Sanctions for being| Transvalued ritual in the poetry of Wallace Stevens

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SANCTIONS FOR BEING:
TRANSVALUED RITUAL IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

by

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Sanctions for Being: Transvalued Ritual in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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This thesis examines Wallace Stevens' poetic transvaluation of ritual. One of Stevens' primary concerns involves the creation of poetry that can serve as a valid substitute for orthodox religion. In the first chapter of this thesis I explore Stevens' ideas concerning religion and poetry through his letters, essays, and aphorisms. I also introduce two major studies of Stevens' poetic engagement with religion—one by Adalaide Morris and the other by David Jarraway—in an effort to outline major critical trends concerning the relationship between Stevens' poetry and religion. In the second chapter I introduce Jonathan Z. Smith's comprehensive theory of ritual, which guides the remainder of the study. I then suggest through historical analysis how the concept of ritual, as it came to be internalized through seventeenth-century Jesuit meditative practices, entered English religious poetry, and, through the development of the Romantic movement, exerted a strong influence on Stevens' meditative verse. In the third chapter, by providing full readings of two poems—"Metaphor as Degeneration" and "The Rock"—I attempt to show how the concept of ritual can be used to understand and illuminate Stevens' later poetry. And finally, as a means of concluding, I turn to "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," a poem that reinforces the primary arguments of this thesis.
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ABBREVIATIONS


In an effort to show deference to the poetry itself, I have chosen to introduce this study of Wallace Stevens by focusing attention upon two short poems written during the last five years of the poet’s life. “The Planet on the Table” and “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” were composed in 1953 and 1950, respectively. Both are farewell poems, conceived after Stevens had become highly conscious of the fact that both his poetic career and his life were nearing their end; yet both poems also convey a strange feeling of anteriority in the particular way that they act as meta-poems, or poems about Stevens’ own poetry, anticipating the sea of criticism that would soon follow.

In “The Planet on the Table” (CP 532) Stevens muses retrospectively on his own poetic career. Harold Bloom has suggested that this poem’s title is “perhaps referring to the manuscript that was to become *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* in 1954” (*Poems* 365). Bloom’s suggestion must be phrased with uncertainty, but the poem’s opening line leaves little doubt that this poem, like so many in Stevens’ oeuvre, is intended to provide poetic commentary on the poet’s own creations. Stevens begins the poem by referring to himself in the third person and naming himself after an exotic character—two well-established conventions in his poetry—saying simply, “Ariel was glad he had written his poems.” The poet’s gladness arises from the fact that his poems preserve “a remembered time / Or something seen that he liked.” The memories preserved in poems are countered in the second tercet by memories of nature itself, or “Other makings of the sun.” These “makings” are the raw products of nature’s fecundity, and they are different from Stevens’ poems insofar as nature produces only “waste and
welter," a remembered ripeness that seems merely to have "writhed." The duality formulated in the first two tercets—refined poetic creations versus raw natural creations—is brought together in the third, which begins, "His self and the sun were one." This marriage between self and sun is unusual insofar as it is stated straightforwardly, with a tone of unqualified confidence. The sun appears most frequently in Stevens' poems as an almost irreducible force with which the poet must struggle, for only a "recent imagining of reality" will allow his imagination to be united with the unimaginable energy of the sun. However, for readers familiar with the whole of Stevens' poetry, the union of self and sun is not altogether surprising: Stevens repeatedly uses the sun as a symbol for nature's immense vitality, and the trope of the marriage sacrament appears throughout his poems to indicate moments when he is poetically capable of mating the creative power of his imagination with nature's writhing reality.

Stevens expands on this idea in the next two lines, saying, "his poems, although makings of his self, / Were no less makings of the sun." These lines are significant because they demonstrate that at the end of Stevens' poetic career he had come to view

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1 Frank Dogget has provided the most thorough summary of Stevens' complex concept of "reality": "Reality, in Stevens' use of the word, may be the world supposed to be antecedent in itself or the world created in the specific occurrence of thought, including the thinker himself and his mind forming the thought. Often the term offers the assumption that if the self is the central point of a circle of infinite radius, then reality is the not-self, including all except the abstract subjective center. Sometimes reality is used in the context of the nominalist position—then the word denotes that which is actual and stands as a phenomenal identity, the existent as opposed to the merely fancied. Stevens usually means by reality an undetermined base on which a mind constructs its personal sense of the world. Occasionally he will use the word real as a term of approval, as a substitute for the word true, and, therefore, no more than an expression of confidence" (Cited in Bloom, Poems 307). Bloom simply says, "Emerson's nature is [...] Stevens' 'reality'" (Poems 310). For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the word "reality" to refer to the "undetermined base on which a mind constructs its personal sense of the world," a definition that should be broad enough to include what Dogget terms the "not-self" as well as "that which is actual and stands as a phenomenal identity."

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the marriage between his imagination and reality as a poetic sacrament in which the two are joined though the one does not become the other. The significance of this idea becomes clearer when these lines are compared to earlier encounters between the poet's imagination and nature's reality: in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," for example, Stevens says, "I was myself the compass of that sea: / I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself" (CP 65); and in "The Idea of Order at Key West," in reference to the girl who sings beside the sea, Stevens similarly says, "the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker" (CP 129). This is Stevens at his least skeptical, expressing his own style of Nietzschean willfulness; but these moments of solipsistic exuberance become less frequent in his later poems, which are composed equally of self and sun, or imagination and reality.

The fourth tercet opens with Stevens saying of his poems, "It was not important that they survive" (CP 532). What are we to make of this pronouncement, given that Stevens has already offered the preservation of memories as reason for gladness in his creative vocation? It is tempting to assign this seeming retraction to the example-bin of Stevens’ frequent evasiveness, but such a reading fails to do justice to the remainder of the poem:

What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part.
That Stevens’ poems should “bear” something, in the transitive sense of the word, suggests a long list of possible meanings: to be equipped or furnished with; to have as a feature or characteristic; to have as an identification; to call for as suitable or essential; to hold in the mind; to hold above, on top, or aloft; to support the weight of; to put up with especially without giving way; to move while holding up and supporting; to give birth to; to permit growth of; to produce as yield. I have intentionally placed these possible definitions in an order that suggests a kind of process: what matters in many of Stevens’ most powerful poems is that they are equipped with an essential characteristic which, when held aloft in the mind, allows for a sense of movement—even under tremendous strain—that leads to some kind of rebirth, or some kind of life-enhancing vitality. This statement serves as a place to begin, and I have deliberately used wide-ranging terms. My intention in this paper is to illuminate and clarify how Stevens’ poems come to enact the aforementioned process, and what is created as a result.

In the final tercet of “The Planet on the Table,” Stevens desires that his poems will bear “Some affluence.” This affluence is not specifically described; rather, it is broadly figured as “Some lineament or character” that may be only “half-perceived, / In the poverty” of his poems’ “words.” Broadly speaking, lineament means distinctive features or characteristics; but lineament also connotes the process of delineation. Stevens frequently uses “poverty” to indicate our need for fresh imaginings of reality; words become impoverished by habitual associations, so that affluence is attained only when words are placed within the delineated space of the poem, where they are stripped of their associative dross and freshly conceived by the imagination. The poem finally appears to suggest that what matters to Stevens at the end of his life is not that his poems
merely "survive" as *objets d'art*, but that they actively delineate a poetic space in which our experience of the planet's writhing reality transcends an empirical experience of "waste and welter" by attaining the sanction of revitalized meaning.

The "affluence" that is attained within the space of the poem is rooted neither solely in Ariel nor solely in nature, but also in the ordered linguistic space of "words" that is produced by the marriage of that duality. Stevens puns on the word "character," the meaning of which includes the alphabet that forms the words of his poems, his distinct style of writing, and the character of Ariel, or the spirit of the poet lingering in the poems. The personal "remembered time" or the subjective "something that he liked" may expire with the poet who cannot hope to survive much longer, but Stevens hopes that "some lineament" of "affluence" and some sense of his distinct poetic spirit will continue to haunt his poetry. This spirit appears in "A Postcard from the Volcano," a much earlier poem, as "A spirit storming in blank walls" (CP 159), a pun in which Stevens' blank verse is figured as walls that delineate the space of the poem. "The Planet on the Table" is written in iambic tetrameter, which, like blank verse, is one of Stevens' favored forms; but whether Stevens was writing in pentameter or tetrameter, he believed that poems are necessary because they structure the space in which they are contained, and therefore imbue whatever is brought into that space with order and meaning. As early as 1918, in an unpublished poem titled "Architecture," Stevens asks "What manner of building shall we build?" and proceeds to describe in architectural terms a poetic space in which "the lusty and the plenteous / Shall walk" (OP 39). In *The Dome and the Rock*, James Baird has commented extensively on the importance of delineated space in Stevens' poetry, going so far as to claim that "for Stevens the dynamics of architecture were commanding
The power of the concept was obsessive. Almost literally, his first and last choices as a craftsman were posited upon architecture" (3). And B.J. Legget has argued that Stevens’ philosophical stance shifted significantly after “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” largely as a result of his discovery of Henri Focillon’s _The Life of Forms in Art_, a book that derives aesthetic theories from the study of architecture.

The theme of delineated poetic space is taken up explicitly in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” (CP 524), but with a shift in emphasis from the space of the poem to the space of the mind that creates the poem. As Stevens’ muse, the paramour instructs the poet to “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.” Stevens frequently employs man-made light as a symbol for the ordering capacity of the imagination. In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” for example, “the glassy lights” of the harbor “Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,” serving as a metaphor for the “maker’s rage to order words” (CP 130). In “The Auroras of Autumn,” the poet is figured as the “scholar of one candle”—another of Stevens’ symbols for the ordering light of artifice—who “feels afraid” as he attempts to imaginatively master the immense, fluctuating, natural beauty of the northern lights (CP 417). In “Final Soliloquy,” within the room’s ordering light, the poet and the interior paramour come together in “the intesnest rendezvous,” a meeting that takes place within the “vital boundary” of “the mind” and results in the creation of the poem (CP 524).

