the forests of memory, dreams, and her unconsciousness. This involved self-analysis is the premise of the poem. Perhaps, she speculates, it is only some malaise left over from a dream, and she goes back to the previous evening, when she had wrapped her head around with her heavy arms, and looked into herself.

Je me voyais me voir, sinueuse, et dorais
De regards en regards, mes profondes forêts.

J'y suivais un serpent qui venait de me mordre.

(Oeuvres I, 97)

In the imagery of this first section of 37 lines the erotic component is obvious, and typical of Valéry, at once the most sensual and the most abstract of poets. But also noteworthy is the extreme difficulty of the theme that has been presented. Such a poem would require the utmost from a writer: intellect, sensibility, emotion, honesty, and long effort. These two conditions of eroticism and sustained inquiry come together in the thought of Valéry in the fragment entitled "Éros et Psyché." The problem of attention, its strength and its weakness in the human organism, was a concern of long-standing in Valéry's investigations of the mind's working. In "Éros et Psyché" he said, "Attention resembles love." He was impressed by the resemblance in their beginnings, their development, their completion. "Two comparable machines in two different nervous mechanisms. Analogous excitability. Erection. Transitivity. Expenditure. Identical cycles." Further, "Attention and erotic erethism are states of coordination permitting a growth of tension up to a limited threshold."¹³ In other words, just as love-making is inaugurated by a

¹³Quoted in Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, Études pour un Paul Valéry, (Neuchâtel, Suisse: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1964), p. 11.

purposeful irritation of the participants, so does the mind have its own means of arousal. Arthur Koestler in The Act of Creation also brings out this more-than-analogy between sexual and mental tension.¹⁴ Be that as it may, in lines 32-36, our Young Fate has produced in herself a state of psychic-physical arousal corresponding to Valéry's erection stage of attentiveness.

... Mais toute à moi, maîtresse de mes chairs,
Durcissant d'un frisson leur étrange étendue,
Et dans mes doux liens, à mon sang suspendue,
Je me voyais me voir, sineuse, et dorais
De regards en regards, mes profondes forêts.

(Oeuvres I, 97)

Completely self-absorbed, aware of her interior self with a part of that self, she enters the "profound forests" of her unconscious self, anchoring herself to awakeness and the body like Theseus entering the Labyrinth. But once lured into the interior, she experiences a crisis of self-discovery. "O ruse!" cries the Fate, when she discovers herself not so much "wounded" as "known"--the ultimate violation. Self-knowledge doubles back and back again on itself.

Au plus traître de l'âme, une pointe me naît;
Le poison, mon poison, m'éclaire et se connaît:
Il colore une vierge à soi-même enlacée, ... (Oeuvres I, 97)

Detached, the exploring self sees the body, a virgin wrapped up in herself, ridiculous figure. She has discovered her "secret sister," another self who prefers herself to the obsessive extreme of self-awareness, protecting herself from the prying intellect.

How many selves are there in the Young Fate? Useless to count them, for with each new discovery of an aspect of self there is always another to know that one. Thus the number of selves is an infinite

¹⁴Koestler, op. cit., p. 495-496.

number. (As one of the areas where mathematics and philosophy come together, the theory of infinite numbers must have been highly interesting to Valéry. The paradox of infinity shows up again in "Le Cimetière Marin" in the stanza beginning "Zénon! Cruel Zénon! Zénon d'Élée!") Nevertheless for the present there is one center of consciousness. Awakened in response to an injury, it now uncovers two more latent characteristics--independence and pride. She no longer needs the serpent, she claims. Her own soul is enough guide. She has found that her own will is sufficiently cruel to prod her on. Her thoughts are a rich desert, shining dryly. They are not infinite; as she advances she can see their limits. But with an infinite awaiting, anything can happen. There are dangers--monsters, grief, insanity--but the Fate has intelligence, and with it she is more versatile and more deceitful than they. Thus she scornfully chases out the serpent, sends him back along the thread of return. Mockingly she tells him to visit other beds (with his "successive robes"), hatch the germ of evil on other hearts. "I'm awake now," she says. The serpent gone, she is sovereign and free, alone with her visions. Since it is still dark, these visions are "between the night and her eye," no external sense data as yet being revealed by the sun.

Et brisant une tombe sereine,
Je m'accoude inquiète et pourtant souveraine,
Tant de mes visions parmi la nuit et l'oeil,
Les moindres mouvements consultent mon orgueil.

(Oeuvres I, 98)

In the dialogue called "Colloquy within a Being," the process of awakening takes a similar form. The two personae are called simply "A" and "B," where B is the sleeper and A is the awakener. "Come," A begins, "Disengage who you are from the living mud which lies, in the

form of a man cast down and abandoned, in the disorder of the bed linen" Lazy B pleads to be left alone. Impossible, he says, since "The least effort, the least essay of the spirit exceed the means of this moment." B even feels tears coming to his eyes, but merciless A replies "Weep, but live! . . . Emerge from your larva-like state."¹⁵ B urges A to summon and assemble "all those little unfocused forces," to divide them up, organize them, separate the true from the false. The crisis occurs:

B

What more do you want of me? Are you yourself distinguishing as to whether you are resuscitating or murdering me?

A

That is not all, I tell you. Stir up your thought. Apply to some point which begins to dawn in your mind the prick of desire and the power of duration through which the totality of similitudes, the space for resonance, the quantity of possibilities infused in what you are will dispose themselves so as to favor the complete development of this germ. . . .

B

Be still! . . . The mere recalling of my forces weighs me down. You constrain me to measure the immense trouble one must take in order to cease being half dead . . . Leave me, at least, all the time I need to return without too much stress or regret from the condition of a thing to that of a beast, and from beast to man, and from man to SELF, to the unique. . . .

A

I see that the hardest part is over. You are leaning on your elbow.¹⁶

We note the many points of similarity between the "Colloquy within a Being" and the first three parts of La Jeune Parque, even to the point of similar phrasing. A plays a role analogous to that of the serpent,

¹⁵Paul Valéry, "Colloquy within a Being," in Paul Valéry, Dialogues, translated by W. M. Stewart, Collected Works, v. 4, edited by Jackson Mathews, Bollingen Series, 45, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), p. 17-18.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 19.

gnawing, tormenting, pricking the consciousness until B fights back. A point, focal point, is born in the soul; it is the germ of something. Finally A is leaning on his elbow like the Young Fate in line 95: "Je m'accoude inquiète et pourtant souveraine" (Oeuvres I, 97).

As is well known, it was Valéry's habit for fifty years, starting at the age of twenty, to rise before dawn. He had thus a few hours to himself every day before the daily routine had to begin. Valéry never complained much (in print, at least) about his situation in life which reduced him to the state of "petit employé" with hours of boring and trivial work every day to support his family of wife, children, sister-in-law, and even part of Mallarmé's family. Once he speculated on what he could have done if he had had an income. There is the inference that he could have gone far with his thoughts--but "I have no right to regrets," he said. He did manage to have a second life in his pre-dawn studies, but it must have cost him some effort, as we see from works such as La Jeune Parque and "Colloquy within a Being." What was Valéry's serpent, or his "A" part? There is some indication in his letter to R. P. Rideau of 1943.

Voici cinquante et quelques années que ma tête avant l'aube l'aube m'exerce tous les jours. Ce sont deux à trois heures de manoeuvres intérieures dont j'ai physiologiquement besoin. Si ce besoin est contrarié, toute ma journée en est affectée: je ne me sens pas bien ...¹⁷

He felt it as a physiologic need, then. The time of awakening would be difficult in such a case, but he would do it as a kind of therapy. It would be entirely different for a person who rose naturally and happily at an early hour; for him body, soul, and spirit would be all united

¹⁷Lettres à Quelques-uns, p. 245.

from the beginning. But we can imagine Valéry with an alarm clock, fighting himself out of bed in the morning. First the external irritant would pierce his sleep, then he would become aware of his body in the dark. Temptation to fall back asleep, but already some ambitiousness, the human part, begins to gnaw at him. Finally the whole being comes awake, and the higher need comes into being. From thing to beast to man to SELF, as he said. The recurrent experience has become a form in the mind, and this abstraction is equally capable of metamorphosing into a dialogue, a poem, or a letter, or whatever art the artist might be capable of.

So far we have covered only the first 100 lines of a 500 line poem, but it was necessary to establish that the poem represents a journey into the self, the self of memories, dreams, and the various phantasmagoria of the sub-conscious. We left the Young Fate as she had confidently chased the serpent away, but after it was gone she evinced a little unsureness, even some regret. Even so she bravely says good-bye to her invented myth of the serpent as inspiration, and good-bye too to her image of the self as mortal body. Now she will walk in the difficult atmosphere of the disembodied spirit, memory without recourse.

Harmonieuse MOI, différente d'un songe,
Femme flexible et ferme aux silences suivis
D'actes purs! ... (Oeuvres I, 99)

She recalls a day in the past when she was perfectly united with nature and the day. She offered herself as a ripe fruit. But beautiful as the memory is, it is not without irony. "Nothing murmured to me that within that blond pulp a desire for death could ripen in the sun (105-6)." She dances in the sunlight, among the flowers. But even the memory has a flaw--her own shadow.

Si ce n'est, ô Splendeur, qu'à mes pieds l'Ennemie,
 Mon ombre! la mobile et la souple momie,
 De mon absence peinte effleurait sans effort
 La terre où je fuyais cette légère mort. (Oeuvres I, 100)

The dramatic irony of this passage is made possible by shifts in tense from present to past. In the past she speaks from a time of nostalgia when, still wholly innocent, she had not yet seen the fatal flaw in her universe, the ugly abyss of death. But now she knows the secret of mortality, and the self of the present paints onto the memory of better days another dimension.

Throughout this poem the present is a thin shell into which the Young Fate is continually breaking. She looks around in the contents and then re-emerges. The contents of this universe, this egg, are memories (because in memories lie the existence of the past), dreams, and the unconscious, all the submerged content of the psyche. Some of the obscurity of the poem is clarified if the subtle and sometimes abrupt modulations of the tenses are followed carefully and taken literally. This procedure presents some difficulty, since often two or three different tenses will occur within twice as many lines. The first dip into the past comes at line 30 (though that very sentence begins in the present) when the Fate begins to speculate on the possibility of her anxiety arising from some remembered dream. Between line 28 and the end of section 1, the tense changes from present to past to imperfect--from now to a specific event to a general remembrance. Again, in the passage quoted above the present tense enters briefly in line 141, but lapses back. Then in line 145 we are back to the present with the line, "Between the rose and myself I see it sheltering; ..."

And thus it was that the Fate had her first inkling of death: as her body received the life-giving rays of the sun, immediately and

inescapably a shadow was formed: absence. To understand this tragic fact is to live on a higher level, but in Pt. 6 we see how the Fate has paid for knowledge.

Et moi vive, debout,
Dure, et de mon néant secrètement armée,
Mais, comme par l'amour une joue enflammée,
Et la narine jointe au vent de l'oranger,
Je ne rends plus au jour qu'un regard étranger ...
(Oeuvres I, 100)

How different is the Fate of the present from that unknowing Sister of some indefinite yesterday. Then she was a daughter of the earth, in no sense alien from nature. How she looks at the world with a stranger's glance. She herself is half appalled at the growth of that dark part of herself during the night. Now her eye is a kind of threshold, a sill where day and night, life and death are likely alternatives. She can even conceive of "a taste for perishing." But she pushes forward with renewed determination to pursue her problem to the end.

Her first discovery is ennui, that bete noire of the sophisticate. Too many too-predictable days have dawned for the mind's eye, and this too is a kind of advance notice of death. Let mornings subside, then; the Fate begs Time to revive an evening from her childhood.

Earliest dawn in this poem is a time of day without colors. Evening, on the other hand, is drenched in rose, emerald, and purple. Likewise, the statue of marble that is her present body so alienated from the soul is pale and cold, bloodless. But memory can inflame, color, and make the blood rise by bringing in other times of day, other times of life. Lines 190-203 are an intensely realized emotional exhortation and command to memory, and the result is so successful as to produce a vertigo in the Young Fate. It is here that the real voyage

into the Self begins, for the Fate will for a time not be conscious of anything other than the memory that she relives, and here too that the real obscurity of the poem begins, for the Young Fate now undergoes a series of metamorphoses, transformed by imagery into a tree, a statue, a rose, a cloud. Things happen here which could only happen in a poem.

And these metamorphoses from one image to another are the poetic equivalent of modulation in music. Valéry had said:

La Jeune Parque fut une recherche littéralement indéfinie, de ce qu'on pourrait tenter en poésie qui fût analogue à ce qu'on nomme "modulation" en musique.¹⁸

A handbook on music defines "modulate" as "to change from one key to another in the course of a composition--such a change being accomplished by 'continuous' musical means (i.e., not simply by starting afresh in another key) and having a definite validity in the structural organization of the music."¹⁹ The idea of modulation helps to clarify some of the difficulties as a deliberate attempt to change from one "key" to another, the equivalent of keys in poetry being perhaps various emotional pitches or planes, involving different structures of imagery. One more quotation on the subject of Valéry's obscurity, and which also pertains to the passage on the Springtime at which we have now arrived:

Quant à l'obscurité, mon cher ami, comment n'y serait-elle pas?-- Vous avez parfaitement vu que ce n'était pas l'obscurité mallarméenne. Celle-ci tient à un certain système. La mienne résulte de l'impuissance de l'auteur. -- Le sujet vague de l'oeuvre est la Conscience de soi-même; la Consciousness de Poe, si l'on veut. Je le disais assez nettement dans des fragments que j'ai supprimés, faute de savoir les faire... Trop difficile: les vers étaient

¹⁸Paul Valéry, "Fragment des Mémoires d'un Poème," Oeuvres I, p. 1473.

¹⁹ Arthur Jacobs, A New Dictionary of Music, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1961), p. 243.

impossibles, secs, cassants comme des squelettes, ou plats et sans remède.

J'ai même été forcé, pour attendrir un peu le poème, d'y introduire des morceaux non prévus et faits après coup. Tout ce qui est sexuel est surajouté. Tel, le passage central sur le Printemps qui semble maintenant d'importance essentielle.²⁰

Enclosed in quotation marks at the beginning of the ninth movement of La Jeune Parque is a couplet with the speaker explained (in a fashion) in the next line. There is no preparation in the preceding lines for this strange speech by some stone being who is not explained either, except as it recalls the leit motif of the marble statue which appears from time to time (e. g., in line 159). The lines in question follow:

"QUE DANS LE CIEL PLACÉS, MES YEUX TRACENT MON TEMPLE!
ET QUE SUR MOI REPOSE UN AUTEL SANS EXEMPLE!"

Criaient de tout mon corps la pierre et la paleur...
(Oeuvres I, 102)

I find no explanation for this outcry in La Jeune Parque itself, but it can be explained as an echo from another poem of Valéry's, the "Air de Sémiramis" from Album de Vers Anciens, which is of course the volume he was editing when he began writing La Jeune Parque. The "Air de Sémiramis" begins with the coming of the dawn, the first rays falling on an eye which sleeps "Sur le marbre absolu" (once again, the statue which is a sleeping body). In strophes 2-6 the Dawn speaks, whipping up Sémiramis into herself in such terms:

"Existe! ... Sois enfin toi-même! ...

.....

Et débarrasse-toi d'un désordre de drames
Qu'engendrent sur ton lit les monstres de ton sang!

(Oeuvres I, 94)

²⁰Lettres à Quelques-uns, p. 124.

Sémiramis, queen of Babylon, rises and mounts the tower which she herself has commanded. From this vantage she surveys her empire, the bustle and noise of the workers who are constructing new temples for her. Sémiramis had the cruel custom of dispatching her lovers, as is depicted in Valéry's poetic drama, Sémiramis, and in the "Air de Sémiramis" she reflects:

Mes plus doux souvenirs bâtissent des tombeaux!

Qu'ils sont doux à mon coeur les temples qu'il enfante, ...
(Oeuvres I, 94)

It is difficult to prove that lines 209-210 of La Jeune Parque are an echo from the "Air de Sémiramis," since there are no two specific lines in the latter poem that conform very closely. (Lines from the poetic drama Sémiramis come even closer.) Nevertheless I submit that these lines are spoken by the persona of Sémiramis, since as the Fate revived her own memories so vividly Valéry's poetic memories also came to the surface. Once this line of inquiry, echoes from Album de Vers Anciens, is begun, other echoes become noticeable, such as in lines 216-217 of La Jeune Parque.

La mort veut respirer cette rose sans prix
Dont la douceur importe à sa fin ténébreuse!
(Oeuvres I, 102)

Recalling that the memory called into being by the Fate was an evening, consider the following lines from "Profusion du Soir, Poème abandonné,"

O Soir, tu viens épandre un délice tranquille,
Horizon des sommeils, stupeur des coeurs pieux,
Persuasive approche, insidieux reptile,
Et rose que respire un mortel immobile
Dont l'oeil doré s'engage aux promesses des cieux!
(Oeuvres I, 86)

Again, in lines 185-186, of La Jeune Parque, the Fate has said:

Osera-t-il, le Temps, de mes diverses tombes,
Ressusciter un soir favori des colombes, ...(Oeuvres I, 101)

echoing even more closely the first line of "Épisode"--"Un soir favorisé de colombes sublimes, ..." (Oeuvres I, 83).

What does it prove? Was Valéry plagiarizing himself, did he run out of inspiration, or fall in love with the sound of his own words? It seems to me that in writing La Jeune Parque Valéry has waked himself up from a long night's sleep as a poet. Now clearly Valéry had not been intellectually asleep, because some of his most important works date from the period of silence, e. g., "L'Introduction à la Méthode de Léonard de Vinci," and La Soirée avec M. Teste. He can be said only to have put his poetic faculties to sleep. Now Valéry is known to have said that he valued La Jeune Parque less for what it finally turned out to be as a product or artifact than for what it had taught him about himself. Here is a more general statement dating from later in his life:

Le produit est, sans doute, la chose qui se conserve, et qui a ou qui doit avoir un sens par soi-même, et une existence indépendante; mais les actes dont il procède, en tant qu'ils réagissent sur leur auteur, forment en lui un autre produit qui est un homme plus habile et plus possesseur de son domaine-mémoire.²¹

This memory-domain of the poet is his interior self, peopled, on the poetic level, by his own creations and thoughts of the past. Probably a new-born baby does not reflect; there are no memories, and no accumulated contents of the psyche. But the older a person grows, the more experiences he collects, and the fuller the mind becomes. Now for a poet, or an ex-poet, the memories would include these psychic experiences that were the poems he had created. And thus does Valéry the poet enter himself into his own poem. More will be said on this subject when the end of the poem is reached.

²¹Paul Valéry, "Calepin d'un Poète," Oeuvres I, p. 1450.

For now, though, the Fate in the form of an overbloomed rose has just been saved from her own death-wish, the reverse image of her will to live, by the unexpected appearance of the Springtime. A thaw occurs--frost gives up its "last diamonds," and spring bursts open sealed fountains. The trees have burst into leaf, and their breeze-tossed canopies are themselves a floating forest. This springtime is ineluctable, violent, undeniably life-affirming, and yet still is there not the presence of death,

Un fleuve tendre, ô mort, et caché sous les herbes?
(Oeuvres I, 103)

Was this, then, the serpent of the opening? The Fate had dreamed of her own mortality, the knowledge of death which was there all the time waiting to be invented, waiting to be discovered, both death and the knowledge of death, the same thing really, since this fore-knowledge is all we ever have of death. If to know of death is to fear it, then fear is a death. The Young Fate is terrified at what she has invented and discovered:

Oh! parmi mes cheveux pèse d'un poids d'abeille
Plongeant toujours plus ivre au baiser plus aigu,
Le point délicieux de mon jour ambigu...
Lumière!... Ou toi, la mort! Mais le plus prompt
me prenne!... (Oeuvres I, 103)

Next comes the inevitable question: Why, then, do I exist?

Les dieux m'ont-ils formé ce maternel contour
Et ces bords sinueux, ces plis et ces calices,
Pour que la vie embrasse un autel de délices
Où mêlant l'âme étrange aux éternels retours,
La semence, le lait, le sang coulent toujours?
(Oeuvres I, 103-4)

recalling the epigraph to La Jeune Parque, a quotation from Corneille.

Le Ciel a-t-il formé cet amas de merveilles
Pour la demeure d'un serpent? (Oeuvres I, 96)

As in Eden, love and death and knowledge all have come together.

Horrificed, she rejects the notion of making her body "an altar of delights." On the other side are phantoms, her night visions, who beckon her to give them light and life. This too she refuses. This is the climax of the poem, where the Young Fate is pulled and nearly torn between conflicting possibilities--life and death, light and darkness, the life of the body and the life of dreams or the imagination. Of the last alternative she rejects both.

Je n'accorderai pas la lumière à des ombres,
Je garde loin de vous, l'esprit sinistre et clair...
(Oeuvres I, 104)

At last the tear appears. Slowly it seeps up from the labyrinth of the soul, from some fearful grotto in her innermost depths. The Fate is wounded--now--and the tear is in some measure a cure or at least a salve. But still at the heart of it all is an unanswerable question: Why? Why wound, sobs, dark trials? There is no answer. The tear itself is not an answer, coming as it does from the body, and above all inadequate for the great spiritual progress made by the Fate in her meditations. If the mind creates the sense of jeopardy, it is the body that will bear the signs or symptoms of impending death. Where will it turn, this body, still lost in black night? Twice now the body will implore earth to be its ally, in lines 304 and 324:

Terre trouble, et mêlée à l'algue, porte-moi!
(Oeuvres I, 105)

Guided only by the feel of solid ground beneath her feet she comes to the edge of the sea. The sea-sounds are like a noise from hell. She is near to suicide, and despairing over her isolation. If anyone finds her footprints, she wonders, will he stop for long from thinking only of himself? In realizing that others might exist, she understands loneliness. She has knowledge not, but nothing else--except a contact

between herself and solid earth. The Young Fate has made much of her circumstance; the price she has paid is happiness. Thus, at the limit of knowledge, the farthest reach of self-knowledge, is a question: what is the meaning of it all? Why live, for what purpose suffer? For the poet-creator, this question is: what are the fruits of this labor, and are they worth the trouble? For Valéry the answer once was no; now he has shown himself that perhaps the affirmative is the better answer.

