

WALLACE STEVENS'S «LE MONOCLE DE MON ONCLE»¹

Critics are agreed, on the whole, that this poem is one of Stevens's finest. It is also one of his most difficult and, I believe, at the same time very central to an understanding both of his poetic themes in general, and of his stature (sometimes disguised by the poet's vaguely embarrassed irony, and an indecision, itself traditionally Romantic from Byron onwards, as to whether it was good or bad to be Romantic) as a major Romantic poet. Though often written about, the poem has not had the detailed enquiry which its obliquity of manner and the exceptional difficulty of its prose-sense demand. Stevens told *The Explicator* (VII [1948], Item 18) what he thought of explications. Poems «have imaginative or emotional meanings, not rational meanings . . . It is not possible to attach a single, rational meaning to such things without destroying the imaginative or emotional ambiguity or uncertainty that is inherent in them and that is why poets do not like to explain. «The note, purring with the company executive's brisk, wordy precision, is good Stevens and should be read in full. No reader of *The Explicator* can feel much moral right to question its propriety, except to say that rational meanings are perhaps not that journal's special strength. But one wants to say also that poems (unlike music, which Stevens mentions by analogy) release their emotional completeness, or ambiguity, or uncertainty, through a

1. This essay began as a paper read to my former colleagues at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and I have benefited from the very helpful comments of all those present.

References to Stevens's works are abbreviated as follows: CP (*Collected Poems*, 1955), OP (*Opus Posthumous*, 1959), NA (*The Necessary Angel*, 1960).

medium which in its very nature involves « rational meanings » directly, and that the ambiguity or uncertainty cannot be fully released if these meanings, the prose-sense of words and sentences, singly and in their context, present inhibiting difficulties. For this poem, an attempt at stanza-by-stanza unravelling seems to me frankly called-for. At the same time, the poet's warning against the kind of reductive, unequivocal conceptualisation which loses the poem in its prose-sense, holds true always and urgently, and with Stevens especially it is important often to think more in terms of atmospheres, directions of feeling, areas of concern, than of neat progressions of argument. « Le Monocle » expresses a complicated and self-concealing range of moods. Its feelings often contain nostalgic or ironic hints of their opposites, and may tend to logical inconsequence. As the much-quoted adage says: « The acquisitions of poetry are fortuitous; *trouvailles*. (Hence, its disorder). » (OP 169). Like its blue pigeon, the poem moves « On sidelong wing, around and round and round », hovers over its subject, which suggests both going round in circles and taking a whole, if oblique, view. By this means, rather than by ordered conclusive definition, it hits on complicated exactitudes, or rich disorders. But what is the subject that is being hovered over?

The usual view is that the subject is Love, and that the woman is the speaker's wife. The *prima facie* reasons for this view are obvious and need not be laboured. On the other hand there are implications in many stanzas which are not accounted for in such a reading. Stanza X is explicitly about poetry, and the topic of art and the imagination is clearly pervasive elsewhere. It seems truer, and more important, to say with Frank Kermode, that the woman addressed in the first stanza (and some others), is the One of Fictive Music². At the same time, a passage like

2. Wallace Stevens, 1960, p. 44. J. J. FINCK, *Wallace Stevens, Images and Judgments*, 1964, pp. 81 ff., also ventures this suggestion, but then writes of the poem as if it were mainly about love. Since this paper was written, at least two good treatments of the poem have appeared, which elaborate the notion that it is strongly concerned with poetry: E. P. NASSAR, *Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration*, 1965, pp. 139 ff., and JOSEPH N. RIDDRI.

the second half of Stanza VIII makes the best sense if it is seen as referring to a middle-aged conjugal situation, and the sexual theme is in general so insistent, and from time to time taken up with such particularity, that it cannot be silenced by being thought of merely as a metaphor in aesthetics. This would seem proper. Stevens disliked analogies in which both halves do not have a vital existence of their own beyond the conceptualisable parallel: in this, as in other things, he belongs to an important Romantic tradition. The poem should I believe be read as a wry meditation on middle-age, preoccupied with sobering thoughts about both sex and the poetic imagination: the two are in part literal and interacting, and in part metaphorical of one another, as for example, in Pound's nearly contemporary *Maunderley* (1920). An extreme reciprocal involvement of the two themes need not surprise us. Analogies or even identities of one sort or another between love and poetry go back at least as far as Plato, in whose *Phaedrus* (265b), for example, Socrates names love and poetry as two of the four forms of divine madness; they are commonplace in symbolist literature and figure in some twentieth-century poetics, those for instance of Robert Graves and Dylan Thomas, not to mention Freud. They are pervasive in Stevens. In his writings about poetry, both Reality, the poet's subject, and his Imagination or Muse, regularly appear as female figures, loved ones; bride, mother or motherly spouse, fat girl, interior paramour, glittering goddess, Venus. Phrases like « The amorist Adjective aflame » (CP 172) are characteristic, the terms « potent » and « impotent » occur constantly in poetic applications, and one of the best-known critical essays is called « The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet ». Imaginative high-points are « not balances / That we achieve but balances that happen, / As a man and woman met and love forthwith » (CP 386), and the poem « The Hand as a Being » (CP 271) celebrates what is perhaps the most vivid sexual act

The Clairvoyant Eye, 1965, pp. 87 ff. Riddel's discussion in fact surveys some aspects of the interaction between poetry and love.

ever consummated as an image of something else. Another poem, « Men Made Out of Words » (CP 355-6), begins:

What should we be without the sexual myth
The human revery or poem of death?

Castratos of moon-mash — life consists
Of propositions about life.

Sex, like death and like the fantasies created by human « revery », are necessary to the imagination as vitalizing « myths ». (How this is true of death is explored and celebrated in « Sunday Morning » and « Esthétique du Mal »). Without these myths, imagination, moon-goddess, is mere moon-mash, and we, her singers, castratos³. Since Stevens sees life itself as a continuous creation of poems about life, since

The whole race is a poet that writes down
The eccentric propositions of its fate,

it follows that « sexual myth » (several forms of it occur in the poems, notably that of the « earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly » and that of the woman Reality) is essential to life itself, and not merely as sexual activity⁴. We are here on the threshold of a mystique not in every way germane to our subject. But this implication is relevant: that love and poetry are not merely like each other, but in some ways *are* each other. Their interpenetration is endless, and circular, as the interpenetration of literature and life is circular. One fairly low-pitched formulation is

3. Conrad Aiken said in 1940 (six years before Stevens uses the word here) that, partly under the influence of Eliot and Pound, poetry had « become ... a sort of *castrato* », so this apt musical metaphor for poetic impoverishment may have had some currency. Aiken was reviewing Dylan Thomas in *Poetry*, and said Thomas was restoring a verbal magic « we have not seen since Wallace Stevens published *Harmonium* » (*A Reviewer's ABC*, 1961, pp. 370-1).

4. See VALÉRY, « Petite Lettre Sur Les Mythes », *Variété II*, 1930, p. 256: « Les mythes son les âmes de nos actions et de nos amours. Nous ne pouvons agir qu'en nous mouvant vers un fantôme. Nous ne pouvons aimer que ce que nous créons ».

the adage: «Literature is the better part of life. To this it seems inevitably necessary to add, provided life is the better part of literature» (OP 158). But the question is larger than that.

The subject of «Le Monocle» springs from a sense of this identity or interpenetration. It is clearly something other than at all times a grand celebration. In a sense, the speaker does not celebrate but merely takes for granted the interpenetration of poetry and love, and exploits it, plays with it. His discourse is sceptical about both poetry and love, comically detached about both in a passionately ironic way. The analogy which pervades it is partly a coy self-concealing obliquity, cutting both ways, as if the uncle was disguising one subject (and his feelings about it) by means of the other, and vice-versa. Since the dignity of both muse and love-goddess (or wife) suffers, and is of course meant to suffer, from all this pained levity, the fusion of the two figures, implied in the poem's heroine or addressee, hardly takes place at the highest intensity, the intensity of «Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour» (the paramour may be interior, but has a vivid poetic life as a paramour). The effect of the uncle's irony, somewhat tensely slipshod and alienating, is to give a sense (against the evidence of the poem in a way), that something no more important than a cool analogy is being formulated. If I am right, this may be one reason why critics tend to talk of «Le Monocle» as being about love singly, or imagination singly, the other of the two in each case being thought of presumably as largely metaphorical in a merely illustrative (and one-way) sense, or perhaps as merely literal in a secondary and unimportant way.

The uncle, anyway, is no unequivocally grand singer of love's joys. He sees things through a monocle, somewhat detached and slightly absurd. The French title is a comic jangle, and may echo bathetically the school exercise about *la plume de ma tante*. The title of the two stanzas in OP 19, «The Naked Eye of the Aunt» (surely not «Stanzas for» the poem but, as Kermode says, a parody), reinforces these overtones

and, since the uncle is the speaker in the stanzas too, adds a further dimension of absurdity. The uncle there is a disenchanting aesthete-sensualist, perhaps a pseudo-sensualist making excuses for being content with merely looking at the «maid of forty» (his wife, a former love, or a stranger): «Oh! How suave a purple passed me by! / But twiddling *mon idée*, as old men will . . . Can I take fire from so benign an ash? / It is enough she comes upon the eye . . .». The lines may be making him speak as his wife's naked eye really understands him, behind the less vulnerable, more effectively defensive utterances of «Le Monocle» itself. The uncle, Europeanized (or, improbably, actually French), monocled, a man of forty growing bald, sexually unvaliant, calls Prufrock to mind, as several critics have felt. The common element may be Laforgue, but Eliot's poem came out in *Poetry* in June 1915 (both poets were beginning to appear more or less frequently in *Poetry* about this time), and appeared in book-form the year before «Le Monocle» was published in *Others* for December 1918 (*Others*, which printed a fair amount of Stevens, had printed Eliot's companion-poem of sexual hesitancy, «Portrait of a Lady», in September 1915. This was of course also in the *Prufrock* volume, which Pound reviewed in *Poetry* in August 1917)⁵. However that may be, the uncle, disaffected with both Venus and Muse, is himself at times a castrato of moon-mash.