Within this space—delineated by the poet’s mind at the time of creation and the poem itself afterwards—“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.

The poverty of words in "The Planet on the Table" has been replaced in this poem by our own poverty of indifference. The problem posed by indifference is not simply a matter of feeling generally indifferent or apathetic; here the word also suggests its archaic meaning, signifying a lack of difference or distinction between two or more things, which in turn creates an absence of compulsion toward one thing or another. We are impoverished because we need to be compelled by the vitality of fresh seeing or new knowledge, and because evening's failing light threatens to drown all meaning in an indistinct sea of darkness. This threat to the poet's humanity is countered by the illuminating and ordering influences of the candle-light, a metaphor for the generative mind of the poet. The ordering influence of the poet's mind and its propensity to focus attention create the comfort of "a warmth," which protects like a "shawl" against the coldness of undifferentiated darkness. Within the warmth of meaning generated by the imagination, we experience "the miraculous influence," whereby we gain full participation in the order of the poem—"we forget each other and ourselves"—and "We say God and the imagination are one... ." Stevens indicates in a letter to Joseph Bennet that he "originally intended to write a long poem on the subject [...] but got no further than the statement that God and the imagination are one. The implications of this statement were to follow" (L 701).

Most critics have focused their attention on this identification between God and the imagination, finding in it a direct, late example of Stevens' longstanding tendency to
embrace humanistic substitution, whereby the generative imagination of the poet replaces the generative power of a deceased God. Although Stevens did employ this type of apotheosis in some of his well-known poems from the 1930's, such readings of "Final Soliloquy" are reductive. Stevens changed the poem twice after initially sending it to Bennet, who had solicited poems from Stevens for the *Hudson Review*. Here the three versions are listed chronologically:

We say God and the imagination are one…
How high that highest candle lights the world!

We say God and the imagination are one.
How high that highest candle lights the world…

We say God and the imagination are one…
How high that highest candle lights the dark. (L 701)

In a letter that accompanied the first revision, Stevens indicates that his change is intended to eliminate the exclamation point. The exclamation point forces too much optimistic closure on the outcome of the identification between God and the imagination. The first version, had it remained definitive, comes dangerously close to engendering a new indifference. If the individual imagination is merely deified, and the light of the individual imagination is made omnipresent, then the movement of meaning becomes static, and undifferentiated darkness is replaced by undifferentiated light. The first revision eliminates the exclamation point, but the shifted placement of the ellipsis changes the reference of the void it represents. The statement that God and the imagination are one ends with much more closure than the ellipsis had allowed, while the elliptical void opens behind the relationship of candle and world. The final version, which appears in the *Collected Poems*, returns the ellipsis to its original position, and the
void opens once again behind the identity of God and the imagination. However, the
“highest candle” now lights “the dark” rather than “the world” (L 701). “The world” has
already appeared in the poem as “the world imagined,” and if the “highest candle” of the
imagination lights that world, then it lights only itself (CP 524). These revisions are
important because they reveal an abiding concern in Stevens' later work: humanistic
substitution, or the deification of the subjective imagination, cannot occupy a self-
contained, self-generating space without acknowledging the void that inevitably
surrounds that space, or the poet's creative capacity collapses into solipsism.

Stevens implicitly acknowledges this concern when he suggests it is for “small
reason” that we “think / The world imagined is the ultimate good,” a point often
overlooked by critics (CP 524, emphasis mine). Stevens seems to suggest that if the
imagined world is to be regarded as the ultimate good, it must not be conceived by
isolated reason writ large, or by rationality’s self-generating light. Ultimately, the
imagined world is “good” only when it acknowledges nature’s “nothing that is” (CP 10),
which in this poem appears as evening’s darkness. Additionally, the “highest candle” of
imaginative power only reaches its height with the establishment of a “vital boundary”
that allows the “rendezvous” of imagination and reality to be recognized and claimed
within the mind (CP 524). This boundary is vital because meaning does not emerge
within the hermetically sealed imagination, but in the ellipsis, or void, that opens beyond
the generative imagination, or in the incongruency between the light of the imagination
and the darkness that surrounds it. Stevens cannot “say God and the imagination are
one,” until he “feel[s] the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which
arranged the rendezvous” (CP 524 emphasis mine). The poem enacts this feeling of an
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obscure order through an incongruency of location. The “here” of the “room,” the 
“rendezvous,” and the “mind” becomes “there” at the end of the poem: “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.” It is also important to notice the ambiguity of the word “out” 
in the preceding lines. To make a dwelling out of the light, or a poem out of the central 
mind, could mean that the poem is produced by the mind’s generative light, or it could 
mean that the poem is made outside the light, at the vital point of obscurity where light 
fails into darkness. The ambiguity is ultimately unresolved. In “The Irrational Element 
in Poetry,” Stevens contends that “men in general do not create in light and warmth 
alone. They create in darkness and coldness” (OP 262).

The “order” in “Final Soliloquy” is “whole” insofar as it arranges our knowledge 
of the relationship between “here” and “there,” between “in” and “out,” between “light” 
and “dark” (CP 524). In much the same way, “The Planet on the Table” suggests that the 
poem’s “affluence” can only be achieved through the “poverty” of the words that 
comprise the poem, or that a certain arrangement of normally impoverished words bears 
the mark of enrichment when encountered within the delineated space of the poem. This 
is not, however, to suggest that the poems achieve final closure. Just as “affluence” is 
never explicitly articulated in “The Planet on the Table,” but is held in unresolved tension 
with “the poverty of words” (CP 532), so too, in “Final Soliloquy,” the feeling of 
obscurity never gives way to a complete or final clarity, and the elliptical void that opens 
behind the unity of God and the imagination is never completely filled. In the final line 
of “Final Soliloquy,” the feeling of “being there together” is “enough”—but, one might 
add, it is enough only in this fleeting moment (CP 524). As soon as “here” is established,
it has already become “there.” The feeling generated by this shift in perspective is one of dislocation, as if the terms of the poem’s dichotomous arrangements are not fixed in time, but are brought together and momentarily suspended in precise but fluid opposition.

As such an analysis makes clear, Stevens did not restrict himself to the statement that “God and the imagination are one” (L 701). While “Final Soliloquy” may not have achieved the length Stevens first envisioned, he manages with a great deal of subtlety to communicate some of the primary implications of this statement. “Final Soliloquy” generates an abiding sense of incongruency by drawing a “vital boundary” between the room and the evening’s darkness, and by acknowledging the void that always exists beyond the imagination. In this way, the poem subtly takes the shape of colloquy, as if to suggest that an obscure dialogue stands behind or beyond the internal monologue. The case for such a reading is reinforced in “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” where Stevens contends that “The rational mind, dealing with the known, expects to find it glistening in a familiar ether. What it really finds is the unknown always behind and beyond the known, giving the appearance, at best, of a chiaroscuro” (OP 232). Etymologically, chiaroscuro combines clarity and obscurity without becoming nonsensical, suggesting heightened contrast and interdependence rather than mere contradiction. In “Final Soliloquy,” the sanctioning of the imagination’s generative power does not rely solely on the imagination’s soliloquy, or its propensity to contradict silent and undifferentiated darkness, but on the “whole” of interplay and contrast that emerges between the soliloquy and the elliptical void that stands beyond it.
Stevens desired to create poetry that could serve as a tenable substitute for traditional religion. The poetic space delineated by the “vital boundary” of “Final Soliloquy” can be understood as a secular space intended to fulfill a traditionally religious function. Stevens’ declaration that God and the imagination are one does not mean that the individual subject is simply deified; rather, the declaration suggests that poetic imagination, by marrying itself to the darkness of the unknown, is capable of producing transcendent moments, or “that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane” (OP 228). Stevens frequently portrays such moments using the trope of marriage, so that a poetic transvaluation of the marriage sacrament reveals the secular relationship between imagination and reality’s otherness. Religious sacraments traditionally take place within a ritual environment; when these sacraments are transvalued by Stevens, they provide visionary moments, or what he generally defines as poetic sanctions that lead to nobility. Thus many of Stevens’ poems, and particularly his later poems, can be interpreted as abstracted and secularized ritual spaces. When the concept of ritual is employed by Stevens’ critics, it is invariably used in a pejorative sense to indicate the thoughtless habits encouraged by orthodox religious faith. Stevens explicitly attempts to overcome such habits; but this pejorative understanding of ritual reveals an unnecessary Protestant bias that has persisted since the Reformation. When ritual is broadly understood as a process that structures and organizes experience, providing moments of transcendence and sanctions for human life, then the general concept of ritual reveals how certain of Stevens’ poems might, in fact, fulfill his desire to provide a valid substitute for religion.
The "lineament" of "The Planet on the Table," like the "vital boundary" of "Final Soliloquy," foregrounds the importance of delineated poetic space in Stevens’ poetic project (CP 532, 524). Within the delineated space of the poem, the "affluence" of "the planet," like the generative power of the imagination, is sanctioned (CP 532). In "Final Soliloquy," it is "the miraculous influence" of delineated poetic space that provides the grounds on which Stevens can "say God and the imagination are one" (CP 524). The explicitly religious character of the terminology in these lines is unmistakable, but it raises an important question. Stevens is often cited, alongside William Carlos Williams, as one of America’s first genuinely atheistic poets. "Sunday Morning," a frequently anthologized early poem, appears to make a clear case for atheism, as do other early poems that polemically argue against Christianity, such as "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb" and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." In addition to these explicit examples, many of Stevens’ poems undeniably engender a Nietzschean transvaluation of values, or extol new naturalistic ideas of divinity to replace old orthodox ideas of divinity, or posit the virtue of unending earthly flux over the vice of changeless paradisial eternity. A close reading of Stevens’ letters and prose, however, indicates that the rejection of Christianity and its particular metaphysical supports cannot be so easily extrapolated into certain, absolute atheism. In a letter written as late as 1951, he says clearly, "I am not an atheist although I do not believe to-day in the same God in whom I believed when I was a boy" (L 735); in another letter, written to Hi Simons in 1940, Stevens says, "If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to
disbelieve” (L 370); and in Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty, one of the first book-length studies of Stevens’ poetry to emerge after his death, Herbert J. Stern rightly contends that “for Stevens, no less than for Matthew Arnold, the salient function of art was one we may legitimately call a religious function” (89). While Stevens undoubtedly rejected, at a relatively young age, the ontological foundationalism and worn-out attributes of a Christian God, he continued throughout his life to try to write poems that could provide what religion had once provided for humanity.

