Wallace Stevens: Toward a Supreme Fiction

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was an American modernist poet. Born in Reading, Pennsylvania, and educated at Harvard and the New York Law School, he worked as an executive for The Hartford Insurance Company in Connecticut. The photograph by Sylvia Salmi was taken in the 1940s, at which time he was vice-president of the company. In his free time Stevens wrote poems, publishing his first book *Harmonium* in 1923. Throughout his life he considered poetry as the "supreme fiction," something that could replace religion in human life, and provide us with a more complete understanding than that provided by science or philosophy. In 1942 he published a set of poems entitled *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,* to illustrate the nature and power of poetry.

The Romantic Revolution

In the late 18th and early 19th Century, artists and writers insisted that art should stress individual creativity rather than formal learning, and that the emotional response to the world was more important that the rational. Not everyone appreciated the new poetry. In 1820, the satirist Thomas Love Peacock described *The Four Ages of Poetry:* the iron age of wherein rude bards celebrated the exploits of their chieftains, the golden age of Homer, the silver age of civilized verse lasting from Virgil to Dryden, and the current brass age wherein poets described their feelings. His invective was venomous: he described the characteristics of romantic poetry as

> harmony, which is language on the rack of Procrustes; sentiment, which is canting egotism in the mask of refined feeling; passion, which is the commotion of a weak and selfish mind; pathos, which is the whining of an unmanly

> spirit; and sublimity, which is the inflation of an empty head.

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a response to Peacock in 1821, but he died in 1822, and *A Defense of Poetry* was not published until 1840. Shelley distinguished two kinds of mental action: reason (Greek *logizein*, logic, analysis) and imagination (Greek *poiein*, poetry, synthesis).

> Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

He proposed that it is through the imagination that we obtain new knowledge:

> The functions of the poetical faculty are twofold: by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.

And at the end of his essay, he claimed

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

The word hierophant, used initially in the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries, comes from the Greek *hieros* (sacred, holy) and *phainein* (show, reveal).

Shelley embodied these ideas in his 1819 *Ode to the West Wind* (full text available). This poem describes the west wind of autumn that blows the leaves from the trees and heralds the coming winter. It ends

> Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
> What if my leaves are falling like its own!
> The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