At the same time, I believe that his meditations belong to, are a wry variant in, a line of great Romantic poems about loss of responsiveness with age, about the challenge and rewards of diminished vitality, about what to do when the «sensual music» must be given up, about the necessary but costly chastening and maturing of the personality and imagination. The poem is, in its combination of slippancy, grandeur

5. ALFRED KREYMBORG, the editor of *Others*, said in his book, *Our Singing Strength*, 1929, pp. 407-8, that Stevens was indebted to the sonnet «Le Monocle» by the American aesthete Donald Evans, which there is no reason to doubt, though that wretched little poem (reprinted in Kreymborg's *Lyric America*, 1930, pp. 318-9) does not throw much interesting light.

and sense of loss, a kind of Prufrockian « Dejection Ode ». It is an amusing coincidence that Coleridge's poem too is addressed to an unnamed Lady, with her capital L more than just a particular woman, with perhaps a small suggestion of a Muse, who in one early version is explicitly Sara Hutchinson, but in others is William Wordsworth. But « Le Monocle », again in its attenuated, ironic way, identifies itself still more with those poems which transcend dejection and find a new, altered imagination to celebrate, « Tintern Abbey », the « Immortality Ode » and (later than Stevens's poem) « Sailing to Byzantium » and « The Tower ». This is not to say that « Le Monocle » arrives at the same answers as these poems, any more than, in detail, they resemble one another. But it does belong with them in kind, and in the nature of its preoccupations. If it sometimes seems less serious, that is not for lack of a real core of pain, but because it masks itself in levity.

STANZA I

The poem begins with a mock-solemn invocation to a female figure, sign-posted as mock-solemn, but with the reservation that the speaker is not sure whether it isn't himself alone that he is mocking. We learn later that the female figure really is in part a kind of goddess, a Venus rising from the sea. Spoken to a goddess, the lines are still mock-solemn, but not totally preposterous and very insultingly overstated as they would be if merely addressed to a woman, the speaker's wife, say. The first two lines need no gloss, except to note the not very significant joking hint of the *Regina Coeli*, the fact that « sun » and « moon » are routine Stevens symbols for reality and imagination, and that the lines have a comic air of packing in a lot of shorthand poetry-talk: a grandiose moon-mash. In other moods Stevens writes such invocations straight, and this may be part of the point. A later example is « To the One of Fictive Music » (« Sister and mother and diviner love . . .

And queen . . . » — CP 87). In « The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet », the virile poet, « in [a] radiant and productive atmosphere » (in « Le Monocle » there is only a « radiant bubble »), is conceived as grandly addressing his Muse: « Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur, enigma and mask . . . » (NA 67).

The next two lines are very difficult. It has been suggested that the title of the poem consists of clashed edges of words: monocle / mon oncle. Why do they kill? There is obviously not nothing like them, since the title is like them, but so what? ⁶. Another suggestion is that « not nothing » is a forceful way of saying « not anything » ⁷. I think Stevens is much too fastidious to talk like that. The only times he commits sub-literacies are, inadvertently, when he uses French, and there he is meaning to be elegant. Even if « not anything » is meant, I see no obvious relevance in the resulting statement that « there is not anything like the clashed edges of words ». The most all-embracing explanation is perhaps Robert Pack's: « The uncle speaks of the clashed edges of words » ⁸.

I suggest reading with diffidence. There may be a clue in a later poem called « Poetry is a Destructive Force » (CP 192-3). There the word « nothing » is contrasted with the phrase « to have », the latter being the destructive vitality of poetry:

6. W. A. FAHEY, *Explicator* XV (1965), Item 16. Various elaborations of the clash are given, which seem strained. For example: « The 'no, no,' like two eyes in the center of the line, provides a typographical illustration of this double vision that is the theme of the poem ». Stevens in fact told J. W. Payne Jr., on 31st March 1928, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. HOLLY STEVENS, 1966, p. 250, that « these words are not an instance of clashed edges ». Stevens says he hasn't read the poem since *Harmonium* was published, and can't recall it too well. But see some amusing or useful remarks about stanzas II and III in the same letter, p. 251. The *Letters* appeared after this paper was completed.

7. R.M. GAY, *Explicator* VI (1948), Item 27.

8. *Wallace Stevens, An Approach to his Poetry and Thought*, 1958, p. 8.

That's what misery is,
 Nothing to have at heart.
 It is to have or nothing.

It is a thing to have,
 A lion, an ox in his breast . . .

The lion sleeps in the sun.
 Its nose is on its paws.
 It can kill a man.

Poetry, made out of conflict, clashed edges of words, kills. No « nothing » kills in the same way. The later poem celebrates the destructive poetry, and the « nothing » is a poor thing. It is not so everywhere in Stevens. The listener in « The Snow Man », « nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is » (CP 10). (This use of « nothing » as almost a positive thing is a familiar habit of Mallarmé, and Stevens may have learnt it from him⁹). « Nothing » there is the purged, still, wintry reality which has a powerful appeal for Stevens in some important moods. The « great poem of winter . . . Destroys romantic tenements / Of rose and ice » (CP 238), there more tempestuously perhaps than in some poems. « Le Monocle » is a winter poem. Its sixth stanza celebrates that « final slate » which in « The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad » (CP 96), is yearningly imagined as a potential achievement of winter. In the mood of Stanza I it is not the wintry vision as calm synthesis which prevails, but as blank refuge from emotional upheaval: « I wish that I might be a thinking stone ». « Clashed edges » means conflict, but see the great hymn loudened by clashes in Stanza IX, where the clashes carry suggestions of corybantic revelry as well as of conflict. No « nothing » is like the painful, but also exciting, clash of poetry, like what another poem calls the « old rebellious song, /

9. See III SIMONS, « Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé », MP XLIII (1946), 243 ff.

An *edge* of song that never clears » (my italics). This poem (« Country Words ») also asks:

But if it did . . . If the cloud that hangs
 Upon the heart and round the mind
 Cleared from the north and in that height
 The sun appeared . . . (CP 207)

No « nothing » is like poetry, then, either in the pain of poetry or its promised rewards. Mixed feelings of satisfaction and regret over such a « nothing » are consistent with the mood of « Le Monocle », as is the slightly desperate, impudent fooling of the utterance. I think that the lines are to be accounted for in some such way. They seem to me bad lines, fussy beyond the speaker's necessary facetiousness. Their full feeling, as it might be reconstructed, is actually lost in demeaning verbalism. They are mainly, I feel sure, about poetry. Conceivably they also apply to love: no peace is like lover's quarrels. Such a hint seems very secondary at this moment in the poem, if only because the language here is so like Stevens's poetry-talk elsewhere.

The figure who rises « from a sea of spuming thought » is a Venus. We shall see that Venus, in Stevens, tends to be more a goddess of poetry than a love-goddess, although the fact that he chose Venus for this role makes it clear that the erotic motif is not meant to be disregarded. « Spuming », for the foam from which Aphrodite (etymologically « foam-born ») rose, conveys a kind of vacuous, energetic insubstantiality. It has the same ironic force as when Yeats later said in « Among School Children »:

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
 Upon a ghostly paradigm of things.

I assume that Plato was not particularly in Stevens's mind, but the reference to a sea which is only of the mind, a sea of thought, is one that might occur readily in popular neo-Pla-

tonising talk. It is a relevant coincidence that Botticelli's most neo-Platonic of pictorial Venuses was recently described by Sir Kenneth Clark as « 'born of the crystalline sea of thought and its eternity' »¹⁰. The phrase is quoted from Shelley, who has at least one other of the kind¹¹. Stevens geyed Shelley elsewhere, and associated him with « an Italy of the mind » (*OP* 48; see *OP* 47 and the « bethous » of *CP* 393-4), and the uncle's mocking phrase evokes this vaguely neo-Platonising manner of speaking, whether Shelley or Plato were in his mind or not. Plato was something of an obsession with Stevens, and appears again and again in the poet's endless debates about the real and the unreal. He saw Plato as a seductive and poetic thinker, but also as one who over-spiritualised things as they are¹², and he quoted with approval Coleridge's remark about « Plato's dear, gorgeous nonsense » (*NA* 3ff). Plato is no Aphrodite (though he has some famous accounts of the goddess), and I am not suggesting his presence here so much as exploring an association of ideas. The half-reluctant repudiation of the Venus, shimmering unbodily goddess of words, watery syllable, is similar to some of Stevens's feelings about Plato and may belong to the same frame of mind. The words « dear, gorgeous nonsense » fit well enough also as a description of the ghostly loveliness that is embodied or (so to speak) enspirited in the « radiant bubble » that the Venus is. Or rather « was », for she is now just a memory that wells up of a lost loveliness, a « radiance which was once so bright / [But] now for ever taken from my sight ». And along with the dismissive irony there coexists exactly this Wordsworthian nostalgia for a departed time when things could be truly seen as « Apparell'd in celestial light »¹³.

10. *The Nude*, 1956, p. 65.

11. *Hellas* 11. 698-9, and the fragment « Great Spirit whom the sea of boundless thought . . . » (or « mind »: readings differ).

12. See DANIEL FUCHS, *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens*, 1963, ch. V.

13. « Immortality Ode », 11. 179-80; 4.