Finally in the eleventh movement, the Fate returns to the scene and the time of the opening lines. There is still a body waiting for dawn. Nothing has happened, really. Nothing, that is, except the terrible revelatory journey into the self. Nothing has changed; everything has changed. The sun rises, and it is still a smile on the world, but an ironic smile. Now the world revealed by the sunrise is a prison "where the ring of the only horizon will float." It will be a dawn like any other dawn; the Young Fate will be "crimson with new desires."

Tout va donc accomplir son acte solennel
 De toujours reparaître incomparable et chaste.
 Et de restituer la tombe enthousiaste
 Au gracieux état du rire universel. (Oeuvres I, 106)

How sad and weary is the enlightened spirit, and yet how eager is the young body to respond to the natural world.

The twelfth movement, consisting of lines 348-360, is a kind of hymn to the islands which become visible as the sun goes up over the sea. Her attitude of ambiguity is shown by the attractive imagery, but with the jolting description of their fathomed reality. "Ever-virginal mothers," she calls the islands, "nothing equals the flowers you place in the air. But in the depths, your feet are icy!" Valéry commented, "This passage is just to express lassitude, the certainty of seeing

again that which one knows too well one will see again."²² In the same letter he also stresses the importance of the use of future tense in this twelfth movement.

In Alain's view, the line "Salut! Divinités par la rose et le sel, ..." (Oeuvres I, 106) is one of Valéry's "miracles of rhyme." "Here we can see," he says "like everywhere in this poem, that prose has no way of discovering, in two little words, the earth and the sea."²³ This comment may be something of an over-reaction to a section which is in my opinion not well integrated into the poem, but it is an apt way of saying what I said above, that things happen in La Jeune Parque that could only happen in a poem.

In part 13 there is a second look at the events of part 10, the climactic movement when the Fate seemed to be so near to death. The body was a structure, a stretched-out naked torso, where the soul nearly fainting with its own memory, hopefully listened to the heart beating at its walls. But she is mature enough to mock herself, thus:

Attente vaine, et vaine... Elle ne peut mourir
Qui devant son miroir, pleure pour s'attendrir.

(Oeuvres I, 107)

Death, then, is seen in its proper perspective, as "a secret child, already formed," like an embryo.

The fourteenth section was Valéry's favorite.

Faire un chant prolongé, sans action, rien que l'incohérence interne aux confins du sommeil; y mettre autant d'intellectualité que j'ai pu le faire et que la poésie en peut admettre sous ses voiles; sauver l'abstraction prochaine par la musique, ou la racheter par des visions, voilà ce que j'ai fini par me résoudre à essayer,

²²Lettres à Quelques-uns, p. 124.

²³Alain, op. cit., p. 112.

et je ne l'ai pas toujours trouvé facile... Il y a de graves lacunes dans l'exposition et la composition. Je n'ai pu me tirer de l'affaire qu'en travaillant par morceaux. Cela se sent, et j'en sais trop sur mes défaites! De ces morceaux, il en est un qui, seul, représente pour moi le poème que j'aurais voulu faire. Ce sont les quelques vers qui commencent ainsi: O n'aurait-il fallu, folle, etc.²⁴

In part 13 the Fate had arranged herself like a sacrifice and awaited death. Likewise in part 11, the dawn brought about "Oh rude awakening of an unfinished victim." Here in part 14 there are two victims, one bleeding to death, paleness gradually overcoming the purple of blooded flesh, the other going up in smoke, "promised to the happy clouds." The first victim represents bodily death, the second represents the fate of the soul, or spiritual self after death. Physical death is the real death. The soul does not die, but rises from the body to merge with the universe.

L'être immense me gagne, et de mon coeur divin
L'encens qui brûle expire une forme sans fin...

(Oeuvres I, 108)

But suddenly she cries, "NO!" Don't think of this suicide, this self-imposed slow death. The body is a "precious vessel" which a yearning alone could not break. For there was a greater power whose interest it was that the Young Fate should live.

--Mais qui l'emporterait sur la puissance même,
Avide par tes yeux de contempler le jour
Qui s'est choisi ton front pour lumineuse tour?

(Oeuvres I, 108)

But even if death cannot be chosen, the Young Fate still has enough dominion over herself and her world to ask--at least--why she among all the dead was the one to be tossed up upon the shore of life? She now sees her present self as equal to one of those phantoms that she

²⁴Lettres à Quelques-uns, p. 124-5.

perceived in part 10, lines 258-278. If this poem has a theme that can be briefly stated, it is in the following lines from part 14:

Souviens-toi de toi-même, et retire à l'instinct
Ce fil (ton doigt doré le dispute au matin),

Ce fil, dont la finesse aveuglément suivie
Jusque sur cette rive a ramené ta vie...
Sois subtile... cruelle... ou plus subtile!... Mens!...
Mais sache!... (Oeuvres I, 108)

Any means is justified by the goal of self-knowledge. Trick yourself, lie to yourself, be cruel or subtle. But--at long last--know yourself. And here, as the Fate has come full circle, the serpent re-enters the picture, as temptation, stimulus, and motive, man's fatal weakness and immortal strength.

One truth the Young Fate now admits--it was her body that betrayed her. Furthermore, she was neither seduced nor raped, as she had indignantly assumed in the beginning. The Swan-God of line 429 is probably Leda's attacker who engendered so much myth. But it was not he who appeared to the Young Fate. She takes all the responsibility onto herself; in her divided self, one half was taken advantage of by the other half. Unfortunately, her rational self had found it necessary to sleep, just as a bird must sometimes rest from its flight. Jacques Charpier calls it a "coup d'état." He asks, "À la faveur de quelle inattention de la soeur rationnelle ce coup d'état subjectif a-t-il pu avoir lieu?"²⁵ But she pardons her body, and as she gives in she sinks down once again into the pleasures of sleep.

Je me remets entière au bonheur de descendre,
Ouverte aux noirs témoins, les bras suppliciés,
Entre des mots sans fin, sans moi, balbutiés.

(Oeuvres I, 109)

²⁵Jacques Charpier, Essai sur Paul Valéry, Poètes d'aujourd'hui 51, (Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1956), 127.

Note that she is now entire; note too that she now enters into a realm where she is among words, endlessly babbled, at last independent of her. The final lines are hypnotic, the alexandrine of line 460 seemingly endless.

Dors toujours! Descends, dors toujours! Descends, dors, dors!
(Oeuvres I, 109)

This is the end of the Young Fate as *dramatis personae*, but the poem continues.

The traditional analysis of the final movement is as another stage of the Young Fate's alternation between sleep and awakening. For example, Charpier says, "Plongée dans ce désordre tiède, la Parque ne s'anéantit pas. Elle continue d'y lutter pour en obtenir encore plus de conscience."²⁶ Alain comes somewhat closer to my view of things with the following explanation. "Et puis l'éveil (465-494) que l'on peut dire double éveil, car mon songe ici est le songe du songe."²⁷ In my opinion, these next lines are not spoken in the person of the Young Fate at all, nor any of her selves, but of a being that subsumes all that has gone before; I mean the person of the poet-creator, the awakening Valéry. The opening lines of part 16 are so crucial for this interpretation that I shall quote them at length.

Délicieux linceuls, mon désordre tiède,
Couche où je me répands, m'interroge et me cède,
Où j'allai de mon coeur noyer les battements,
Presque tombeau vivant dans mes appartements,
Qui respire, et sur qui l'éternité s'écoute,
Place pleine de moi qui m'avez prise toute,
O forme de ma forme et la creuse chaleur
Que mes retours sur moi reconnaissent la leur,
Voici que tant d'orgueil qui dans vos plis se plonge
A la fin se mélange aux bassesses du songe! (Oeuvres I, 109-110)

²⁶Charpier, ibid., p. 128.

²⁷La Jeune Parque commentée par Alain, p. 130.

He is talking about his own bed, his own sheets, in his own flat. Proudly and in possession of himself he had allowed himself to sleep, only to find himself possessed by lowly dreams. Furthermore, that "Lasse femme absolue, et les yeux dans ses larmes" is a real woman, perhaps even his actual wife. It was she who cried out by his side and woke him in the night. He calls her an "idol"; that night in 1892, it will be recalled, Valéry had resolved to give up women along with poetry. He called them both "idols"--objects of false worship.

Alain called Valéry the Dante of modern times.²⁸ He was referring to the way in which Valéry advanced into the nether regions, but the comparison is a good one in other ways as well, for just as in Dante's case his Beatrice and his poetic inspiration somehow merged, for Valéry the notion of women and poetry as idols became fused in the rejection of them. They re-surface still merged twenty years later as Valéry realizes that just as a woman was there through the night, so was the poetry. When he says

Arche toute secrète, et pourtant si prochaine,
Mes transports, cette nuit, pensaient briser ta chaîne;...
(Oeuvres I, 110)

whom or what is he addressing? The bed, the wife, the absence from poetry itself? He thought to cast off in a secret ark and break its chains, but

Je n'ai fait que bercer de lamentations
Tes flancs chargés de jour et de créations! (Oeuvres I, 110)

Valéry had thought to make an ark in which he could renounce the old world and perhaps find a new clean world. But if after all he came back to the same world, he was a bigger and a deeper man for having

²⁸Ibid., p. 122.

attempted the voyage.

I am aware that to enter the poet-creator directly into the poem is not a "safe" interpretation, and indeed the closing lines are once again spoken in the person of the Young Fate. Nonetheless in lines 465-480 a place is composed which is found nowhere else in the poem, and since the entire poem is an allegory, or in the words of Valéry an "autobiography in form," then I find it quite plausible for such an island of firmament to surface out of the sea of meaning.

Valéry would not have wanted to pretend that the composition of a poem could take place in a moment between darkness and dawn, and thus as the sun rises the Young Fate will come into being again, and have her second birth, as a literary creation. The poem ends at the sea, with the Young Fate standing with her face in the wind. Now there is no fear of the sea comparable to that in lines 310-321. There the sea was a fearful darkness, howling with the noises of wrecked dreams and lost fates. Now the Young Fate is confident that she will be a survivor; she will return from the chaos of imagination, a lucky figure to come into full existence, thanks to her creator. She is grateful and full of self-love, a favored daughter.

At the end of La Jeune Parque the reader is irresistibly thrown back to the beginning, always with the feeling that one more reading would produce a better understanding. And perhaps this is true; one more reading would always yield something in a poem of such size and complexity. But of what is this an indication? Does the feeling of imperfect comprehension mean that the reader has failed or that the poet has failed? Valéry held that obscurity came from a gap in mentality between the poet and his audience. But there is an argument on the

other side. Here is Edmund Wilson on Valéry's obscurity:

The things that happen in "La Jeune Parque" and in Paul Valéry's other mythological monologues--the Narcissus, the Pythoness and the Serpent of the rich period of poetic activity which followed immediately upon "La Jeune Parque"--are never, on the one hand, quite imaginable as incidents which are actually taking place and never, on the other hand, quite reducible merely to thoughts in the poet's mind. The picture never quite emerges; the idea is never formulated quite. And for all the magnificences of sound, color, and suggestion which we find in these poems stanza by stanza, it seems to me that they are unsatisfactory because they are somehow not assimilable as wholes.²⁹

A provocative criticism, because of the more than grain of truth in it. I shall not defend La Jeune Parque by saying that Valéry intended to make a poem which was not assimilable as a whole. This would be no excuse if it turned out to be axiomatic that assimilability is a necessary virtue in art objects. But such is not the case: there are many acknowledged classics of world literature which are really too complex for immediate total understanding. For example, Hamlet, Kafka's The Castle, and perhaps Joyce's Ulysses, are among the works which do not yield to intuition alone.

On the other hand, I object to Valéry's defense in "Le Philosophe et la 'Jeune Parque'," the poem which he published in conjunction with Alain's commentary on La Jeune Parque.

Tentez d'aimer cette jeune rebelle :
"Je suis noire, mais je suis belle"
 Comme chante l'Amante, au Cantique du Roi,
 Et si j'inspire quelque effroi,
 Poème que je suis, à qui ne peut me suivre,
 Quoi de plus prompt que de fermer un livre?
(Oeuvres I, 165)

This is no good, for it could be said equally well about a poem of no value.

²⁹Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle, A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, Scribner Library edition, 1959), p. 71.

I prefer Valéry's remarks in his "Première Leçon du Cours de Poétique," as he attempts to define the category known as "works of art."

Mais si l'on porte le regard sur les effets des oeuvres faites, on découvre chez certaines une particularité qui les groupe et qui les oppose à toutes les autres. Tel ouvrage que nous avons mis à part se divise en parties entières, dont chacune comporte de quoi créer un désir et de quoi le satisfaire. L'oeuvre nous offre dans chacune de ses parties, à la fois l'aliment et l'excitant. Elle éveille continuellement en nous une soif et une source. En récompense de ce que nous lui cédon's de notre liberté, elle nous donne l'amour de la captivité qu'elle nous impose et le sentiment d'une sorte délicieuse de connaissance immédiate; et tout ceci, en dépensant, à notre grand contentement, notre propre énergie qu'elle évoque sur un mode si conforme au rendement le plus favorable de nos ressources organiques, que la sensation de l'effort se fait elle-même enivrante, et que nous nous sentons possesseurs pour être magnifiquement possédés. (Oeuvres I, 1355)

A work of art has the property of furnishing both the appetite and the food. Unlike any food, it nourishes without ever surfeiting. It raises a question and gives an answer, but the sort of answer which enhances rather than dismissing the question. For its audience it produces a state of creative dissatisfaction.

Now that certain tendencies of Valéry have been discussed, it is time to return to "Le Vin Perdu," the short poem offered in Chapter One as an example of a poem which seemed clearly to relate to creativity but which did not fit the pattern of the creative process. The outline of the poem is simple. He (the "je" of the poem) threw a little wine into the Ocean one day. Why did he do it, he asked himself? The wine made a pink smoke in the water, then disappeared. It was lost. But he saw leaping in the air profound figures. Obviously the poem makes a fanciful analogical use of the effect of alcohol on the human mind. A small amount is drunk; the thoughts that ensue may be extremely imaginative--but always shadowy. Thus when the wine is dropped into the water, the great ocean is intoxicated and releases fantasies.

In the light of our knowledge of Valéry's habit of subsuming all the world into himself, of taking the data of himself as the available universe, and furthermore remembering that Valéry liked to perform a kind of experiment on himself, using the problems he gave to his mind to observe his psychic machinations, we may now obtain a further understanding of the poem. It is sometimes possible to get the impression that Valéry wrote poetry much as a psychologist gives a box and a stick to a caged chimpanzee, just to see how he will get at the bananas. This is the situation in "Le Vin Perdu," with the intoxicated ocean representing the sea of memories and emotions and psychic phenomena that is the mind of the poet. Stimulate that mythopoetic mind, and the stimulus may at first seem to disappear, to blend completely with the contents. But unexpected results can spring from this wine of the spirit; the "figures" that rise from the sea seem incommensurate with the simple cause. These figures are profound and subject to interpretation. Thus begins the creative process.

It would be possible now to say that this poem does after all fit the basic pattern of creativity in its earliest stages. From the birth-death-rebirth scheme, only the stage of birth has been used for the poem. But it would not have helped our understanding of Valéry to accept this from the beginning.

* * * * *

In conclusion, what was poetry to Paul Valéry? He liked to understand the word "poétique" in its etymological sense of making, constructing. For Valéry a poem was a structure in which sound made its demands on sense; as the poet made the poem he discovered what its meaning was to be. In addition, the poem was not only an end in

itself, but also a means to self-discovery. And discovery of the self, as we have seen, was Valéry's major pre-occupation.

Thus, out of Valéry's understanding and experience of the creative process, we have seen certain patterns developed as an expression of the process. He invented a fiction, M. Teste, to express an image of an impossible man who lived almost entirely in a realm of thought, in whom the body had almost disappeared as an object of concern. Further, he adopted a historical personage, Leonardo da Vinci, as an object of inquiry; but his research, following the Valéryan rule, served mainly to explain himself. And finally, La Jeune Parque, his longest poem, is a re-creation of an actual journey into an interior self, and a record of the findings that were made. Interestingly enough, the "plot" of La Jeune Parque evinces a clear enactment of the birth-death-rebirth scheme presented in Chapter I, as the young Fate awakens from a sleep, deliberately allows herself to wander in the dark regions of her unconscious memories, and then once again emerges as a second dawn breaks out over the world. La Jeune Parque is also the most elaborate of Valéry's experiments on himself; as he wrote, and observed himself in the process of creating, his responses entered into the poem. Thus are poem, poet, and process woven into whole cloth.

CHAPTER IV

"SUNDAY MORNING" AND "LE CIMETIÈRE MARIN":

THE MOTHER OF BEAUTY

Both Valéry and Stevens have been shown to be poets with distinctive attitudes toward and approaches to poetry. In Stevens' case, the poetic life was a life of endless questing for encounters between imagination and reality, or between the poet and his world. For Valéry, poetry grows out of the life-long endeavor for maximum knowledge of self. The aim of Chapters Two and Three was to present the poets' views of the creative process as a whole, and to present them separately. In this chapter and the following chapters, poems will be thematically compared on the basis of certain aspects of the poetic process.

Clearly, to say that Stevens and Valéry have "attitudes toward," "approaches to," and "views of" poetry and the creative process is but a manner of speaking. The relationship between the poet and his poems is perhaps expressible only metaphorically and poetically, for his version of poesis is exemplified in and contained in his poetry in a non-discursive, non-propositional way. It is a commonplace to say that a work of art is the child of its creator; this is true if we think of the poet as both father and mother of the poem. The poet contains all the genetic elements of his canon; it should be possible to subsume

all his poems under one organic law or principle. It then follows, that although each individual poem does not necessarily exemplify the whole of the poet's nature, any poem should relate in some integral way to the whole of the poet's work.

The poems discussed in this chapter are, primarily, "Sunday Morning" and "Le Cimetière marin." Neither poem is concerned, on its surface, with the creative process. "Sunday Morning" is a meditative poem in which a woman expresses a craving for some permanence in a world of change and death. "Le Cimetière marin," also a meditative poem, deals with the same themes from quite a different attitude. Here the persona of the poem is transfixed by the static state of the scene before him. He too thinks of death, but death's finality and lack of change is what he sees. Even though the two poems are quite different, each relates to its creator in the same way. For Stevens would attempt to solve the woman's problem in his habitual way of fusing the forces of imagination and reality, in "Sunday Morning" represented by a union of blood and sky. Likewise, Valéry's pervasive habit of mind, an excursion into himself and the final re-entry into the world, informs "Le Cimetière marin." Within himself Valéry finds a mental anguish that he compares to the worms that feed on the dead. The end is a burst of energy, as Valéry chooses the party of life, and the waves break.

Significantly, both of these poems solve their separate problems in themes of death and time in a discharge of poetic energy. For Stevens, the union of blood and sky results in an "orgiastic chant"--a song, or a poem. For Valéry, the choice of the active life and the casting away of contemplation represents an accommodation with the world of men. The result is the poem itself.

Thus, though we shall not see enactments of the entire process of creation in this chapter, there is a fragment of poesis presented in each of the two poems--a motive for creation. For Stevens, poetry, considered as symbol of the entire aesthetic realm, is engendered by a desire for immortality. In Valéry, poetry is engendered by the poet's rejection of the consolations both of death and of philosophy.

In "Sunday Morning" an entire ideology is evolved out of an idle woman's day-dream. Although she is of the Christian era, she is not in church this day. But her disbelief is only a veneer, for when she dozes the real contents of her mind are revealed. "Complacencies of the peignoir" (CP, 66)? This is surface. The properties of this stage setting--oranges, a green bird woven on a rug, sunshine--are transformed into wilder things, just as the lady's complacency becomes a basic metaphysical disturbance. In her unease as quasi-atheist in a theist society, the "pungent oranges and bright green wings" of her sunny comfort become a ritual funeral procession in her dream. Spirit-like, she passes over water to Palestine, the site of catastrophe, sacrifice, and sepulchre.

But she is not given over completely, for resentment appears in Stanza II. "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" she demands (CP, 67). In Stanza I religion appeared only after she had loosened her grip on day and rationality. Can't there be a god of day, life, and waking thought? Perhaps it might have been necessary in previous ages for men to hold thoughts of heaven, i. e., some existence after death, most dear. But she wants to cherish the things of the earth.

Divinity must live within herself:

(CP, 67)

This is stated firmly--a conclusion, or demand. Joseph N. Riddel calls this "a latter-day Emersonianism without its transcendental rationale. It is at once a discovery and a premise . . . ,"¹ reflecting the ambiguity of the auxiliary "must." But a further distinction can be made between the existence of this divinity and the Emersonian one. Emerson's over-soul is something of which man is a part, and which has an existence not exactly independent of man, but larger than man. Looking at the line quoted above out of its context, it does match Emerson's "within man is the soul of the whole,"² but the succeeding lines of "Sunday Morning" show that the difference is quite basic, a matter of the immanent structure of the thought. For Stevens the divine thing is the encounter between the woman and the world, the emotions that she feels, be they

Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; . . . (CP, 67)

Emerson's kind of divinity involves successive divisions in which any part equals that of which it is part and that which is a part of it, in the same way as an atom and a solar system are models for each other. Whereas in Stevens divinity, creativity, all important things are analogical to the spark that flashes when a flint strikes hard steel. Elsewhere Riddel discusses Stevens' essay "Effects of Analogy," bringing in the name of Emerson where Stevens did not. In regard to Stevens' theory of poetry, Riddel concludes, ". . . repudiating the romantic, it repudiates the transcendental and makes poetry central in the struggle

¹Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 81.

²Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by Brooks Atkinson, The Modern Library College Editions, (New York: The Modern Library, 1940, 1950), p. 262.

of the self to know its world."³

To continue, then, the woman's natural penchant is to cherish things of the earth, and to find divinity in her pleasures and pains, these--especially the painful moments--being concrete rebuttals of solipsism. Her meditation on man's various religions continues.

Her objection to Christ, a human god, was that his religion exalted death and sacrifice (the crucifixion). Jove, on the other hand, was inhuman (and he is always referred to in the past tense), never suckled by any mother. Thus the people who were his worshippers felt entirely on another plane from their divinity. Jove was a king, and they were hinds (peasants).