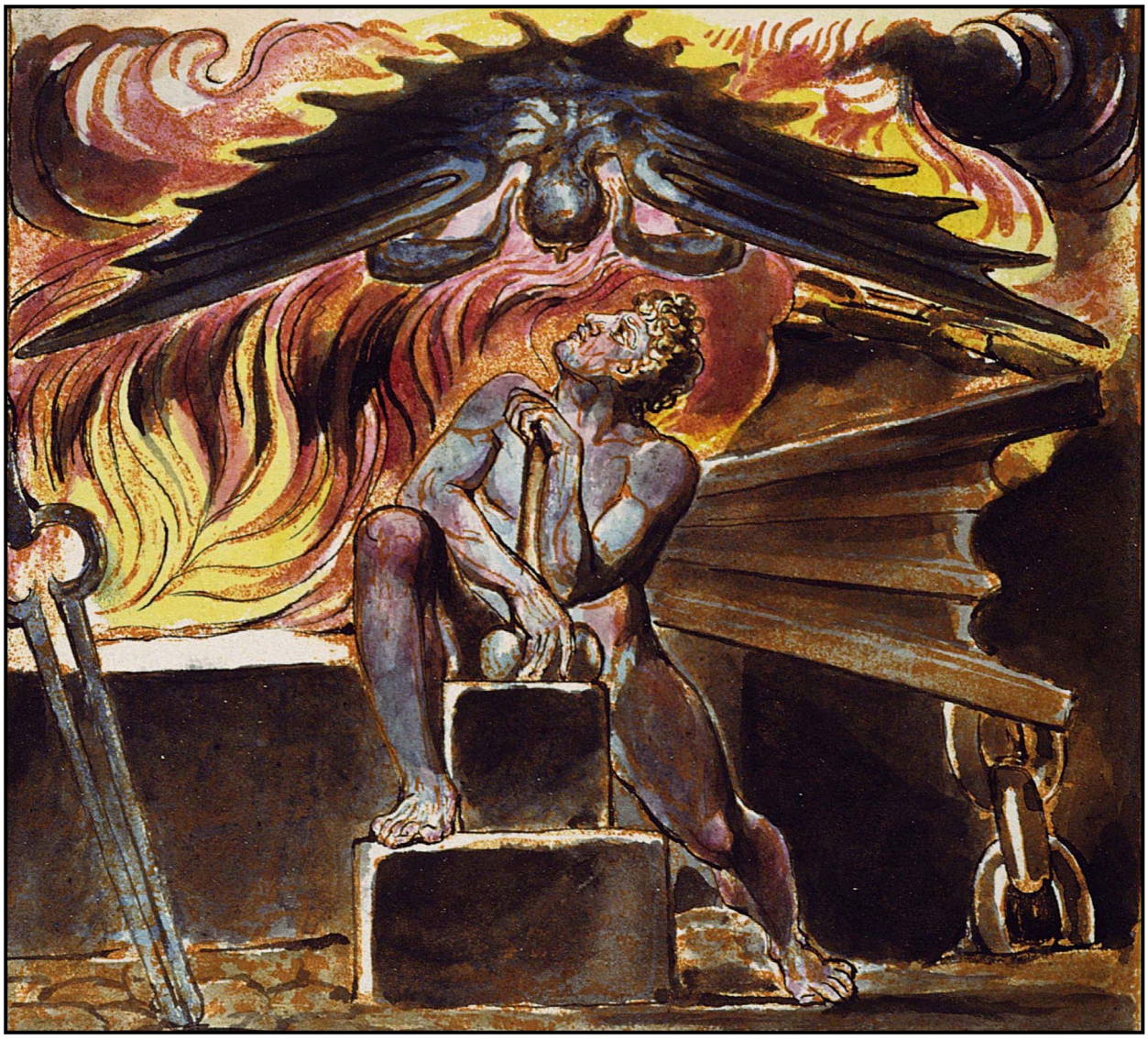
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Shelley was not alone in considering poetry as a great system for creating knowledge and understanding. In his prophetic books, William Blake described Los as the personification of the creative imagination, in despair at the state of the world following the Industrial Revolution. In the 1820 book *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, Los is driven by his demonic Spectre to destroy the present state of England (personified by the Giant Albion), and reforge a new world. The following is Blake's representation of Los from page 6 of *Jerusalem:*



Los proclaims

> I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's
> I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create
> (Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1820, p 10)

Modern Ideas of Poetry

Shelley and the Romantic poets were soon criticized for being too idealistic, too removed from the real world, and too emotional. The following quotation is from a critique of

Shelley by George Santayana (1863-1952), a poet and philosopher who taught at Harvard when Wallace Stevens was an undergraduate there. Stevens and Santayana became friends, exchanged poems and stayed in contact long after Stevens graduated (Mariani, 2016, pp 21-23). Santayana claimed that Shelley

> could never put together any just idea of the world: he merely collected images and emotions, and out of them made worlds of his own. His poetry accordingly does not well express history, nor human character, nor the constitution of nature. What he unrolls before us instead is, in a sense, fantastic; it is a series of landscapes, passions, and cataclysms such as never were on earth, and never will be. (Santayana, 1913, pp 181-2)

After Romanticism, the Realists had their day. And as the 20th Century began, Modernism came to the fore. Modernists poets tended toward the everyday rather than the fantastic, irony rather than idealism, objectivity rather than passion, and innovation rather than derivation. In his 1942 poem *Of Modern Poetry*, Stevens remarked

> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time. It has to think about war
> And it has to find what will suffice. It has
> To construct a new stage.