Stevens was raised in a religious household in Reading, Pennsylvania, as a journal entry from 1912 makes clear: “I remember how [my mother] always read a chapter from the Bible every night to all of us when we were ready for bed. [...] She always maintained an active interest in the Bible, and found there the solace she desired—She was, of course, disappointed, as we all are” (L 173). Stevens’ ambivalence toward religion, hinted at in this disappointment, is captured in a journal entry from August of 1902, when the poet was twenty-two. The entry describes “a handsome day” on which Stevens took one of his oft-described walks that left him “contented again”:

Last night I spent an hour in the dark transept of St. Patrick’s Cathedral where I go now and then in my more lonely moods. An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses. What incessant murmurs fill that ever-laboring, tireless church! But today in my walk I thought that after all there is no conflict of forces but rather a contrast. [...] The priest in me worshipped one God at one shrine; the poet another God at another shrine. [...] As I sat dreaming with the congregation I felt how the glittering altar worked on my senses stimulating and consoling them; and as I went tramping through the fields and woods I beheld every leaf and blade of grass revealing or rather betokening the Invisible. (L 59)
For readers who are familiar only with the most common characterizations of Stevens as staunch atheist, it may come as a surprise to learn that he sometimes visited a cathedral to find solace. Clearly, however, when Stevens contemplates the difference between the natural, murmuring realm of nature and the orthodox realm of the cathedral, he finds a stimulating contrast rather than a pure contradiction. While such a firmly relativistic stance disallows Christianity's claim to absolute truth, it is not wholly antagonistic toward the environment provided by the church. In fact, by the 1930's Stevens had managed to synthesize some of the contrasts noted in this letter, arguing in the "Adagia" that "The poet is the priest of the invisible" (OP 195).

As early as 1909 Stevens was beginning to refine his view of religion. In a letter to Elsie Moll, who was soon to become his wife, Stevens records his thoughts after having "dropped into St John's chapel an hour before the service and sat in the last pew and looked around" (L 140). Stevens says that the mystification and entrancement of the spirit provided by "the space, the gloom, [and] the quiet" of this particular chapel "is not enough," because the Christian church's "vitality depended on its association with Palestine," or on its location within a particular time and place that had become so distant from Stevens' own time and place as to render it powerless (L 140). Stevens does not feel "the wonder of the life and death of Jesus" when he looks upon the church's "gold cross on the altar," so he turns his thoughts "from this chapel to those built by men who felt the wonder of the life and death of Jesus—temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness—tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the depths of men familiar with Gethsemane, familiar with Jerusalem" (L 140). For Stevens, a lack of emotional reverberation always indicates a loss of the human capacity to make sensory
perceptions transcend the empirical process from which they arise. In this letter, Stevens acknowledges that the capacity for transcendence has been linked historically to the sacredness encountered in temples. Though such encounters are no longer possible in the orthodox setting of the church, Stevens' attitude toward the concept of sacredness is far from inimical.

The cross on the altar of St. John's chapel does not convey a sense of the sacred to Stevens because the cross's sacredness depends on an untenable, ontological belief in the historical life of Jesus. In the same letter Stevens goes on to say,

> Reading the life of Jesus [...] makes one distinguish the separate idea of God. Before today I do not think I have ever realized that God was distinct from Jesus. It enlarges the matter almost beyond comprehension. People doubt the existence of Jesus—at least, they doubt incidents of his life, such as, say, the Ascension into Heaven after his death. But I do not understand that they deny God. I think everyone admits that in some form or another. (L 140)

Having accumulated nearly two thousand years of orthodox associations, the cross no longer produces a fresh sense of the invisible power it once conveyed to Christian believers. For Stevens, specific orthodox figurations of God must be separated from the more general idea of God, which is a human construct and thus remains important not in an ontological sense, but rather as an imaginative idea. This idea is essential for two reasons: the irreducible otherness of God provides a potency against which habitual perceptions and entrenched solipsism can be broken, and the unifying transcendence of God provides the possibility that the abyss separating self and world can, during certain moments, temporarily be overcome. As Stern has aptly suggested,

> It was Stevens' conviction that although we can, if only because we must, learn to live without God, we cannot, if we are to remain human, live without the satisfactions that belief in God could formerly provide.
Whatever else religion of more devout ages than our own may have done, it did at least supply substance for visions grander than the empiricism of the present age has been able to achieve. (89)

For these reasons, Stevens contends that “it is not possible merely to disbelieve” in the idea of God, but that “it becomes necessary to believe in something else,” or in another “thing created by the imagination” (L 370).

If any of these new things created by the imagination are truly to engender belief, they will necessarily be rooted in the time and place in which they are created. For Stevens, imaginative creations such as specific gods or particular figurations of God always arise from local soil and local needs. This notion appears explicitly in “Two or Three Ideas,” an essay written nearly a half-century after the journal entry of 1902.

Describing the significance of “the gods of classical mythology,” Stevens contends that in the blue air of the Mediterranean these white and a little colossal figures had a special propriety, a special felicity. Could they have been created for that propriety, that felicity? Notwithstanding their divinity, they were close to the people among whom they moved. Is it one of the normal activities of humanity, in the solitude of reality and in the unworthy treatment of solitude, to create companions, a little colossal as I have said, who […] are, at least, assumed to be full of the secret of things and who in any event bear in themselves, even if they do not always wear it, the peculiar majesty of mankind’s sense of worth, neither too much nor too little? […] The celestial atmosphere of these deities, their ultimate remote celestial residences are not matters of chance. Their fundamental glory is the fundamental glory of men and women, who being in need of it create it. (OP 260-61)

As a young man who was still twenty-one years from publishing his first book of poems, Stevens sometimes turned to a cathedral—a space associated with one particular figuration of God—to cure himself of loneliness; as a mature poet who had published five volumes of poetry, Stevens views the very creation of gods as an “unworthy treatment of solitude” (OP 261). Despite this shift, Stevens acknowledges an over-arching human
need to create something “full of the secret of things,” something that bears “the peculiar majesty of mankind’s sense of worth” (OP 261). For Stevens, who grew up in Pennsylvania, moved to New York, and settled in Connecticut, the problem is that “In the North and East the church is more or less moribund” (L 237). In other words, Stevens sees himself living in a time and place in which a firm belief in “the gods, both ancient and modern, both foreign and domestic,” is no longer possible (OP 259). The unhappy result of this impossibility is summarized in the same essay, where Stevens says,

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. Since we have always shared all things with them and have always had a part of their strength and, certainly, all of their knowledge, we shared likewise this experience of annihilation. It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amicable rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness. (OP 260)

Although the gods have come “to nothing,” Stevens cannot adopt the purely atheistic stance of mere disbelief, because such a stance leads to feelings of annihilation, dispossess, isolation, desertion, hardness, and emptiness (OP 260).

Religion has traditionally provided the foundational framework through which the idea of God has been understood and articulated; it follows, then, that if the idea of God is to be maintained in an age when orthodox religious belief is no longer tenable, religion must be replaced by something else that is capable of engendering belief. In a letter to Hi Simons written in 1940, Stevens emphasizes the need for a “substitute” that can take the place of religion:
[T]he strength of the church grows less and less until the church stands for little more than propriety [...] I ought to say that it is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. [...] My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe. (L 348)

To create a substitute that could compensate for the loss of belief in God, Stevens turned his attention toward the creation of poetry that would be rooted firmly in his own time and place and conditioned by the needs he encountered there. As Adalaide Morris has suggested, “what Stevens confesses as a habit of mind, his poetry and prose reveal to be a near obsession. His search for a substitute for religion occupied his poetic energy from the early poetry to the late” (9).

Such a claim is born out not only in Stevens’ poetry, but also in his prose. As this study unfolds, I will return to many of these passages and the issues they address; here, however, I have chosen to present them without a great deal of commentary in order to demonstrate the extent to which Stevens’ poetic vocation was, according to his own letters, essays, and aphorisms, inextricably linked to religious issues such as the idea of God, the efficacy of the church, and the question of belief. After Stevens suggests to Hi Simons that disbelief in God makes it “necessary to believe in something else,” he says,

Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination. A good deal of my poetry recently has concerned the identity of that thing. [...] In one of the short poems that I have just sent to the Harvard Advocate, I say that one’s final belief must be in a fiction. I think that the history of belief will show that it has always been a fiction. (L 370)

In another letter to Simons in which Stevens answers questions about certain difficulties in his poems, he once again aligns God and fiction, saying, “the fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet, as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the
theologian” (L 434). In the same letter, Stevens describes his purpose in writing “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” as “trying to create something as valid as the idea of God has been” (L 435). In 1940, Henry Church wrote to Stevens for advice; a man of some wealth, Church was in the process of drafting a legal will, and he desired that money from his estate be used to establish a Chair of Poetry at an American university. In his response, Stevens explains his own opinion concerning the study of poetry:

What is intended is to study the theory of poetry in relation to what poetry has been and in relation to what it ought to be. [...] While aesthetic ideas are commonplace in this field, its import is not the import of the superficial. The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing. (L 377-78)

In the “Adagia,” a collection of aphorisms believed to have been written at various times from the early 1930’s to the mid 1940’s, Stevens contends that “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption” (OP 185). Later in the same collection, he says, “The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give” (OP 186). In addition to validation and support, Stevens reiterates several lines later that “Poetry is a means of redemption” (OP 186). Of the poet, Stevens says, “It is he that invented the Gods. It is he that put in their mouths the only words they have ever spoken” (OP 193). He goes on to say that “God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry” (OP 193). Near the end
of the “Adagia,” Stevens says, “God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)” (OP 198). And finally, in “Two or Three Ideas,” Stevens argues that “In an age of disbelief, or, what is the same thing, in a time that is largely humanistic, in one sense or another, it is for the poet to supply the satisfaction of belief, in his measure and in his style” (OP 259). As these examples clearly indicate, Stevens’ abiding concern with religion guided him as a poet, deeply affecting his reason for writing as well as his conception of what poetry could accomplish. A full understanding of Stevens’ poems demands a critical approach that accounts for the post-Christian religious content they contain.