He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star. (CP, 67-68)

These lines from stanza 3 broach a theme which is repeated to be resolved in stanza 7. This theme is the union of blood with heaven, or sky, or the spiritual plane. Blood is human, the body's food, warmth, and coloring. (Elsewhere Stevens speaks of "an abstraction blooded.") In our blood there is a religious impulse. Modern man may think he can be an atheist with impunity, but the atheist is denying a part of his nature. Indeed, a determined atheist like Stevens is really acting out of his religious impulse, the desire to unite his humanity with divinity. He can subsume god into himself; thus the desired union will be complete. In the time of belief in Jove, the hinds' desire to possess god's spirit sometimes became transformed into god's desire

³Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 30-31.

to possess a mortal--Jove especially was a rapist of women. Sometimes the victims are changed into stars, as in Ovid's Metamorphoses, II, "Jove in Arcady." Men saw the stars, sensed something divine about them, and their yearning for a union with something permanent caused them to invent myths which project their blood (heredity, race) into the heavens. Jesus was a human baby whose birth was acknowledged by the heavens by the sign of a great star shining on the town of Bethlehem. This too was a "requital to desire," man's desire to be united with heaven, that "dividing and indifferent blue." But what if there is no god, either of the Christian half-human type, or the ancient droit de seigneur type. How then shall we find our atonement?

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know? (CP, 68)

Here is an answer: say man is god, say earth is paradise. Our blood is the spirit of god. This is Stevens' radical humanism, and as an answer to the religious perplexity it does suffice for many people. But the woman of the poem is not satisfied: she is repelled by the image of death, and this is of course the hard cold question which all atheists must face, a crux for existentialism. She is content with natural things; no paradise could be better than the fields of the earth. But these things fade; the birds have their seasonal migration, and the fields are destructible.

Stanzas IV and V deal with this question of impermanence. The point of stanza IV is that these fading and perishable things leave tracings that last as none of the promised eternities have lasted. No happy hunting ground, or "golden underground," not the "heaven's hill" of Christianity has ever endures "as April's green endures" (CP, 68).

The woman's remembrance, her desire, the consummation she gets from the swallow's wings, above all the recurrent cycles like Spring, are the kind of thing that lasts. This is, of course, a hedonist's paradise, and the carpe diem theme does enter into the philosophy. It is death that causes the maidens to "stray impassioned in the littering leaves" (CP, 69). Their dread of death seduces them, urges them to the experience of love, one of life's beauties. And so the talismanic phrase:

Death is the mother of beauty. (CP, 68)

repeated in stanzas V and VI. Without death there would be no fulfillment. If, as in stanza VI, there should be a world in which the trees were always ripe and full and never changed, then many of life's wonderful moments would never occur.

Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
The silken weavings of our afternoons,
And pick the strings of our insipid lutes! (CP, 69)

This acceptance of renunciation goes beyond hedonism. A pure pleasure-seeker, even though driven by fear of death, tries to forget death. Stevens remembers always that death will follow, death of the moment, of the beloved, of the lover, and he accepts.

Stanza VII presents the ritual of Stevens' religion of earth and day, an orgiastic chant and dance to the sun, now a "savage source" (CP, 70). Once again the union of blood and sky is introduced, but with a difference. It is their chant that rises to the sky, and the chant comes out of the blood.

Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
That choir among themselves long afterward. (CP, 70)

It seems to me that it will not be stretching a point to say that in this resolution of the religious-eschatological problem raised by the poem the three basic elements hypothesized are formally present: self, the world, and poetry. The blood, the sky, and the chant. The chant grows to encompass nature, and delight in nature. In the poem as first published in Poetry magazine, stanza VII was the concluding stanza, and the poem does have its logic when arranged that way, the order being I, VIII, IV, VI, VII.⁴ In the Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning" is printed in the arrangement as originally submitted to Harriet Monroe. Thus, there is another stanza which is a reprisal of the whole poem. The first four lines are a rejection of the idea of a world of spirits separate from our known world: Jesus' tomb is a grave, nothing more. Next, our world is an "island solitude" from which there is no escape; we are trapped, but free. And finally, a celebration of our natural world, our paradise, the prescribed chant of stanza VII, with wild birds, wild berries and green mountains being the outgrowth of the artificial indoor atmosphere of a carpet cockatoo in the beginning.

This is a brave poem, for from a religious point of view, Stevens' platform must seem small consolation as an exchange for personal immortality. In the woman's rejection of Jesus there is a certain wistfulness, for it is death that she dreads. It requires a larger, stronger consciousness to persuade her, the abstract narrator of the poem. In an unpublished dissertation by Edward Grosvenor Powell, there is a provocative assumption:

⁴Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 85.

The principal subject of Harmonium . . . is nostalgia for the consolations of traditional religious experience. Since Stevens is heavily influenced by a tradition having a kind of mystical experience for its objective while holding views which deny the possibility of such experience, he is reduced to writing poems which express the desire for something more than normal human experience, or to writing poems which generate the illusion of direct experience as a kind of surrogate mysticism. The poems of Harmonium do not really resolve the problem; they simply obscure its true nature. Only some implicitly mystical doctrine, even though denied by the solipsism which Stevens derives from his philosophical assumptions, could have led him to continue writing poetry.⁵

Although I would quarrel with some of these conclusions, they do lead to a later statement with which I am in substantive agreement:

The doctrine developed in Harmonium provides room for few consolations. The earth is lovely but it perishes, and beyond it is the bleakness of the universe:

.
A number of poems deal with the nothingness behind the comforts of the sun and the comforts of the imagination which are made to parallel each other.⁶

This is true; as I have pointed out before, the rock is always present underneath the foliage in Stevens. But this basic uncertainty or insecurity is not as I see it a flaw; it is part of the truth of the poems. As for the mysticism, can there be a mystic without god?⁷ Stevens is persistently an atheist, especially in "Sunday Morning."

Stevens' poetic preoccupation with a union between the imagination and reality, with poetry as a redeeming act akin to an auto da fe, does place him in the Romantic tradition. On similar grounds, J. Hillis

⁵Edward Grosvenor Powell, "Romantic Mysticism and the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1965, p. 111.

⁶Ibid., p. 95.

⁷Similarly, the idea of a "mystique sans Dieu" crops up in Valéry's *Teste* cycle when Madame Emilie Teste describes her husband in those terms. But the priest calls the idea an impossibility.

Miller places Stevens in the tradition:

The creation, after the death of the gods, of new fictions, based on fact and not pretending to be more than fictions, is the act of poetry. "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (OP, 158). In defining poetry as a substitute for religion Stevens is joining himself to a tradition extending from the romantics through Matthew Arnold down to our own day.⁸

Stevens craves union, not with God, but with the world. This would be mysticism if the world were God, as in transcendentalism or pantheism. But the world is not God; the world is the world--reality. And beyond the world, there is nothing.

Death and art intermingle again in "Peter Quince at the Clavier," a poem which is vexatious because its central conclusion, in lines 1-4 of stanza IV, appears to be self-contradictory.

Beauty is momentary in the mind--
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.
The body dies; the body's beauty lives. (CP, 91-92)

It seems illogical, and to say that poetry is not the same as logic is to beg the question. Meaning is meaning, and should be all of a piece. If the body dies, then how can the flesh be immortal? Perhaps, then, it is not flesh that is immortal, but beauty. But line 1 says that beauty is momentary. One re-reads the poem, this time asking a question, actively stimulated by a problem whose solution comes in a poem. Surely this is the archetypal aesthetic experience; as the meaning evolves, as form grows out of chaos, the reader gradually becomes aware that he is exemplifying the message of the poem. The subject of the poem is the mode of existence of the aesthetic dimension,

⁸J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 223-4.

not Susanna or Peter Quince; they are, respectively, parable and pretext.

Briefly, Peter Quince is a character in A Midsummer-Night's Dream who directs, produces, and perhaps writes a play within a play. Thus he is a kind of understated fragment of Hamlet. Susanna is the character from the Apocrypha. Spied upon in her bath, blackmailed and accused of adultery by two elders, she is cleared when the two elders give contradictory evidence. (When the elders were taken aside separately by Daniel, one said Susanna's immoral act had taken place under a mastic tree, and the other said a liveoak tree. Thus, Susanna's story was shown to be the truth.) Her virtue in the eyes of men is restored. Taken by itself, the Apocryphal tale is a contribution to the law; its meaning is in a clever way of taking evidence, of distinguishing where the truth lies when two conflicting statements are given. The truth will be something that is in harmony with the natural world, that corresponds to reality. A lie is a fiction that denies what is in the world of things.

Peter Quince, playing the clavier, uses Susanna's story to illustrate something that he is saying about music. Where is music? The performers' fingers on the instrument make music; and the sound in his mind makes music too. The music lies in the relation between the mind and the sound, between the spirit and a physical event.

Music is feeling, then, not sound: (CP, 90)

The idea of music is extended to include other relations, other feelings, such as a man's desire for a woman. Susanna is an example: the sight of her body produced a certain kind of music in the elders, represented

by imagery of throbbing bass pizzicati. Susanna also experiences her own body, and the music she hears is in the form of intense melody.⁹ When the elders try to rape Susanna, the music is cymbals and horns, crashing and roaring. The aesthetic element lies not in the mind of the beholder alone, but in the relation between them, and this leads on to the crucial lines from stanza IV quoted above. Beauty is immortal because it outlives both the beholder and the object. The elders are dead now, and Susanna is dead too, but her beauty is immortal, since it lies in a relation which can outlive its source and its discoverer. In the twentieth century we read a poem about beautiful Susanna, immortalized once again in poetry. Her beauty lived again as the poet discovered the Apocryphal tale, and we see it too as we experience the poem. Thus in the poem's ultimate meaning we are not dealing with contradiction, but with paradox.

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
So evenings die, in their green going,
A wave, interminably flowing. (CP, 92)

There is no need for religious or mystical doctrine to produce this kind of poetry. Artistic creation has its own, purely aesthetic motive.

* * * * *

Valéry called La Jeune Parque an "autobiography in form," but he might well have applied the same label to other poems, the dawn poems, "L'Aurore" and "À L'Aurore" for example, and especially to "Le Cimetière marin." La Jeune Parque is removed from the person of

⁹An autoerotic episode according to Neil D. Isaacs, "The Autoerotic Metaphor in Joyce, Sterne, Lawrence, Stevens, and Whitman," Literature and Psychology, XV, 92-106.

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the poet by the introduction of a fictional persona for the poem; the events of this poem are acts. "Le Cimetière marin," on the other hand, is spoken in Valéry's own person, and the cemetery is geographically locatable (Valéry, in fact, was to be buried there); but the content of the poem is abstract and generalized. The twenty-first stanza, in fact, with its opening line, "Zénon! Cruel Zénon! Zénon d'Élée!" represents an allusive habit of mind frequently found in scholarly essays but rarely in a poem, symptomatic of Valéry's nature as universal thinker first, poet second.

The poem begins in an atmosphere and setting which are utterly basic to the mind of Valéry. He states, in Souvenirs poétiques,

Pour parler des origines, je dirai simplement que je suis né dans un petit port--pas trop petit--du Midi de la France, et que, par conséquent, mon enfance a été entièrement--comment dirais-je?--intéressée aux choses de la mer. J'ai toujours fréquenté un port; les spectacles du port, les différents travaux auxquels on s'y livre m'ont toujours assez impressionné--non pas que j'ai eu l'intention de faire une carrière se rattachant directement à la mer, mais enfin, il y a quelque chose de particulièrement important, pour la formation de l'esprit, d'être en présence de ce paysage de la mer, qui a ce caractère remarquable d'être intangible; les hommes n'y ont rien apporté. En regard des constructions d'une ville et des constructions particulièrement marquées qui font un port, les mûles, les quais, les phares, etc., vous avez cette étendue qui est toujours la même depuis que la terre existe, du moins depuis que la mer existe.¹⁰

For others the sea might represent aboriginal chaos, or perhaps the teeming source of life, but for Valéry the sea is usually a surface, the visible skin of things upon which islands are visible and boats and ships float. From the graveyard, looking out from among the trees and the tombstones, the sea is a roof where doves are walking. It is noon, blazing Mediterranean noon. The scene is not so much

¹⁰Paul Valéry, Souvenirs poétiques, (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 9-10.

described as evoked. Flashes of light reflect off the calm sea. The sun is at its zenith, neither ascending nor descending. The tide is between ebb and flow. Even the wind is still, the time being between the morning land breeze and the afternoon sea breeze. It is an extraordinary time of day, one which makes the poet meditate on Time itself, and eternal causation.

Quand sur l'abîme un soleil se repose,
Ouvrages purs d'une éternelle cause,
Le Temps scintille et le Songe est savoir.

(Oeuvres I, 148)

The entire scene Valéry treats as a temple, "temple simple à Minerve," goddess of thought, and "Temple du Temps." He is in the scene but not of it, and the relationship between poet and place is epitomized as "un dédain souverain" (Oeuvres I, 148).

Time seems to be at rest here, but this is only an illusion. He knows that he is as impermanent as those who formerly walked the earth but now lie beneath his feet. The dead disintegrate; their substance is changed to smoke. In this place he breathes his own future smoke. But that is for the future; he is aware also that even now under the sky of noon he is changing. An autobiographical passage follows:

Après tant d'orgueil, après tant d'étrange
Oisiveté, mais pleine de pouvoir, ...

(Oeuvres I, 148)

He is speaking of his own past history, all pride and disdain for the opinions of men. He had tried to make of himself something static and absolute as the sun at its zenith. But physical nature has somehow brought him to abandon his ambition. He is tamed by the fragile movements of his own shadow passing over the graves.

How much conclusion can be drawn from this passage? Was Valéry motivated to change himself, to soften his idealistic stance of complete "absence" by thoughts of death and passing time? According to his own philosophy, he should have had no desire to justify himself, to write for others. But to write poetry for himself--that might be another matter entirely. Theodora Bosanquet does take this literal biographical interpretation of "Le Cimetière marin," the poem presenting in her view a dilemma: "He can identify his spirit with the everlasting Nirvana and lose himself in ecstatic union with the absolute, or he can renounce the purity of his consciousness by plunging into the turbulent movement of creation." His choice: "Valéry has decided to create again. And he describes the moment of quickening which has always been for him the prime interest of the creative act, the moment when the conscious mind first becomes aware of the movement of an idea formed somewhere in the silent depths of the soul, the moment when the miracle of birth is just about to happen."¹¹ Thus Bosanquet finds "Le Cimetière marin" to be an extended metaphor for Valéry's inner conflict of perfection in withdrawal versus imperfection in creative production. The end of the poem, when the wind rises up again and the poet plunges into the sea and re-emerges to live, is the moment when the conception of a poem occurs. Without a doubt, this is a valid interpretation of this poem, and very convenient indeed for the purposes of my thesis, commenting as it does upon the creative process. But at least two difficulties are present, which force one to delve further into the

¹¹Theodora Bosanquet, Paul Valéry, (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), p. 67-69.

poem. One is Valéry's own statement that to assume that a poem has one unique, true meaning is a fatal error.¹² Another is the significant remainders in the poem which do not seem to fit into the Bosanquet hypothesis. This poem is a meditation on death and time even more than on creation. Poetry is there, definitely, for concrete references occur in the eighth and twenty-fourth stanzas. But just as death and time are evolved from the setting, so must poetry be evolved out of the given situation. It will be a tautology to say that Valéry's response to the stimulus of noon and the cemetery was to write a poem; for us, the poem is the given.

Valéry had presented the scene as a Temple of Time, a solid edifice coalesced for a moment into a static state. Within the structure he is a kind of flaw, the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, or the one live thing in a world of absolutes.

Beau ciel, vrai ciel, regarde-moi qui change!
(Oeuvres I, 148)

he shouts, raising the question of whether flux is artistically realisable or not. Changing things are dying things; to experience them "in delight" is to witness their dissolution. To hold a moment of time fixed in art is to destroy the truth of the moment. Indeed, when dealing with fleeting things, the harder we try the less we succeed. But this has been a dilemma of science, too, one of the century's most pervasive questions.

Valéry is a mirror on the world; he reflects back all that "pitiless armed light." But just as a mirror is backed with silver

¹²Cited by Charpier, Essai sur Paul Valéry, p. 154.

an external object features a his spirit; to unite. 12.

Though "Asides on the Oboc" Stevens recognizes the invalidity of myth, or pure illusion, as the crystallized perception of reality, and devotes himself to the ever-changing perception of the "present," to discover ^{the} ~~best~~ ^{reality} ~~possible~~ ^{in a way} overall belief. Each poem ^{was possible by} its fusion of separate reality, ^{its} ~~its~~ fusion of reality + imagination.

Sonnet

He is compelled to awaken his inner soul, to ~~write~~ mark in external objects features of his spirit, to unite the world of his sense's experience + that of Nature so he can consciously embrace + rediscover himself. And by making his spirit materially evident to himself, he makes it evident to others.

Wallace Stevens' poetry

~~Usually when a poet attempts to straddle the two opposing poles of realms of imagination and reality, his poetry becomes muddy. But Wallace Stevens' refusal to resolve this dualism~~ ^{and incorporate}

Usually a poetic attempt to straddle + incorporate the two opposing poles of imagination + reality muddies the ~~any~~ resulting "poetry." But Wallace Stevens' refusal to resolve this dualism ^{and} acts as the key to his sensual vitality. ~~He~~ reveals his distrust of dogmatism in poetry. ^{He} ~~transfers~~ ^{transfers} ~~transfers~~ Although man is an object of Nature, or reality, he ~~has~~ has the mental awareness to make himself present to his imagination and thought, for only through this self-realization is man ^{imagination} ~~mind~~ or spirit. Wallace Stevens personalizes this concept through ~~his~~ his poetry, the ^{momentary + tangible} union of reality + imagination.

In each of the films utilized in the experimental conditions the model performed four distinctive physical aggressive behaviors. In order to evaluate further the variety of the models' behaviors which were transmitted to the subjects an analysis of the number of different model-provided behaviors found in the initial performances, subsequent performances, and the postexperimental retention tests of the experimental subjects was evaluated by the *t*-test procedure for correlated means. The differences between the initial and subsequent performance phases of the experiment were significant for boys ($t = 6.39, p < .01$) and for girls ($t = 3.24, p < .01$) indicating that the number of modeled behaviors found in a subject's performance is greatly reduced 6 months after exposure to an aggressive model.

The evaluation of the differences of the number of different model-provided behaviors found in the performance and retention of subjects 6 months after exposure to the films showed that the children retained more elements of the model's behavior than they performed. The differences found were significant for boys ($t = 4.30, p < .01$) and for girls ($t = 4.02, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study confirm the finding reported by Bandura et al. (1963a) that exposure to filmed aggression effectively shapes the form of children's aggressive responses.

In studies by Jakubczak and Walters (1959) and Bandura and Kupers (1964) it was found that an increased probability of receiving positive consequences or preventing negative ones when adults rather than peers were modeled apparently determined the model choice and imitative performance levels of children. When aggression is the type of behavior under investigation the age-status of the model does not appear to operate as a discriminative cue which alters the amount of imitation.

The relatively low imitation scores obtained by girls could be attributed to either response inhibition or inhibition of observational tendencies. Bandura and Walters (1963) have proposed that the probability of occurrence of observing responses may increase or decrease depending on the observer's anticipation of positive or negative reinforcement. The difference in imitative

responses between boys and girls could, then, be due to the increased tendency by male subjects to observe what would be a sex-appropriate behavior and a decreased predisposition to observe a sex-inappropriate behavior on the part of female subjects. A comparison of the observational responses of boys and girls does not support this differential observation hypothesis. It did not differ significantly from girls in amount of time spent in observing the model's behavior ($t = .05$). An observer's willingness to perform a model's behavior rather than a willingness to observe would appear to account for the significant difference in imitative responses between sexes.

The exposure of children to aggressive models appears to remain a relevant antecedent shaping the form of their aggressive responses for a considerable length of time. The consistency of aggressive matching responses is most significant when the model is an adult male. This finding would be of particular importance in light of the frequency with which aggressive adult males are presented in movies and television.

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A laboratory belief, by formed by Sociometric hypothesis than the opinions of deviates, first born

The concepts of social (1954) and social reality (Bak, 1950) have been social psychological has been established that, in a negative, nonsocial standard available, people will (Festinger, Gerard, Hyman, 1952), their abilities (Lawrence, 1954), and (Schachter & Singer, 1954) there of others.

It has been argued that a discrepancy of emotion in a group of conformity so that men to arrive at subjective opinion (or ability) among the variables of be productive of present social group have been of issue, presumably an "expert" or of a dependence. It is to some extent that the present results.

Three studies provide reference for the experimental relevance of these three to the present study is dependence—that is, "the visual uses or relies on sources of approval, such (Schachter, 1959, p. 10). Schachter (1951) found that from the model of to be rejected—providing relative and discussing. A. Schachter interpreted measures to uniformity.

Now at McMaster University.

Wallace Stevens

The ^{vocation} job of poetry has long been thought to be the expression of the self-aware inner life of the soul itself, an activity for the inner world of conscious intelligence. And Wallace Stevens' poetry asserts itself through the concrete point which becomes the mind, or the imagination, who determines the content and delivers itself to man's soul, passing through "the poetry of imaginative idea into the prose of thought."

poetic truth

mortal life + immortal yearnings

reality + imagination

- self - irony
- poet's sense of the world
- "imagination a miracle of logic."
- "living in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them"

Can poetry (the union of imagination + reality) exist as ideas alone, or as words (sounds)? p. 29

meshing, coalescing of imagination + reality -
give examples - + its result - how it is achieved
(p. 30)

subsumed under the term "identification" is accounted for in terms of incidental learning, a learning that apparently takes place in the presence of an induced set or intent to learn the behaviors or activities in question . . . (Mussen & Huston, 1961, p. 311).

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IMITATION AND RETENTION OF FILM-MEDIATED AGGRESSIVE PEER AND ADULT MODELS¹

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The relative effect of peer and adult models as transmitters of novel aggressive responses was investigated. Children viewed either male or female adult or male or female peer models presented on film and a test for imitative aggression was made. 6 mo. after seeing the films the same children were reobserved in order to assess the long-term influence of the models. In addition, a test of retention was made after the 6-mo. interval. It was found that the male peer had the most immediate influence in shaping children's aggressive behaviors while the adult male had the most lasting effect. A significantly greater number of the models' behaviors were retained after 6 mo. than were performed.

Research on the influence of film-mediated aggressive models in shaping children's aggressive behavior has utilized adults or cartoons as the models to be observed with the measurement of imitative aggression closely following exposure (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963a, b; LeVine, 1961; Mussen & Rutherford, 1959). Minor attention has been devoted to the effect of peer models on children's performance of aggressive responses while the long-term effect of aggressive models on children's behavior has not been studied. The present study was designed to investigate the immediate and post-test effectiveness of film-mediated peers and

adults as transmitters of aggressive patterns of behavior.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 30 boys and 30 girls enrolled in the Chico State College Laboratory School and Child Development Laboratory. They ranged in age from 41 to 76 months, with a mean age of 61 months. A female experimenter conducted the study for all 60 children.