The venerable « radiant bubble » whose « watery syllable » is burst by a rougher and truer force has precisely and specifically to do with poetry, like the venerable imagery elsewhere « Of golden quirks and Paphian caricatures » (CP 4) and especially the later address to the « Poet, patting more nonsense foamed/From the sea » in « Prelude to Objects » (CP 195). The bubble¹⁴ is burst by a deeper and more sober truth from a saltier well within the speaker, a truer sea than the sea of mere thought. The sea and salt are normal Stevens images for a grey, imposing, somewhat bitter but bracing monochrome reality, the basic slate, the final slate, « the strict austerity/Of one vast, subjugating, final tone » (CP 30). The mood is of winter, a true Stevens mood, but it includes longings for what it rejects, longings poignantly celebrated, in another mood, in « To the One of Fictive Music » (CP 88):

Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:
The imagination that we sputned and crave.

STANZA II

Of this stanza, Yvor Winters says « The first four lines are incomprehensible, except as description »¹⁵, but this is not surprising since he assumes the poem to be simply about love. The « red bird », elsewhere also an image of creative or imaginative strength (CP 244), is here the young poet. The lines are about the poetry of young men, and how alive it seems, or is: the poetry is not insubstantial because, for the moment, perhaps, the uncle is sympathetically caught up in the red bird's feelings, which were his once. The « golden floor » is metallic.

14. Santayana, a philosopher much loved by Stevens, often talks of the « bubblings » of poetry. See *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 1916, pp. 167, 260, 277.

15. WINTERS, *In Defense of Reason*, [n. d.], p. 457; see also Pack, p. 9.

in feeling as well as fact, and has a suggestion of that brilliant deathliness that we later find in the Emperor's palace of Yeats's imagining: but the red bird is no golden bird and streaks the floor with a garish vitality. Perhaps this hint of artifice shot through with colourful life reflects qualities in Stevens's earliest work. The undergraduate poems of 1898-1900, reprinted in the Stevens Number of the *Harvard Advocate* (December 1940), and recently discussed in Robert Buttell's *The Making of Harmonium*, 1967, combine something of this liveliness of movement (with plenty of birds, including, incidentally, pigeons who « rise and turn and turn anew », prototypes of the « blue pigeon » of Stanza XII), with a strong element of cool metallic aestheticism, where wind « rises on a silver wing » and terms like « silver » and « amethyst » are readily used in nature-description. But there is nothing so tersely alive as this first line, and at least one poem, the « Ballade of the Pink Parasol », of gay undiluted aesthete's artifice alone, and perhaps Stevens is thinking more particularly of some more recent things later included with « Le Monocle » in *Harmonium*. The third and fourth lines are a lovely celebration of a truer and more monochrome vitality, as the bird seeks out his choir among things as they are, « wind and wet and wing ». This is more the world of, say, the great second stanza of « Sunday Morning », « gusty / Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights » (CP 67). « Finds » refers of course to the poetic discovery, *trouvaille*, what troubadours etymologically did.

Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing, the hackneyed message of this red-bird talk? I am well-off, and elderly, and have heirs, an elderly poet also whose poetic strength younger poets inherit. (« I am a man of fortune » may echo Elpenor's description of himself as « A man of no fortune », towards the end of the first version of « Three Cantos », which Pound published the previous year in *Poetry*, June, July and August, 1917, and which seems also to have minor parallels with Stanza III. Elpenor's phrase from a speech near the beginning of *Odyssey*, XI, is now in Canto I). I greet the spring

as an old man, a man of winter, and spring's songs of welcome « choir for me farewell ». He is still partly talking to the Venus figure, at least intermittently. She is directly addressed throughout much of the poem, but in quotation-marks only in the first four lines of Stanza I, towards the end of which stanza she is called « she » and not « you ». Here she is « you », and remains « you » in Stanza III and later. There are no more quotation-marks because there is no more formal mocking set-piece in magnificent measure, only the speaker's more serious and intimate, though still ironic, musings, which, as in Stanza I, modulate from direct address to general meditation and back. He says now: the choirs bid farewell but you, wife, Venus, Muse, aged 40 also, go on as if things had not changed. « Anecdotal bliss » is a formidable reduction of the radiant lies, watery syllables, of the imagination, to a garrulous elderly absurdity. Enck (p. 55) has noted in another connection what is surely significant here, that seven Stevens poems (all roughly contemporary with « Le Monocle », one should add) are called « Anecdotes » of one kind or another; and « The Comedian as the Letter C » also refers to itself, in mock-depreciation, as an anecdote (CP 45). One of the adages says: « The poet is a god, or, the young poet is a god. The old poet is a tramp » (OP 173). Here not literally tramp so much as bedraggled socialite. « Starry *connaissance* » sharpens the overtones of « anecdotal bliss » beautifully. Stars in Stevens not infrequently suggest a remote prettified insignificance, or a realm of the trivially unreal: « a delicate ether star-impaled » (CP 144), the poet-ghosts « from the wilderness of stars » (CP 423). He wants « Day hymns instead of constellated rhymes » (CP 185), and in a different context says that he « understands why Victor Hugo said, in his time, that stars are no longer mentionable in poetry » (OP 184). This is the flavour of « starry » here, though Stevens does of course also write otherwise about stars. *Connaissance* can mean knowledge, understanding, and, usually in the plural, erudition, but here has very strong overtones of the social sense of « acquaintance » (*une connaissance, un ami de ma connaissance*), and

reduces knowledge or insight to the level almost of a fatuous claim to social familiarity with the stars, just as « anecdotal bliss » reduces the supreme fiction.

STANZA III

This stanza, one of Stevens's loveliest and wittiest, firm and richly-woven and fantasticating, exploits a fresh range of witty identities between sex and art. Its dominant mood is one of disenchantment with art, but this is qualified not only by touches of nostalgia but by infinite modulations of delight and fun. The visual arts (prints, paintings) supply the main images, and poetry and painting were closely linked for Stevens. His writings are full of assertions of the resemblance between the two arts (he has a whole essay on the subject), and his poems are notoriously painterly.

The stanza brings out a variety of aspects of the unreality of art. Presumably out of some old print, the Chinese sages contemplating their beards belong to a traditional identification of Chinamen with the cool ecstasies of limpid thought as against immersion in the realities of life. In « *Las de l'amer repos* » Mallarmé yearns to be like « *le Chinois au coeur limpide et fin* » and to paint upon a porcelain cup a lake in thin blue lines (this has been suggested as Stevens's source for the opening of Stanza VI¹⁶). Stevens told, in old age, of a remark by a young Korean friend of his, when congratulating him on his seventy-fifth birthday, about the poets and philosophers of the Far East who lived to a hundred or a hundred and fifty, « *nourishing themselves only on the mist* ». « *That* », says Stevens, « *is my idea of a specialist* ». On the same page, he makes his famous distinction between the theorist and the technician, « *the man who can talk about pictures and the man who can afford to buy them* » (*OP* 231; cf. 232). The painter, almost, isn't in it. This is Stevens, fairly straight-faced, at his

16. SIMONS, p. 237.

most substantial: « Money is a kind of poetry » (OP 165; cf. 240). Chinamen, with beards or with some symbolic involvement with Venus and the imagination, occur elsewhere (CP 73, OP 127ff.), and beards and hair, key images in this stanza, are frequently associated in Stevens with poetic activity. This symbolic association (whose cruder popular variant is the stock-image of the long-haired artist, current then as now, and noted with gusto by Pound in 1921)¹⁷ is often respectful, with or without secondary ironic overtones (CP 87, 105, 150, 240, 262). Elsewhere, as here, a mocking note is dominant. In « The Comedian as the Letter C », Crispin, etymologically curly-headed, « Socrates / Of snails », poet of salad-beds and quilts, begins with « a barber's eye ». Faced by the sea's vastness, his first practice is to barber it, turning waves into porpoises' mustachios, « Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world » (CP 27). His awakening begins when he learns that the sea is a big and serious thing. At the end of a long and varied progress, he returns to salad-beds, but without the barber's eye, no longer Socrates, lex or rex, no longer poet. He lives real life and has daughters with curls, natural and, unlike the women here, « unbraided » (CP 43). (They seem, however, eventually to become poetesses themselves (CP 44-5), in a final circular irony, though perhaps only metaphorically, since « the whole race is a poet » (CP 356) and life « the reflection of literature » (OP 159).

Hair, as one would expect, is also almost always sexual. In the very striking sexual-poetic act of « The Hand as Being » (CP 271), the « glittering hair » of the « naked, nameless dame » evokes the sexual and poetic potency without sarcasm. But there is an ironic view, closer to this stanza. « The Ordinary Women » (CP 10-12), seeking fulfilment, leave the ordinary world of « dry catarrhs » for the poetic-imaginative world of « guitars », a gaudy but disembodied dream-territory of

17. « Postscript to *The Natural Philosophy of Love* by Rémy de Gourmont », *Pavannes and Divagations*, 1960, pp. 207-8.

« nocturnal halls » with « lacquered loges ». There they get fantasy-sex, *reading* « of marriage-bed » (« Ti-lill-o! / And they read right long ») and being played to by gaunt guitarists, until a barren climax of absurd, ornate and phallic sexlessness is reached:

How explicit the coiffures became,
The diamond point, the sapphire point,
The sequins
Of the civil fans!