Most of Stevens’ critics tend to adopt one of two general views concerning the issue of religion in his poetry. One the one hand, many critics are quick to call attention to Stevens’ atheism, finding support for this approach in his overt rejection of Christianity as well as all other traditional religions and their orthodoxies. These critic tend in one way or another to read Stevens as a poet of “reality.” By discounting religious considerations outright, critics writing in this vein are free to view Stevens as the great poet of the mind adhering to some variety of Freudian empiricism, or as the astute philosopher-poet bent on discovering his own naturalistic epistemology. While these approaches should be available to the reader who desires a full understanding of Stevens’ poetry, they both fail to account for Stevens’ explicit intention to write poetry that could serve as an adequate substitute for religion, an intention that the previous excerpts from his prose make abundantly clear. Images and ideas involving the miraculous, the revelatory, and the sacramental appear again and again in Stevens’ poems. According to Thomas Walsh’s Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, 21
explicit allusions to divinity or the divine appear no less than twenty-five times in his *Collected Poems*, along with twenty-four references to churches or cathedrals, and at least fifty references to God or the gods.

On the other hand, many critics view Stevens as a modern humanist heir to the romantic tradition and focus on his valorization of the creative power of the imagination, which they take to be a substitute in Stevens' poetry for traditional, orthodox theism. At its most reductive, this second view accuses Stevens of simply deifying subjective creativity, and these critics consequently tend to read Stevens as a poet of the "imagination," frequently viewing him as the modern artist-hero exercising his Nietzschean will-to-power. This stance, while certainly tenable and oftentimes illuminating—particularly when applied to Stevens' least skeptical moments of solipsistic exuberance—frequently fails to capture the complexity of Stevens' struggle to overcome the "trouble" caused by "the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom [he was] brought up to believe" (L 348). In short, these critics tend to ignore the implications of Stevens' insistence that an "essential imagination [...] has its difficulties" (L 370).

Recent critics, attempting to acknowledge the difficulties posed by essential imagination without reading Stevens as a poet of "reality," tend to view him as an early postmodern poet demonstrating through rhetoricity the problematic nature of linguistic referentiality. The problem with these theories, which will be discussed in more depth as I consider one postmodern critic's approach to Stevens, is that they unjustly rule out the possibility that poetry can provide any affirmations whatsoever, or "that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane" (OP 228). Stevens believed that "the unknown" will always be found "behind and beyond the known, giving it the appearance,
at best, of a chiaroscuro” (OP 232); but such a belief does not imply that his poetry is best understood in terms of the negations associated with the abyss of language.

Adalaide Morris and David Jarraway have both written extensive book-length studies of Stevens’ poetry that focus on his engagement with religious concerns. Of the two, Morris remains closer to the spirit of Stevens’ poetry, acknowledging both his attempt to create imaginative poetic fictions that could serve as secularized temples and his continual use of sacramental tropes. Jarraway’s study is insightful insofar as his mastery of postmodern theory allows him to bring a wide range of the twentieth century’s most important philosophical ideas to bear on Stevens’ poetry, a critical endeavor that results in fresh readings of some of Stevens’ more difficult poems; but Jarraway’s over­arch­ing attempt to relocate Stevens’ humanism within postructuralism’s linguistic abyss seems unnecessary in light of the skepticism and careful attention with which Stevens’ searched for a tenable humanism throughout his poetic career.

In Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith, one of the first book-length investigations of Stevens’ poetic engagement with religion, Morris provides a comprehensive analysis of Stevens’ attempt to write poetry that could “take the place of ‘empty heaven and its hymns.’ [...] Again and again he described poetry as a ‘sanction’ for life: poetry decrees our cosmic isolation, at once a curse and a nobility” (3). Morris is justified in arguing for the importance of poetry’s function as a sanctioning force for Stevens, a function repeatedly confirmed in his prose: “Life without poetry is, in effect, life without a sanction” (L 299); “everything depends on its sanction; and when its sanction is lost that is the end of it. But the poem is precisely what is printed on the page. The poem is the absence of the archbishop” (L 347-48); “I know exactly why I write
poetry [...]. I write it because for me it is one of the sanctions of life” (L 600); “the poets [...] urgently search the world for the sanctions of life, for that which makes life so prodigiously worth living” (OP 228); “the end of the poet is fulfillment, since the poet finds a sanction for life in poetry” (NA 43). An understanding of Stevens’ concept of sanctioning is crucial to an understanding of his poetry, and I will return to this concept in the next chapter.

Morris also argues that despite Stevens’ concern with religion, his “role is not to be found in morals”: for Stevens, “Ethics need not offer a prescriptive code of behavior” (144). This contention is supported in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” where Stevens admits that “if a social movement moved one deeply enough, its moving poems would follow”; but he does not see himself as being involved in such a movement:

> I am interested in the role of the poet and this is paramount. In this area of my subject I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligations of the poet. He has none. [...] I do not think that a poet owes any more as a social obligation than he owes as a moral obligation, and [...] the role of the poet is not to be found in morals. (NA 27-28)

For Stevens, “the social,” and by implication moral “obligations so closely urged is a phase of the pressure of reality which a poet [...] is bound to resist or evade today”; or, in a more blunt statement to the same effect, “No politician,” or priest for that matter, “can command the imagination, directing it to do this or that” (NA 28).

In a chapter entitled “The Deaf Mute Church and the Chapel of Breath,” Morris contends that while Stevens could not accept a repeated return to the orthodox churches of an earlier time, the “goal of Stevens’ critique of the deaf-mute church is [an] escape from repetition into the moment of vibrant potentiality” (50), a moment which Morris
describes in a later chapter as arising from “the dynamic relationship” between “the imagination” and “the physical world” (142): “each act in the world is potentially sacramental, a sign of spiritual reality and a means to spiritual grace, and each place emerging in his description becomes potentially [...] a place where, for a moment, imagination meets and marries reality” (169). Morris argues that such moments result from an active receptivity of the type described in “How to Live. What to Do.” The plot of this poem is straightforward: two men stop to rest as they ascend a ridge, and during their rest they perceive “the heroic height” of the rock on which they stand as well as the “heroic sound / Joyous and jubilant and sure” that is produced by “the cold wind” (CP 126). As Morris suggests, and as is usually the case with Stevens, such an experience begins with receptivity to “the mysterious callings of Nature” (L 59), but only becomes an example of how to live and what to do when the imagination is married to sensory perception through apt description; as Stevens says elsewhere, “Description is revelation” (CP 344). In this particular poem, the men set out in the evening “To seek a sun of fuller fire. / Instead there was this tufted rock” (CP 125). As Stevens immediately begins to describe the rock—“Massively rising high and bare / Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown / Like giant arms among the clouds”—it becomes apparent that the “sun of fuller fire” (CP 125) is precisely the imagination and its “desire, set deep in the eye” (CP 467) as it successfully marries itself to massive rock and cold wind through metaphorical description. The rock is part of the earth, and yet its verticality, its position “Beyond” all earth-bound plant life, and its personified magnitude among clouds indicates that the earth can accommodate the poet’s desire for transcendence. Significantly, in “Christian iconography, the rock represents the revealed truth of Christ promised by the church”
(Morris 139); for Stevens, the rock comes to represent the revealed truth of the earth promised by poetry: “Founded in the physical being of the earth as the chapel of breath is founded in man’s physical being, the rock embodies the interchange of environment and self, visible and invisible, reality and imagination which is, for Stevens, the essence of poetry” (Morris 141). Stevens believed that the revelatory, ritual space of the church had lost its power to provide the sanctions on which everything depends; but its function remains necessary, and therefore must be relocated within a poetry of the earth.

Morris’s study of Stevens’ engagement with religion and faith is thorough, but she does not exhaust the topic. Although Morris alludes to the Romantic influence on some of Stevens’ major poetic conceptions, she frames Stevens’ engagement with religion largely in biographical terms: Stevens enacted a poetic transvaluation of Christian values, Morris argues, primarily because he grew up with a strong Protestant heritage, read deeply in the Bible, and absorbed a great deal of Christian theology; as a poet, this experience allowed him to retain, secularize, and rearticulate what orthodox Christianity had once provided for its followers. This focus allows Morris to analyze Stevens’ transvaluation of specific Christian concepts—such as a re-imagined version of the Trinity—that cannot be covered within the scope of this thesis. While Morris’s Christian-centered approach is valid and illuminating, Stevens’ engagement with religion can be placed within a long lineage of English poetry, and can be read within a broader, more comparative religious context. Such an approach is useful because it clarifies one of Morris’s central arguments: again and again she emphasizes the central importance of a sacramental marriage between imagination and reality in Stevens’ poems. This emphasis is justified, but Morris never offers a comprehensive theory that explains how
this aspect of Stevens’ poetry—his absolute reliance on, and particular understanding of, the interdependence between imagination and reality—can be understood within the larger context of both English poetry and religious history. One of the goals of this thesis will be to show how it is that Stevens might have arrived at this vital concept as he attempted to write poetry that could serve as a valid substitute for orthodox religion.

In *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief*, Jarraway begins with a critique of humanistic substitution, which he describes as “the objective truth of God gradually collaps[ing] into the subjective truth of the poet only as the individual mind” (12).