Procedure

Subjects were assigned to four experimental groups and one control group of 12 subjects each. One group of experimental subjects observed an adult male model while a second, a third, and a fourth group of experimental subjects were exposed to a female adult

¹The investigation was supported in part by Grant MH-7401 from the National Institute of Health, United States Public Health Service.

and blacking, so there is darkness to the mirror of Valéry. ("Mais rendre la lumière / Suppose d'ombre une morne moitié.") This is a mirror with depth: as the consciousness shifts to the back of the

Poetic Truth
 Nature vs + Intellectual Transcendence
 Reality + Imagination

- Self-therapy
- "Imagination a miracle of logic"
- poet's world
- "living in concepts of the imagination before the human has established them"

Can poetry (The union of imagination + reality) exist on its own, or do words (symbols) p. 29

working, coexisting of imagination + reality -
 as examples - + its result - how it is achieved (p. 30)

IMAGINATION TO KNOW THE NO SIGNIFICANT MEANING

and blacking, so there is darkness to the mirror of Valéry. ("Mais rendre la lumière / Suppose d'ombre une morne moitié.") This is a mirror with depth; as the consciousness shifts to the back of the mirror, the light disappears. Now the scene is darkness and empty caverns, where all was light before.

O pour moi seul, à moi seul, en moi-même,
 Auprès d'un cœur, aux sources du poème,
 Entre le vide et l'événement pur,
 J'attends l'écho de ma grandeur interne,
 Amère, sombre et sonore citerne,
 Sonnant dans l'âme un creux toujours futur!

(Oeuvres I, 149)

The source of a poem has much to do with the dark side of a mirror, with the scene viewed from a certain vantage point. Elizabeth Sewell finds the mirror theme to be crucial to any understanding of Valéry. His poems, she points out, were not written for their own sake so much as for their effect upon his mind. Thus the poems themselves were a kind of mirror. Sewell's image of Valéry's entire universe is as a spherical concave mirror with him at the center. The effect of a concave mirror is to shrink, to concentrate images, and thus, "The final image is not the haunted face reflected in the looking-glass. It is the self concentrated inside the diamond of its universe and its mind, a concentration of ice and fire, and in the middle, the play of light and reflection and beyond that--nothing."¹³ A glorious conception indeed, but quite contrary to my view of Valéry's universe. To take the mirror theory, I would say that Valéry himself was the mirror, a sphere with the reflecting surface on the outside. Inside there would be darkness, with an occasional bit of image from outside

¹³Sewell, Elizabeth, Paul Valéry; The Mind in the Mirror, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 15, 54.

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piercing in, perhaps through flaws in the silvering, but the meditations (reflections, to use a bit of metaphor that has passed into definition) would be carried on as much as possible in isolation. Some part of the world must be admitted to this closed system in order to write a poem, some common ground must be found for communication to occur. A window will be opened into the interior, and the world gets in.

To continue the discussion of the stanza quoted above, if the reflecting side of the mirror, that which is turned toward the sun, is all scintillation and reflection of light, the inside contains the reverberations of sounds.

... aux sources du poème,
Entre le vide et l'événement pur,
J'attends l'écho de ma grandeur interne,
Amère, sombre et sonore citerne,
Sonnant dans l'âme un creux toujours futur!
(Oeuvres I, 149)

At the source of the poem is not light and visible imagery but sound. In one poem ("La Pythie") the most rabid exorcism of the soul's contents produces finally words, "Saint Langage." Not that Valéry wrote his poems in a frenzy--quite the opposite was true--but he knew that language was quite basic to what he found on his explorations into the self.

On the subject of poetic creation he referred specifically to "Le Cimetière marin," comparing the creative state to a taut string. A slack string, he said, will produce no sound when plucked, but a taut string has the energy to produce a sound. In himself, Valéry has discovered a property which he called rhythmic effusion, the property of feeling himself a producer of rhythm: "It has happened that I have written certain poems out of a simple rhythm, without knowing what would

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be the subject of the poem, in particular a poem . . . which is called 'Le Cimetière marin.' It was made out of a certain rhythm that came to my mind and which, little by little, was somehow nourished by certain words, whose coming together itself seemed to form a text."¹⁴ As he worked on the poem, he saw meaning developing, and he was reminded of the process of developing a photograph, the way fragments of a picture appear one by one when an exposed plate is placed in the revealing bath. "I believe that I have assisted at this very phenomenon myself; I only discovered it on subsequent reflection, when I made certain poems. I saw appearing as though on a rhythmic apparatus (dispositif), which perhaps served as revealing bath, certain verbal elements that came to a meaning; this meaning little by little became more precise to give a sort of potential (virtuelle) definition of a poem. On top of this, naturally, a much more considerable labor had to follow, a labor which utilized this point of departure, the rhythmic image of this object, and permitted me to work in a certain sound while conserving as much as possible the initial rhythmic energy."¹⁵ This statement must be considered in any discussion of the poetic stimulus of "Le Cimetière marin." But as Valéry wrote the poem, composing the place and meaning out of the fragments given to him by means of this property of rhythmic effusion of which he speaks, he observed himself writing it, and observed himself observing himself. And if the sum or result of all this convoluted thinking is only emptiness, nothingness, then this only shows that Valéry in 1920 is still the same as the man who had renounced poetry as vain idolatry

¹⁴Paul Valéry, Souvenirs poétiques, p. 19 (my translation).

¹⁵Ibid.

in 1892.

But he loves the scene; it pleases him and satisfies him.

The very air seems filled with invisible flames, and

Tout est brûlé, reçu dans l'air
A je ne sais quelle sévère essence ...

(Oeuvres I, 149)

Even the dead here are comfortable in this hot earth that warms them and dries them. The static noontime scene seems as serene and self-sufficient as a Buddha, or a diamond crystal. There is only one flaw:

Midi là-haut, Midi sans mouvement
En soi se pense et convient à soi-même...
Tête complète et parfait diadème,
Je suis en toi le secret changement.

(Oeuvres I, 149)

Valéry--thinking man--is the one inharmonious element. If the scene is all "absence," he is the one bit of whatever is opposite: being, existence, imperfection. Like a tree in a thunderstorm, he attracts all the potential energy in the situation. He is made of something different from those three great incontestable deities: the sun, the sky, the sea. But what of the dead, here under the earth? To which party do they belong? They are humans, made of Valéry's own stuff--and yet--he finds that they are really closer to the absence of noon. It is decomposition that makes them one with physical nature: they are clay now, not the "white kind" of bones and the body, but red earth. Whatever part of life they ever possessed has now passed from them into nature's general reservoir.

"Ubi sunt," sings the poet, "Where are they now, the familiar sayings, the personal ways of the dead?" But it is just what is most individual that is most perishable. For them there can be no more personal griefs. All the burgeoning effervescent life in flirtatious

young girls with their conflicts, bodily submissions and withdrawals,
at once offering and refusing,

Les derniers dons, les doigts qui les défendent,
Tout va sous terre et rentre dans le jeu!

(Oeuvres I, 150)

With intense irony now, he turns on himself, "great soul." Did he for a moment hope to be exempted from nature's inexorable laws, hope to find something real and lasting within the human sphere? Even "holy impatience," his contribution to noon's temple, dies. Immortality he depicts as a woman frightfully decked in black and gold and laurels. It is a beautiful lie, a pious ruse, to make a mother's breast of death. He rejects all ideas of immortality: death is final. And so the dead are truly at rest. Their dissolution, the consumption of the body by the organisms that transform flesh into earth, is nothing to them. It is we the living who truly are gnawed.

Le vrai rongeur, le ver irréfutable
N'est point pour vous qui dormez sous la table,
Il vit de vie, il ne me quitte pas! (Oeuvres I, 150)

What is this inner tormentor? He cannot call it self-love or self-hatred: it is so near to him that all names can fit. The name doesn't matter: it is something that lives, and Valéry belongs wholly to it. It is the same question as the stimulus of La Jeune Parque in another form. There the question was "What woke the Young Fate, what thing violated her virginal sleep?" Put another way "Why was there a Serpent in the Garden of Eden?" Philosophers have always found a gnawing anguish in man: it is original sin, it is basic anxiety. From this stance of mental anguish, Valéry turns to Zeno's paradox, for reasons which have not in my opinion been understood.

Here is what Bertrand Russell has to say about the questions

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raised so long ago by Zeno of Elea. Each of these questions, it may be recalled, presented a paradox, a situation contrary to common sense, but nevertheless philosophically truthful. But as Russell says, in mathematics, " . . . familiarity with truth eliminates the vulgar prejudices of common sense."

Zeno was concerned, as a matter of fact, with three problems, each presented by motion, but each more abstract than motion, and capable of a purely arithmetical treatment. These are the problems of the infinitesimal, the infinite, and continuity. To state clearly the difficulties involved, was to accomplish perhaps the hardest part of the philosopher's task. This was done by Zeno. From him to our own day, the finest intellects of each generation in turn attacked the problems, but achieved, broadly speaking, nothing. In our own time, however, three men--Weierstrass, Dedekind, and Cantor--have not merely advanced the three problems, but have completely solved them. The solutions, for those acquainted with mathematics, are so clear as to leave no longer the slightest doubt or difficulty. This achievement is probably the greatest of which our age has to boast; and I know of no age (except perhaps the golden age of Greece) which has a more convincing proof to offer of the transcendent genius of its great men. Of the three problems, that of the infinitesimal was solved by Weierstrass; the solution of the other two was begun by Dedekind, and definitively accomplished by Cantor (my italics).¹⁶

The exact nature of these problems is not within the scope of this study. What is important is their significance for Valéry the poet, and the fact that the paradoxes of Zeno had been grappled with in their times by Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz and Gauss--without result. If they also tormented Valéry, then he was in excellent company. Perhaps only the best disciplined, farthest-reaching minds could realize the importance of these problems.

Thus, Valéry had been struck by the overwhelming philosopher's question. Not really equipped to handle it with the tools of logic

¹⁶ Bertrand Russell, "Mathematics and the Metaphysicians," in The World of Mathematics, III, edited by James R. Newman, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 1580-1.

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immobilize him completely. This, of course, is the worm, the "secret tooth": it is man's desire to know. To know what? It matters not. If there is no question, he will make or find one. If he solves his question, he will find another one. The one universal in man's mentality is this undirected curiosity, this fatal itch. When she stole the fruit in the Garden of Eden, Eve had no particular question to answer, no object for her wondering. She was seduced by the serpent, symbol of man's tormenting curiosity. What would stolid Adam have been without weak Eve and her alluring friend? He would have been raised above the other animals only by his moral superiority. It was lucky for him that his irresponsible rib had been removed to lead a separate life.

Valéry's seaside meditation had begun when sun and wind had seemed immobile and time stopped for a moment. An unnatural state; in the physical world, it would be impossible. In Valéry's internal, metaphysical world, though, there is some danger of standing forever in an immovable wind, rapt in contemplation of the (for him) insoluble problem.

Valéry would not have known that Zeno's problem would be solved by the development of a new axiom, a new theory of infinity. For him the crux may well have lain in the incommensurability of philosophical truth--incontrovertible--with observable common sense experience--also incontrovertible. Of course Achilles would overtake the tortoise. And yet, to understand the problem is to grasp that he would not, in the realm of philosophical truth. There lies the paradox. And Valéry is lost in wonder; he could make a god out of this idea which seems to be larger than man. But he refuses. Bodily, he forces himself out of

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Brisez, mon corps, cette forme pensive!
(Oeuvres I, 151)

He must stir himself. Finally the wind rises off the sea, returning to him his soul. In this poem, the philosopher's realm is the realm of mind only, soulless and bodiless, closer to death than to life. Contemplation is on death's side; action is on the side of life.

For the man of action and the body, the sea is something entirely other than the

Stable trésor, temple simple à Minerve,
Masse de calme, et visible réserve, ... (Oeuvres I, 148)

of the third stanza. Now the sea is a howling delirium.

Oui! Grande mer de délires douée,
Peau de panthère et chlamyde trouée
De mille et mille idoles du soleil,
Hydre absolue, ivre de ta chair bleue,
Qui te remords l'étincelante queue
Dans un tumulte au silence pareil,

Le vent se lève!... il faut tenter de vivre!
(Oeuvres I, 151)

In the last stanza, the scene is breaking up. The rising of the dashing waves is interspersed with the careless tossing of Valéry's book. (Presumably the book is a blank book for writing in, because "pages tout éblouies" implies a whiteness of the page.) The scene is breaking up, and he urges it to break, even to the point of destroying metaphor.

Rompez, vagues! Rompez d'eaux réjouies
Ce toit tranquille où picoraient des focs!
(Oeuvres I, 151)

The final lines shows a rapid deterioration: "toit tranquille" is identical with the first line, but "picoraient," a word which applies to birds hunting their food, is already in the past tense, almost the

first use of this tense in the poem. Finally in "focs" the metaphoric doves have disappeared; they are sailboats after all.

Valéry exclaimed "I must try to live!" If he does intend to turn away from a life of pure contemplation, does he mean to take the extreme opposite way, the life of pure action? Where does poetry fall in this spectrum? For most people poetry would be somewhere in the middle, perhaps falling on the side of contemplation. But Valéry took poetry to be part of the active life. Poetry was literature, something which made one a public man. Poetry's existence was in a realm where other men existed. A Leonardo might write poetry; a M. Teste, never. Poetry and the active working-out phase of the creative process are part of what it means to live. Valéry was accepting poetry, then. But he was renouncing his attempt to be a twentieth century Plato. The epigraph to "Le Cimetière marin" is as follows: "Seek not, my soul, the life of the immortals; but enjoy to the full the resources that are within thy reach."¹⁷

* * * * *

In the preceding analyses of "Sunday Morning" and "Le Cimetière marin" I have considered each poem entirely without regard to the other. It is striking to see how similar are the paths taken by these two meditations. In a world of conflict, the great diversity of human thought is what we tend to see; the unity of man's mind may well be the greater truth.

It is a commonplace of the twentieth century that man's worst

¹⁷Translation in The Penguin Book of French Verse, 4, The Twentieth Century, Introduced and edited by Anthony Hartley, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 64.

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dissatisfactions begin amid plenty. This is true on several levels. If a man has nothing (and has always had nothing) he dreams only of food and a roof; if he has everything in the way of bodily comfort, a mental anguish begins. When hunger is appeased, then a higher hunger is born.

Stevens' poem begins with a luxurious woman. All around her are food and warmth and the trappings of a well-furnished life. She is content--complacent. But this feeling of surfeit gives way to thoughts of unattainable things, the search for some eternal verity. And this is exactly Valéry's situation in the opening of "Le Cimetière marin." In the presence of his beloved segment of nature, the seashore, Valéry at first seems to believe that he can be content merely to enjoy. In "O récompense après une pensée / Qu'un long regard sur le calme des dieux." (Oeuvres I, 147) Valéry has the air of a man who thinks he is about to have a vacation from thought. But he is quickly surfeited with beauty; his thoughts return to nothingness, and the metaphysical concerns of which the sun, the sea and the sky know nothing. In the midst of an ideal life, to think of black death; what irony. Is this perversity, an abnormality, or a truth of the human spirit? Let me invert Stevens' phrase, and say that

Beauty is the mother of Death

or at least, a taste of beauty makes men think of death. To understand this fully we shall have to know more about the aesthetic emotion than we now know. But most people will accept at least that an experience of beauty in art is nearer to grief than to joy. When we are moved at the symphony we are moved to tears, not laughter. Perhaps part of the explanation is this: the aesthetic emotion is wonder, is man faced

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with something he yearns to capture, but yet cannot fully grasp. Thus it reminds him of his limitations, and chief among those limitations is mortality. "Had we but world enough, and time . . ." we muse. There is world enough, alas, but not time.

Now death enters Stevens' "Sunday Morning" in the first stanza, but as part of the religious theme, when the woman finds Judaeo-Christianism to be a religion of death and the dead. Death taken directly, as a theme in itself, enters in stanza IV and runs through stanzas V and VI. In "Le Cimetière marin" the meditation on death enters at almost exactly the same place, or approximately stanzas thirteen to nineteen, the transitions from and into other themes being less abrupt.¹⁸ By stanza thirteen, Valéry has already declared himself to be something other than the scene in whose presence he stands. Noon, the sea, the sky, all are of the non-human, unchanging as a great diamond. He, life, is change, with complexities, difficulties, and mistakes and wrong turnings because there is the possibility of choice. There is a feeling of triumph, if not of domination here. "I am I, life, perhaps not above the scene because not outside it, but capable of things which inanimate nature can never know." But he is now forcibly brought "down to earth" by simply continuing the meditation on the dead of the cemetery beneath his feet. The difference between himself and Noon is

¹⁸Coincidentally, the two poems are almost exactly the same length, "Sunday Morning" having eight stanzas of 15 lines each, or 120 lines, and "Le Cimetière marin" being composed of 24 stanzas of six lines each, or 144 lines. As for versification, Stevens uses his customary blank verse, iambic pentameter unrhymed, and Valéry uses a decasyllabic line, each six line stanza having a feminine couplet, a masculine line, another feminine couplet, and a masculine line rhyming with the preceding masculine line. While the decasyllabic line is not unusual in French poetry, it is not as classical as the alexandrine or 12-syllable line.

not absolute after all; for the dead, those formerly part of life, are gradually making the transition into the other party. And of course this fate awaits him too; to die, to disappear, to become earth. Where stands Paul Valéry, unique being, will be absence. And he turns his back on this fate, rejects it absolutely. One must live; there is no death.

Stevens' poem and Stevens' philosophy are simpler. His is a world in which contentment is possible, whereas for Valéry to live is to feel discontent. For Valéry nature was the realm of absolutes like Noon and the Sea. For Stevens, nature is birds flying in "misty fields," fleeting things summed up in "April's green." These changing things are also eternal; there is a sense of the world in Stevens in which April's green endures, as no hypothetical paradise of immortals has ever done. Which is the truth of the sea: tides, waves, turn and overturn, in short, change? Or is it basic sameness, all motion dictated by immutable law, all change only apparent within the real constancy of the whole body extended in time? There is no answer to this question; it is entirely a matter of point of view. Stevens, seeking his version of the truth always in the world, seeking as much as possible to eliminate the barriers between himself and the world, finds his meaning in the perishable details of the scene. Valéry, who sought to turn his back on the world, to find what truth there might be in himself, takes an outsider's view of nature. Poetry is written out of a man's immediate apprehension of the world, his intuition of the world. Thus for Stevens the actuality is change, perishability. For Valéry the emphasis is reversed.

It is interesting that both Stevens and Valéry use the image of

a mother's breast when speaking of death. Here are the two passages:

Maigre immortalité noire et dorée,
 Consolatrice affreusement laurée,
 Qui de la mort fais un sein maternel,
 Le beau mensonge et la pieuse ruse! (*Oeuvres* I, 150)

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
 Within whose burning bosom we devise
 Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly. (*CP*, 69)

To make a maternal breast of death is a lie, in Valéry's view. Death does not nourish us; quite the contrary, it is we who become food when we die. The dead are only dead, buried under the ground. Stevens' attitude toward death is accepting, positive. Death as absence, as a limit to our time on earth, stimulates our productivity. But death does not only engender in this abstract way; by a leap of the imagination we transform the abstraction into "our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly." Thus the idea of a kind of non-specific life after death, or life in death, is developed.

It may be that our earthly mothers, our ancestors, live on only in memory, like Susanna. After all, the ground of our everlasting life, Jesus, was specifically rejected:

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

In the end, I would say that Stevens' attitude toward death is equivocal, like the "ambiguous undulations" of the pigeons who fly downward to darkness in the end of the poem.

Each poet, in his separate, characteristic way, has evolved a motive for artistic creation. Valéry was led to reflect on time's immobility by a static state in the scene before him. When he found in himself an analogous point of motionlessness he was in danger of

never coming back from it. A wind from the sea reminded him of his physical body and the need to live with it. The poem ends in a burst of creative energy. Likewise for Stevens the traditional meditations of a "Sunday Morning" would be transformed into a ritualistic chant in response to love of the physical world. What might have been a religious experience has become an aesthetic experience.

In Stevens' quest for reality, poetry--the true conjunction between the poet and the world--is a moment out of time, released from the relentless cycling of birth and death. Beauty is immortal. But at the same time the truth of the poem must correspond to reality, and flux and change are part of reality. This is a paradox, and as such it is a stimulus in itself, to further questioning and to the beginning of a quest for aesthetic realization of the idea.

Valéry too is struck by paradox, and finds his stimulus in a curious synecdochical relation to the scene of his meditation. The "perfect" noon contains but one flaw, the secretly changing man. The seemingly changeless dead too are actually being decomposed all the while. Valéry equally is the victim of an inner torment; while outwardly serene, rapt in contemplation, within he is goaded by the fatal desire to know that is man's felix culpa. For Valéry, both the source and the material of the poem are within, where he lives.

For both poets, death is only death; there is no other world. To be fully human is to live, to die, to change, and to create.

CHAPTER V

NARCISSUS AND "ESTHÉTIQUE DU MAL":

CRISES OF THE SPIRIT

In the preceding chapter on "Le Cimetière marin" and "Sunday Morning," we saw the two poets finding aesthetic solutions to problems essentially philosophical or religious. While the theme of the poems was death and time and was deeply serious, nevertheless the poems ended on a note of hope, as the poets found their creative powers adequate to the situations before them. Now, in a longer and more complicated pair of poems we will see Valéry and Stevens turning their poetic methods to questions which are not, in the end, answerable at all. Thus, we see the poets and their symbolic figures involved in crises of the spirit, poetic and creative blocks.

"Esthétique du Mal" is Stevens' attempt to plumb the meaning of the existence of pain and evil in the world. If poetry to Stevens lay in a relationship between the imagination and reality, an analogous mode of existence might be posited for pain. For evil is part of reality, and pain is man's experience of the evil in the world. Thus, with his poet's perception, might he not also be equipped to appreciate and understand pain, and present it in a way acceptable to all mankind? Perhaps he felt that if he could manage this great tour de force he would be fulfilling the poet's duty to mankind that he had called the

defense against "the pressure of reality."

Valéry's poetic exploration of the myth of Narcissus relates in an equally cohesive way to his own version of creativity. It will be shown that creative writing is an essentially narcissistic activity, but that narcissism in its psychoanalytic meaning results not in a diminishing of the meaning of "self," but in an expansion of the ego. The Narcissus-myth is rich in its implications for the poetic process as well as for self-analysis.