Beyond this high-point of comic pseudo-eroticism, sex in (or on) the head can hardly go, and there is nothing left for the women to do but cry « quittance / To the *wickless* hall » (my italics) and return, from « dry guitars », to the real world. There are, again, poems in which poetry is more or less respectfully spoken of as involved with sexual pain and deprivation (CP 240-1, 245-6), and the poet says to the One of Fictive Music that on her head « No crown is simpler than the simple hair » (CP 87). But the « all-speaking braid » of Utamaro's beauties and the « mountainous coiffures of Bath » (also presumably from a world of prints and paintings) are not this simple hair but exactly like the elaborately « explicit . . . coiffures ». The uncle's repeated « You know » is an eyebrow-raising, monocled knowingness, but its hint is not of active passion so much as of desire formalised into its social indications, reduced to overstated hints. Utamaro is an artist enormously conscious of hair, and one who, in the pillow-books and elsewhere, did full justice to naked passion. But what Stevens is obviously thinking of are the distinctive and elaborate Japanese hairdos (not braids in the pure sense of plaits, but what the girl in *The Mikado* perhaps meant when she sang « Braid the raven hair »), with their bulky twinings, of Utamaro's other world of gracious ladies and decorous courtesans, with their air of flouncing but dignified and coyly unconsummated sexual challenge. The flavour of this strongly visual stanza is that the ladies, like the sages (whose nearest approach to vitality con-

sists of « tittivating »), live attenuated lives, doubly thin and remote for being carried out in pictures: existences lived out not exactly on the pulses, and caught in that ghostly two-dimensional permanence which is all that can remain of them. For not one curl *in nature* has survived. Pictures, art, like history itself, are flat and ephemeral. This must be part of what the uncle means by « I shall not play the flat historic scale ». He means that he won't rehearse flat historical examples, since he does just that, but something like « I won't play at that sort of art, 'you know' the kind of Chinese thing and all that Utamaro hairdressing, etc ». The musical metaphor may be an allusion to the pentatonic scale (flat because its five notes are most familiarly represented by the black keys on the piano), on which Chinese melodies are based¹⁸. There may also be an allusion to another passage in Pound's « Three Cantos » (see commentary on Stanza II), in *Poetry*, June 1917, where various figures of the past are named in the Poundian way, and where Pound says (using, as here, the word « ghosts »): « Ghosts move about me / Patched with histories ». Stevens may in part be repudiating this kind of past-invoking poetry. He certainly disliked modern poems which deal with the past or use old forms, are played on the psaltery rather than banjo, or favour « Aztec almanacs » above the realities of the « intricate Sierra » (CP 38). This feeling is intimately involved with a larger sense of the flatness and ephemerality of all the perceptions and poems of the past itself, however real at the time:

Things are as they seemed to Calvin or to Anne,
Of England, to Pablo Neruda in Ceylon,
To Nietzsche in Basel, to Lenin by a lake.
But the integrations of the past are like
A *Museo Olimpico*, so much
So little, our affair, which is the affair
Of the possible. (CP 341-2)

18. I owe this suggestion to Professor G. K. Hunter.

Past poems (therefore, in time, every poem?), and not only the doubly-offending poems *about* the past, soon become irrelevant; and there are moods when earlier poetry is felt to have been so bound by convention and the old dead myths that it was a repetition instead of a « finding », as in « Of Modern Poetry »:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
 What will suffice. It has not always had
 To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
 Was in the script. (CP 239)

It is not irrelevant in this connection that the three examples in this stanza of « Le Monocle » evoke both highly stylised art-forms and highly stylised modes of existence. So not playing the flat historic scale seems to imply some sort of abandonment of art, or the abandonment of some sorts of art (say a barber's art of thin living and incomplete sex), since art, or the example the uncle gives, automatically become flat history. Hairdressing, Crispin's coiffure-poems, are play, but is all art hairdressing? The poem does not tell us at this point. But Crispin did stop writing, and Stevens published no new volume of poems for twelve years after *Harmonium* (which contains « Le Monocle »), so that it is right that the more extreme implication, among others, should hover over the situation momentarily. At any rate, the « playing », whatever it is, is a paltry thing; and the word's primary musical sense here carries the same mocking implication of a solemn triviality as in the sixth stanza of Yeats's « Among School Children » (just as that Platonic airiness, « the sea of spuming thought », resembles Plato's playing spume in the same Yeats stanza, and it is perhaps possible to think that Yeats may have had a vague memory of Stevens's poem when he wrote)¹⁹.

19, Yeats uses « play » thus of Plato's spume, and of Aristotle, who « played the raws ». With Pythagoras his third, and musical, example, the word « play » (puningly conspicuous by its absence) is replaced by « *Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings* ». (My italics).

The uncle's pity for the barbers is thus plainly a taunting one, though mixed with a kind of sadness:

Alas! have all the barbers lived in vain
That not one curl in nature has survived?

and the mocking yet elegiac note is finely clinched in the very beautiful, difficult last two lines:

Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,
Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?

The « studious ghosts » are those of the dead barbers, unworldly pedants of the art of hair, the poets and painters and also their subjects, the Chinese sages and coiffured ladies who made of their lives an ineffectual over-refined art, the wrong sort of poem. (The wry mock-tenderness of « studious » is a triumph). The person addressed is of course the Venus of Stanzas I and II, unreal goddess of love, watery syllable of unreal poetry. The copious wet hair of emerging Venus is an old commonplace among poets, Ovid, Spenser and others, as also among Births of Venus in the visual arts, from ancient statuary to Renoir (and especially since the Renaissance). The uncle's radiant bubble is clearly a comic version of the more aetherial Venus, Botticelli's, say, rather than Titian's Venus Anadyomene (in the Ellesmere Collection) or Renoir's *baigneuses*²⁰, although in this stanza with a subsidiary, vestigial hint of real sensuality which, I shall argue, also has its importance. The ghostliness is the main thing. In this very painting-conscious stanza, it is possible that Stevens had paintings in mind here too. If so, it would be pleasing and appropriate if Botticelli's were among those involved, for not only is his neo-Platonic Venus one of the best-known and most celestial of painted Venuses, but her long wet hair flows down to, and hides (as that of Titian's

20. A Venus Anadyomene by Renoir, an etching prefixed to Mallarmé's *Pages*, 1891, is different a witty, not particularly sensuous sketch, though rich in hair like the rest.

Anadyomene, for example, does not), her sexual parts. This may be asking too much. But Botticelli's goddess was a favourite among poets just at this time, and had appeared at least twice in recent numbers of *Poetry*, in Amy Lowell's « Venus Transiens » (April 1915) and, once again, in Pound's « Three Cantos » (June 1917). Two years after « Le Monocle », she reappeared in the « Botticellian sprays » of Pound's *Mauberley* (1920), less a token of active love than some critics have suggested. And Yeats, describing the eighth gyre, said, I am not sure how gravely, that Titian's forms « awaken sexual desire — we had not desired to touch the forms of Botticelli »²¹.

No paraphrase can do justice to the rich comic ghostliness of these last two lines, their blend of a fantasticating loveliness and a diamond-hard, witty precision, like a few rare moments in Pope or in Byron's *Vision of Judgment*. Perhaps they say this. Why, unreal and deceiving goddess (but also « dripping » and somewhat foolish-looking?), do you appear with all that rich wet hair, careless of the feelings of your betrayed and half-forgotten votaries, the ghosts of the dead barbers, the ghosts that all barbers are? I take it she hurts by arousing their ghostly cravings (sexual and artistic), reminding them of her past betrayal of them, and transferring her attentions to one who is not yet dead. Ghosts in Stevens, however, are not merely those who are dead, but those who ignore or won't come to terms with reality. Barber Crispin is a « sovereign ghost » (*CP* 27). The rabbit is king of the ghosts when, his « head like a carving in space », he chooses to ignore the cat who will eat him (*CP* 209-10). The barber-ghosts are the ghosts of « Large Red Man Reading » (*CP* 423-4), dead poets and their missed chances, who flock back to hear the Red Man read true poems, things as they are, « the pans above the stove, the pots on the

21. *A Vision*, 1961, p. 293. Yeats called Botticelli (along with Titian and D. G. Rossetti) a « great poetical painter » (*Autobiographies*, 1955, p. 125). For an amusing glimpse of the Botticelli-fad in the years just before 1914, see Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (1929), II, iv, Consul Books, 1965, pp. 161-2.

table, the tulips among them ». Venus, though, is no Red Man, but a betraying goddess, radiant bubble.

And yet, here, not quite so radiant, not quite such a bubble, as in Stanza I. She is not quite a ghost with the ghosts she mocks, and rises not from a sea of thought, but from sleep. The dripping hair seems real. It suggests the sea and echoes Stanza I, but the word here is « sleep ». This variation, on the one hand, gives out suggestions of languor and dreaminess which may be thought appropriate to the main aetherial effect. But it also evokes a real woman getting out of bed, perhaps vaguely the uncle's wife. She is obviously awakening something in the uncle, as goddess or wife or both (which may add to the pains of the ghosts). He did once, after all, love her, and she had not seemed a bubble then. In the second edition of his second book, *Ideas of Order*, Stevens added three poems, placing one of them, « Farewell to Florida » (CP 117-7) at the head of the collection, clearly as a farewell to the kind of poetry he associated with *Harmonium*. Florida, rich, lush, feminine land, is a muse. « I loved her once ». That love was no bubble, but very real at the time, and passionate. Its trouble was not insubstantiality in this case, but a kind of hot poetic barrenness: « The palms were hot / As if I lived in ashen ground ». *Harmonium* has several Florida poems, and one in particular where, in urgent erotic terms, the poet-lover begs her not to torment him with rank imaginations, but only, characteristically, to disclose « A few things for themselves »:

Donna, donna, aark,
 Stooping in indigo gown
 And cloudy constellations,
 Conceal yourself or disclose
 Fewest things to the lover —
 A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit,
 A pungent bloom against your shade. (CP 47-8)

The poem is called « O Florida, Venereal Soil ». The touch of erotic vividness at the end of Stanza III of « Le Monocle » is

thus entirely consistent with Stevens's way elsewhere of addressing Venus as a poetic muse. At the same time, the poem is about to concern itself more prominently with a literal love-situation, and it is probably right to sense that the goddess, mostly a ghostly muse so far, is beginning to be associated with a real woman in the uncle's mind, presumably his wife.