Despite being critical of Shelley's poetry, Santayana nevertheless largely agreed with his idea that poetry creates our understanding of the world. He described the "great function of poetry:"

> to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but

> indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. (Santayana, 1900, p 271).

Santayana realized that the creative imagination works in science as well as poetry:

> Science and common sense are themselves in their way poets of no mean order, since they take the material of experience and make out of it a clear, symmetrical, and beautiful world (Santayana, 1900, p 271).

He also proposed that poetry and religion were closely related:

> Poetry raised to its highest power is then identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth; at their point of union both reach their utmost purity and beneficence, for then poetry loses its frivolity and ceases to demoralize, while religion surrenders its illusions and ceases to deceive. (Santayana, 1900, p 290).

These last two quotations recall Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*:

> Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred

These ideas were not accepted by all modernist poets. W. H. Auden (1907-1973) had much more restrained views on the function of poetry:

> For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth.
(Auden, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats,* 1940)

Wallace Stevens, however, thought about poetry in much the same way as Shelley and Santayana (Italia, 1993). In his essay *The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet* in his 1951 collection *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens quotes Shelley extensively:

> He speaks of poetry as created by "that imperial faculty whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man." He says that a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. It is "indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge . . . the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds . . . it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life." In spite of the absence of a definition and m spite of the impressions and approximations we are never at a loss to recognize poetry. As a consequence it is easy for us to propose a center of poetry, a vis or *noeud vital,* to which, in the absence of a definition, all the variations of definition*s* are peripheral. (Stevens, 1951, pp 44-45).

Stevens' conception of the poet was very similar to Shelley's:

> what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (Stevens, 1951, p 31)

Stevens used the term "fiction" to describe the creative process of poetry. "Fiction" comes from the Latin *fictus* the past participle of *fingere* meaning to shape, form, devise, feign; "poetry" comes from the Greek *poeisis* meaning a fabrication or creation, which is itself derived from *poiein,* to make or compose.

Stevens' proposal of poetry as the process primarily

responsible for our understanding of the world is similar in may ways to the Martin Heidegger's ideas about Hölderlin's poetry, though neither writer could have been aware of the other:

> The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet's naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known as beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word. (Heidegger, 1941, p 58)

What we can express in words we can hope to understand. Poetry is unlike other modes of expression used in religion, law, or science. Poetry is particularly and vividly close to experience, and because of its attention to sound and metaphor it makes that experience memorable. In his essay *On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, points out that poetry brings experience "near" to us:

> A genuine poem …allows us to experience "nearness" in such a way that this nearness is held in and through the linguistic form of the poem. What is the nearness that is held there? Whenever we have to hold something, it is because it is transient and threatens to escape our grasp. In fact our fundamental experience as beings subject to time is that all things escape us, that all the events of our lives fade more and more, so that at best they glow with an almost unreal shimmer in the most distant recollection. But the poem does not fade, for the poetic word brings the transience of time to a standstill. (Gadamer, 1986, p 114)

Gadamer realizes, however, that poetry is but one of many linguistic modes used to gain understanding of the world:

> Language gives all of us our access to a world in which certain special forms of human experience arise: the religious tidings that proclaim salvation, the legal judgment that tells us what is right and what is wrong in our society, the poetic word that by being there bears witness to our own being. (Gadamer, 1986, p 115)

Supreme Fictions

Stevens first used the term “supreme fiction” in his 1923 poem *A High-Toned Christian Woman* (Brazeal, 2007). The main them of the poem (full text available) is that human creativity knows no hierarchy: poetry is as valuable as religion, jazz improvisations as important as choral hymns, and bawdy merriment as meaningful as moral laws. The poem begins

> Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
> The conscience is converted into palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
> We agree in principle. That’s clear. But take
> The opposing law and make a peristyle,
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
> Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
> Is equally converted into palms,
> Squiggling like saxophones.

Stevens is indulging is word games: “nave” leads to “knave,” “palm” recalls “psalm,” and the “supreme fiction” brings to mind the “supreme being” who created everything, the creator free of any church, the godhead of Deists and Revolutionaries.