In "Esthétique du Mal," Stevens uses his poetic, metaphorizing faculty to tackle the knottiest problem of metaphysics. Ultimately he faces the insolubility of it, with his own special "sense of the world," as he would have put it. Valéry uses his capabilities as writer and intellect to explore a myth which has deep meaning for his self-analysis, and finally exposes the dangers in his withdrawal from the world.

Like some of Valéry's other poems, particularly La Jeune Parque, the Narcissus poems seem to call for a semi-allegorical treatment, so suggestive, so rich in implications are they. But--again like La Jeune Parque--Valéry's Narcissus evades a final solution into one meaning. As an archetype of human experience, Narcissus will continue to yield his own meaning for each age, if not each reader who is willing to dedicate himself to a hunt for meaning. In the way of a true artist, Valéry did not begin with a preconceived notion of what Narcissus was to be. He discovered his own intentions as he wrote; the poetry developed out of itself, out of the myth, out of the language, out of Valéry as an individual and as a man in touch with universals.

Let me briefly summarize this myth of Narcissus which was so appropriate to the anguished thought of Paul Valéry both as budding

poet and mature academician. Narcissus was the child of a naiad and a river-god, and he was most beautiful in appearance. Tiresias told Narcissus' mother that the boy would live to a ripe old age only if he "never knew himself." Although Narcissus was extremely attractive to both boys and girls, he had no interest in other people. Echo was one of those who loved him unrequitedly. He caused such frustration that one of his spurned lovers begged for a vengeance in which Narcissus should love himself and not win himself. And so one day it happens that Narcissus, tired from hunting in the forest, comes upon a quiet pool not frequented by animals or birds, not even disturbed by falling leaves. As he leans down to drink, he catches sight of his own reflection, and becomes infatuated by his own beauty. When he tries to embrace or kiss his image, nothing is there but himself. And yet if he leaves the reflecting pool then even the insubstantial image is gone. At first Narcissus does not understand, but at last the truth comes home to him: what he loves is himself. He grieves, knowing that there is no end to his yearning. He dies there at the edge of the pool, and is transformed into a flower. But in Hell he still gazes at himself.

Now since Narcissus did die, he must have fulfilled the prophecy of Tiresias, that is, he must have known himself. It was enough, evidently, to recognize the beloved image in the water for what it was, and to understand that the only face and body that could so perfectly respond to his fleeting impulses was his own. Narcissus marvelled at how understanding and responsive the figure in the water was to him; but soon he understood that it could not do what he most desired: be another.

What I want is with me,
 My riches make me poor. If I could only--
 How curious a prayer from any lover--
 Be parted from my love.¹

When Narcissus realized that he had in a sense created his beloved the affair was ended, just as the realization that one's absolutes are fictions is always fatal to absolutes. No church can survive the knowledge that its gods are creations of men. This is one meaning of Narcissus.

Valéry's meaning has more to do with his own dilemma of writing for the delectation of other minds vs. a cloistering of all that he thought. The first of the poems in question, "Narcisse parle," was one of a burst of poetic production occurring around 1891-1892 and coming to a definitive close with the night in Genoa of October 1892. It is possible to see the germ of an attitude of world-renunciation in the Narcissus-theme even this early (Narcissus, the most beautiful boy on earth, could not love one less beautiful; Valéry had similar difficulty in finding a worthy audience.), but it is also possible to conclude that Valéry did not fully plumb the subject in "Narcisse parle," and only really developed it in the later work "Fragments du Narcisse." Nineteen lines from "Narcisse parle" are used either verbatim or nearly so in "Fragments du Narcisse I." For example, here are lines 5-9 of "Narcisse parle."

Un grand calme m'écoute, ou j'écoute l'espoir.
 La voix des sources change et me parle du soir;
 J'entends l'herbe d'argent grandir dans l'ombre sainte,
 Et la lune perfide élève son miroir
 Jusque dans les secrets de la fontaine éteinte.

(Oeuvres I, 82)

¹Ovid, "The Story of Echo and Narcissus," Metamorphoses, III, translated by Rolfe Humphries, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 72.

Here are lines 35-39 of "Fragments I":

La voix des sources change, et me parle du soir;
 Un grand calme m'écoute, où j'écoute l'espoir.
 J'entends l'herbe des nuits croître dans l'ombre sainte,
 Et la lune perfide élève son miroir
 Jusque dans les secrets de la fontaine éteinte...
 (Oeuvres I, 123)

But whereas in "Narcisse parle" the subject is immediately dropped,
 in "Fragments" some further development occurs with lines 40-42:

Jusque dans les secrets que je crains de savoir,
 Jusque dans le repli de l'amour de soi-même,
 Rien ne peut échapper au silence du soir...
 (Oeuvres I, 123)

Thus "Fragments du Narcisse I" may be considered as a revised version
 or a later edition of "Narcisse parle," except that "Narcisse parle"
 was reprinted in Album de Vers Anciens and does of course contain many
 lines not found at all in the later poem.

Clearly, though, "Fragments I" is much the superior poem, for
 irony, depth, complexity. In "Fragments" there is, relatively speaking,
 an impression of detachment from the subject, with the irony resulting
 from such an attitude, and at the same time a greater realization by
 the poet that Narcissus is part of him, part of mankind in fact, and
 that he is part of Narcissus. In addition, in "Narcisse parle" Valéry
 is still very much the disciple of Mallarmé, with the silvery atmosphere,
 the music of flutes in the air, and in "Fragments du Narcisse" he has
 moved into another era of poetry. One set of quotations will illustrate
 both of these points. Although it is impossible to prove it seems to
 me Valéry was probably thinking of the first when he wrote the second,
 since both contain this idea of "breaking the crystal," allowing
 Narcissus a requital to desire. First, "Narcisse parle":

L'espoir seul peut suffire à rompre ce cristal.
 La ride me ravisse au souffle qui m'exile
 Et que mon souffle anime une flûte gracile
 Dont le joueur léger me serait indulgent!...

(Oeuvres I, 83)

Next, "Fragments du Narcisse I":

Mais ne vous flattez pas de la changer d'empire.
 Ce cristal est son vrai séjour;
 Les efforts mêmes de l'amour
 Ne le sauraient de l'onde extraire qu'il n'expire...

(Oeuvres I, 124)

First, a word such as "monstre" and even a concept such as "Le monstre de s'aimer" would be out of harmony with "Narcisse parle"; and yet this is very much a truth of Narcissus, where self-love is both the crime and the punishment. Further, the idea of indulgence, of a possible release from fate, is not a part of "Fragments"; it is a tougher poem. Last, that "flûte gracile"--"Narcisse parle" is a musical poem, a symbolist poem, and the music is its conclusion. In "Fragments du Narcisse" there is no music, only language; the critic Alain finds in Echo's appearance (line 93) the birth of rhyme.²

Thus I shall take "Fragments du Narcisse I" to be a superior version of the earlier poem and base my discussion on "Fragments." But Valéry's Narcissus is not simply a re-telling of the Narcissus myth. Rather, it seems to me, that as Valéry explored the hidden springs of the archetypal figure, meanings were released that made Narcissus a personal matter for the poet Valéry in his own situation. Further, this allegorizing tendency leads to recognition of a truth in Narcissus which is applicable to all men, that self-love is love,

²Paul Valéry, Charmes commentées par Alain, (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 86

but that the self must be expanded. This second, larger meaning will be dealt with later. For Valéry specifically the situation of Narcissus is a metaphor for the life of the mind. A writer is always a narcissist; writing is basically a narcissistic, self-loving activity. When a poet begins to write he is like Narcissus coming down to his beloved pool in the middle of the alien forest.

Narcissus runs to the water's edge with the avidity of a thirsty animal, but in order to quench this peculiar thirst the water must not be disturbed--not, that is, by any outside influences, not even by a stirring of the very nymphs that are the body of the water. How fragile a situation is this:

Votre sommeil importe à mon enchantement,
 Il craint jusqu'au frisson d'une plume qui plonge!
 (Oeuvres I, 122)

For Narcissus can imagine what his life would be like without the pool; his drive for love intact, he might have been attracted to some other. He can even imagine the pool without him; it would be accustomed to reflecting only tranquil scenes, clouds and the sky. He begs the water to endure his tearful face. For anguish and sadness are constant with Narcissus.

It is difficult to say exactly what "happens" in this poem. Does Narcissus at first see his reflection by the fading light of day, only to have day disappear and then have his image revived by the rising of the moon? Or is the pool actually in darkness throughout, forcing him to create a mirror image out of imagination alone? Or, finally, does he begin by staring into a dark pool and witness a gradual lighting up by moonlight? Perhaps the actual sequence of events is not so important as the fact that the light does change: at one point Narcissus is

admiring his image, at another point he is staring horrified into the bottom of the pool, and in yet another instance a figure seemingly coalesces into being before his eyes. And thus does self-knowledge progress: at times lovingly, joyfully, with pride, and at other times with self-loathing. For Narcissus loves only the surface, only the visible body. When he looks into the fountain rather than at its surface he sees the contents of his soul.

He did not look willingly into the water, but was in a sense tricked by the moon, "la lune perfide." Still he is attracted to the water, continues to look, but finds in it not the calm, the fulfillment he was seeking, but only ennui and unrest. He sees not the eyes of his face, but the very eyes of his soul in the black pool.

Que je déplore ton éclat fatal et pur,
Si mollement de moi fontaine environnée,
Où puisèrent mes yeux dans un mortel azur,
Les yeux mêmes et noirs de leur âme étonnée.

(Oeuvres I, 124)

What is more, those eyes see him; Narcissus is gazed upon by himself, but another self, perhaps a self of memory or a self of dreams. Here it is as though Narcissus has discovered his subconscious, and wonders what this fragment thinks of its fellow fragment, the physical Narcissus, so unhappy and maladapted to the world he lives in. Narcissus seems to know that he has reached a form of the self whose continuing existence is perhaps as large in proportion to his being as the submerged part of an iceberg is to the whole. He pleads

Cessez, sombres esprits, cet ouvrage ancieux
Qui se fait dans l'âme qui veille; ...

(Oeuvres I, 124)

Valéry once called himself "the least Freudian of men,"³ but a couplet such as the one just quoted is strikingly in rapport with Freudianism, even to the language used. Perhaps Valéry never read Freud, but Freud liked to point out that poets had been the first discoverers of the subconscious.

Narcissus has begun to entangle the deeper parts of his psyche into his web of self-love, always conscious that he, and thus the love, must die, when he is interrupted by an echo.

Mais ne vous flattez pas de le changer d'empire.
Ce cristal est son vrai séjour;
Les efforts mêmes de l'amour
Ne le sauraient de l'onde extraire qu'il n'expire...

PIRE.

Pire?...

Quelqu'un redit Pire... O moqueur!
(Oeuvres I, 124)

It is only pitiful Echo, one of the unfortunates who had fallen in love with Narcissus, but he is driven into a frenzy of denunciation, imagining that the very trees and rocks are bandying about his most private thoughts. And we begin to understand why Narcissus is impossible, and against nature. If even Echo can disturb him, then the conditions for self-love are too rare for anything but the most ephemeral existence. Even more, it will be seen in Cantate de Narcisse that gifts from the gods such as beauty or talent are meant to be shared. Narcissus cannot bear to share; thus it is decreed that he cannot exist.

Finally the beloved image Narcissus has been craving to see forms there in the water, and Narcissus admires himself. Now beautiful are my arms, he says, and my silky hair, and my mouth. He loves the

³Lettres à Quelques-uns, p. 225.

whole body of himself, but hardly has he spoken the words when the curtain of night threatens to divide him from the vision. He realizes, too, that even his voice is deadly, for his breath disturbs the surface of the water, causing Narcissus' double to tremble and distort.

Even without speaking he can get the image to respond, for every fleeting thought or emotion that passes through his mind is subtly reflected in the water. (Perhaps, just as this quality of subtle expressiveness in Narcissus' face was what produced the impression of overwhelming beauty, the quality in poetry which leads us to speak of beauty is a like expressiveness of fleeting states of mind.)

Jusqu'à ce temps charmant je m'étais inconnu,
Et je ne savais pas me chérir et me joindre!

(Oeuvres I, 126)

And with those words, of course, he has pronounced his own death sentence. But he evidently feels that he has received something valuable in return, and perhaps death can be a kind of reward as well.

Narcissus has benefited from his insight into hitherto uncovered layers of himself. He has known himself, realized himself as never before, and can now think of himself as fathomless, inexhaustible,

inépuisable Moi!... (Oeuvres I, 126)

Without being too literal, what have we learned for our interpretation of the poet or writer as Narcissus? Of great interest was the moment when, unawares, Narcissus stumbled across his hidden self, the unconscious (or, that part of the mind which is not ordinarily available to conscious thoughts). At first he was horrified at what he saw, but as he tentatively explored he began to accept. At last he was glad that he had found an inexhaustible spring into which he could dip, but still he knew that his discovery could not save him from his

fate. Poets and writers too discover the unconscious as hidden source; indeed it may be said that they must make this discovery in order that the imagination may be liberated from the requirements of simple day-to-day living. But the revelations may not be pleasant; weaker souls succumb to the horrors of chaos before they perceive the underlying order.

If Narcissus is a figure for the writer as explorer of the self, then what is the fountain in the allegorical scheme? The fountain is external to Narcissus and yet so instrumental to his meditations. For it is expressly stated that without the pond as reflector, Narcissus would be unable to live out his role.

Sans vous, belles fontaines,
Ma beauté, ma douleur, me seraient incertaines.
Je chercherais en vain ce que j'ai de plus cher,
Sa tendresse confuse étonnerait ma chair,
Et mes tristes regards, ignorants de mes charmes,
A d'autres que moi-même adresseraient leurs larmes...
(Oeuvres I, 122)

The opening lines of "Fragments II" (lines 1-23) re-open the theme of the nature of the fountain. The stress is on the fountain's qualities of passivity and eternal purity. Never experiencing anything directly, the fountain only receives impressions from those who do. Narcissus calls her "tranquil sister of Fate," so accepting is she of everything that comes within her scope, complacent even toward humans who, "tempted by themselves follow death to the end." There is nothing that the fountain will not accept, and equally, nothing that has the slightest real effect on her.

O présence pensive, eau calme qui recueilles
Tout un sombre trésor de fables et de feuilles,
L'oiseau mort, le fruit mûr, lentement descendus,
Et les rares lueurs des clairs anneaux perdus.
Tu consommes en toi leur perte solennelle;

Mais, sur la pureté de ta face éternelle,
L'amour passe et périt... (Oeuvres I, 126)

Is the fountain, then, the writer's audience? I would say no, for Valéry's attitude toward his audience, even when he supposed that one might exist, and he did not by any means always do this, was always disdainful. Never would an audience reflect clearly what the artist had produced for it. Never could a public be so pure, so clear as to accept unquestioningly new forms of artistic expression. Thus the fountain-symbol simply could not stand metaphorically for the poet's audience.

But it might be closer to the truth to say that the fountain symbolizes that part of the writer which is audience or critic as the creative process proceeds. It is well known that Valéry used his poetry as a kind of experiment for making observations on the workings of his own mind. Surely the answer to the meaning of the fountain lies somewhere close to this: the fountain is poetry itself in all its stages from the tabula rasa or white page of potential creation, into the first lines set down in haste or meticulously and then scratched out, revised beyond recognition, all the way to the finished printed official poem, so regular on the page, so inevitable-seeming. In the privacy of the poet's own notebooks, anything is permitted. The white pages of paper accept all that comes within their bounds and are affected by none of it. This is what poesis does for the Narcissus-writer, the writer who creates for himself first and for others only second.

Narcissus is a story of love, and the Narcissus poems already dealt with, "Narcisse parle" and "Fragments du Narcisse I," are love poems. But there is a strange lack of sexuality in these poems; if it

was not especially noticeable before, it comes out strikingly in contrast to the middle portion of "Fragments II," where Narcissus witnesses a love affair between a man and a woman. They meet and couple in a scene which is in the tradition of eroticism among the Symbolistes such as Mallarmé and Baudelaire, but so much more down-to-earth than Mallarmé and more normal than Baudelaire as to make one think of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde. But hardly have the lovers' heartbeats slowed when a thousand evils, hurts, and lies are conceived between them. Their conflict is such that "La caresse et le meurtre hésitent dans leurs mains" (Oeuvres I, 127). So they separate, and their torments are those both of the dying and the bereaved. A living body paces the bank of the fountain who witnessed all, but buried within the visible body there is another being of memory:

Et dans ce corps caché tout marqué de l'amour,
Que porte amèrement l'âme qui fut heureuse
Brûle un secret baiser qui la rend furieuse...
(Oeuvres I, 128)

Narcissus compares himself: he is so constituted that he will never penetrate the body or mind of another person, never love. Even his love for himself is infantile, being attached to the whole body. Normal adult sexuality holds no attraction for him. Once again, the motive is stated:

Le plus beau des mortels ne peut chérir que soi...
(Oeuvres I, 128)

Can he accept a lover who is less beautiful, less desirable than himself? Likewise, can a poet who is far advanced beyond all his fellow men write poetry for others? If he writes for an audience, then he must be conscious of their needs, and his work will be affected, not a bad situation in most cases. But what if the potential audience

is simply unworthy of the poet: if he wishes to be appreciated, or even understood, he must diminish his work, produce something which requires less than his full capabilities. Or he can write his best and his fullest and have the words fall as though on deaf ears. In the first case he is understood, but he is not a whole man; in the second case, he maintains his integrity, but lives in a kind of vulnerable imprisonment. He can also give up trying for any audience other than himself; write poetry for no one's eyes other than his own. Then he is a Narcissus. But of course real men never have the essential purity of mythological figures. Pressures bear on them from outside; someone will know that the poet is writing and demand to see. He will be open to charges either of dilettantism or of false pride. Too, it is hard for a man to maintain himself economically in an ivory tower. If neither of the first two alternatives appeals to him, he can give up writing altogether. There is no ideal solution to the problem of being far in advance of all other minds. Some small consolation may be found in hoping that future generations may be ready.

Although Narcissus had chosen not to share his goods with any other, and to find his lover in himself, there are signs in "Fragments II" that he has perceived his lack. After he witnessed the sexual union between the two lovers beside the pool, he had a desire for something similar, or at least analogous. What kind of child could he beget on himself? Here a sort of rarefied reproduction takes place:

Naisse donc entre vous que la lumière unit
De grâce et de silence un échange infini!

Je vous salue, enfant de mon âme et de l'onde, ...

(Oeuvres I, 128)

Married by light, Narcissus indulges in an abstract intercourse, "Infinite exchange of grace and silence," with the water. His/their

child is his image. Tenderly he will attempt to caress his child, but it is too fragile--he disturbs the water. Checked, disappointed, he finds his sterile love for the first time not sufficiently carnal, "... une amour trop pareille à la faible amitié" (Oeuvres I, 128).

He begins to wish for the impossible: that his reflection will become incarnate and divide itself from the water, still without somehow becoming other. He imagines their love-making in terms which are more similar to the scene between the two lovers than to Narcissus' transparent and rudely disruptible frustrations with the water. Narcissus has been corrupted.

Quitte enfin le silence, ose enfin me répondre,
Bel et cruel Narcisse, inaccessible enfant,
Tout orné de mes biens que la nymphe défend...
(Oeuvres I, 129)

He has begun to speak more as a man than a myth.

Part III of "Fragments du Narcisse" contains the death of Narcissus (but does not go so far as his transformation into a clump of daffodils). There is a final sense that Narcissus has chosen his death, rather than simply living out his fate like a puppet of a god's will. Death for Narcissus involves an escape from Self through the means of an infinite enlargement of the Self, thus at once freeing himself and remaining within the demands of his mythical personality.

I have already pointed out that this later Narcissus has sufficient detachment and awareness to know that alternative life-patterns exist in the world. His comparison of himself with "normal" men goes even further when he realizes

Et qui donc peut aimer autre chose
Que soi-même?...
(Oeuvres I, 129)

Once again, how strikingly close to Freudian theory is such an

aperçu. At this point I should like to introduce what has been lurking in the background of all this discussion of Narcissus, i. e., Chapter IV of Norman O. Brown's Life against Death, "The Self and the Other: Narcissus." Brown begins with Freud, uses Freud, and ends with Freud. But he also is able to show connections the master did not himself make between fragments of his own writings. Norman O. Brown does what Freud did not do: construct a theory of Narcissism which rests solidly on the Freudian foundation and at the same time goes beyond what was written.

It is necessary to recapitulate somewhat in order to come abreast with the theory of Narcissism. First, sexuality (defined as "the energy or desire with which the human being pursues pleasure, with the further specification that the pleasure sought is the pleasurable activity of an organ of the human body")⁴ arises in infancy; the infant finds pleasure in all his body. In normal adult sexuality, the "polymorphous perversity" of the child has been repressed; but infantile sexuality is forever part of the subconscious memories. Second, the sexual instinct seeks a union with objects in the world; it is basic for love to reach out. This tendency arises from the infant's basic economic need for sustenance. He loves/needs his mother. The primordial pattern of the love relationship is the infant at his mother's breast. Thus, a human being has originally two sexual objects: himself and his nurse (not necessarily, of course, his biological mother).

But to an infant there is no distinction between the

⁴Norman O. Brown, Life against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History, Vintage Books, (New York: Random House, n.d.), p. 25-6.

narcissistic love of self and the reaching out for the mother. He knows no subject-object dualism; the pleasure of sucking includes within it the desire for the breast, and vice versa. For in infancy the Ego is large--the mother, source of pleasure, is part of the infant's perception of himself. Here is Freud on the subject: "The ego-feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling--a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world."⁵ So that all love is narcissistic. All our desire for pleasurable psychic activity is narcissistic.

J'aime... J'aime!... Et qui donc peut aimer autre chose
Que soi-même?... (Oeuvres I, 129)

Man is born to love. The choice of an object and the shrinking of the self come later. "Love thy neighbor as thyself"--this is the ideal which is the foundation of all moral behavior, if adult humanity were only capable of it.

For Narcissus the only possible escape from the prison of the self is in death. In death, as in love, the walls of the ego are broken down and the circle of self-interest is widened. To a certain extent an adult can re-create his infantile paradise of love by providing himself with a mate--and a child. But none of this is within Narcissus' reach; maimed beyond the capacity to love another, he nevertheless is able to yearn for release.