Jarraway points out that in Stevens’ letter to Hi Simons concerning “some substitute for religion,” Stevens goes on to say that “Humanism would be the natural substitute, but the more I see of humanism the less I like it” (L 348). According to Jarraway, “Stevens’ point here is that the foreclosure of spiritual experience in the matter of faith has not really altered to any significant degree if orthodoxy’s transcendent theism is merely exchanged for its antinomian variation in an immanent humanism” (5). Jarraway suggests that when Stevens says, “‘The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary,’ [...] the ‘either’ in Stevens’ notation [...] makes it fairly plain that there are actually only two alternatives worthy of serious consideration” (3). Jarraway argues that despite what Stevens says in the letter, the options presented by Stevens’ either/or proposition do not

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2 It should be pointed out that the notion of mere substitution, or the simple deification of the subjective imagination in a post-Christian world, is itself a reductive oversimplification that has sometimes been posited as a way to understand, and usually to undermine, “the Romantic endeavor to salvage traditional [religious] experience and values by accommodating them to premises tenable to a later age” (Abrams 69). In *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Natural Supernaturalism*, M.H. Abrams thoroughly and convincingly demonstrates that the Romantic attempt to salvage religious experience (as well as Stevens’ similar attempt to provide a transvaluation of religious values) is, in fact, much more nuanced than mere “substitution” suggests.
mean the same thing. He goes on to introduce “One of the first principles of [his] study” by suggesting that he will “pay close attention to the sense of alternativeness between a differing, or differentiating intelligence, on the one hand, and an intelligence more conveniently predisposed to substituting or replacing ideas offered to it in the whole relation between imagination and faith, on the other” (3). In the course of his study, Jarraway suggests that one of the major developments in Stevens’ poetry, as it evolves from its early stages in *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order* through to its later stages in *Transport to Summer, The Auroras of Autumn,* and *The Rock,* involves a movement first toward a belief in humanistic substitution, then away from that belief and toward a differing intelligence that Jarraway terms a/theology, which he locates in Stevens’ poetry after “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

Jarraway argues that in the second phase of this movement, “when belief ceases to be either a subject or an object of thought and becomes instead the question of thought [...] itself, then what constitutes meaning for the poet begins to take on far greater significance than the actual meanings of his poems” (183). Following an argument postulated by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp,* Jarraway sets up a structural dichotomy “of what [Roland] Barthes might call ‘the great semiological “versus” myth’: mimesis / poiesis” (12), which arises from the opposition between “orthodoxy’s transcendent theism” and “immanent humanism” (5). According to Jarraway, the High Romantic notion of poiesis—adopted to varying degrees by modernists—causes “a poet like Wallace Stevens” to “either approbate or at some point register his disenchantment with classic deduction posing as romantic induction” (12). “It should not surprise us,” Jarraway continues, “to find Stevens midway though his poetic career writing about the
romantic in 'a pejorative sense,' as he phrases it, about 'some phase of the romantic that has become stale' and that he views in his letters as leading to 'fatalism and then to indifferentism'” (12). Jarraway fails to point out that Stevens believed all poetic fictions, including those of the Romantics, would inevitably become stale and need to be re-imagined. Stevens may have grown weary of particular Romantic tropes, but there is little indication that he rejected outright the major tenets of the Romantic project.

Jarraway argues that because neither classical mimesis nor romantic poiesis could sustain Stevens’ poetic project, he was forced to turn to

\[a \text{ third idea} \ldots\] that is thoroughly poststructural and thoroughly postmodern. It is this third idea \ldots that turns the poet's objective quest for faith not into subjective art but rather into the eventful question of belief and traces a continual pattern of spiritual rebirth spiraling through his last three collections of verse. (13)

Jarraway’s term for this “eventful question of belief” is “semiosis,” an “invented term” (13) which he uses variously to suggest a pastiche of philosophical and critical ideas:

Nietzsche’s “discursive, rather than substantive, possibilities for maintaining ‘the satisfactions of belief’” (9); Marin Heidegger’s “force of an Other” (13); Barthes’ idea of textuality; Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse; and, primarily, Jaques Derrida’s “‘force of the question’” (14). According to Jarraway, Stevens’ development can be read as “an important realignment of linguistic and aesthetic priorities […] that allows belief to pass from a literal quest to a figural question” (17), a necessary adjustment since, for Stevens, “a dark abyss has swallowed up all the available spiritual options” (18). Jarraway summarizes his thesis as follows:

Stevens […] reach[es] into that abyss, not so much to deliver us up […] to another meaning and another truth but, like his Metaphysician in the Dark, rhetorically to suspend the question of belief over the abyss as a question.
of style. "[It] becomes the question of style as the question of writing," as Derrida would say, "the question of a spurning operation, more powerful than any content, any thesis, any meaning ... [and] considered as a question ... remains, interminably." [...] The really valuable insight that Stevens' interrogation of faith will ultimately be able to show is not so much what can and cannot be thought once theological representation has reached its limits but rather what makes that thought and those limits possible in the first place. (18-19)

At the close of his study, after bringing a wide range of postmetaphysical thought, poststructural criticism, and postmodern theory to bear on Stevens' body of work, Jarraway concludes that Stevens' "form of belief," equated with a collection of poetry that can only reveal the limits of belief, "will never count for more than the force of its question" (315)—a conclusion intended by Jarraway to convey high praise.

Jarraway’s study adds philosophical depth and critical complexity to a project initiated by earlier deconstructive readers of Stevens’ poetry, most notably J. Hillis Miller, who, in his essay "Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure," investigates the ultimate indeterminacy of certain key words in "The Rock" to argue that the poem, finally, is an abyss and the filling of the abyss, a chasm and a chasmy production of icons of the chasm, inexhaustible to interpretation. Its textual richness opens abyss beneath abyss, beneath each deep a deeper deep, as the reader interrogates its elements and lets each question generate an answer which is another question in its turn. Each question opens another distance, [...] without ever reaching any closer to the constantly receding horizon. (49)

Stevens undeniably embraces flux and avoids the stasis of closure in his poems. In his prose, Stevens explicitly warns readers not to search for rational certainty in his poems, as a brief essay from 1948 entitled “Poetry and Meaning” makes clear:

things [such as poems] that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions very often take on a form that is ambiguous or uncertain. 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. (OP 249)
However, despite the fact that a certain degree of uncertainty is central to Stevens’ poetry, Jarraway’s conclusion—that Stevens’ poetry, as it repeatedly and variously poses the question of belief, can “never count for more than the force of [that] question” (315)—finally obscures more than it illuminates because it refuses to acknowledge or account for the affirmations that can potentially rise from the abyss, or the sanctions for being that Stevens sometimes celebrates by employing a secularized ritual structure in his poems.

In “The Ultimate Poem is Abstract,” Stevens sheds light on the meaning that can, in fact, emerge from the force of a question. The poem first poses a central question—“This day writhes with what?”—which, in its non-specificity, is intended not to elicit an answer, but to mark the space of the poem as distinct from the writhing day itself. The poem then describes a type of stock character—“The lecturer / On This Beautiful World Of Ours”—who, always ready with certain metaphysical answers, “composes himself / And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe, / And red, and right” (CP 429). Stevens’ tone becomes mocking as the capitalized lecture’s formal certainty is undermined by the informal uncertainty of the hemming and hawing that implicitly ensues. With the lecturer’s certainty undermined, the alliteration of “rose,” “ripe,” “red,” and “right” suggests that any certain answer to the poem’s question will only add to the alliteration by being wrong. Near the end of the poem, Stevens concedes, albeit somewhat ironically, that “It would be enough / If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed / In This Beautiful World Of Ours” (CP 430). If this middle can be achieved, however, it cannot be achieved through poetry, where we are always “Writhing in wrong obliques
and distances” and “Helplessly at the edge,” a suspended state which prevents us from feeling “Complete” and “merely enjoy[ing]” the day (CP 430). In other words, the ultimate poem would, if only it could, fix us in the enjoyable, non-abstract middle of each day’s immanent writhings. However, in order for a poem to fix us in those writhings, the writhings themselves must in some way be named or figured, which implies that the poem will always, implicitly if not explicitly, pose some variant of the question, “This day writhes with what?” (CP 429). “If the day writhes,” then when those writhings are invited into the poem via its question, the day does not writhe “with revelations. / One goes on asking questions” (CP 429). Consequently, the poet can never achieve the certainty of the lecturer. The poem continues to announce itself as distinct from the day’s writhings, and to disrupt our unquestioning belief in, and certain enjoyment of, any supposed sense of immanent completion. For Stevens, this is why “The particular question—here / The particular answer to the particular question / Is not in point—the question is in point” (CP 429).

Jarraway would have us stop at this point where the question disrupts the smug certainty of the poem’s lecturer and casts doubt over the static certainty of any meaning; but the “question is in point” precisely because the question itself is transformative: one may go on asking questions, but “So said, this placid space / Is changed” (CP 429). And what is the nature of this placid space once it is transformed by the poem’s inevitable question?

It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,
There must be no questions. It is an intellect
Of windings round and dodges to and fro,

Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,
Not an intellect in which we are fleet: present
Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole
Of communication. (CP 429-430).

The immediate, intense perception of the sky's color fades somewhat as soon as we ask questions about it instead of merely experiencing it as a sensory fact; but an unquestioning, immanent engagement with the day, if ever we were to achieve such a state in actuality, would make us "fleet," which could mean nimble or quick, but also evanescent, or likely to disappear altogether. In the absence of the question that marks the space of the poem and allows communicative thought to take place, the immanence of "Everywhere in space at once" would lead to the "cloud-pole," or dark terminus, "Of communication" itself, and we would be relegated to a silent and therefore meaningless, non-human existence.

The question that opens "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" is not, strictly speaking, the eventful questioning of belief that Jarraway finds throughout Stevens' later poetry; but there is a direct parallel between the poem's question and Jarraway's question of belief in that the poem's question opens an abyss between the subjective observer and the objective world. Morris calls this abyss "our cosmic isolation, at once a curse and a nobility" (3). It is a curse insofar as it distances us from an immanent participation in the world's writhing; but it is a nobility in that it allows for what Joseph Riddel terms "the origin of consciousness," which is also "the birth of the imagination": "man grown conscious of himself wills to name the world, to possess it as it once possessed him. He wills the 'I am' of poem one, and in willing it completes his fall into an alien world. The paradox is this: without self-consciousness there is no poetry, no need for the fiction
which marries self with world” (Morris 160). In “Saint John and the Back-Ache,” Stevens succinctly summarizes both the abyss and its value when he says that the “illustrations” of poetic metaphor “help us face the dumbfoundering abyss / Between us and the object, external cause, / The little ignorance that is everything” (CP 437). In the strict sense of our desire, we like to think it would “be enough / If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed / In This Beautiful World Of Ours” (CP 430); but if this desire was ever realized, it would lead to the closure of the “dumbfoundering abyss,” to the loss of the impetus for poetry, and, like the disappearance of the gods, to the loss of life’s sanctions, or to emptiness and annihilation.