Stevens had given up his belief in the Christian God but still felt the need for something to believe in. That it might be possible to believe in a fiction was suggested in his 1942

poem *Asides on an Oboe* (full text available) which begins

> The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
> Of final belief. So, say that final belief
> Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

Two ideas – the concept of a supreme fiction by which the poetic imagination could create and understand a world, and the need of human beings to believe in something – ran through all of Steven's thought and poetry. In the *Adagia* (an unpublished collection of aphorisms), he claimed

> The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly (Stevens, 1997, p 903)

Unfortunately, although the word "fiction" means an imaginative creation, it also carries the connotation that it is untrue. In this regard, Stevens' statements become contradictory since we cannot believe in something that we know to be untrue (Brazeal, 2007). Stevens is using William James' idea of the will to believe. But, as Brazeal points out, it was not James's view that we could just believe in anything. Rather we could believe in what we thought was true even though we had not yet fully proven it.

Stevens discussed the problems about believing in a fiction in a 1942 letter to Henry Church about *Notes to a Supreme Fiction*:

> One evening, a week or so ago, a student at Trinity College came to the office and walked home with me. We talked about this book. I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction The student said that that was an impossibility. that there is as no such thing as believing in something that one knew was no true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time.

> There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief, if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. There are fictions that arc extensions of reality. There are plenty of people who believe in Heaven as definitely as your New England ancestors and my Dutch ancestors believed in it. But Heaven is an extension of reality (Stevens & Stevens, 1996, p 430)

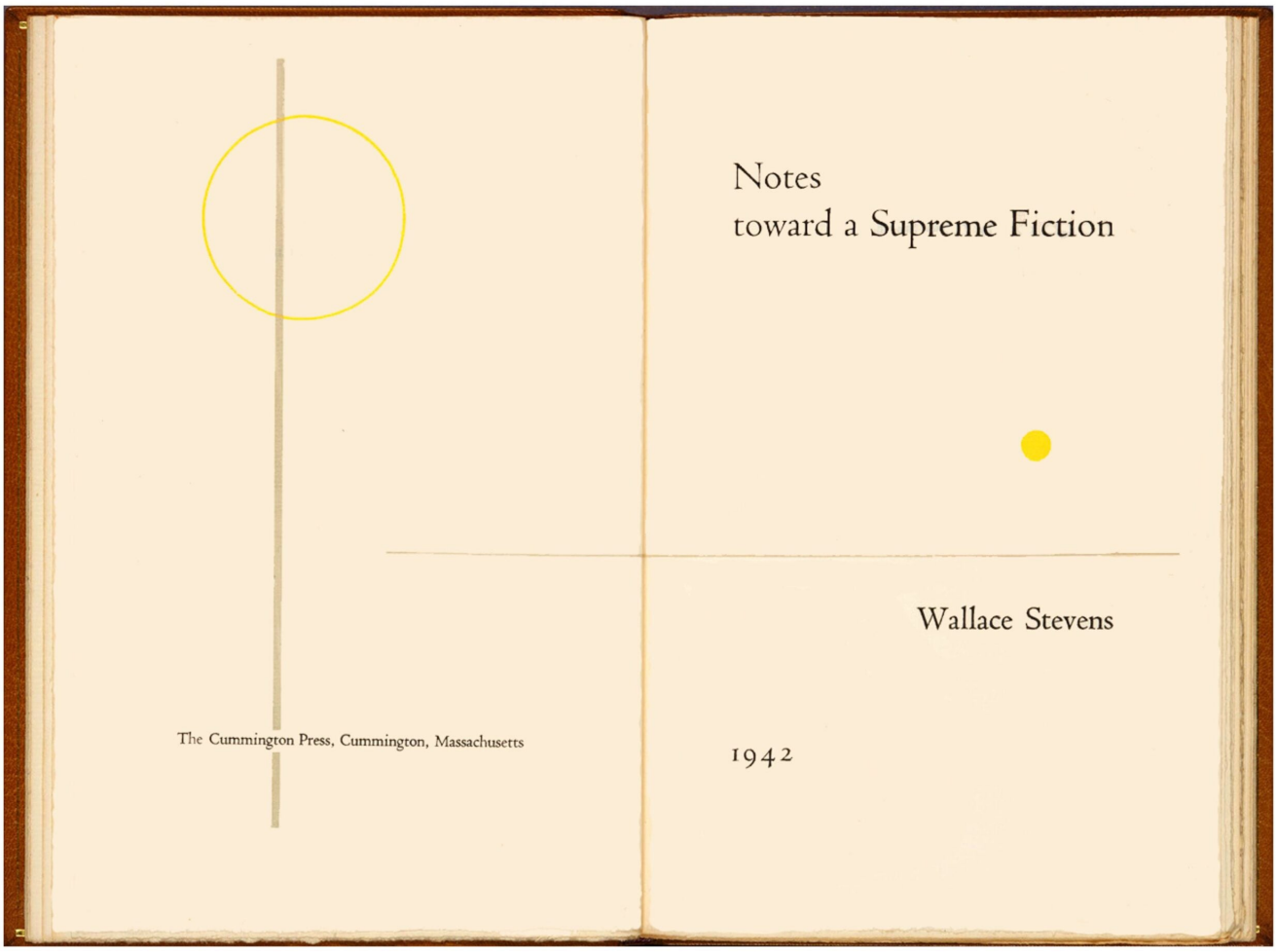
Some resolution of these contradictions may be found in the way we consider fiction. Any worthwhile work of fiction must be "true to life." If it has no relevance to real life, it is not worth reading. This is likely the meaning of Stevens' fiction – something created by the human imagination that represents what could or does happen in real life as accurately and completely (as "truly") as it can. Michael Frayn has discussed some of the complex relations between truth and fiction (2006).