O mon corps, mon cher corps, temple qui me sépare
De ma divinité, je voudrais apaiser
Votre bouche... Et bientôt, je priserais, baiser,
Ce peu qui nous défend de l'extrême existence,
Cette tremblante, frêle, et pieuse distance
Entre moi-même et l'onde, et mon âme, et les dieux!...
(Oeuvres I, 130)

⁵Quoted by Brown, Life against Death, p. 45.

Narcissus' body was the visible symbol of the Self he loved; but once he perceived its limitations he was eager to penetrate visibility and physical beauty into the mysteries of the dark nether soul that he had seen first with horror in "Fragments I." Now he accepts the dark water, passing from his own deep formless soul into communion and finally union with death.

Mon âme ainsi se perd dans sa propre forêt,
 Où la puissance échappe à ses formes suprêmes...
 L'âme, l'âme aux yeux noirs, touche aux ténèbres mêmes,
 Elle se fait immense et ne rencontre rien...
 Entre la mort et soi, quel regard est le sien!

(Oeuvres I, 130)

Narcissus drowns himself in the pool, thereby achieving the only possible kind of contact with his captivating reflection. The death is not an accident, but welcome to Narcissus. To break the surface of the water and absorb its fluidity and formlessness was self-destructive for Narcissus, but not self-defeating. In death he became larger, no longer out of harmony with the universe but a part of it.

Narcissus met death willingly, because he had come to sense his inadequacy (which is in part the inadequacy of all of us). But he was doomed to die because of vengeance and the enmity of the gods. What was the reason for this hostility? Ostensibly Narcissus' punishment came about because he caused too much frustration; his body arouses love, but his spirit refused to accept the lovers. Cantate du Narcisse, the one-act libretto which completes the Narcissus cycle, goes further into the meaning of Narcissus in this one respect: why Narcissus had to die, could not persist.

The action of the libretto is furnished by an attempted seduction of Narcissus by a nymph. As he is admiring his reflection in the pool, a figure slowly coalesces out of the mists. It is a Nymph,

and so beautiful is she that Narcissus at first thinks she is himself, that the impossible wish that Narcissus shall be at once himself and separate from himself has been granted. The Nymph tries to take advantage of his evident desire, but he rudely spurns her, in the following exchange:

LA NYMPHE, devenue toute visible.

Non pareille, Narcisse... Admirez d'autres charmes
Que ceux dont vos soupirs n'obtiendront que vos larmes.

LE NARCISSE

Je les vois. Je les hais... Maudite soit l'erreur
Qui me fit presque aimer ce qui me fait horreur!

(Oeuvres I, 409)

Cruel words for one who had shown herself (in Scene I) to be quite a narcissist herself, if not on an absolute basis like Narcissus. She tries the persuasions of logic next: even if she is not precisely Narcissus, there are resources in their very differences. Furthermore, unlike Narcissus' reflection, she is not restricted to the water, and what is more, lasts through the night. She has a real practicality:

Vous n'aimiez que de l'onde, et je suis certitude.

(Oeuvres I, 409)

She promises him much pleasure, but he finds her odious. Finally in her wrath she reveals the real reason why Narcissus cannot exist: he has broken a law of nature, the fructifying renewing principle whereby an individual shares his traits with the fellows of his species in order to strengthen his kind.

LA NYMPHE

Insensé!... Tu veux donc aimer contre les dieux,
Vouer à ton suprême et détestable inceste
Le présent qu'ils t'ont fait de ta beauté funeste,
Et tristement corrompre une éternelle loi...

(Oeuvres I, 411)

This is Narcissus' crime: he refuses to share his goods, the gifts of the gods. In nature the only purpose of outward beauty is to attract, in order that insemination may occur. Narcissus, in committing a particularly sterile form of incest, wastes his beauty, and the gods will reclaim their gifts. He could save himself by loving the Nymph, but this would be an immolation for him; there would be nothing left of the essence of Narcissus--he would be saving another.

Narcissus' purity is that of the deliberately alienated artist who divides himself from all others. If such a poet chooses simply never to reveal a line of his making to anyone, then he is not in the position of Narcissus, for he does not attract. But the artist who produces a beautiful and provocative surface while obscuring the true meaning beyond the reach of any audience is committing an unnatural act. For the only justification for art lies in dissemination, a communication of forms that are new and valuable because they come from what is unique in the artist, a sharing of what a man has found on his voyage into himself.

A poem like La Jeune Parque is a likely candidate for this kind of charge: its beauty attracts, but the meaning escapes. Valéry had faced the charge and given a sort of answer in "Le Philosophe et La Jeune Parque." This was a poem for the few, not the many; she wanted to be grasped, but not easily. Her very difficulty would have to be part of her nature.

Mon coeur veut qu'on me force, et vous refuse, Amants,
Que rebutent les noeuds de ma belle ceinture.

(Oeuvres I, 164)

This is quite different from Narcissus, who wanted neither seduction nor rape.

Narcissus, like La Jeune Parque, and also "Le Cimetière marin," is part of Valéry's "autobiography in form." The death of Narcissus, alluring but unfruitful, is the birth of Valéry the living poet.

* * * * *

Once again, as in the preceding chapter, a hiatus must now occur as the discussion shifts to Wallace Stevens' long and seemingly discontinuous poem, "Esthétique du Mal." "Esthétique du Mal" is no more an artistic entity than the Narcissus cycle of Valéry; conversely, it is no less. "Esthétique" is a cycle, a loosely connected group of poems through which several themes run, no one poem containing all the themes, except as they are subsumed under the great topic of an esthetic response to the world. Any listing of the themes is bound to be provisory for they are all inter-related and shifting; another reader might make another equally valid list. In my opinion there are three major themes: (1) the validity or authenticity of an aesthetic response to evil, and the nature of that response, (2) the failure of myth, and its aftermath, (3) Stevens' deeply conservative political outlook.

The opening of this meditative poem is rich in atmosphere and allusion. A world will be constructed out of man's morning preoccupations.

He was at Naples writing letters home
And between his letters, reading paragraphs
On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned
For a month.

(CP, 313)

Vesuvius and the sublime: the destruction by volcano of a city full of people, and an ancient work of literary criticism. These two events are juxtaposed; is there a further relation? Yes, Longinus probably wrote On the Sublime around the year 80 A.D., and the destruction of Pompeii occurred in 79 A.D. Not much of a coincidence, except that

Stevens has chosen to bring them together as two of the elements in a character's meditation. He thinks about pain and terror, also the sublime, that which is at a drastic remove from earthly pain and terror. The only links between them are their historical contemporaneity and the man's mind. One event might be said to be wholly in reality, the catastrophe producing an undeniable pressure of external events on the victims. It would not be possible for a Pompeian to imagine himself out of the situation. The other event is classifiable wholly as imagination; "On the Sublime" is no imitation of an action, but discusses literary forms and arrangements. Nothing in it is real. What significance, what value can such a work--a book of philosophy, and aesthetic philosophy at that--have compared to a real event which alters people's lives? The question is unavoidable, and leads to a statement of the first and largest theme of this poem: can there be an aesthetic response to pain and evil? Is it appropriate to respond aesthetically to catastrophic events? These are questions which must be answered in our democratic and violent age. It may be that there is no need for men to use their energies for works of the imagination such as poetry and criticism. But poetry continues to exist; perhaps, then, there is a need.⁶

An answer is beginning to come even in the first stanza, with the idea of perception. A volcano alone does not produce pain; men must be present. In this second part of stanza I are two relations involving pain, first the people of Pompeii in relation to Vesuvius, and second the man in Naples (persona of this poem) in relation to the ancient

⁶It seems pertinent to interject at this point the fact that "Esthétique du Mal" was first published in October 1944.

pain in Pompeii. "This is a part of the sublime from which we shrink," he says, probably making reference to our enjoyment of tragedy.

And yet, except for us,
The total past felt nothing when destroyed. (CP, 314)

Culturally we furnish the past with a continuing existence. At the same time, history humanizes us if we pay attention to it.

Pain exists, then, in a relation between man and his world, or in Stevens' scheme of things, between the imagination and reality. Thus it is part of the same general faculty as poetry, and music too as shown by Peter Quince at the clavier: "Music is feeling, then, not sound."

And yet if forgotten pain is really abolished, might it not be better to forget? Do we owe anything to the past? Later it will develop that we do indeed have a duty to remember everything, to know all the truth of reality that it is in our power to know. In the second stanza the thinker of the poem, continuing his troubled examination of the questions he has raised, tries to eliminate a prime source of error--pure deduction.

As he drifts into sleep, some of the elements of the setting ("warblings") enforce themselves into his thoughts. His thoughts will come into harmony with his environment, under such an influence, and he will have a sense that he has grasped the truth. But all this is too inward, too much a process in which the self's wishes are served, and not the truth of reality.

Warblings became
Too dark, too far, too much the accents of
Afflicted sleep, too much the syllables
That would form themselves, in time, and communicate
The intelligence of his despair, express
What meditation never quite achieved. (CP, 314)

The moonrise points up this problem of right thinking: how to be sure that one's answers correspond to some truth of reality. Too many philosophers have pursued labyrinthine arguments deep into a realm whose existence proved to correspond to nothing outside their own minds. And strangely--meaningfully for Stevens' mission of inquiry--pain is like this too, all inward, not interested in the reality which is above it. "It is pain that is indifferent to the sky" (CP, 315). For pain there is no external reality. Nothing is, except that which directly impinges on it. Here Stevens discusses pain as something which has an existence of its own, an entity, without thinking of it as something that perpetrates itself in or on a human body. As such, like all things that exist, it has a certain will to perpetuate itself. Pain does not wish to die. But if it rejects, and is rejected by, external reality, here symbolizes as sky, moon, and night, it is this very side of things that "saves it in the end" (CP, 315). Reality allows pain to exist; but pain, wrapped up in itself, cannot acknowledge this.

Stanza III opened with Stevens' antimyth theme, very similar to that which is found in "Sunday Morning." The elements are familiar: Heaven and hell are here on earth now. Jesus failed as a god because he was overly human, too much a brother; our need for a god is a need for a parent. And then, he weakened us with pity. No, Jesus was an end to religion, a tapering off of belief, a half-way point between theology and humanism. But all this is familiar ground, and Stevens does not linger on it.

Once we had an explanation for pain which, if it did not provide comfort, at least might point toward a fatalistic acceptance; pain was God's will. Or, it was in the nature of the gods to inflict pain. But

now we have no myths; our grief must now contain an anguished questioning. Once God punished his children, and if they seldom understood the reason, they nevertheless thought that there was a reason, that God understood. But now the only god is chance. In our statistical universe, evils fall where they fall. Understanding this, it seems that man might take it upon himself not to inflict any unnecessary pain. If this is the only world we have,

It seems
As if the health of the world might be enough.
(CP, 315)

It seems that men might work together for this health, because of this health. But of course this has not happened. Stevens drops the subject and goes on to another.

Stanza IV abruptly shifts from the generalities of stanza III into Stevens' gaudy surrealistic mode. There is no logic, no continuity to the lines that follow. He is cataloguing a few different forms that an aesthetic of evil might take. First there is "Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs d'après Nature" (CP, 316). One could simply list all the "fleurs." (Fleurs du mal? If this is a reference to Baudelaire, it is an oblique one.) A compendium of evils would be sentimental because such a matter-of-fact "listing" frame of mind somehow evades the evil in the subject. One evil becomes equal to another. Riddel points out in regard to these lines, "The sentimentalist like the Platonist negates evil by denying the significance of individual things of this world."⁷ In this case we would have not an aesthetic of evil, but rather a banal sociology of evil.

⁷Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 207.

The next approach (lines 3-9) is the philosophical. Could we analyze evil as we analyze the mode of existence of a work of art? The questions asked here about music are fruitful in that good answers might arise from them. The same, or analogous, questions might be asked about pain, taking it as something which is performed or produced in the same way as a work of art. Man can inflict pain, just as he can inflict music on a hearer.

Third there is a "Spaniard of the rose," a cultivator of the rose "itself / Hot-hooded and dark-blooded" (CP, 316), an image loosely allusive to Don Juan. Here is a kind of attention to the flowers which leads yet closer to a valid response. The feeling, so necessary to a good aesthetic, is present, but without sentimentality. And the rose, symbol of passion and blood, herein readily transfers its associations to pain and evil; evil is a "hot-hooded and dark-blooded" rose. There is vitality in such an approach.

Finally, what is the genius, or the tutelary inner spirit, of misfortune? Realistically we must conclude that it is something in ourselves. But why can we not drive it out, once we know of this? The answer is that evil is not in the mind, but in the body, in our clay. Consciousness, rationality have access to the mind; if evil were only a mental illness then there might be hope. But Stevens concludes that it is in our clay, the physical stuff of which we are made. Evil is

The genius of the body, which is our world,
Spent in the false engagements of the mind. (CP, 317)

But lest this grimness color the whole world gray, we are immediately reminded of the power which redeems us from the miseries of the self: love.

For the world presented to us by Stevens, and indeed by all

atheists, has a double disadvantage: it makes us feel naked and unsheltered in an alien world, basically insecure amidst a perceptual disorder which one is forced to conclude is a true underlying disorder, as well as wearing a poverty-stricken, aesthetically unpleasing aspect when compared to religion's world of festivals, decked-out churches and priests, and rich implements, the "damasked memory of the golden forms" (CP, 317). Once we lived in a palace of gold, protected and even loved by a father-god. But we have cast away this heritage for a poverty of pride and freedom. The kind of aesthetic pleasure once furnished to us by religious practices and their concomitant ready-made forms is no longer permitted. Likewise the comfortable feeling of relating to the world as a child to his father's house is gone. What is left? Some very great recompense is necessary to give us psychic satisfaction. Stanza V offers us brotherly love, the love between two equals. This kind of relation is "within what we permit"--a phrase which is used twice in stanza V, once with regard to love, once with regard to beauty. It is an important idea, since it makes us wholly responsible for the new world we inhabit. The love we are able to feel now, now that we are "wholly human" is ample reward for courage.

Be near me, come closer, touch my hand, phrases
 Compounded of dear relation, spoken twice,
 Once by the lips, once by the services
 Of central sense, these minutiae mean more
 Than clouds, benevolences, distant heads.
 These are within what we permit, . . . (CP, 317)

The Stevens coinages "in-bar" and "ex-bar" make this poem appear more opaque to understanding than it really is, as in "in-bar / Exquisite in poverty against the suns / Of ex-bar, . . ." (CP, 317). The idea of these words is in a kind of barrier, the "-bar." What we do not permit (e. g., sentimentality, the supernatural), because it might cloud or

distort our perception of the true aesthetic we seek to substitute for the old false one, is "ex-bar." What we permit, things strictly human and natural, is "in-bar."

Although Stevens will later, in the eighth stanza, lament that "the death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination" (CP, 319), in stanza VI he makes a first, experimental attempt at producing a poem, of exercising his metaphorizing faculty, within what is permitted, within his hoped-for new aesthetic. He re-creates a poetic sun which is neither a god nor the creation of a god, but an explicable sun, part of a scientific world. It is strange that so few poets have made use of the enormous lore of natural knowledge that has been developed in the scientific investigations of the last two centuries, particularly the last century. There are many gaps in knowledge: those who know the science are not writing the poetry, and vice versa. But every educated man must know some science in this age; the intellectual atmosphere is permeated with it. There may also be a problem of recognition; how many readers, even professional critics, can recognize a scientific allusion when they see it? Or they may see it and not be able to fit it into the customarily high-toned and immaterial language of criticism.

At any rate, Stevens in stanza VI writes a poem in the mode of his called-for non-traditional aesthetic. The sun is "clownish yellow," not the noble "golden" (a word used three times in the preceding five lines). Many attributes of the sun are captured in metaphor: the sun's orbit, how the sun causes the lunar month we watch from our planet, and the unceasing atomic reaction which is the energy, light, and heat of the sun.

A big bird pecks at him
 For food. The big bird's bony appetite
 Is as insatiable as the sun's. (CP, 318)

And then the necessary leap into poetry occurs, for it is not enough to furnish accurate new metaphors based on science. Poetic apperception must also occur. The sun is a furnace which feeds on itself. The poet's metaphorizing faculty feeds on itself, on the poet's psychic contents, on data from the world. It too is a voracious bird, as omnivorous as the energy that feeds on the sun. Beginning with line 10 the bird is gradually transformed from something cosmic into something earthly, and something which even harks back to the "ambiguous undulations" of the final lines of "Sunday Morning." There is no repose, no contentment for the restless bird--energizing factor of poetry, the desire to express what has not been expressed before in the words of our language.

The yellow grassman's mind is still immense,
 Still promises perfections cast away. (CP, 318)

There is much in the mind, much not yet gotten out, and higher and higher degrees of expressiveness, always leading toward the perfect way of saying.

Wounds, soldiers, wars and death must inevitably find their way into an aesthetic of evil. Stanza VII is a lament and memorial for "the soldier of time," who is all the soldiers who have ever fallen, and who in the course of the poem becomes enlarged into a quality which is in all of us and thus is deathless. The soldier of time is deathless--why? Because there has always been a soldier, always is a soldier to fight time's battle. All common men are soldiers of time, and not on the side of death, for death is the enemy, and those who are subject to

death are soldiers of time.

If it had seemed that Stevens was marching into the new era of true perceptions with all self-confidence and courage, then stanza VIII corrects this impression.

How cold the vacancy
When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist
First sees reality. (CP, 320)

The phantoms are all the deities, spirits, ancestors, explanations and what-have-you, who ~~once~~ were supposed to live in an underground supernatural realm. But now they exist no more, not so much killed or assassinated as simply denied. We said a "mortal no," and there was no immortality. No to Satan, and he was gone too, "And, with him, many blue phenomena" (CP, 319), that is, happenings which depend on imagination.

Stanza VIII marks, too, a turning back toward imagination, as though some corrective was necessary. There were no's, negations, denials; but underneath, all the while, there was a yes because

under every no
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.
(CP, 320)

Stevens' kind of quest for an underlying reality is above all a positive act, requiring a basic temperamental yes. Negation had led to the point of reality's bare rock, and the cycle back to imagination begins again. There is a momentum which requires that the cycle swing back; the momentum is poetry.

There is much talk of "poverty" in the ninth section, but the emphasis is very different from section V, with its "in-bar / Exquisite in poverty against the suns / Of ex-bar, . . ." The momentum of V was all in the direction of the pole of reality; now by stanza IV the

farthest point has been rounded, and the force is toward imagination. Now we will get a look directly at the moon, as at the sun before (VI). And the key word is "panic" (CP, 320)--when we look at the moon, we feel panic. Because now we have no myths, no meanings for it.

And nothing is left but comic ugliness
Or a lustred nothingness. (CP, 320)

We are "destitute," "divested," "pure poverty" (CP, 320). Something is needed, evidently, but what? For we cannot--absolutely cannot--return to old beliefs once we have thrown them off.

Like T. S. Eliot, Stevens avails himself of images of drought and water to describe the demythologizing of the west.

This is the sky divested of its fountains.
Here in the west indifferent crickets chant
Through our indifferent crises. (CP, 321)

Our need is for another chant, but Stevens is too intent on his brave new self to accept any Eliotic re-mythologizing. Simply to take up new beliefs from another culture would be to sully the honesty of his new-found way of looking. Where can man turn, then, if not to belief?

The desire for the world we saw through the eyes of belief, without faith to shield us from true perceiving, is like an adult's desire to return to home even though he cannot return to the childhood feeling of belonging as a child belongs to home. It is, in short, a nostalgia, a natural and primitive feeling. The most basic of all nostalgias is of course the return to the mother, to the time when all needs were met (because the needs were few and simple); some say there is a nostalgia for the womb. Stevens subsumes all these forms of nostalgia within the category of mothers in stanza X.

He had studied the nostalgias. In these
 He sought the most grossly maternal, the creature
 Who most fecundly assuaged him, . . . (CP, 321)

He finds home, his true re-beginning, in birth, and he re-makes himself as a child who is "fierce," "savage," "merciless." All this is for the purpose of "accomplish [ing] the truth in his intelligence" (CP, 321). And he finds that this mother is, after all, reality. The beginning of the cycle between imagination and reality has at last been located at the pole of reality. Imagination comes later; and recall that we saw that the rock of reality is also the end.

Reality explained.
 It was the last nostalgia: that he
 Should understand. (CP, 322)

And what of suffering, what of death? They simply are; they have no meaning.

That he might suffer or that
 He might die was the innocence of living, if life
 Itself was innocent. To say that it was
 Disentangled him from sleek ensolacings. (CP, 322)

Here there is balance, a satisfying downturn after so many questions. But it is not the end, even though it might have been a likely stopping place. There is an acceptance of suffering and death, but Stevens does not wish to leave it at acceptance. Stevens is temperamentally not one to rage and rail at the human condition. Even without biographical evidence, such as certain notorious statements made by Stevens in letters posthumously published, it is obvious that he stands politically with those who know that, say, poverty exists, but who accept. He is the opposite of a revolutionary; this idea will come in stanza XIV. He does not end the poem with the resignation, the acceptance of stanza X. Apparently it seems necessary to him to say that he is bitter. Still, when the poem does end, after fifteen stanzas, he accepts.

Stanza XI, like VI, VII, and IX, is an example, a poem which has been written as a demonstration of the kind of aesthetic Stevens is talking about in the other stanzas, which are philosophical and programmatic. When he says "Life is a bitter aspic. We are not / At the center of a diamond" (CP, 322), he means we do not live in a rigidly structured, perfectly crystalline and clear world of order (like a diamond), but rather in a substance that is relatively cloudy, jelly-like, unstable--an aspic, in short, and one that is bitter to the taste. Thus he proclaims himself a man of bitter appetite, capable of this kind of poetry: no sentiment, no false nostalgia.

At dawn,
The paratroopers fall and as they fall
They mow the lawn. (CP, 322)

A town is being attacked and wiped out; a ship sinks. It's war, and Stevens likes to write it just this way (lines 1-9) and not that way (lines 12-17). "The gaiety of language is our seigneur" (CP, 322), our lord and guiding force. We are the way we write; the metaphors we use, especially unconsciously, are the best key to our nature. A bitter man writes a bitter scene. But there is enjoyment even in the bitterness, just as, perhaps, he was trying to show us that there was some bitterness in the enjoyment. A further corrective is applied in stanza XII; if Stevens was having difficulty finding a comfortable attitude toward a world which contains evil in its very fabric, he will now rationalize himself into no attitude at all, "a third world without knowledge" (CP, 323). He postulates a realm neither peopled (imaginative) nor unpeopled (realistic), a world of no perceptions, no will, and, thus, no pain. Is it possible? This is the world in which he is utterly alone, the only possible mode of existence for this third world. If he can only become sufficiently detached from the world and the people in it, then the problem of pain will be solved. Solipsism has always

been a danger for this poet. Noticeably in stanza XII, image and metaphor almost disappear as this condition of thought is reached. Poetry depends on the tension between the worlds of imagination and reality. To rise above the fray will be to deny the poetic energy which is his raison d'être. There is no quest and no goal in this nirvana-like condition. The price is too high.