Jarraway, then, is not entirely incorrect when he argues that the “force of [the] question” is vital to Stevens’ poetry; but he goes too far when he says that the “form of belief” in Stevens’ poetry “will never count for more than the force of its question” (315). By framing his study within the deconstructive skepticism of poststructural critique, Jarraway unjustly mitigates the structural significance of the question itself. The question of belief does not only open abyss after abyss, but also provides the possibility for poetry to yield up momentary bridges that transcend the abyss and allow us, however fleetingly, to celebrate “the marriage of flesh and air” (CP 83). This marriage is different from being “at the middle, fixed / In This Beautiful World Of Ours” (CP 430), because the image of a downed tree’s stump defines the middle of “Life is Motion,” the early poem in which this marriage of flesh and air takes place. As Robert Pack has suggested in an essay entitled “Place and Nothingness in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens,” the “motion of life” in this poem is “to be seen as inseparable from the stasis of death” (104). Bonnie and Josie, the characters in the poem who celebrate their momentary marriage with the
air, are not immanently fixed in this marriage; rather, they are able to be thrust into the motion of a marriage celebration precisely because the stump makes them self-conscious, or aware of their own mortality, at the same time that it clears a human space in the natural world, distancing them from immanent fixedness in an unbroken forest. This consciousness and this space—their very separateness from the earth—does not simply spurn them into an extended, postmodern, semiotic contemplation of abyss upon abyss. More importantly, it gives them cause to avow and rejoice in their subsequent sacrament with the earth’s air; at the end of the poem, they are thrust into affirmative celebration, dancing as they rapturously sing “Ohoyaho, / Ohoo’ . . .” (CP 83).
The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” an essay Stevens composed in the early 1940’s, is organized around the concept of nobility. Stevens imbues the quality of nobility with the quality of transcendence in such a way that nobility can be understood as a secular trope with religious connotations. Stevens says of the poet that “his function is to make his imagination [his readers’] and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others” (NA 29). This description of the poet’s function follows the common pattern of evasiveness and ambiguity that characterizes much of Stevens’ prose; but even here he is not far from implicitly giving the poet a non-institutionalized religious role appropriate to his time and place. As he works to clarify the role of the poet, he describes what the poet’s imagination offers as it “becomes the light in the mind of others”: “the imagination gives to everything that it touches a peculiarity, and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility, of which there are many degrees. This inherent nobility is the natural source of another […] I mean that nobility which is our *spiritual height and depth*” (NA 33-34, emphasis mine). According to Stevens’ argument, the poet’s imagination takes on an unorthodox though unmistakably religious characteristic: whatever comes into contact with the imagination is made noble, and this process of ennobling leads to the only available transcendence in an age of disbelief.

As the essay concludes, Stevens uses the pivotal notion of sanctioning to assemble the relationship between the poet’s proper function and nobility’s affirmative
power: “For the sensitive poet, conscious of negations, nothing is more difficult than the *affirmations of nobility* and yet there is nothing that he requires of himself more persistently, since in them and in their kind, alone, are to be found those *sanctions* that are the reasons for his being” (NA 35, emphasis mine). For a critic like Jarraway, consciousness of negations is all that Stevens hopes to achieve in his later poems; Stevens insists, however, that the poet must strive to provide affirmations, even while remaining conscious of negation’s persistence. In other words, everything that is conceived adequately by the imagination is not simply negated as the limits of meaning are revealed, but is potentially made noble, or sanctioned, by that very process. Because Stevens attributes to nobility a quality of spiritual height and depth, which implies the verticality of transcendence, nobility becomes one of Stevens’ major tropes for a secular, post-Christian rearticulation of the religious content of poetry.

A sanction is, most generally, a formal decree, especially an ecclesiastical decree. Since Stevens was concerned that “the strength of the church [had grown] less and less until the church [stood] for little more than propriety,” and since, as a result of this concern, “it [became] a habit of mind with [him] to be thinking of some substitute for religion” (L 348), it is fitting that he describes the poet in terms of the sanctions that can be provided within the formal space of the poem. Etymologically, “sanction” is derived from the Latin verb *sancire*—to make sacred—and is closely related to the Latin *sacrare*, which gives rise to the English words “sacred,” “consecrate,” and “sacrament.”

In a journal entry from 1906, Stevens describes yet another evening spent in a church:
Full litany—sweet and melodious and welcome. They should have dark corners there. Impossible to be religious in a pew. One should have a great nave, quiet lights, a remote voice, a soft choir and solitude. […] Sometimes I think that all of our learning is the little learning of the maxim. To laugh at a Roman awe-stricken in a sacred grove is to laugh at something to-day. I wish that groves still were sacred—or, at least that something was: that there was still something free from doubt, that day unto day still uttered speech and night unto night still showed wisdom. I grow tired of the want of faith—the instinct of faith. (L 86)

In the church’s pew, Stevens cannot fulfill his nostalgic longing for something “sacred,” or “something free from doubt”; and, despite the fact that he grows tired of what he terms “the instinct of faith,” instincts are inherent impulses or unalterable tendencies, and therefore are unavoidable (L 86). Modern man, armed with the insufficient knowledge provided by his axiomatic beliefs, is all too willing to deny this instinct by laughing scornfully “at a Roman awe-stricken in a sacred grove,” and fails to realize that his compensatory scorn is directed at his own burden of doubt (L 86). Stevens understands this irony and refuses to add his voice to the laughter; but neither can he join in the litany from the orthodox position of the Christ Church pew. Instead, with the words “They should,” he begins to compose a place where his instinct for faith might be more fully realized. In his journal entry this place turns out to be not much different from the church in which he finds himself. Soon, however, Stevens would come to view the imagination and the poems it produces as the composed space that in “the absence of the archbishop” (L 348) could produce “the sanctions of life,” or “that which makes life so prodigiously worth living” (OP 228).

By the end of his life, Stevens would place the poetic process of sanctioning in “a chapel of breath” (CP 529), a replacement for the “deaf-mute” (CP 357) churches of traditional religions. A chapel, as a metaphor for a religious place of worship, is
traditionally the site of ritual occurrences; it is the site where the lives of believers are ritualistically sanctioned, and it provides the delineated space in which sacraments take place. Though Stevens refers specifically to “ritual” only once in his poetry, his preference of Catholicism over Protestantism, along with his repeated allusions to churches and cathedrals, to the poet as priest, to the sacrament of marriage, and to the sanctions provided by poetry, work together to suggest that Stevens’ poetry, as a tenable substitute for religion, must provide a structural setting similar to that which ritual spaces traditionally provided, and must function in much the same way that ritual had functioned within such a setting.

The challenge, then, is to find a theoretical framework within which Stevens’ poetry can be understood as composed ritual space, or as a space in which the sanctioning of life can occur, without making its sanctions appear to be certain, unchanging pronouncements “On This Beautiful World Of Ours” (CP 429). As many of the previous examples indicate, Stevens’ understanding of religion—including his idea of God and his concern with belief—was not limited to Christianity. Stevens maintained a comparative attitude toward the world’s religions, viewing all of them that he encountered in his studies and in his life as necessary fictions, or imaginative human constructs, that were relative to specific historical times and geographical places. Consequently, an understanding of Stevens’ poetry as ritual space calls for a broadly comparative, constructivist theory of ritual.

3In his letters, Stevens mentions frequent visits to Catholic cathedrals, where he liked to sit and meditate; in Peter Brazeau’s Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered, Stevens is cited by a close friend as saying that if he ever joined a church it would be the Catholic Church (291); and the Rev. Arthur Hanley, who was the chaplain at the hospital where Stevens died, claims to have baptized him into the Catholic Church shortly before he died (294-96).
Such a theory can be found in Jonathan Z. Smith's *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. According to Smith,

Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest. It is the recognition of this fundamental characteristic of ritual that most sharply distinguish our understanding from that of the Reformers, with their all to easy equation of ritual with blind and thoughtless habit. It is this characteristic, as well, that explains the role of place as a fundamental component of ritual: place directs attention.

Such a preliminary understanding of ritual and its relation to place is best illustrated by the case of built ritual environments—most especially, crafted constructions such as temples. When one enters a temple, one enters a marked-off space [...] in which, at least in principle, nothing is accidental; everything, at least potentially, demands attention. The temple serves as a focusing lens, establishing the possibility of significance by directing attention, by requiring the perception of difference. (104)

These observations, when considered in light of Stevens' concern with the poem as delineated space, work to make sense of two seemingly distinct ideas that Stevens proposed at about the same time: in a letter to Hi Simons, Stevens argues that “The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God” (377); in the “Adagia,” Stevens argues that “There is no difference between god and his temple” (OP 191). If the major poetic idea always has been the idea of God, and if there is no difference between god and his temple, then one could say, following Stevens, that the major poetic idea always has been the idea of the temple, or the idea of the ritual space where the commonplace is made noble.