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction

In 1942 Stevens published *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* with Cummington Press, a fine press founded by Harry Duncan in 1939 in Cummington, Massachusetts. 273 copies of the 45-page book were hand-printed, 80 of which were signed by Stevens. A second edition of 330 copies was published in 1943. The book was dedicated to Henry Church, a patron of the arts, whose fortune derived from his father's patent for baking soda (with the brand name *Arm and Hammer*). The design for the book's title page was by Alessandro Giampietro. Stevens told Henry Church in a 1942 letter

> that the straight lines in the designs of the book represent direction and that the circles mean comprehension. (Stevens

& Stevens, 1996, p 418)



The poem (full text available) consists of a prologue of 8 lines, three sections containing ten poems, each composed of 7 unrhymed tercets (21 lines), and an epilogue in the same form as the preceding poems. The printing was set up so that the title, dedication (to Henry Church), prologue, section titles and the poems were each printed on a separate page.

The title informs us that this is not the definitive description of the supreme fiction. The poetry provides notes – either in the sense of early observations or in the sense of musical notes that can form an overarching harmony. Furthermore, it is "a" supreme fiction – the creation of Stevens rather than of the ultimate creation of everything.

The prologue is addressed to something not clearly identified,

probably the creative imagination with which the poet interacts to bring forth understanding – the “vivid transparence” that leads to “peace.” Older poets would have called it their “muse.”

> And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
> Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
> Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
> In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
> Equal in living changingness to the light
> In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
> For a moment in the central of our being,
> The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.

The three sections of the book are entitled

> It must be abstract
> It must change
> It must give pleasure

These titles denote the essential characteristics of any worthwhile fiction.

A detailed commentary is beyond the scope of this essay, which will limit itself to a few of the poems. Many scholars have provided more extensive analyses: Kermode (1960, pp 111-119), Sukenik (1967, pp 136-163), Vendler (1969, pp 168-205), Bloom (1977, pp 167-218), Cook (2007, pp 214-236), Bates (2007).