STANZA IV

Venus and Eve are related by obvious associations of ideas. They are erotic temptresses, leaders-astray. The art-historians have shown that they are iconographically related. The apple, a central image in this stanza, is an unmistakable connection. I believe that for the first time in the poem, the uncle's Prufrockian erotic malaise is a more dominant theme than his concern with poetry, though the two are never separable. « When you were Eve » seems more specifically addressed to his wife or some other real woman, than to the Venus as muse. It mainly means when you were young and innocent, or precariously innocent. The apple, fruit of life, later called fruit of love (ll. 9-10), can take care of itself, need not, should not, be plucked. The first four lines end in a harsh sarcasm about love. It was good, though perhaps somewhat coldly and lifelessly (« luscious », « impeccable ») so long as it remained untasted. After that, known to be acrid. « Untasted », between commas, heavily opening a line, coming after « sweet », makes this emphasis very strong. The words « in its heavenly, orchard air » add the suggestion of a somewhat unreal loveliness which we might well be prepared for by now, from this poet.

The subject of poetry is secondary here, but the momentum of the previous stanzas makes it unlikely that it should be entirely absent. I think there is at least an implication of parallel painfulness in poetry and love. I do not press this, but the apple might suggest in a marginal way those luscious and impeccable fruit poems, those « poems, of plums » (CP 30) and

peaches and pears and «apples on a plate» (*CP* 217) which Crispin rejects, and then, rather more seriously, takes up again, and finally apparently rejects along with all other kinds of poem. These Cézanne-type still-lives were important to Stevens, but a bit of a worry. On the one hand, fruit are real, survive their poems, should not be falsified.

The words of things entangle and confuse.
The plum survives its poems . . .
. . . good, fat, guzzly fruit. (*CP* 41)

Just in this way the apple can take care of itself and should not be peered into and messed about. On the other, fruit are good, beautiful, and above all real, so they must have « apposite ritual » (*CP* 39) not just in little dandy poems, but grandly in « Sunday Morning » and in much of the later work. « Le Monocle » is certainly a repudiating poem. The « luscious » apple may, or may not, connect with the « silver-ruddy, gold-vermillion fruits » which are explicitly associated by the uncle with other people's poems in Stanza X, and which quite readily describe some of Stevens's own. Stevens has a very important later statement about these poems of fruit and other pretty exotics, which shows, through its very positiveness, exactly the kind of uncertainty:

It is absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet.
Unless one is that, one is not a poet at all. That, of course,
does not mean banyans and frangipani; and it cannot
for long mean no banyans and frangipani. (*OP* 252)

Apples (specific symbolisms apart) are less exotic, more real (if « the full flower of the actual, not the California fruit of the ideal »? *OP* 172) which conceivably makes the problem harder.

Still, I think the poetic theme is subdued here, though the overtones would be roughly of the kind I've been sketching. Sex comes first. The last seven lines say this: the apple decays and dies, like skulls. It is, if correctly read, as good an emblem of putrefaction and death as the skull; better, for it

is the fruit of love as well as the fruit of life. Love is too mad, bewildering, confusing to the young who are capable of it, and can only be truly come to terms with when one is too old for it. Presumably this is true of poetry in a secondary way. The mood is again close to implying that the abandonment of both may be the most realistic solution. But it stops short of this.

This parallel sense of a sexual difficulty or distress and a poetic impulse that goes sour or wrong may be compared (despite important differences) with the situation in Pound's *Maunderley*. The two poems are not far apart in time, and may be products of the same climate of thought. At a period when psychoanalytic notions were gaining momentum, such identifications may have seemed particularly inviting material for poetic exploration.

STANZA V

This stanza contains a restatement of the theme of youth and age, and sexual decline, which was the concern of Stanzas II and IV. The « furious star » might be another of Venus's identities, as a planet; or Hesperus, western star, sacred to Aphrodite, and in its own way mythologically related to the apple-imagery of Stanza IV. The energy that it stands for is lovingly celebrated in the fourth and fifth lines, but « furious » and « fiery » are also frantic. The analogy is limited, but we may be being prepared for an erotic variant of the Wordsworthian progress from « aching joys » and « dizzy raptures » to a wisdom more chastened and subdued²². If so, it does not really become evident until the next stanza. For the moment, « the firefly's quick, electric stroke » ticking tediously is a nervous, edgy boredom. The crickets are reminders of death and nature's indifference to human suffering, the « indifferent crickets » of « Esthétique du Mal », whose painful cry can be overcome by a massive chant of celebration (the « great hymn »

22. « Tintern Abbey », II:83-93.

of Stanza IX), but only after their painful truth has been recognised instead of being evaded in shimmering prettinesses:

. . . A loud, large water
Bubbles up in the night and drowns the crickets' sound.
It is a declaration, a primitive ecstasy,
Truth's favors sonorously exhibited. (CP 321)

The loud large water bubbling up is the maturer stronger version of the internal « deep up-pouring from some saltier well » of Stanza I of « Le Monocle », whose first job it was to burst the radiant bubble. The primitive ecstasy is the chant at the end of « Sunday Morning » as well as the great hymn of Stanza IX. The « mother grass » is the Earth, which contains death, the cricket's sound, « our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly » in « Sunday Morning » (CP 69), where, as is implied also in « Esthétique du Mal », « Death is the mother of beauty ». The woman being addressed as « you » is still perhaps the wife, but we have returned to a very strong association of her with poetry. It is through her, in spite of everything, that one arrives at the saving truth: « your first imagery / Found inklings of your bond to all that dust ». « Imagery » which « finds inklings of bonds » is one of poetry's high tasks, as Stevens tells us in the prose essay « Three Academic Pieces I » and the one called « Effects of Analogy » and elsewhere. In the first of these essays, some of the bonds are said (and Stevens uses the Wordsworthian phrase) to yield « intimations of immortality » (NA 75). At this point in the poem, however, it is mortality which must first be grasped. The mood is appropriately sombre, but is ready to be opened up.

STANZA VI

As in Stanza III, painting is partly a metaphor for writing, and painting blue lakes means writing poems: the image is used elsewhere (CP 37), and may originate in Mallarmé's

« *Las de l'amer repos* » (see commentary on stanza III, and n. 16). If a specific painter comes to mind here, it is perhaps Cézanne, though there is no special significance in this beyond the fact that Stevens was interested in Cézanne's work and at least once used him as an example to illustrate by analogy a remark about the poetic process (NA 46). Lakes in Stevens are often a token of a simplified, cosier reality (« Lakes are more reasonable than oceans », CP 325, and see CP 24), and the uncle may be implying this about poetry too. (On the other hand, « The lake . . . full of artificial things », which has its part in the supreme fiction, is perhaps highly valued and celebrated at CP 397). Blue is the colour of imagination. Its lighter ephemerality, the ephemeral blues which are no subject for the poet of forty, have already in a way perhaps been the concern of Stanza III, but its more sober, inclusive and enduring form, the « basic slate », which is the same as the « final slate » wished for from the song of winter in « The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad » (CP 96), is now positively asserted for the first time. This yearning for an inclusive monochrome truth is a major Stevens motif (although the opposite, polychrome yearnings, the mood of summer, also exist). It takes many forms. It loves the « one vast, subjugating, final tone » (CP 30) of the sea, the « essential prose »

*To which all poems were incident, unless
That prose should wear a poem's guise at last, (CP 36)*

the « essential barrenness », « Without evasion by a single metaphor » (CP 373). It rejects « letters » for the « imaginative, ghosts that dally / With life's salt », which « secrete within them / Too many references » (CP 279). This monochrome mood has its exquisite as well as its sturdier variants, and this celebration of a unitary ecstasy in « *Esthétique du Mal* » may be an example:

*Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs d'après Nature.
All sorts of flowers. That's the sentimentalist.*

When B. sat down at the piano and made
 A transparence in which we heard music, made music,
 In which we heard transparent sounds, did he play
 All sorts of notes? Or did he play only one
 In an ecstasy of its associates,
 Variations in the tones of a single sound,
 The last, or sounds so single they seemend one? (CP 316)

In « *Le Monocle* », the rejections and celebrations are of the sturdier sort. The element of drab austerity in « *basic slate* » appropriately arrests any impulse to sentimentalize its bracing simplicity and any grandeur that resides in the « *universal hue* ». It includes that necessary awareness of death which the two previous stanzas especially had begun to express. Its sober monochrome is Wordsworth's « *sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality* », but like Wordsworth's does not exclude ecstatic utterance, and is prepared to celebrate its own version of the « *primal sympathy* »²³ in the turbulent « *great hymn* » of Stanza IX, the « *boisterous devotion to the sun* » (CP 70), the « *primitive ecstasy* » (CP 321). This stanza is cooler than that, the poem has not yet worked up to it, any more than it has risen to the calmer dignity of the gigantic tree of Stanza X, another great climax of the monochrome.

Still, recalling the « *basic slate* » is a release from the disheartening contemplation of lost radiances, and he can now assert that « *There is a substance in us that prevails* ». That more modest, greyer potency, poetic or sexual, depends on avoidance of the quirky restlessness of elderly infatuations, that senile overdoing of fiery-boy giddiness which no scrivening can keep pace with. The amours of balding men of forty do not measure up to the sensuous splendours of the red bird's song, but are a kind of academic nothingness, whose song seems for the moment bound to be flattened to an abstract

23. « *Immortality Ode* », ll. 207-2; 185.

lecture: I wonder if « introspective exiles » contains a hint of Eliot, by this time well-known as an expatriate poet, whose theme in « Prufrock » (recently out in book-form) is precisely the erotic introspections of a balding middle-aged dandy, talking about rather than making love. The « lecturing » is a polar opposite of the unifying activity imaged in the « universal hue » which merges its component shades in one. In its wry, ironic, understated way, this dismissive conception of a mere poetic academicism or abstraction as the consequence of imagination lost or impaired, the inevitable alternative to unifying power or « shaping spirit », is one of the great Romantic themes. It is, with some differences of detail, Coleridge's great sadness in the sixth stanza of « Dejection », and occurs as a passing phase in Yeats's « Tower »:

It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend
Until imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things.