Stevens clearly believed that within the space of the poem ordinary life is sanctioned. He likely would have been uncomfortable equating “sanctioned” with “made sacred”; but Stevens lived during a time when Émile Durkheim’s comparative theory of
religion had made “the Sacred” a substantive category, a theory that contradicts Smith’s (and Stevens’) constructivist leanings:

Within the temple, the ordinary [...] becomes significant, becomes “sacred,” simply by being there. A ritual object or action becomes sacred by having attention focused on it in a highly marked way. From such a point of view, there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational ones. Sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement. [...] We do well to remember that long before “the Sacred” appeared in discourse as a substantive (a usage that does not antedate Durkheim), it was primarily employed in verbal forms, most especially with the sense of making an individual a king or bishop (as in the obsolete English verbs to sacrate or to sacre), or in adjectival forms denoting the result of the process of sacrament. Ritual is not an expression of or a response to “the Sacred”; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual [...]. [D]ivine and human, sacred and profane, are transitive categories; they serve as maps and labels, not substances; they are distinctions of office, indices of difference. (104-105)

In this passage, if the overtly religious terminology is replaced with Stevensian terms, we are left with a statement that describes Stevens’ poetry with remarkable accuracy: In the imagination, and subsequently in the poem, the ordinary gains nobility, or becomes sanctioned, simply by being there. A poetic object or action becomes sanctioned by having attention focused on it in a highly marked way. From such a point of view, there is nothing that is inherently sanctioned or unsanctioned, noble or ignoble. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational ones. Sanctioning is, above all, a category of emplacement. Imaginative, poetic creation is not an expression of or a response to “the Noble”; rather, something or someone is made noble and thereby sanctioned, first by the imagination, and subsequently by the poem. Noble and ignoble are transitive categories; they serve as maps and labels, not substances; they are distinctions of office, indices of difference.
That Stevens believed nothing to be inherently sacred or profane is evidenced in "Montrachet-Le-Jardin," where he describes in ritualistic terms a poetic process that allows the poet to make "A hero’s world in which he is the hero" (CP 261). As "the x malisons of other men" are left behind, "The poison in the blood will have been purged" by

An inner miracle and sun-sacrament,
One of the major miracles, that fall

As apples fall, without astronomy,
One of the sacraments between two breaths,
Magical only for the change they make. (CP 261-62)

The "inner miracle" in this passage is compared to the natural process of sun-ripened apples falling from a tree; but "as" makes the falling apples metaphorical, suggesting that the natural fact of the apples falling gains the divinity of a "sun-sacrament" only when it is placed in the poem. The wise poet-hero does not need the astronomical guidance of the star of Bethlehem to be purged of sin, because the inherent sacredness attributed to the major miracle of Christ’s birth is part of the poison that must be purged if the new world of poetic sacraments is to be brought into existence. The magic that results in the sacramental poetic act is not inherent in any particular words, historical events, or natural objects; rather, the natural fact of the falling apples, like every other natural fact, becomes divine when the poet sees the event between breaths, and then breathes the words of metaphor into existence, so that "Magical" is "only" a label that indicates difference—in this case the "change" brought about by the words of the poem as they are breathed into existence by the poet.
The parallels between Smith’s theory of ritual and Stevens’ theory of poetry are extended as Smith expands upon his theory, and it will be helpful to readers unfamiliar with Smith’s theory of ritual to quote him at length:

Ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference. [...] Ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are. Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities placed within an extraordinary setting, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts. But it also relies for its power on the perceived fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be realized. There is a “gnostic” dimension to ritual. It provides the means for demonstrating that we know what ought to have been done, what ought to have taken place. Nonetheless, by the very fact that it is ritual action rather than everyday action, ritual demonstrates that we know “what is the case.” Ritual thus provides an occasion for reflection on and rationalization of the fact that what ought to have been done was not, what ought to have taken place did not. From such a perspective, ritual is not best understood as congruent with something else—a magical imitation of desired ends, a translation of emotions, a symbolic acting out of ideas [...]. Ritual gains force where incongruency is perceived and thought about. (109-110)

This theory of ritual can be usefully applied to Stevens’ poetry, and particularly to his major late poems, which can be understood as extraordinary efforts to create non-orthodox, imaginative ritual spaces where the commonplace is temporarily made noble through a secularized version of a traditionally religious process.

When considering Stevens’ poetry from The Auroras of Autumn to “The Rock,” critics tend to focus on his well-known delineation between the imagination and reality. Too often these critics conclude, implicitly if not explicitly, that late in Stevens’ life he finally adhered to one or the other. Depending on a critic’s inclinations, Stevens
ultimately becomes either a poet of the imagination or a poet of reality. Stevens' first significant articulation of this duality appears in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," where he attempts to define "the relation between the imagination and reality" (NA 7). In this relation, there is no choice according to Stevens; rather, "the universal interdependence exists, and hence [the poet's] choice and his decision must be that [the imagination and reality] are equal and inseparable" (NA 24). Stevens' idea that the imagination and reality are ultimately interdependent is closely related to Smith's theory of ritual, in which "Ritual gains force where incongruency is perceived and thought about" without being overcome (110). In the same way that ritual gains force through the interdependence of what ought to be done and what is actually the case, Stevens' late poems gain force through the interdependence of imagination's "ought to" and reality's "is," and not between a choice of one over the other.

Stevens also contends in "The Noble Rider" that poetry results from placement. As in ritual, the poet places quite ordinary activities (reality) within an extraordinary setting (the imagination), a process that results in the poem: "his own measure as a poet, in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth, is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination" (23). The poet must be able to abstract himself in order to recognize that he is something more than an empirical body; the imagination is itself an abstraction, serving as the site of our capacity to form conceptions

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4 For a full discussion of this critical tendency, see the introductory chapter to B.J Legget's Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory.
distinct from purely physical or empirical sensations. For Stevens, any reality outside the imagination can then be placed within this ordering, conceptual space where it is sanctioned by the addition of poetic meaning, just as ordinary objects can be placed within the ordering space of a ritual environment where they are sanctified by the addition of religious meaning.

This act of placement is captured succinctly in “Anecdote of the Jar,” an early poem that begins with the simple statement “I placed a jar in Tennessee” (CP 76). The act of placement must first take place in the poet’s imagination, so that the jar placed in Tennessee also comes to be placed in the poem. This placement then orders the unordered wilderness: “It made the slovenly wilderness / surround that hill.” Stevens captures the constructive nature of this act when he says that the jar “took dominion everywhere,” stressing its newly sanctioned nobility, even though considered as an empirical object it “was gray and bare.” This act of ennobling placement is closely related to ritual acts; for Stevens, the built environment of the temple is replaced by the built environment of the poem, the orthodox process of sacration is replaced by the poetic process of sanctioning, and the resulting experience of the religiously sacred is replaced by the experience of the poetically noble.

Smith’s description of the ways ritual should not be understood is also relevant to Stevens’ poetry. In *Words Chosen out of Desire*, Helen Vendler defends her overarching critical approach to Stevens’ poetry against critics who read Stevens’ poems as “a collection of ideas” (4). Because so many of Stevens’ poems address the subject of poetry itself, and because his later poems make increasing use of abstract diction (as opposed to the concrete sensuality that dominates *Harmonium*), it is indeed tempting to
focus on the ideas they contain. But while Vendler remains one of Stevens’ best readers, she often reacts to idea-oriented critics by going too far in the other direction and reading Stevens’ poems almost wholly as translations of emotions. This leads Vendler to read “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” as a “resolutely impoverished poem” that “sets a desolate scene” and that “cannot hope, under these conditions, to overcome entirely the exhaustion and despair that motivate it. It is, humanly speaking, the saddest of all Stevens’ poems” (*Extended* 269). While “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” does confront “the total leaflessness,” “The dominant blank,” and “the wasted figurations of the wastes” (CP 477), the poem also insists that “The barrenness that appears is an exposing” of the “visibility of thought, / In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once” (CP 487-88). These lines call to mind Emerson’s invisible eyeball, and they do not sound solely desperate, exhausted, or sad. The “thought” that gains “visibility” in such a poem is precisely the thought of incongruency—the acute perception of the difference between our unending desire for the way things ought to be and our unflinching knowledge of the way things are. This poem, like many of Stevens’ late accomplishments, is both more than a symbolic acting out of ideas and more than a translation of emotions; it is, above all else, an extraordinarily moving attempt to represent poetry’s ennobling sanctions by perceiving and thinking about the incongruency between the “savagery” of “plain things,” or reality, and its “diviner opposite,” or the metaphorical constructs that the imagination makes of plain reality (CP 468).
I will return to Smith’s theory of ritual in my subsequent analysis of particular poems. Before moving on to a more in-depth study of specific poems and specific applications of this theory, it is helpful to understand, from an historical rather than a biographical perspective, how the idea of ritual might have found its way into Stevens’ poetry. Today the idea of ritual is oftentimes dismissed as unworthy of serious academic attention unless the ritual in question raises anthropologically loaded questions concerning sex or sacrifice. This negative preconception arises from the fact that since the reformation, ritual has been scorned by Protestant religious scholars, and “ritual” tends to appear in the English language primarily as an object of derision. Smith captures this bias by noting citations of historical usage in the *Oxford English Dictionary*; shortly after the Reformation gained strength in Europe, Smith says,

> a new language was brought into being with respect to ritual. Rather than some rituals being “idolatrous,” that is, false, one could speak of all rituals as being “only” or “merely symbolic.” Thus [...] Ritual could be perceived as a matter of surface rather than depth; of outward representation rather than inward transformation. It was a matter of “bare ceremoniousnesse” (1583); “it is onlie a ceremonie” (1693), a “mere ceremony” (1759). As such, ritual was to be classed with superstition (shallow, unreasoning action) or with habit (costumary, repetitive, thoughtless action). “Let vs not come to y’. Chirche by vse & custome as the Oxe to his Stalle” (1526). Although this language might be directed by Protestant authors against “Jewish” or “Pharasaic ritualism,” its polemic object was, in fact, always Roman Catholicism. It was Catholicism that could be described as having “Rytes superstycyouse” (1538), “a vayne supersticious ceremoniall Masse” (1545), “superstitiousness of Beades” (1548), “papistical superstitions” (1547); the host was an example of “supersticious worshippyng” (1561), of “paganick rites and foolish observances” (1573). (100)

In Europe, and subsequently in Western civilization, the Reformation drastically altered ritual, calling it into question and subsequently denying its legitimacy. In summary,

Smith points to “the earliest instance of the English use of the word reported by the
Oxford English Dictionary: ‘contayning no manner of Doctrine . . . but onely certayn ritual Decrees to no purpose’ (1570)” (102). One of the primary complaints of many reformers was that individual Christians should be granted a direct and personal relationship with God, and that the sacerdotal nature of Catholic rituals interfered with such a relationship while simultaneously supporting otherwise indefensible authoritarian hierarchies. Ritual was thus declared empty, and Protestants since the sixteenth century have continued to speak of ritual in pejorative terms.