The first poem in the first section (It must be abstract) is addressed to an “ephebe,” the name for a young man in training in Ancient Athens.

> Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun.
>
> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see the sun again with an ignorant eye

And see it clearly in the idea of it.

The poet urges to ephebe not to accept what he has been taught – not to believe in the gods – but to make his own understanding of the world

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

Umber is an earth-brown pigment, but the word derives from the Latin *ombra*, shadow, and suggests the shades of the dead. The epithet "gold flourisher" describe the sun's essential characteristics: the sun as an abstraction.

The final poem in the first section considers the idea of what man must become. The poet envisions a man in clothes too big for his body seeing the world clearly without regard to what religion requires or what humanity desires

Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man
In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

The 5th poem of the second section (It must change) describes a deserted plantation on a tropical island – likely in the Florida Keys, which Stevens visited many times in 1920s and

1930s.

> On a blue island in a sky-wide water
> The wild orange trees continued to bloom and to bear,
> Long after the planter’s death. A few limes remained,
>
> Where his house had fallen, three scraggy trees weighted
> With garbled green. These were the planter’s turquoise
> And his orange blotches, these were his zero green,
>
> A green baked greener in the greenest sun.
> These were his beaches, his sea-myrtles in
> White sand, his patter of the long sea-slushes.

Before the recurrent hurricanes had ruined the plantations, the Florida Keys were famous for the limes used to make Key lime pie. Stevens’ poem about the planter illustrates how our conception of the world must take into account its transience. And find this beautiful. The poem’s third verse is remarkable for its portrayal of the sound of the waves upon the beach.

This poem concludes with a eulogy to the planter. Because he is no more, the eulogy is expressed in negative terms:

> An unaffected man in a negative light
> Could not have borne his labor nor have died
> Sighing that he should leave the banjo’s twang.

Vendler (1969, p 170) transcribes the verse without the negatives:

> He lived in a positive light, a man deeply affected by his islands, and therefore he could bear his labor, and could die, in spite of exile and desire, sighing that he should have to leave even so simple and small a pleasure as his banjo’s twang.

The 6th poem of the second section deals with birds:

> Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade,
> And you, and you, bethou me as you blow,
> When in my coppice you behold me be.
>
> Ah, ke! The bloody wren, the felon jay,
> Ke-ke, the jug throated robin pouring out,
> Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade.
>
> There was such idiot minstrelsy in rain,
> So many clappers going without bells,
> That these bethous compose a heavenly gong.
>
> One voice repeating, one tireless chorister,
> The phrases of a single phrase, ke-ke,
> A single text, granite monotony

Stevens was a connoisseur of birds and could whistle a multiplicity of birdsongs (Cook, 2007, p 224). The following are some typical songs of the birds mentioned in the first two verses

Sparrow:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/sparrow.mp3

Wren:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/wren.mp3

Bluejay:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/bluejay.mp3

Robin:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/robin.mp3

As the poem provides its brilliant rendition of the different birds, it makes passing references to other birds that have found their way into poems. “Coppice” is a reference to Hardy’s *The Darkling Thrush*; “pouring forth” and “glade” are quoted from Keat’s *Ode to a Nightingale*.

> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy!

Stevens cannot resist the wordplay between the “jug-jug” sound of the robin and “pouring out” from a jug.

However, Stevens notes that most birdsong is monotonous. Because it does not change it is not like the supreme fictions of a poet. Stevens criticizes the tendency of the Romantic poets to liken themselves to birds or to other natural phenomena. The “bethous” that he monotonously repeats are a reference to Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*.

> Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Stevens’ poem concludes

> These are of minstrels lacking minstrelsy,
> Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale
> Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird
>
> Of stone, that never changes. Bethou him, you
> And you, bethou him and bethou. It is
> A sound like any other. It will end.

The birdsongs are not supreme fictions because they never change.