Coleridge sees no real way out, and Yeats seems to hope at this point that the imagination will be able at last to make the abstractions flower. Stevens's uncle brushes the whole thing aside. It is not his problem. « It is a theme for Hyacinth alone ». It is sometimes held that this means that love is a theme only for the young and beautiful. My feeling is that this gets the tone wrong. The line is obscure and « it » has no clear antecedent: it could refer to « love » in general or to all the elderly erotic mess just described. Perhaps both are vaguely implied. But on any reading, Hyacinth is hardly an obvious image of sexually vigorous youth. The flower is an object of pale rather than full-blooded beauty, and in Eliot's « Portrait of a Lady » (also in the *Prufrock* volume), for example, its « smell » evokes the weakest and most distant kind of sexual stirring (« Recalling things that other people have desired »). The young

man Hyacinth was the first-ever object of a homosexual passion, and it seems to the point here that he was the beloved of Apollo. In its almost gayly aggressive, simplifying way, this joke clinches some of the overtones of earlier stanzas, those sad adumbrated relations between sexual inadequacy and a poetry that goes wrong, but this time it lets the uncle out.

STANZA VII

This is no theme for Hyacinth. It is the major theme of « Sunday Morning ». The old religious myths are lies, the only available ecstasies are earthly ones. The angels here are not like « the necessary angel of earth » (CP 496), that secular glory which replaces the religious, but which must be celebrated by religious metaphors, so that trees, in « Sunday Morning », though not « serafin » are « like serafin », and the Sun must be worshipped « Not as a god, but as a god might be » (CP 70). These angels are celestial, and that they should ride celestial mules is appropriate fun. That their « blazing passes » also have loveliness is a sign of Stevens's often-noted nostalgia for the myths he is repudiating. Such muleteers are so dainty of their way that the chances are they will never reach earth. Meantime, real life on earth goes on, gross, ugly, warm, vital: soldiers drinking. Out of this, as out of pain, the earthly ecstasy makes itself available: so the sad awareness at the end of Stanza V and the grey sobriety of the « basic slate » later culminate in the « great hymn ». The ecstasy of earth's own heavenly honey (the celestial sort « may or may not come », and probably won't) is suddenly and briefly vouchsafed: « One's tootings at the weddings of the soul / Occur as they occur » (CP 222), and for a moment only, coming and going at once. But this « world of a moment, / Fitted by men and horses / For hymns » (OP 37) is also inclusive and eternal, « For a moment final » (CP 168), « like sudden time in a world without time » (CP 237). In a way, it counterparts and complements the im-

plications of the « basic slate ». On the one hand, steady, all-embracing monochrome, « vast, subjugating, final tone » and « universal hue ». On the other, the dazzling, all-subjugating, all-inclusive clarity, epiphany, still point, the « point in the fire of music where / Dazzle leads to a clarity and we observe, / And observing is completing and we are content, / In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole » (CP 341), an eternity in transience. The mood here is more bracingly low-pitched, and it is the element of transience in this equation which is stressed. A very sober facet of it is soberly developed in the first half of the next stanza. Still, a note of delighted and witty expansiveness does I think prevail, and it is characteristic of Stevens that it should do so just when the pretensions of great moments (even, to this extent, secular ones) are being played down.

The « honey » belongs to the traditional language of ecstasy²⁴. As in « Kubla Khan », it is associated with the momentary or putative vision of a « damsel ». Coleridge says that, could he revive the damsel's song within him, all would say that « he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise ». Coleridge laments the transience and so does Stevens in a different way: but Stevens, or the uncle, also says that the frank recognition of the transience, the refusal to indulge in fantasies of an eternal ecstasy, is the only realistic attitude and perhaps a pre-condition of having any great moments at all. It would of course be nice if the damsel of the vision were eternal. The yearning, if it is that, combines with a note of hearty, almost joyfully defiant scepticism. The unfinished sentence suggests an inconclusive longing, mockingly

24. See for milk and honey the Plato reference in commentary on Stanza IX, and ELISABETH SCHNEIDER, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan*, 1953, pp. 245-6. The woman in Mallarmé's prose-poem, « Le Phénomène Futur », to whom Renoir's Venus (see n. 20) probably refers, is described as having « des seins levés comme s'ils étaient pleins d'un lait éternel », and her hair is described as « une extase d'or ». See also the « honey wild, and manna dew » in Keats's « La Belle Dame sans Merci ».

toyed-with. Suppose the angels did bring « A damsel heightened by eternal bloom ». Suppose, suppose. It's a lovely thought, and out of the question. The last line also brings us back to earth in another way. After all this talk of « blazing passes » and heavenly honey, we realize with a sudden shock that the line is also very literally a reminder of the uncle's ageing wife.

STANZA VIII

The uncle is a dull scholar, and he is in love. Why dull? Because he is middle-aged, and it has taken him all this time to learn the truths of middle age? Dull by the standards of the splendid impossible vision of the damsel with eternal bloom, and therefore also dull rather than flashy, solid rather than radiantly unreal? « Dull » may have a relation to the « basic slate », and « dull scholar » may, self-depreciatingly but with tenderness rather than contempt, suggest a quiet steady devotion. The dull scholar is no « introspective exile, lecturing » or Chinese sage « tittivating ». He is, he realizes after all, in love with his middle-aged wife, and his middle-aged muse. When the sad truths are faced, love can be reasserted, the ecstasies released, the hymn sung: these are bound to be duller with age, that is itself one of the truths to be faced. But he is still a scholar in a good sense, germane to poetry, as when Yeats talks in « The Tower » of compelling his soul to study « in a learned school ». One of Stevens's adages is « Poetry is the scholar's art » (*OP* 167). It occurs more than once:

... the best definition of true imagination is that it is the sum of our faculties. Poetry is the scholar's art. The acute intelligence of the imagination, the illimitable resources of its memory, its power to possess the moment it perceives... (NA 61)

He is dull because getting old, but still a scholar, because he understands that in real life things come and go, and that

in old age « possession » of the « finds » must be briefer. If he did not acknowledge this dullness, he would be no scholar at all. The « ancient aspect touching a new mind » is variously an old truth freshly realized, an old wife seen with fresh eyes, the old revelations realized in a new secular way (not the *flat* historic scale) in Stanza VII. Poetry, said Stevens, is « saying new things about old things » (OP 267). Like everything else, each freshness passes, each find evaporates, and more quickly the older one gets. « It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies ». It is probably no accident that this recalls, in feeling and cadence, « They mount, they shine, evaporate and fall » from *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. The truth is, « Our bloom is gone ». (« Bloom », used twice, takes up and dismisses the « eternal bloom » of the hypothetical, impossible damsel of the previous stanza). The chastened reality remains to be sung. The wonderful closing lines celebrate himself and his wife and muse (but more his wife), as elderly, hale and fat, distended gourds: a rich song of grotesque and oddly joyful tenderness. It is the sad triumphant joy of facing facts exactly and knowing that « Death is the mother of beauty ». This kind of exuberance is exactly prescribed in these famous lines from the late poem whose very title is a key to this, « Esthétique du Mal »:

Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
The gaiety of language is our seigneur. (CP 322)

STANZA IX

And so he invites his wife to join him in the great turbulent hymn. He wonders where he will find a grandeur adequate to it (it may be that the great symbolic tree in the next stanza, « that bears / A semblance to the thing I have in mind », is the answer to his question). Blackmur says this stanza is a « rhetorical interlude » which « has nothing logically to do

with the poem »²⁵. My feeling, on the contrary, is that it is an obvious natural development of much that has gone before. Blackmur's view that it instead expresses Stevens's feeling towards this poem seems unconvincing: the stanza is an invitation to write a poem, not on the face of it a comment on one already written, and « verses wild with motion » in any case hardly describe the elusive sophistication of the poem we have been reading so far.

One or two marginal notes seem worth making. Like some other ecstatic rituals in Stevens, the « verses wild with motion » suggest corybantic revelry, of the kind described, for example, in Plato's *Ion*, 533c-534 (where there is also milk and honey) and in Catullus, LXIII (*Attis*), 19ff. The « clashes » may consequently evoke clashing cymbals, but they mainly, of course, join with the war-parallel to recall the « clashed edges of two words that kill » in Stanza I (for another analogy between soldier and poet, see *CP* 407). The hymn is expansive, extravagant (no conceit is too lusty to be expounded or « broadened » in it, and, perhaps, no thought, however lusty, cannot be made « broader » in the sexual sense), but it is also accurate, realistic and painful, for its subject is a deadly truth.

The « ward of Cupido » is still the Venus or Veneréal figure of earlier stanzas, and it is hardly a troublesome detail that this new phrase should put things upside down. A « ward of Cupido » (that is, of Venus's son) can be Veneréal in something like the way in which a beautiful woman, as it were ward of Helen (Leda's daughter) can, in Yeats's « Among School Children », be called a « Ledaean body ». « Venerable » in the next line may be a kind of buried vestigial pun (for Venus, though unmistakably suggested in the poem, is not actually named). For a similar pun, see « Venerandam » at the end of the third of Pound's « Three Cantos » in *Poetry* for August 1817 (the passage, altered, is now in Canto I). Pound borrow-

25. *Language as Gesture*, 1954, p. 241.

ed this from Dartona, a Latin translator of the second Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite²⁶, but a source for such verbal play would hardly be needed. The pun would be entirely relevant to Stevens's poem, linking, as it does in this stanza, the ideas of old age and sex, but I mention it only as a pleasant possibility.