It may seem by now that the poem (and my discussion) is winding hopelessly, and even contradicts itself as idea doubles back on idea. But this is part of the fiber of Stevens the thinking poet, and should not be thought of as a flaw in Stevens. "As we read the poems we are so continually aware of Stevens observing, meditating, creating, that we feel like saying that the process of creating the poem is the poem. Surprisingly often the motion of qualification, of concession, of logical conclusion--a dialectical motion in the older sense of dialectical--is the movement that organizes the poem; and in Stevens the unlikely tenderness of this movement--the one, the not-quite-that, the other the not-exactly-the-other, the real one, the real other--is like the tenderness of the sculptor or draftsman [sic], whose hand makes but looks as if it caressed."⁸ At somewhere past the halfway point of "Esthétique du Mal" the reader is nearly lost in the tangle of qualification, concession, and dialectic. But the central thread of thought has never been lost: How is one to respond aesthetically to evil? In stanza X, he was almost ready to give the answer of hedonistic acceptance, but it seemed immoral and unpleasantly smug

⁸Randall Jarrell, "The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens," in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, edited by Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), p. 185.

coming from the well-fed unwounded American poet. In stanza XII, he escapes into an overly purified realm of Nirvana-like oblivion, where the contemplating self is utterly removed from the world. This marks an extreme of Stevens' thought.

The utopian alternatives are pure introspection and pure abstraction--knowledge of pure act as against knowledge of pure substance. In the one mode, we would know ourselves as knowing; in the other, we would know the "object" so completely that we would not be aware of ourselves as knowing. The radical disjunction is, as I have said, between act and substance and marks the extreme development of Stevens' abiding concern with the relationship between "imagination" and "reality."⁹

Affirmation, acceptance--Stevens can find no other answer.

Is he then unalterably trapped by temperament? This is the import of stanza XIII:

The son
And the father alike and equally are spent,
Each one, by the necessity of being
Himself, the unalterable necessity
Of being this unalterable animal. (CP, 324)

And if there is "evil in the self" (stanza IV), there is no cure for it. Just as all are victims, so do all participate in the evil of the world. "The longest meditation" (CP, 324), that is, the largest possible overview of the scene invariably will reveal the presence of the assassin. Though we are locked in human nature, ineluctably objects of knowledge, we have a degree of freedom in what we choose to see. To put it another way, insofar as we are part of reality--and man with his certain nature is part of reality--we are trapped in destiny, not free to choose our being; but insofar as we are imaginative, we increase our freedom, for the imagination can to a degree choose what

⁹Roy Harvey Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Last Lesson of the Master," ELH, 31 (March 1964), p. 69-70.

it sees and what it does with what it sees. The man of stanzas I and II who began these meditations on evil established a point of view; the poet established the mundo of this poem, as he has done for his entire canon of poetry. Each of us may have his own spectrum of visible light, "a zone of blue and orange / Versicolorings" (CP, 324). At a certain time, within a certain zone of sight, what he sees may be good. Within this limited scope, he sees what he sees; the poet is free within the poem-world he creates. On the other hand, Stevens stressed time and time again that the imagination must never lose contact with reality. Perhaps it is only a question of the scope of a man's vision. Today he might see good, tomorrow evil. In the long run, "the maximum," he would see both. And we must endure it all, both as spectators and as participators.

A political stanza now intervenes. Stevens was anti-Marxist, of course, for many reasons. If man is unalterable, then there can be no point in revolution. Evil does not lie in forms of society, but in each individual. Further, if governments are allowed to grow naturally many forms will be born, and a great variety of forms is desirable. Konstantinov, on the other hand,

would be the lunatic of one idea
In a world of ideas, who would have all the people
Live, work, suffer and die in that idea
In a world of ideas. (CP, 325)

True, it is a logical idea. But logic is not what's needed. Too much logic is equivalent to lunacy, if applied too strictly. There can be many right paths of logic, because logic is inward. But reality resists and evades logic. The danger is the same as in stanza II, that a man's thought will communicate to him only "the intelligence of

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his despair." William Van O'Connor believes that Stevens had no liking for politics, in spite of the fact that the subject does creep into his poetry time and time again. "The number of those poems that touch on political questions and the social order should not be taken to indicate that Stevens believes, as do some of his contemporaries, that politics must play a necessary part in the role of the poet. . . . In fact, for Stevens the preoccupation with politics forced upon us by the developments of our time is a part of the 'pressure of reality' against which the poet's imagination must press back."⁹

As I said above, Stevens is profoundly conservative in his political philosophy, and the final outcome of his aesthetic of evil is simply another branch from the same root. He accepts and affirms and endures all that he sees. The next step is to delight in the sight.

This is the thesis scrivenered in delight,
The reverberating psalm, the right chorale. (CP, 326)

Evil and pain are part of living in a physical world; the "non-physical people, in paradise" can experience only the minor of what we feel, living physically. For Stevens, life is worth the living, and worth the suffering and dying too. He would not choose to recreate another world without evil; there is so much richness in this world.

One might have thought of sight, but who could think
Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees? (CP, 326)

For the poet of reality, richness is enough.

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⁹William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit; a Study of Wallace Stevens, (Chicago: Regnery, 1950), p. 74-75.

In this chapter we have seen two poets in crises rooted in the nature of their habitual ingrained patterns of thought. For Valéry, the poet of the journey into the self, danger lies in certain forms of inwardness. Stevens, on the other hand, sought a new and complete view of reality; he too stood the risk of being overwhelmed by what he discovered. How they faced their respective perils will be interesting to trace, as the struggle feeds back into the poetry.

Stevens' highly ambitious project began extremely well. He was in a sense calling into question the continuing existence of poetry, and indeed all forms of art, in a world which seemed to contain so many evils that a man might properly be ashamed to claim a common humanity with some of his fellows. We may well not yet have reached a point in the development of mankind where we can afford art; especially after a devastating war, it seems arguable that we should all become farmers or physicians. Everyone involved in work which is not necessary for economic survival must occasionally ask himself whether he might not be more useful to his fellow man in some other way. In short, it is not only Philistines who ask whether art is necessary.

Stevens began with a situation as far removed from his own possible involvement or moral guilt as possible. He set the scene with a modern man contemplating ancient pain. To get even further away from sharing any blame or interest (in order to be perfectly objective), he chose pain that was not inflicted by man at all, but by blind physical forces--Pompeii, A.D. 79. Allusion is also made to a work of aesthetic philosophy, On the Sublime, A. D. 80. Is the latter utterly trivial when compared to the former, or can there be some relation between them? The idea that Nero fiddled while Rome burned is repellent, it

is true; but there may be some justification for a serious work of philosophy to overlap a catastrophe.

Slowly the answer begins to come. We remember and commemorate the sufferings of the dead because of our perceptiveness. We sharpen our perceptions and try to understand everything for greater empathy. For the development of this faculty of perception, we even create objects to perceive: tragedies, epic poems, plastic and pictorial representations of actions. Art is the materials of experience, arranged meaningfully. Here, with meaningful arrangements, enters the aesthetician. "And yet, except for us, / The total past felt nothing when destroyed" (CP, 314).

Thus man enters the argument first of all as pure perceiver, witness to evil. But later it will be seen that man is also a causer of pain, and that evil is in man. Indeed, far from being a power of Satan, a deity in whom we no longer believe and who therefore no longer exists, evil is in the fiber of man. It cannot be gotten out of us or out of the world, ever.

Thus, starting from the inevitability, if not the necessity of perceiving well and truly all that is, and taking into account the inevitably and necessity of evil, we come into the realm of Stevens' poem, where the goal is the ultimate perception of reality, the point where the maximum mind is brought to bear on the maximum view of things as they are. Through Stevens' poetic method of "visibility of thought," we are able to witness the questions-and-answers, the push-and-pull, in short, the dialectic that holds the poem together. But toward the end it begins to be obvious that Stevens was in some sort of trouble. We know that he was dissatisfied with the outcome of the poem. In a

letter regarding the publication of "Esthétique du Mal" in Kenyon

Review he wrote the following:

The last poem ought to end with an interrogation mark, I suppose, but I have punctuated it in such a way as to indicate an abandonment of the question, because I cannot bring myself to end the thing with an interrogation mark.¹⁰

Is the last line of "Esthétique du Mal" a question or not? Is it an end or not? It seems to me that this ambiguity reflects an insecurity toward the conclusion of this aesthetic. Stanza XV might better have been placed at the end of some other poem; there is a jarring gap between the assassins and soldiers and lunatic reds of the first 14 and the green corn fields of the fifteenth stanza. We have come back to the final resting place of "Sunday Morning," but after what a different journey! But if a poet is eupeptic, has a sanguine temperament, what other kind of conclusion can he draw?

I do not propose, not have I thought of, another conclusion to "Esthétique du Mal." I do say that Stevens was near a sort of poetic breakdown, where he was unable to cope with the aesthetic problems he had set himself--and yet was unwilling to admit it.

What would another poet do in similar circumstances? Valéry also faced a creative crisis, in which it seemed that he was unable to meet the demands of his own poetry. Valéry's solution was drastic, dangerous, and effective.

Biographical data show that Valéry contemplated suicide; in addition, he killed the poet in himself, or thought he had killed the poet. But it was only wounded by the knife of self-immolation, hid

¹⁰Wallace Stevens, Letters, selected and edited by Holly Stevens, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966, p. 469.

itself away to heal and re-appeared at the first opportunity (when Gide sent Valéry the galley proofs of Album de Vers Anciens). It is a commonplace that unsuccessful suicides are insincere; so be it. Having nurtured itself privately, the gift of poetry was stronger than ever.

Valéry's Narcissus was Valéry as he might have been, Valéry on one pathway of creative development. Narcissus is a concrete representation of certain aesthetic problems: how far is it possible to go with this particular form of inwardness? How long can a poet live in utter self-sufficiency, using himself as audience, as erotic outlet, as proving ground, as the whole circle of aesthetic meaning? Valéry had his Narcissus discover that his pleasure was not reason enough to exclude all others, that indeed the more he pleased himself and did not need the others, the more he attracted them. Narcissus devotedly and not at all coyly tried to turn his back on the world; but the world intruded nonetheless.

Even more importantly, the Narcissus reveals a risk of blocked creativity in his life pattern. For Narcissus, the real crisis occurred not when death or injury threatened, but at the moment when he looked too deeply into himself, into the blackened pool of "the anxious work of the waking soul" (*Oeuvres I*, 124, my translation). Unknown to Narcissus, this less beautiful level of his mind had been functioning all the while. He was truly in danger of "knowing himself," and his narcissistic self-esteem could not survive the knowledge. What is Narcissus without self-love? He dies. But, I stress, this death is a suicide; Narcissus is transforming himself into something larger.

Mon âme ainsi se perd dans sa propre forêt,
 Où la puissance échappe à ses formes suprêmes...
 L'âme, l'âme aux yeux noirs, touche aux ténèbres mêmes,
 Elle se fait immense et ne rencontre rien...

(Oeuvres I, 130)

Narcissus represents a double crisis for the poet Valéry; the necessity of living in the world of others, and the breaking of the hard-surfaced mirror of self-esteem in exchange for a plunge into the demoralizing formlessness of the innermost self. Thus he continues his journey into his creative soul.

And yet--almost no new poetry will follow the publication of Charmes. There is an enormous outpouring of essays, dialogues, colloquia, writings about poetry and poetic production. But very little new poetry is published. If Valéry, by amputating his Narcissus-self, had overcome an obstacle to creativity, then why did not more poetry ensue? First, the history represented by "Fragments du Narcisse" did not necessarily occur at the same chronological point in Valéry's poetic life as its order of publication. Valéry's "autobiography in form" is not the same as Stevens' "visibility of thought." Autobiography is written after the fact. Second, the first sketch or plan of Narcissus was made early in the career, with "Narcisse parle," part of the first burst of poetic creativity. Third, Valéry's creativity was not for the greatest part expended on his poetry; nor even on the essays, dialogues, etc. Valéry wrote himself into his notebooks, to the very end of his life.

Stevens, on the other hand, produced another book of poetry, plus a book-length section for his Collected Poems, after the book which contains "Esthétique du Mal." (After this, there was not much time remaining in his life; otherwise there is no reason to assume

that he would not have written more.) Perhaps this is an indication that the imperfections in his poems served as irritants, stimulating him to create more. Transports to Summer was published in 1947; thus in his sixties Stevens had been threshing out problems that in their knottiness and over-ambitiousness were characteristic of much younger men. If "visibility of thought" is one's poetic aim, then an unanswerable question will serve better than an answerable one.

In this chapter I have presented, from the poetry of Stevens and Valéry, examples in support of my thesis that the pattern of poesis finds its way into the poem. "Esthétique du Mal" is Stevens' attempt to reach an accommodation between the poet's imagination and the evil in reality. Early in the poem (stanza II) Stevens expresses a warning about conclusions based too little on reality, and too much on the workings of the mind and imagination. In the end, he relies not so much on the power of metaphor as on his sense of the world to find his atonement and peace. To Stevens, the evil in reality is a necessary part of life in a physical world. And delight in the physical world is an integral part of Stevens' sense of the world. That he is aware of the limitations of his approach is part of his theory. Imagination is not enough; reality must be adhered to.

Valéry's treatment of the myth of Narcissus and the fountain is infused with the conception of the poetic process as a voyage into the self. Narcissus uses the fountain to study the beloved image of himself, just as the artist uses his work to examine the side of himself that he most admires. But just as Narcissus inadvertently looked into--rather than at--the pool of water, and was frightened, the writer may accidentally go beyond what is pleasing in his

self-examination. In addition, Valéry's Narcissus reveals the dangers and weaknesses in an excess of inwardness: sterility, lovelessness, and selfishness.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis may be somewhat unusual among comparative literature theses for the reason that there is no direct connection such as influence between the two poets involved. They are linked only by a theme, a preoccupation throughout their productive careers with poetry-making both as subject and as activity. Though their lives span approximately the same years--Valéry lived from 1871 to 1945 and Stevens from 1879 to 1955--they never met, since Stevens never travelled to Europe, and Valéry never travelled to America. What is more, I have never seen a word to indicate that Valéry had ever heard of Wallace Stevens, or read any of his poetry. On the other hand, Stevens knew of Valéry, owned some of his works, and wrote "Two Prefaces" to dialogues of Valéry in the fifties. But I am fairly certain that there is no question of influence from Valéry to Stevens either. Here are some excerpts from Stevens' letters:

I have read very little of Paul Valéry, although I have a number of his books and, for that matter, several books about him. If there are any literary relations between my things and those of other writers, they are unconscious. Such a thing as adopting the method or the manner of another writer is inconceivable. Granted the strong effect of literature, it is an effect derived from the mass of things that I have read in the past. Of course a man like Valéry emerges from his books without a close reading. Some months ago I received from Mr. Vidal a copy of Valéry's État de la Vertu, beautifully printed by Leon Pichon, and I have had it in my room under my eye ever since, but I have not read a line of it. If there is any relation in my things to Valéry's, it must come about in some such way as this:

It is difficult for me to think and not to think abstractly. Consequently, in order to avoid abstractness, in writing, I search out instinctively things that express the abstract and yet are not in themselves abstractions. For instance, the STATUE about which I am doing a great deal of writing now-a-days was, . . . a symbol for art, art being a word that I have never used and never can use without some feeling of repugnance. . . . I repeat what I said recently that my object in all this is simply to write poetry, keeping it as true as possible to myself and as near as possible to the idea that I have in mind (Nov. 5, 1935).¹

Thus, at the time of writing the letter quoted above, Stevens was hardly acquainted with Valéry at all, in any very specific way. Even by 1945, Stevens apparently knew no more of Valéry, as is shown by the following excerpt from a letter.

What you say about Valéry is interesting. He was not a very attractive looking person. While I have a number of his things, there has always been too much to do to get round to him. I don't feel so badly about that now that I have read what you say. I hope that someone will think it worthwhile to do an article on him (Aug. 27, 1945).²

Finally, even as near the end of his career as 1952, he is still professing ignorance of Valéry. In the following letter, Stevens refers to his reading of the book by Elizabeth Sewall, Paul Valéry: The Mind in the Mirror, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

When I had finished I thought it was a wonderful work and felt relieved that it was over. In any case, I know even less about Valéry than I thought I knew (June 30, 1952).³

The general impression is that Stevens knew Valéry mainly by reputation, from some assorted biographical data that might have been picked up from literary magazines, until the fifties when he began reading some of Valéry's prose, and was asked to write the two prefaces for a volume

¹Wallace Stevens, Letters, p. 290.

²Ibid., p. 510.

³Ibid., p. 757.

of the Bollingen editions of Valéry. At this time, Stevens was obliged to acquire a copy of these dialogues (Eupalinos and Dance and the Soul) and to read them for the first time. Nevertheless one remark in the preface to Eupalinos shows Stevens to be utterly in sympathy with the Valéry he read:

It follows that for Eupalinos and for men like him what they do is their approach to the divine and that the true understanding of their craft and the total need that they feel to try to arrive at a true understanding of it and also at an exact practice of it are immeasurably the most important things in the world, through which the world itself comes to the place of the divine. The present work has to be read with all this in mind. Any rigorous intellectual discipline in respect to something significant is a discipline in respect to everything significant. Valéry's own discipline appears in every page of the dialogue. The need to understand uncommon things and to manifest that understanding in common things shows itself constantly. The modeling of the cluster of roses is an instance. The comparison of the object found on the shore of the sea, a natural object, with an object made by man is another. The parable of the Phoenician and how he went about making a ship is a third. It is the parable of the artist (OP, 277).

An approach to the divine through one's craft and through understanding of the common things of the world--Stevens might have said the same thing about himself.

Elsewhere in the same preface, Stevens refers to the dialogue as "the apotheosis of aesthetics" (OP, 274), a phrase which very neatly sums up the life work of both Valéry and Stevens, especially if the meaning of the word "aesthetics" is allowed to include its etymological sense of perception. Aesthetics is the study of the beautiful and of man's perceptions of the beautiful. I had at first thought of entitling this thesis "The Apotheosis of Poesis," but later decided to make a less emphatic point of the fact that for Stevens and Valéry poetry-making as a paradigm for all sorts of making--intellectual, artistic, physical in the instance of dance or sport--in short, poesis,

became a value, as the best if not the only approach to the thing that did matter most in the world, reality or the mind. A man is born into this world, and he must somehow pass his days of life. How shall he live? For Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry, the answer was the life of the mind, to spend their days engaged in the creative process.

I have tried to avoid making much references to Valéry's and Stevens' work habits, but the subject has been broached (in Chapter III) with the discussion of Valéry's habit of daily pre-dawn rising. Stevens' work was quite another matter. By his own testimony, in the Letters, he was very often so preoccupied with other matters that he had no time for poetry. In 1938 he wrote, "I cannot believe that I have done anything of real importance. The truth is, of course, that I never may, because there are so many things that take up my time and to which I am bound to give my best. Thinking about poetry is, with me, an affair of weekends and holidays, a matter of walking to and from the office. This makes it difficult to progress rapidly and certainly."⁴ Again in 1954:

I have no set way of working. A great deal of my poetry has been written while I have been out walking. Walking helps me to concentrate and I suppose that, somehow or other, my own movement gets into the movement of the poems. I have to jot things down as I go along since, otherwise, by the time I got to the end of the poem I should have forgotten the beginning. Often, when I reach the office, I hand my notes to my stenographer who does a better job frequently at deciphering them than I should be able to do myself. Then I pull and tug at the typed script until I have the thing the way I want it, when I put it away for a week or two until I have forgotten about it and can take it up as if it was something entirely fresh. If it satisfies me at that time, that is the end of it.⁵

⁴Stevens, Letters, p. 333.

⁵Ibid., p. 844.

Perhaps it would be overly fastidious to feel that there is something incongruous about an insurance company stenographer being an integral part of the poetic process. But that of course is the great crux of the life of Wallace Stevens--that he was a highly successful businessman, and yet remains one of our finest poets, rated with increasing frequency in the topmost rank, along with T. S. Eliot and Whitman.

How tempting it would be to explain Stevens' job away. In his chapter on Stevens as a "legend," O'Connor theorizes, "In his own person he dramatizes the opposition between the world of business and the alienated artist. In his poetry the careful craftsmanship of the symbolists, who most strongly opposed the values of the bourgeois world, finds its best American expression."⁶ I am forced to conclude (from publication dates if nothing else; the Letters of Stevens appeared in 1966, O'Connor's The Shaping Spirit in 1950) that O'Connor did not have access to knowledge of Stevens' character. Far from being opposed to bourgeois values, Stevens was imbued with them. Homeowner, upper-bracket martyred taxpayer, beautifully clothed and fed, Stevens loved material possessions, comfort, and yes, money. Instead of being an alienated artist, he was--if anything--an alienated businessman. He was never comfortable in literary gatherings. He kept his job long after the normal retirement age, even refusing a year of Harvard's Charles Eliot Norton chair of poetry when it was offered. All this may well demonstrate nothing more than the ultimate irrelevance of biography to poetry; but the idea that Stevens' position as insurance executive chafed him should be laid to rest.

⁶O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit, p. 21.

It is the proportion that poetry occupied in the lives of Stevens and Valéry that has greatest relevance here. A comparison of the relative importance of poetry in the lives of the two men leads to a somewhat contradictory double conclusion. Valéry took his creative-intellectual work far more seriously than Stevens, giving the best part of himself to it. He was obliged to make a living, but he took a job that left plenty of time and energy for his real work of thought. On the other hand, the actual poetry produced in all this vast labor was almost the smallest part (the drawing and sketching I take to be the smallest part, although I assume that Valéry approached this with the same seriousness as he did everything else), the essays and the notebooks which were like a scientist's daily log of his research into the workings of his mind being by far the largest. Thus we may be left with poetry having approximately the same relative importance in the lives of the two men.