In the 8th poem of the second section (It must change) Stevens imagines how Shelley's Ozymandias, who thought he could impose his order on the world, could have been seduced by the beautiful Nanzia Nuncio so that the constant order that the king of kings desired could give way to changing fictions:

> I am the woman stripped more nakedly
> Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
> Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.
>
> Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
> In its own only precious ornament.
> Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.
>
> Clothe me entire in the final filament,
> So that I tremble with such love so known
> And myself am precious for your perfecting.
>
> Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
> Is never naked. A fictive covering
> Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.

In the 7th poem of the third section (It must give pleasure), Stevens contrasts politics, the imposing or order on the world, to poetry, the discovery of order in the world. And finds pleasure in the changing order of the seasons (Lensing, 2007):

> But to impose is not
> To discover. To discover an order as of
> A season, to discover summer and know it,
>
> To discover winter and know it well, to find
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
>
> It is possible, possible, possible.

The final poem of the third section is a paean to the world we live on, affectionately referred to as the "fat girl," the earth in all its plenitude and beauty, and "my green, my fluent mundo." A world that we can only understand through feeling and through fiction:

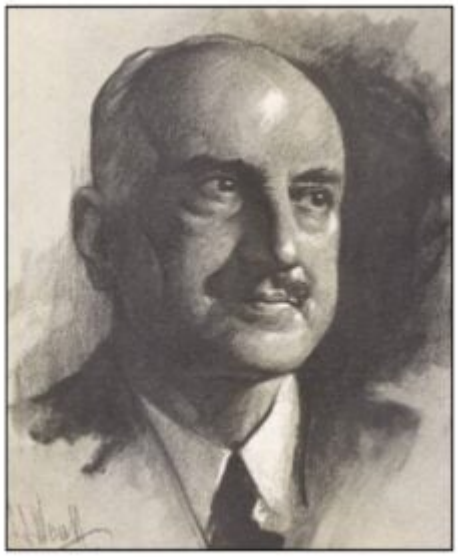
> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.
>
> They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
> We shall return at twilight from the lecture
> Pleased that the irrational is rational,
>
> Until flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
> I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
> You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction concludes with an epilogue in which Stevens compares the poet to the soldier. Stevens may have thought this necessary in a poem written during war. However, the epilogue really does not work. Poets lay down their lines but not their lives for what they believe in. Stevens claims that poetry can give meaning to the soldier's sacrifice. But as James Merrill pointed out in his 1985 poem *Page from the Koran*:

> How gladly with proper words," said Wallace Stevens
> "The solider dies." Or kills.

Death Comes for Philosopher and for poet

George Santayana resigned from Harvard University in 1911 and spent the rest of his life in Europe. He was financially supported by a small inheritance from his mother and by the royalties from his books, among which was the best-selling novel *The Last Puritan* (1935). His portrait by Samuel Johnson Woolf graced the cover of Tim magazine in 1936.



At the beginning of World War II, the philosopher was living in Rome. It soon became difficult to transfer money from his American publishers to Italy. In 1941, rather than undergo the stress of travelling during wartime, the 77-year-old obtained lodgings with the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary, who ran the small Calvary Hospital next door to the ancient Basilica Santo Stefano Rotondo. Since the sisters also managed a hospital in Chicago, Santayana's publishers could pay the sisters in Chicago for his upkeep in Rome (McCormick, 1987, p 420). Santayana continued to live with the sisters after the war. Despite being a confirmed atheist, he enjoyed the liturgy, austerity and tranquility of his Catholic surroundings. Robert Lowell later commented that Santayana believed that "There is no God and Mary is His mother" (in the poem *For George Santayana (1863-1952)* in *Life Studies, 1959).* Nevertheless, Santayana maintained his scepticism to the end and insisted on being buried in non-consecrated ground.

In the summer of 1952, Wallace Stevens wrote a poem about the old philosopher. Santayana died from stomach cancer before the poem was published later that year. As well as describing his situation in Rome, Stevens' poem makes multiple allusions to Santayana's 1923 *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (Griswold works through these references on his website). The poem (full text available) begins

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end –

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

How easily the blown banners change to wings…
Things dark on the horizons of perception
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
Of the unknown. The newsboys' muttering
Becomes another murmuring; the smell
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled…

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle as it evades the sight, these are
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome,
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
And these beneath the shadow of a shape

In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

The “more merciful Rome” of the second stanza is heaven and the parallel lines becoming one represent death as a transition to eternity.