STANZA X

The greath hymn is turbulent but true. Its conceits are lusty and resounding but of the basic slate, « Truth's favors sonorously exhibited » (CP 321). It has nothing to do with foppish fancy, mystic spouts, magic trees and gold-vermilion fruits. I do not know whom he is attacking, certain « charlatans of the irrational » (OP 228), poets « overfull of abnormality » (NA 153), whatever forms of stepped-up romanticism happened to be going. The barren self-centred automatism of « Spontaneously watering their gritty soils » may, with « mystic spouts », refer to some early forms of surrealism. Crispin also saw himself called to put the poetic situation right (CP 37), but his « first central hymns », unlike the uncle's late one, merely celebrated « rankest trivia ». Neither Crispin, not the uncle, certainly not Stevens, escape the guilt of « silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion fruits ». So the uncle may partly be repudiating by implication his own earlier work, like Byron bidding farewell to the « golden dreams » and « mystic round » of romance and fancy and turning to the realms of truth²⁷. The uncle's truth (and perhaps the « bravura adequate » he was looking for) is embodied in the beautiful image of the tree and its imposing, over-riding simplicity and grandeur. Unlike Wordsworth's « Tree, of many, one » it does not « speak of

26. See also *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 1960, p. 266. The essay on early translators of Homer originally appeared in sections during 1918-9 in *The Fugist*.

27. « To Romance ».

something that is gone »²⁸ but compensates richly for that something. But like Wordsworth's, it is one of the great Romantic images, in a line which includes Arnold's «Thyrsis» and Yeats's «Among School Children», noble emblematic presences in a world of imaginative quest or endeavour. Here it grandly restates the «substance . . . that prevails» of Stanza XI.

Those who take the poem to be exclusively about love presumably read the tree as a phallic assertion²⁹. This must be accepted as an undertone, but as a dominant element in the poem's main plot creates difficulties: the image of birds visiting the tree, and of the tip still tipping it when the birds have gone, evokes selfconsciously frolicsome visions of sub-Rabelaisian fantasy entirely at variance with the austere grandeur of the lines. The tree after all is explicitly contrasted with other people's bad poems, and it makes more satisfactory sense to think of its primary emblematic value as having to do with poetry and the imagination. A great and noble tree is similarly used in a later poem, «The Old Woman and the Statue» (OP 45-6). The poor old woman in the park is a reminder of the over-simplifying falsity of art (the statue), however noble. Without her, the «evening like a budding yew» could afford to be noble and serene:

It would become a yew
Crown great and grave beyond imagined trees.

The statue would come into its own again and «How clearly that would be defined». Despite the wonderful nostalgia for the tree's towering simplicity, the mood, in this poem of the 1930's, is sombre, and expresses a disillusion with what the

28. «Immortality Ode», ll. 51-3.

29. E. g. ENCK, p. 82: «Sex, strikingly depicted for *Harmonium* in the tenth section . . . » Contrast the infrequent, and in my view correct, reading of H[arriet?] M[onroe?], in a review of the *Others* anthology for 1919 in *Poetry*, XVII (December 1920), 156-7, where her comment on the stanza is «His artistic creed professes certain austerities».

tree stands for in a world which contains the ignoble particularities of pain, which is the opposite of the excited faith of this stanza of «Le Monocle». But though the mood differs, the two trees mean similar things.

STANZA XI

This and the next stanza are a kind of dying fall, an ironic, perhaps Laforguan, withdrawal from the magnificence of the great hymn and the gigantic tree. The drift of thought is similar, but in a lower, self-mocking key. Much of the stanza is a comic-serious, Browningsque coruscation. It is also very difficult. « If sex were all » (as it is not, especially after the « fiery-boy » stage is past), then the slightest stimulus would produce poems, « the wished for words ». The way this is put suggests not only that the idea is impossible, but that if it were true, the results, sexual or poetic, would have a frantic, twitching automatism: the fiery boys, the balding amorists, and especially the fops of fancy, come to mind. The « first, foremost law » is either (a) ironically, the proposition « sex is all », or (b) unironically, the whole « If . . . then . . . » proposition of the first two lines, with the attendant implication « but sex is not all », or (c) unironically, some great over-riding truth like that of the tree or the booming frog. From the syntax, it is impossible to be certain, and this is true of the whole second sentence (11.3-7). This could mean: (1) How treacherous of fate to make us do all these varied frantic things other than sex, without regard to the foremost law that sex is everything (ironic sense (a). Either « we » or « fate » might be doing the disregarding. This applies to all the readings I can think of, and tends to come to more or less the same thing either way. The point of (1) is that fate proves that there is more to life than that silly law suggests: that « more » will include the intrusive reality of the booming frog, or be contained in the grand and simple inclusiveness of the gigantic tree. (2) assumes, unlike (1),

that all the antics fate makes us perform are erotic. How treacherous of fate to do this to us, ignoring (or making us ignore) the law that « sex is not everything » (sense (b)) or the law embodied in the tree and/or the frog (sense (c)). (3) assumes that the antics, whether erotic or not, are trivial and hysterical. Fate treacherously makes us perform them, in disregard of the law in sense (c), which, being serious and truthful, deserves wiser behaviour from us (and fate). There are doubtless other possible readings, and this sort of dispiriting analysis could be prolonged. I do not think it matters much which conceptual unravelling we choose, since in a large sense they seem to me to come to the same thing on the whole. I shall say what I think that is in a moment, but the general point about syntactical uncertainty may be illustrated from a simpler example further on in the stanza. Who is « Keen to the point of starlight »? is it « us », the lovers by the « pool of pink », with our small intensity of love, our minute, coldly burning, feeling, like a star? or is it the pool, or the lilies, or the chromes, with their cool and pretty brilliance? Syntactically, it could be any one or all of these, but we hardly stop to be puzzled: on any reading, the phrase belongs to the pink pool's world of attractive and artificial insignificance, a world apparently removed from any larger awareness, and from the odious booming of frogs. Similarly in the earlier lines, the syntax may make various kinds of logical sense or nonsense, but I think that the really important points make themselves felt whatever logical route we choose to take towards them, and perhaps especially if we don't bother much with such routes at all.

On any reading, sex and poetry, as in much of the rest of the poem, are inter-involved, and the first seven lines, with their « wished-for words » and « doleful heroics », are as much about poetry as love. The poetry in question sounds foolish, unsteady, emotional in a bad sense, and the rejection parallels that of the « fops of fancy » in the previous stanza, and much else in the poem. Against whatever is being rejected stand the frog, a wholesome crude reminder of unsentimental fact, and

the tree of the previous stanza, a token of that austere grandeur of vision which can only be earned when the pain and ugliness of reality have been fully recognised and assimilated, instead of being evaded in unreal radiances, sentimental prettinesses, or restless hyperactivity. Stanzas VI to X have shown us that the uncle is not repudiating every form of either poetry or love, but his conception of both now involves a more realistic awareness of harsh and ugly facts, and a sort of chastened grandeur. A doctrine or catchphrase like « sex is everything » is precisely the sort of sentimental fatuity which goes with the restless, unrealistic and undirected hysteria, in sex and poetry, described here (and also in Stanzas VI and X), as well as with the earlier cult of the « radiant bubble » aspect of the uncle's Venus, and the more mundane and elderly rosy glow of last night's « pool of pink ». It does not alter the case that in the contemptuous repudiation of all this there is also an element of rueful nostalgia for the vigour and self-abandon of youth (especially Stanza V), the lovelier phases of early poetic creation (especially Stanzas I and II), and the prettiness of the pink pool. The pool has a chromatic vitality out of Impressionist painting, but hardened by a light comic scepticism all Stevens's own. If lakes are more reasonable than oceans (see above, on Stanza VI) the pool is cosier still. Its cool dandy prettiness is shattered by the « black fact » (*OP* 19) of the booming frog, one of the necessary reminders of reality, ugly, alive and warm. « Anguishing hour » and « odious chords » are a coy, mincing way of describing it. The uncle is retreating selfconsciously from his recent magniloquence into a sort of aesthete's shell, understating a great truth and mocking himself for it. The theme is that of the great hymn, and its truth stays uncanceled, but there is a climb-down in the tone, back perhaps to the understating edginess of earlier stanzas.

Sex is not everything. But there is a secondary implication (« ambiguity or uncertainty », in Stevens's phrase) which pulls the other way. Both the tree and the booming frog may be read (and have been) as sexual assertions, the tree phallic be-

yond the capacities of lesser mortals than the uncle, or impersonally as a great enduring ideal of sexual potency, while the frog unquestionably suggests in part a rude simplicity of animal eroticism which is the polar of sentimental soirées by pools of pink. Is sex, then, after all everything, an irony that the uncle does or does not see? and is not his earlier implied protestation that « sex is not everything » also a customary phrase of sexual timidity or refusal? Possibly. Some overtones of the kind do make themselves felt. Nowhere is it clearer than in this stanza that mere conceptual logic will get us nowhere, and that complicated, perhaps confused, emotional states are at work. But the main effect remains, and points to a dismissal of « sex is all » and all the attendant nonsense, on sturdy realistic grounds. Animal boomings (of frogs, oxen, and the like, a recurrent Stevens image), if themselves erotic, are at least more vigorously and unfussily so than pools of pink. But I am convinced that the true significance of these boomings is generalized away from their erotic overtones; that they nearly always, in Stevens, stand for a full-throated virile assertion of reality *tout court*, for a poetic potency to which pools of pink are just one of the many negligible, prettifying trivialities.