Here is another paradoxical conclusion: Although Valéry was more the intellectual, standing in the tradition of Montaigne and the philosophes as much as or perhaps even more than in the tradition of the Symbolistes, his poetry is less intellectual than Stevens'. Critics are patronizing toward Stevens' philosophical essay, "A Collect of Philosophy," sniffing that he based it on a students' handbook. When it is philosophy, they say that his concern with the dualism between man and the world is "hackneyed." The same problem explored with the poetic concretizing and verbalizing imagination is somehow acceptable. Nearly all of Stevens' thought goes into his poetry, including what for Valéry would have been essays, dialogues, paragraphs, etc.

Stevens' poetry is much more voluminous than Valéry's, and

it has a more provisory air, the famous "visibility of thought." When dealing with Stevens, it is always important to read on. Very few of the poems have the air of most of Valéry's--that they are finished products with all the loose ends wrapped up. It is tempting to compare Stevens' irregular blank verse with Valéry's flawless regular meter--except that each is perfectly normal for its respective culture. Valéry descends from Racine, Stevens descends (linguistically at least) from Shakespeare.

Although for Stevens writing poetry was an off-and-on occurrence, even secondary to his occupation, and Valéry had long periods when he was unproductive as a poet, still they are poets. We may put aside the fact that they were something else as well in the same way that we accept Rimbaud's short life in poetry without subtracting for the latter part--almost half--of his life. The creative life takes the form of a quest, directed outward always for Stevens, inward always for Valéry. Thus the scenery along the way is quite different. But what of the end of the journey, something I have not yet discussed. It should be surprising, and yet is somehow inevitable, that the long quest leads to the same destination for both: to language and then beyond. That the end is not God, or even noble mankind, is perhaps what makes the two poets modern. In the end is the word--a tautology as well as a truth--because that was the beginning too.

What I mean by "language, and beyond" can be seen in La Jeune Parque. The Young Fate began her ordeal actually in her sleep, although the poem begins as she awakens, or at the moment when she awakens. When at the end of the poem the Fate falls asleep again, she sinks into a non-verbal level, a realm without words. Here is

the Young Fate falling asleep, descending into the underground like an Orpheus or a Dante (both artists, of course):

Je me remets entière au bonheur de descendre,
Ouverte aux noirs témoins, les bras suppliciés,
Entre des mots sans fin, sans moi, balbutiés.
Dors, ma sagesse, dors. Forme-toi cette absence;
Retourne dans le germe et la sombre innocence,
(Oeuvres I, 109)

This, I stress, is not to evade the answer she sought in lines 419-20, "Mens!... / Mais sache!... Enseigne-moi!..." but in a direct manner to find it. If what she finds is inexpressible in words, truly ineffable, then that is the paradox of poetry. The poet's impossible dream is to express mutely. The Young Fate passes downward, inward, through a stratum of words, "babbled," then no words, only an open throat where we may imagine that the sound emitted is meaningless.

(La porte basse c'est une bague... où la gaze
Passe... Tout meurt, tout rit dans la gorge qui jase...
L'oiseau boit sur ta bouche et tu ne peux le voir...
Viens plus bas, parle bas... Le noir n'est pas si noir...)
(Oeuvres I, 109)

And it is gone, but not finished. The subject matter, the referent, has passed the limitations of poetry.

"La Pythie" ends with the following provocative stanza:

Honneur des Hommes, Saint LANGUAGE,
Discours prophétique et paré,
Belles chaînes en qui s'engage
Le dieu dans la chair égaré,
Illumination, largesse!
Voici parler une Sagesse
Et sonner cette auguste Voix
Qui se connaît quand elle sonne
N'être plus la voix de personne
Tant que des ondes et des bois!
(Oeuvres I, 136)

These lines come at the end of a long frenzy in which the Pythoness, a priestess of Apollo who was capable of foretelling the future, is racked incredibly by a visitation from the Gods, and finally by a

subtle alteration in her method produces the cryptic utterance given above. It would be natural to theorize that the Pythoness is a representation of the poet at his work, first in the throes of inspiration, the recipient of a literal breath from the gods, then broken and desperate to a morbid degree, and finally undergoing insight and understanding. The whole process fits remarkably well into the classic scheme of the creative process. The first, or irritant phase comes in the first thirty lines, when the Pythoness is seized by the agony of the prophecy which is coming to her. Her suffering is intense, but she cannot turn away even if she wishes:

Si la folle tarde à hennir
 Mime de noirs enthousiasmes,
 Hâte les dieux, presse les spasmes
 De s'achever dans l'avenir! (Oeuvres I, 131)

She must bring the prophecy to bear if she is ever to be released from her agonies. So she labors on, digressing to remember her youth when before she was possessed she was a fresh virgin who felt in harmony with her body (lines 78-100). But her world went bad, life turned sour for her when "Un soir, de mon triste delire / Parut la constellation" (Oeuvres I, 133). This was a new and meaningful way of looking at the heavens. She received the stigmata of her calling, and was forced by priests or gods to enter the cavern of prophecy (where hallucinogenic gasses escaped from a crevice in the rock. The Pythoness was mounted on a tripod directly over the fissure.) But it was a cruel and unjust fate.

Qu'ai-je donc fait qui me condamne
 Pure, à ces rites odieux! (Oeuvres I, 133)

Indeed, the cause is hopeless; she is inadequate to receive the gifts

of god. Thus she has undergone the second stage of creativity--fruitless endeavor--and now she will turn away in despair. Tears come, and she thinks of death (lines 172-180). Just at this very point of lowest morale, the answer begins to surge up in the body, "Mes secrets sonnent leurs aurores!" But the coming climax has a deathly feel:

Je sens dans l'arbre de ma vie
La mort monter de mes talons! (Oeuvres I, 135)

Finally, when the long-awaited prophecy comes, with a bursting of living doors, and cracking of seals, the prophetess is heard to speak in "une voix nouvelle et blanche" (Oeuvres I, 136). When wisdom speaks it is in the voice of "no person as much as the waves and the woods." Language is a set of "beautiful chains that ensnare the distracted god within the flesh." Syntax, grammar, the accepted definitions of words, the rules of verbal reason: all these are obstacles to the non-verbal or pre-linguistic kind of idea that poets, like all artists, try to capture. To write poetry is to submit oneself to the disciplines of language--especially when the poetry is as rigidly versified as Paul Valéry's. How to get at the hidden strings that will sound the desired chords? In La Jeune Parque he evoked the moment of passage from consciousness to unconsciousness, through the stratum of basic words and beyond. "La Pythie" finds her gods of prophecy not in any Olympian heights but in her own body. Her words were at once hers and not hers, a personal utterance and yet something she had not realized before she spoke.

Although "La Pythie" obviously relates to the creative process, it must not be taken to mean that Valéry's method of writing poetry was to torment himself with incipient inspiration in order to produce a

cryptic and unexpected utterance. Theodora Bosanquet quotes Valéry in this regard, thereby laying this interpretation permanently to rest--or so it would seem--but then within a paragraph revives the very idea she had squelched.

"The hypothesis of inspiration reduces the author to the role of observer"--the hypothesis, that is, of unchecked inspiration.

"How shameful it is to write without any knowledge of language, verb, metaphor, change of ideas and of tone; without any conception of the structure of the length of the work or of the conditions of its term: scarcely to know Why and not in the least to know How! Blush to be the Pythoness..."

Words which make it clear that the poem called La Pythie is not, whatever else it may be, a picture of Valéry in the throes of composition. This vigorous description of the invasion of a reluctant body by an alien spirit may be read in more ways than one. It is another account of creative energy breaking its way through that pure virginity which is the unchanging order of the primordial cosmos. But it has an additional reference to the special creation of poetry, a divine spirit wandering in the flesh of words, subduing them to its purpose as the invading god of the oracle subdues the rebellious flesh of the intoxicated virgin to a new rhythm and uses her abandoned body to give voice to his own speech.⁷

"La Pythie" is "about" language. The Pythoness (like the poet) is a being who is able to speak truly because she has found the way to the roots of language. Literature essentially is "a development of certain of those properties of language which are most active (agissantes) in primitive peoples"

Plus la forme est belle, plus elle se sent des origines de la conscience et de l'expression; plus elle est savante et plus elle s'efforce de retrouver, par une sorte de synthèse, la plénitude, l'indivision de la parole encore neuve et dans son état créateur.⁸

Language at its origins, and even more, our very consciousness at its

⁷Bosanquet, Paul Valéry, p. 79-80.

⁸Paul Valéry, quoted in Hytier, La Poétique de Paul Valéry, p. 70.

origins, is Valéry's ideal, the goal toward which his poetry strives.

For Valéry on his search for the self, poetry's goal of language and beyond would necessarily be found inwardly, where language lives. It remains to look at Stevens, to see where language lies on the road of the reality-quest.

It will be recalled that in Chapter Two, the general introduction to Stevens, I discussed his whole work as representing a life in poetry which had passed through the seasonal cycle of the solar year, from spring's variety and new leafiness to the barrenness of winter's bare rock. At the very end there was a new hope of spring, but the cycle would have to be taken up by some other creator, not the old poet of "The Whole of Harmonium."

In "The Rock," the last group of poems in Stevens' Collected Poems, there is a sense of a poetry beyond words, insofar as that is possible, i.e., a poetry without metaphor in which the intrusion of the mind upon the thing perceived is as little as possible, and the words are no barrier between the self and the earth. In "To An Old Philosopher in Rome," Santayana is dying in a room in Rome. He is in the room, and he is also on a threshold to another world. How very concrete, physical, and real are the objects in the room,

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle . . .

(CP, 508)

If poetry is present in this room--and it is present--then it is in these objects and their relation to the dying man, not in any words about them. The candle's flame is a spirit, burning to be part of the spirit world.

A light on the candle tearing against the wick
 To join a hovering excellence, to escape
 From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible. (CP, 509)

He begs the philosopher to speak into his pillow, to us, but "with
 an accurate tongue / And without eloquence." The poetry he wants to
 hear, or that is, to know, is the "Profound poetry of the poor and of
 the dead" (CP, 509).

It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most.
 It is older than the oldest speech of Rome.
 This is the tragic accent of the scene.

And you, it is you that speak it, without speech,
 The loftiest syllables among loftiest things (CP, 510)

Ten more lines to show how all the power of the poem is based on the
 actual content of the room. There are no leaps into incongruity as in
 some of Stevens' earlier poetry.

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
 With every visible thing enlarged and yet
 No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
 The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,
 The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
 Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
 For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
 As if the design of all his words takes form
 And frame from thinking and is realized. (CP, 510-11)

What was a threshold for Santayana between his room in Rome and
 another kind of existence which might even be non-existence was for
 Stevens also a threshold between his poetry and either another kind of
 poetry or something else that is and is not poetry. This other realm
 is represented by the words "design," "form," and "frame" in lines
 79-80, and is the muteness of art. The next step in this line of
 thinking might well be that it is the death of poetry (and perhaps

the birth of some other art more suited to such expressions) except that the poet's rebellious momentum carries him on.

In "The Rock" (a three-part poem within the section entitled "The Rock") the extreme of this phase of rejection of poetry is reached and passed.

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.
They never were . . . The sounds of the guitar

Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken
Were not and are not. It is not to be believed. (CP, 525)

After this turning point the barren rock becomes something for which man needs a cure, and poetry is the needed cure. The rock is one huge underlying thing--real, yes--colored in a monotone, shaped in uniformity. By contrast spring's leaves and flowers are multitudinous, changing and subject to change. They renew the cyclical quest, and poetry is part of them.

The pearled chaplet of spring,
The magnum wreath of summer, time's autumn snood,

Its copy of the sun, these cover the rock.
These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man.
These are a cure of the ground and of ourselves,

In the predicate that there is nothing else. (CP, 526-7)

That fearful predicate, the assertion that there is nothing else in the world but ourselves and the bare rock of reality must be and has been overcome.

Poetry did not disappear for long from the Stevensian scheme of things--only long enough for its absence to be felt as basic need. Even so, poetry has been discussed as a generality; what was needed was a theory of language, its place in the imagination-reality dualism. For that it is necessary to turn back to the penultimate book of the

Collected Poems, the book called The Auroras of Autumn.

I should like to return to the important poem entitled "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" already discussed in Chapter Two as an example of Stevens' primary theme, the quest for reality, and the role of the perceiving self, or imagination, in that quest. The poem begins with one premise given, or at least accepted: "The eye's plain version," our common experience of the world. "I see, therefore something is." But what is the nature of the thing that is? Leaving our more essential properties, can the eye even be sure of what it sees as surface, as coloration? This is a mature poem, and there is no bold pacing off of the distance to reality, as in the manner of Harmonium; it is more fitting to approach such questions in an inching, sidling manner. And finally, the elusive goal may be immaterial.

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (CP, 489)

Within this general theme and approach are many smaller topics, one of which is language. In order to deal with this topic, my method will be to extract the statements about language found in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and use them inductively in relation to all of Stevens' poetry. The question is: in man's groping toward reality, what is the role of language, how important is this role, and in what stages is language present (or not present)?

Although terms such as "words," "poem," "speeches," even the letters "A and Z," "Alpha and Omega" are sprinkled into the poem from the beginning, a full-fledged treatment of language does not occur until the eighth stanza. Desire has been used as an analogy for vision from the third stanza on, the motive for the seeker. We do not

actually choose to see; the will to perceive is built into the eye. The poet's drive toward what is real is like the urge of a lover toward his beloved. In this natural process, speech is a natural occurrence, as much a part of the body's life as the breath speech requires. We inhale "a health of air " (stanza VIII) into the body, fragrances of leaves enter; this is one way to apprehend the world.

Our breath is like a desperate element
That we must calm, the origin of a mother tongue . . .
(CP, 470)

Here in this context language is a cry, a "syllable / Of recognition" (CP, 470), a primitive instinctive function like a conversation between two bodies. We speak because we are capable of it. Speech flows from the same kind of organic desire as vision.

But just as the philosopher's theory of vision is a long way from instinctual seeing, the sophisticate's language is infinitely far from primitive speech. Although in its origin speech may have been a direct version of experience like a cry of pain or joy, the complex utterances of modern man often obscure more than reveal, standing as a barrier before reality. Nevertheless we must try to overcome the obscurantism and automatism of this overdeveloped speech. This is the poet's job: "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu."

We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself, . . . (CP, 471)

Here is a clear indication of Stevens' habit of identifying word and object. From a purely linguistic point of view it may confuse the problem, but it may also be said to simplify it somewhat. If a word

could be truly said to equal an object exactly, or even universally represent the object, then the purest and most direct poem would be a manipulation of these truly meaningful words.

Recall that Stevens said "A poem is poetry in words"; the poetry of the world is in the world, and not in the words about it. But, in a typical Stevensian about-face, this assertion appears to contain its own negation. Even in "the poem of pure reality," "the word" was still there. This aspect of the subject will grow and grow, until the wordiness of whatever situation is at hand is part of that situation. "The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it" (CP, 473). Indeed, the words of the world are inescapable.

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
Together, said words of the world are the life of the world.
(CP, 474)

Is there a contradiction here? Does Stevens want reality without words, without any intervention, or does he want reality with the words? In the role of "Professor Eucalyptus of New Haven" the subject is attempted once again. On a rainy day the professor sits beside his window listening to the sound of the rain falling into the spout. Now Professor Eucalyptus is a man who "seeks / God in the object itself" (CP, 475). This is axiomatic (and was always axiomatic for Stevens). But he has discovered something extremely significant--an idea that justifies his whole life in poetry. It is his description that creates the divinity, creates the presence of god in the poetic encounter between the man and his world. It would not be enough somehow to reproduce the actual noise made by the rain as it falls: the crucial

understanding, the true perception or reception of the object has not occurred.

Without the intervention of the poet with his lexicon of true expressions of the world, a time of too much reality would ensue; without the insistence on reality--"things as they are"--the poet's flights of fancy would have no meaning for the others of the world with their simpler, less acute perceptions. Poetry is a cure for the barren rock of reality; but that rock is all that is real in the world. It remains barren only if there are no poets.

Although it is possible to haggle back and forth endlessly with the two sides of the question, it should be possible to make some final statement of Stevens' basic position on language in its relation to the dualism of imagination and reality. I will state it this way: What he seeks is reality--ultimately, a reality beyond words, and thus beyond man's comprehension. Up to this limit, this unbreachable threshold, words are necessary as handles on the objects of consciousness, ways to manipulate and understand the data of the senses. In Stevens' view, any understanding of the world that we have is possible only because there are certain parallels between the self and the world; perhaps we create the parallels. When the words we use are truly exact, they will actually disappear.

There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel: a rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verballity (NA, 118).

At this point it would be extremely convenient to conclude that Valéry and Stevens have come to a point where what they are driving at is the

same: that is, a realm beyond language, but which is approachable only through the medium of language. Stated thus, it is true. But the last quotation from Stevens given above is very close to Valéry's description not of poetry, but of prose.

La poésie n'a pas le moins du monde pour objet de communiquer à quelqu'un quelque notion déterminée--à quoi la prose doit suffire. Observez seulement le destin de la prose, comme elle expire à peine entendue, et expire de l'être,--c'est-à-dire d'être toute remplacée dans l'esprit attentif par une idée ou figure finie. Cette idée, dont la prose vient d'exciter les conditions nécessaires et suffisantes, s'étant produite, aussitôt les moyens sont dissous, le langage s'évanouit devant elle. C'est un phénomène constant dont voici un double contrôle; notre mémoire nous répète le discours que nous n'avons pas compris.⁹

For Valéry it is not poetry but prose that performs a disappearing act when it means something. This may be simply an aspect of the technical differences between Valéry's tight French verses and Stevens' free English style; Valéry's poetry is so much more an artifact. Too, we have seen that poetry for Stevens filled nearly all his intellectual needs whereas for Valéry poetry was something much more specific in a whole range of forms including essays and dialogues.

So a valid conclusion does remain. Language is necessary in the life-quests of both Stevens and Valéry, both as a tool and as a phase. The greatest goal, whether the self for Valéry or reality for Stevens, lies beyond language. In Chapter One I spoke of a motive for creativity. Here is another motive for poetry itself: language is man's highest function; it is most fitting that it should be used to reach his greatest goals.

* * * * *

⁹Valéry, "Préface" a Charmes commentées par Alain, p. 15-16.

Based on the explications and analyses of poems contained in the body of this study, the questions raised in Chapter One can now be answered. How does the poetic process figure forth thematically in poetry? And, can poetry be said to fit the myth and ritual pattern of birth, death, and rebirth? So involuted are the matters being dealt with here, that the primary difficulty is in finding a logical beginning for an explanation. For when we ask the question, how does poesis express itself in poetry, we would like to present a mechanism as well as a description.

To begin with the writer before his blank page is not soon enough; by the time he has mastered the linguistic and disciplinary tools necessary to begin a poem he is already experienced in creativity, influenced by tradition, and bound by the rules of his language. We know that the creative process is described subjectively by workers in all fields in almost the same terms: there is a stimulus or irritant, there is a phase of work leading to frustration, there is a phase of despair, and finally there is a flash of insight. The creative process is not a property of artists alone; scientists and mathematicians have described it too. It is a property of all to whom thinking and making are familiar processes.

The most general statement that can be made about the process is that it is extended in time. Although the crucial flash of insight may occur in an instant, most creators acknowledge that it was preceded by a period of incubation. Next, since one moment is not like another, the beginning of the process is not like the end. A simple analogy is made between time and space, and already we have the elements of a

quest or journey: a starting place, an intervening pathway, and a goal.

Recall that the creator does not know what the goal or destination is to be, but he recognizes it with pleasure when he reaches it. Compared to the hardship of the way, the final vision is a positive joy. Already it becomes difficult to speak of the process without figurative language: the process is like day, night, and a fresh dawn; like entering a dark place and re-emerging; or like dying and being re-born. We have only to use our memories to think of a hundred stories and myths that fit the pattern: Jonah and the whale, the resurrection of Christ, complex literary creations like the Divine Comedy. Indeed, if we simply require that the plot have a hero who experiences doubt and difficulty followed by an awakening to new and higher forms of truth, we can include novels like War and Peace, and Camus' L'Etranger.

Thus, we have in the first place a phenomenon which is subjectively familiar to all of us. In the second place, we have a recognizable pattern in myths and in literary works of art. What is the connection between the process and the pattern? The answer given in Chapter I (in the quotation by Herbert Weisinger) is that, in myth, the mind describes itself in the process of creating.

But what of poetry? The subjects of drama and fiction are usually based on men's actions, and thus tend to have definite plot lines, but poetry is about states of mind which are much harder to delineate. In particular, what of the poetry of Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry?

I took La Jeune Parque as paradigm of all Valéry's poetry; as a story of an awakening, a voyage into memory, and then finally a

re-awakening as dawn breaks over the world; it fits the pattern of birth, death, and rebirth very well. In "Le Cimetière marin" we saw a poet almost lost to the world, so involved in contemplation was he, suddenly shake himself out of his trance crying "Il faut tenter de vivre!" This too could be interpreted as a symbolic rebirth. "Fragments du Narcisse," the third poem of Valéry's discussed at length, ends with night and death, and thus does not in itself fit the pattern. But the myth of Narcissus includes an after life in metamorphosis, which is a rebirth. And my interpretation of Narcissus was as a fragment of Valéry killed off by himself in order to be reborn into an active creative life.

On the other hand, no single poem of Stevens discussed in this study fits the pattern of birth, death, and rebirth. Not "Sunday Morning," and not "Esthétique du Mal," unless we consider the fact that each of those two poems begins with a question and ends with an answer, a connection too vague to be really convincing. But I said that Stevens' poetry has to be read as an entire volume from beginning to end, and that such a reading manifests a cycle of the seasons. The end of the work is at winter and the bare rock of reality, but the end is a new beginning--a springtime. A progress from spring to winter and to spring once again, is of course one of the most universal of all the versions of birth-death-rebirth.

So it is possible to say that Valéry's voyage into the self and Stevens' quest for reality are part of the pattern of myth. Furthermore, though this sort of statement is beyond proof, I would say that they re-enacted the pattern without knowing it. What is the mechanism

for this kind of occurrence, then? The creative process furnishes its own momentum. Primed by the memory of the moments when he was most alive, most in possession of all his potentialities, that is, remembering the moments when he experienced the flash of insight which is the reward of poesis, the poet chooses a subject which will figure forth this same experience. As he writes, he re-lives the process, thus furnishing more memories to his store of poetic materials. As he creates, the artist is created.

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