The poem ends:

> It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
> With every visible thing enlarged and yet
> No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
> The immensest theatre, and pillared porch,
> The book and candle in your ambered room,
>
> Total grandeur of a total edifice,
> Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
> For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
> As if the design of all his words takes form
> And frame from thinking and is realized.

The “inquisitor of structures” may refer to Santayana’s likening architecture to poetry:

> Every human architect must do likewise with his edifice; he must mould his bricks or hew his stones into symmetrical solids and lay them over one another in regular strata, like a poet’s lines. (Santayana, 1900, p 261)

Griswold suggests that the final lines relate to Santayana’s

> The ultimate reaches of doubt and renunciation open out for it, by an easy transition, into fields of endless variety and peace, as if through the gorges of death it had passed into a paradise where all things are crystallised into the image of themselves, and have lost their urgency and their venom. (Santayana, 1923, p 76

The following is Steven’s recitation of the poem

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/To-An-Old-Philosopher-In-Rome.mp3

Wallace Stevens himself developed stomach cancer less than 3 years after Santayana (Mariani, 2016, pp 394-402). The cancer was inoperable and a gastroenterostomy was performed at St Francis Catholic Hospital in Hartford. During his recuperation Stevens met the hospital's chaplain Father Arthur Hanley and talked to him about poetry and religion. Stevens was discharged but re-admitted a few months later. During this second and final hospitalization he agreed to be baptized by Father Hanley (Hanley 1977). Stevens had been brought up as a Lutheran as an adult he had questioned the need for any organized religion. Although Stevens was prone to irony, it appears that his final conversion was sincere. Perhaps he took to heart the words of his friend Santayana:

> Scepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer: there is nobility in preserving it coolly and proudly through a long youth, until at last, in the ripeness of instinct and discretion, it can be safely exchanged for fidelity and happiness. (Santayana, 1923, pp 69-70)

The Internal Paramour

One of Stevens' last poems *Final Soliloquy of the Internal Paramour* was published in the *Hudson Review* in 1951:

> Light the first light of evening, as in a room
> In which we rest and, for small reason, think
> The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one…
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

The following is Stevens' recitation of the poem

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Final-Soliloquy-Of-The-Interior-Paramour.mp3

Stevens does not directly identify his internal mistress. She shares qualities with the idea of the self that, like a shawl, we wrap tightly about us. This formulation is related to Santayana's description of the self:

> If I exist, I am a living creature to whom ideas are incidents, like aeroplanes in the sky; they pass over, more or less followed by the eye, more or less listened to, recognised, or remembered; but the self slumbers and breathes below, a mysterious natural organism, full of dark yet definite potentialities; so that different events will awake it to quite disproportionate activities. The self is a fountain of joy, folly, and sorrow, a waxing and waning, stupid and dreaming creature, in the midst of a vast natural world, of which it catches but a few transient and odd perspectives. (Santayana, 1923, p 146).

However, the mistress is also the creative imagination that proposes our understanding of the world: "an order, a whole, a knowledge." The creation of this supreme fiction may be like God speaking the words "Let there be light!" The crucial comment, "We say, God and the imagination are one …" refers to

one of Stevens' *Adagia*:

> Proposita:
> 1. God and the imagination are one.
> 2. The thing imagined is the imaginer.
> The second equals the thing imagined and the imaginer are one.
> Hence, I suppose, the Imaginer is God. (Stevens, 1997, p 914)

The poem harks back to the prologue of *Notes to a Supreme Fiction,* which described the poetic process as a meeting between the poet and his creative self:

> In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
> Equal in living changingness to the light
> In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
> For a moment in the central of our being

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