Consider some examples. « The Latest Freed Man » (CP 204-5), newly and ecstatically alive to the real, feels himself changed to an ox with « organic boomings », part of a big clear-sighted earthiness « *Qui fait fi des jolieses banales* ». Here the erotic element, in any literal sense, is vestigial. In the « Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction », in the « interior paramour » style, the erotic is frankly metaphorical of imaginative activity. « The booming is blunt, not broken in subtleties » (CP 390), is explicitly sexual, as is another a little later in the poem (CP 391), but the real subject is the supreme fiction. The most magnificent assertion of what the « odious chords » stand for, and in a way the closest to the passage in « Le Monocle » because it marvellously includes the element of pain as well as its transformation into a « great hymn » of joyful celebration, oc-

curs in the «dead shepherd» episode later still in the «Notes». As in «Le Monocle» too, what the boomings cancel are things red or reddish, a stale sentimental colour standing for the lifeless old conventional fictions, dull «face of slate» (poles apart from the basic slate),

An effulgence faded, dull cornelian
 Too venerably used. That might have been.
 It might and might have been. But as it was,
 A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell
 And bade the sheep catouse. Or so they said.
 Childrem in love with them brought early flowers
 And scattered them about, no two alike. (CP 400)

The «dead shepherd» and the «chords from hell» are, again, the great *esthétique* of evil (*esthétique* does not mean just an aesthetic for Stevens, it is a way of life, «the measure of a civilization: not the sole measure, but a measure» — OP 171)³⁰. which translates life's pain into an imaginative joy that remains aware of pain. «Le Monocle» stops short of the full flowering. It knows where the supreme fiction is, but remains on the foothills. The uncle has not, he seems to realize, «bravura adequate» after all. So he plays it cooler. But that he can see through the pool of pink to the booming frog earns him a kind of gaiety. It is a happy little paradox (or a trivial joke, I am not sure which) that it should be the «rose rabbi» of middle age, rather than the «dark» one of youth, who makes this perception.

30. The dead shepherd is perhaps partly an image of Christ. In his «Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction»: A Commentary', *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale (Sezione Germanica)*, Naples, 1961, p. 193, FRANK KERMODE says: «Stevens here uses the Christian revelation as an instance of beneficent and pleasure-releasing change, the result of a re-imagining of reality». Stevens's paganism is a sufficient guarantee that the Christian image involves no Christian commitment, but that (as Kermode says) it is a metaphor of imaginative rebirth or, as Harold Bloom puts it in his «Commentary», «Orphic salvation» (*Wallace Stevens. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. MARIE BORROFF, 1963, p. 90). Note that in «Sunday Morning» the sun is to be celebrated «Not as a god, but as a god might be» (CP 70).

STANZA XII

Young uncle was « dark rabbi », old uncle is « rose rabbi » (or was). This, whatever the meaning, is the pattern. It is not so clear with the blue and white pigeons. The white pigeon tired of flight suggests age of course, but the mood of his fluttering to the ground is not much like the uncle's assertion of the substance that prevails. On the other hand, has this « fluttering » anything to do with the « fluttering things » later in the stanza, with a touch of ambiguous gaiety in decline, fit for a rose rabbi? Pigeons or doves, « fowl of Venus » (*OP* 35), are often in Stevens birds of imagination, and blue (supremely) is imagination's colour. The blue pigeon here has something of the restless circularity of youth, going « around and round and round », giddily and apparently without objective, « merely circulating » (*CP* 149-50). But this, in fact, is also a very grand thing to do in Stevens. It is the way true poems are written, and belongs, in the « Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction », to a high form of the final slate:

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
 One of the vast repetitions final in
 Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round
 And round and round, the merely going round,
 Until merely going round is a final good,
 The way wine comes at a table in a wood. (*CP* 405)

The essential decorum of finality (« a table in a wood », returned to its original element, plus the pleasure of wine) is a circular thing, as must be the poet's explorations, so that the true poet or « man-hero is not the exceptional monster, / But he that of repetitions is most master » (*CP* 406). The pigeon, circling on sidelong wing, also belongs to a group of important bird-images in the poems, images which at their finest evoke the immense and poignant glory of the earthly myth. This glory has a powerful lovely calm, instinct with passion, and

contains within itself, in the slow ambiguous downward (or sidelong) gliding of the birds, the exactly sufficient hint of death:

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings³¹. (CP 70)

One need not labour the point that the blue pigeon in « Le Monocle » is less grand than this. It is difficult, however, not to sense a note of poignancy in the uncle's self-ironic account of him, and these examples of great highpoints elsewhere in Stevens help a little to define his admittedly equivocal and (here characteristically) undercut status. We cannot at any rate be content with a simple dismissive allegorical placing of him as an image of somehow inadequate or culpable youth (like the « dark rabbi »), by contrast with an aged declining (but not more impressive) white pigeon. There may on the contrary be a hint of nostalgia for the blue pigeon, if he does stand for youth, as there was for the red bird of Stanza II. But it seems on the whole a mistake to read the two pigeons too simply as contrasting images of youth and age. They do not yield to the kind of explicit and clearcut (though sharply paradoxical) apportionment of meaning which the dark and rose rabbis demand. The whole colour-pattern in this stanza has a throwaway element of absurd paradox, but the blue and white pigeons are allegorically blurred even beyond this — an extreme instance of what Stevens called « ambiguous and uncertain » images, expressing a complicated feeling whose many shadings interpenetrate in a way that eludes exegesis. Perhaps both pigeons have spring-like touches, as well as a suggestion of helpless decline, a kind

31. Such « ambiguous » bird-images, evoking a glory tinged with pain, occur more than once in Stevens (« the grand decadence of the perished swans », CP 145, « the consummation of the swallow's wings », CP 68), and are perhaps a traditional Romantic motif. See Keats's « Ode to Autumn », where « Hedge-crickets sing . . . / And gathering swallows twitter in the skies ».

of disorientated frivolity as well as an understated poignancy. They are perhaps both together the uncle now, and both together the uncle when he was young, a tired parable shrugged-off inconclusively but also a blurred but creative glimpse of the important relationship (or indistinguishability) between one's plight in age and youth. « Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace / And forth the particulars of rapture come » (CP 392) — but here less than rapture, for the earlier grandeurs are being toned down.

Of rabbis, Stevens said: « the figure of the rabbi has always been an exceedingly attractive one to me because it is the figure of a man devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes »³². Poetry is the scholar's art. The « dark rabbi » is the uncle as a young man, dark because he hadn't then the truths which give the chastened rapture, and because of a callow detachment. He « observed » rather than « pursued »³³, his « human purposes » were uninvolved, and his « lordly study » is Crispin's first stage, trivial and arrogant, as « sovereign ghost », « principium » « Socrates / Of snails » (CP 27). In the « mincing world » of his complacent, precious poems, man was a « gobbet »: gobbets are short notes of perhaps undue patness, and little lumps of half-digested food. Where « dark rabbi » should parallel « dull scholar », it instead has ironically to do with the false and callow radiances of youth. The older « rose rabbi » is a more truly gay figure because capable of seeing beyond the pool of pink, although it is only last night that he heard

32. *Mattino Domenicale ed altre Poesie*, IIS. RENATO POGGIOLI, 1954, p. 185.

33. See WILLIAM YORK TINDALL, *Wallace Stevens* (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 111), 1961, p. 14. In the letter to L. W. Payne, Jr., *Letters*, p. 251, Stevens speaks puzzlingly of the apparently older *rose* rabbi: « one is a rose rabbi, and pursues a philosophic ideal of life when one is young ». Conceivably, since he didn't look up the poem, he was forgetting his contrast between the two rabbis, and his paradoxical reversal of their roles. Still, the *rose* rabbi *could* be older than the dark one and still be young!

the frog. The point may be that this experience, or the previous capacity for it, earn him a true pink joy which is better (chastened and more knowledgeable) than mere sentimental pools of pink. Or perhaps he is no longer, since last night, a rose rabbi either. Perhaps this stanza is a wilful, playful mass of contradictions, paradoxes, clashed edges of words, a dandy's throw-away prinking-and-pranking, a defensive frivolity, a final shyness of grand statements, or just silly. What I do not doubt is that it contains a note of slightly desperate respect for the « odious chords », and that the uncle's patter now does not destroy, but rather movingly points up, his earlier, justified forays into grandeur.

The last few lines re-assert the poem's great theme, yet almost peter out in a coy, deflating erotic suggestion. Lodged in the more serious distinction between the dark and rose rabbi is the note of sexual comedy in which the elderly rabbi pursues love while the young one only observed. Up to a point, « fluttering things » have an inescapable hint of frou-frouing girls (though elderly ones). In « The Naked Eye of the Aunt » (*OP* 19), « Oh! How suave a purple passed me by! ». There, the distinct shade is comically black: « Eheu! Eheu! With what a weedy face / Black fact emerges from her swishing dreams ». In « Le Monocle » itself, « distinct shade » is also a monochrome, not, I believe, a separate distinct colouring of each fluttering thing: the colour, though, is not black, but a sober synthesising blue no doubt realistically darkened by « black fact ». And, although undercut by the coy suggestions, the fluttering things are, also, the flickering shadings of the colours of life, the ephemeral blues which must be synthesised by a true, mature imagination.

The rose rabbi, like the « roscate parent » of a later poem, is in some private sense of Stevens's associated with « what is real » (*CP* 308) and its earned colouring of pleasure. The perception of « What is real » involves « things as they are » in their particularity, but at the same time absorbs them into a darker unifying shade which is their common factor and which

contains, among other things, the black fact of old age. So each human figure resolves itself into the same old clown. As the « Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction » puts it:

What rabbi, grown furious with human wish . . .

Does not see these separate figures one by one,

And yet see only one, in his old coat,

His slouching pantaloons . . . ? (CP 389)

This comic-tender note is warmer and less self-conscious than the uncle's utterance, but it makes the same point. The basic slate, the slouching of the old clown, and the supreme fiction all belong to one another, though the uncle has not « bravura adequate » to say it quite as grandly as it deserves. The « distinct shade », perhaps only fully discovered when the frog boomed last night, is exactly « The basic slate, the universal hue » into which the fluttering things have merged. And it means that the uncle, mincingly still perhaps, has learned to see life steadily and see it whole.

C. J. RAWSON