Counter-reformers such as St. Ignatius responded to ritual’s demise by developing the art of meditation: ritual was internalized, and by following the proper steps individuals could communicate directly with God. Smith justifies the end of his study of ritual in the following way:

Our consideration of [...] ritual must end [...] in a distant land, in Paris, in 1535. For there, [...] Ignatius of Loyola completed his classic manual of devotion, The Spiritual Exercises. There, as the first set of exercises for the third week of retreat, he commends, for the contemplation at midnight, meditation on the events of the Passion of Christ spread out over seven days. In each of these, the individual is asked, first, to “call to mind the narrative of the event,” and, second, to make a “mental representation of the place.” Here, all has been transferred to inner space. (117)

In The Poetry of Meditation, Louis Martz argues that St. Ignatius of Loyola’s meditative exercises, outlined in The Spiritual Exercises and approved by the Pope during the Counter-Reformation, “flourished on the Continent during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (4). At that time a great number of English Protestants were eager to regain some of the formal structure of worship that had been jettisoned as a result of the Reformation. Consequently, Catholics as well as Protestants (both Anglican and Puritan) eagerly adopted the highly structured meditative practices which, by the
beginning of the seventeenth century, were appearing “by the scores and by the hundreds” (Martz 5): “continental works of meditation poured into England, through English translations and adaptations […]. Such an eager reception of the works of continental Catholicism suggests the satisfaction of a deep inner need” (Martz 7). This deep inner need involved a desire for devotional communication with God, which was both initiated and consummated through meditative exercises.

As a result of their power and popularity, Martz contends, these meditative exercises deeply influenced “the flourishing of English religious poetry in the seventeenth century” (1). According to Martz, Loyola’s meditative practices were essential to the poetic development of John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and Richard Crashaw. Martz’s study is devoted primarily to an extensive analysis of the parallels he finds between the structure of widespread meditative practices and the structure of major religious poetry written in seventeenth-century England. However, Martz is quick to point out that “a study of this art of meditation bears a strong relation to the poetry of our own day, so greatly influenced by two poets whose work bears the unmistakable imprint of the same Jesuit methods of meditation: Donne and Hopkins” (4).

By suggesting that there is a “deep affinity between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries,” Martz hopes to show that the art of meditation, once it was adopted as an underlying principle of English poetry in the seventeenth century, continued to influence a broad range of poets through the twentieth century. After outlining the detailed structure of seventeenth-century Jesuit meditation, Martz goes on to speak more broadly of “Meditation as Poetic Discipline”: 49
Meditation was a discipline directed toward creating the “act of pure attention” which D. H. Lawrence saw as essential to all significant discovery or decision: “you choose that object to concentrate upon which will best focus your consciousness.” It was a discipline directed toward creating the kind of concentration which Wallace Stevens has described in a passage of his “Credences of Summer”:

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found. (68)

Since Jesuit meditative exercises were intended to personalize and internalize Catholic forms of worship that previously had been ritualistic and sacerdotal, it follows that the highly structured meditative practices should bear a close resemblance to ritual as it is broadly defined by Smith. It comes as no surprise then that Martz’s definition of meditation as “a discipline directed toward creating the ‘act of pure attention,’” which he compares to Stevens’ “concentration” (68), bears a striking resemblance to Smith’s definition of ritual as “first and foremost, a mode of paying attention” (104).

Martz outlines three phases of meditative exercise. He describes “the first prelude” of Jesuit meditation as

the famous “composition of place, seeing the spot”—a practice of enormous importance for religious poetry. For here, says St. Ignatius, “in contemplation or meditation on visible matters, such as the contemplation of Christ our Lord, Who is visible, the composition will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing I wish to contemplate is found.” (27)

Everything that follows this first prelude relies for its effectiveness on the imaginative construction of a place in which subsequent mental activity takes on special significance.
This emphasis on place finds a direct parallel in Smith’s account of ritual as “the creation of a controlled environment” (109) where “the ordinary [...] becomes significant [...] simply by being there” (104).

As these resemblances suggest, meditation is, in a broad sense, the internalization of ritual; it is a process through which the individual, using the imagination, creates and subsequently gains access to a ritual environment without relying on a geographically situated, site-oriented structure such as a temple. In Natural Supernaturalism, Abrams argues that the development of Christian thought includes a long history of internalization through which “the theatre of [Biblical] events” is transferred “from the outer earth and heaven to the spirit of the single believer” (47).5 This aspect of Christian history suggests that the internalization of ritual practice through meditation was not an anomaly; Christians had long been accustomed to viewing all divinely-sponsored external events as having an analogical counterpart in the inner life of the individual.

Martz explains that after the composition of place has been accomplished, “there follows in the Jesuit exercises yet another prelude, of the utmost importance for the construction and outcome of the total exercise. For here the meditator asks of God ‘that which I wish and desire’ to achieve in the whole exercise” (32-33). Martz suggests that when this second phase of meditation is introduced into English poetry, it tends to involve “elaborately argued paradox” (41). The seeming contradiction of paradox mirrors the insurmountable incongruency that Smith locates in ritual. Smith argues that “Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are,” and that, because ritual is comprised of “ritual action rather than

5 For a full discussion of Christian internalization, see Abrams’ Natural Supernaturalism, pp. 46-56.
everyday action, ritual demonstrates that we know ‘what is the case’” (110, emphasis mine). The accidental space outside the ritual environment—the disruptive force of the natural world that threatens to undo ritual’s imposed order—is brought into the ritual environment via the consciousness of the participants. Within the closed system of ritual everything has meaning and nothing can disrupt the system; but consciousness of the unordered, accidental space outside the ritual environment is not annihilated, and ritual’s participants subsequently gain a heightened consciousness of the insurmountable tension between the extraordinary otherness of the ritual environment—a direct reflection of God’s grandeur—and the ordinariness outside that ritual environment. By engendering this heightened consciousness, ritual both clarifies and intensifies the incongruency between “there,” where the substances or words or actions in question are profane, and “here,” where those same substances or words or actions become sacred. Notions of sacredness, then, as maps or labels or indices of difference, indicate a renewed knowledge of the sponsoring deity’s supreme otherness.

Likewise, in the second prelude of Jesuit meditation, the practitioner willfully brings to mind the inevitable forces of sin and death that threaten to disrupt meditation itself. As an example, Martz cites these “graphic directions” from St. Ignatius:

When I awake, not admitting other thoughts, immediately to turn my mind to that which I am going to contemplate in the first Exercise at midnight, bringing myself to confusion for my many sins, proposing examples to myself, as if a knight were to stand before his king and his court, covered with shame and confusion, because he had grievously offended him, from whom he had first received many gifts and favours. And thus too in the second Exercise, considering myself as a great sinner, and in chains, imagining, namely, that bound in fetters I am about to appear before the Supreme, Eternal Judge, taking as an example from how prisoners bound in chains, and deserving of death, appear before their temporal judge. (33)
As this example clearly demonstrates, the seventeenth century practice of meditation, like ritual, clarifies and intensifies incongruency. The simultaneous existence of, and insurmountable difference between, the fallen and sanctified states of the practitioner is brought to mind by imagining confusion, sin, shame, offensiveness, chains, and death as elements of the process that is intended to overcome these spiritual deficiencies. While these signs of disorder encompass the very forces that threaten to disrupt successful meditation, they demonstrate that the meditator is aware of the way things are. Without this awareness, the desire for what “ought to be” and the efficacy of God’s power and grace in achieving it become unnecessary and meaningless. Stevens, as a secular meditative poet, replaces sacredness with nobility; but what he sought to achieve through his poetry is closely linked to the heightened consciousness engendered by ritual and meditation: Bloom suggests that though “nobility” is “hardly a word that now moves us,” nobility “in its root means to be knowing or seeing” (Introduction 9). In other words, Stevens uses the concept of nobility to connote a state of heightened knowing or seeing that is rooted in traditional religious practices.

Before proceeding with this line of inquiry, there is an essential distinction that must be made between meditation and ritual: in meditation, ritual’s “there” and “here” are not experienced as actual, external, physical locations to be traversed, and therefore must be constructed internally by an individual imagination, or within a single poem. In other words, meditation internalizes the boundary that delineates ritual space, which appears as the “vital boundary” in Stevens’ “Final Soliloquy” (CP 524). In order to engender a heightened consciousness of incongruency—the structural foundation of ritual’s religious, sacerdotal process of sacration as well as Stevens’ secularized, poetic
process of sanctioning—Stevens’ poems must engender both the imagination’s order and reality’s potential destructiveness: paradoxically, “the absence of the imagination has / Itself to be imagined” (CP 503).

Martz explains that once the first two primary meditative steps have been accomplished—once place has been imaginatively composed and incongruency has been clarified and intensified—“the climax, the aim and the end, of the whole exercise [of meditation] is achieved when the soul […] is lifted up to speak with God in colloquy and to hear God speak to man in turn”: “It is no surprise,” Martz argues,

to find the Jesuit Puente describing the ultimate goal of meditation in terms of poetical kinds, adapting the passage of Ephesians (5.18-20) which [seventeenth century English poets] constantly used to justify the writing of religious poetry: “Be filled with the spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (69-70)

Stevens could not sing and make melodies in his heart to a Lord in whom he did not believe; but he did sing and make melodies in his heart to the earth: “the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written” (NA 142). Stevens’ song of praise to the earth emerges forcefully in “Sunday Morning” where, after a six-canto meditation on nature’s divinity, fraught as these cantos are by the constant threat of Christianity’s silencing staleness, Stevens finally lifts up his voice:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
Out of their blood, returning to the sky. (CP 70)
Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge jettisoned the orthodox Christian beliefs that guided earlier meditative poets, but they continued to write meditative verse, complete with the composition of place, the dialectical movement between desire and the forces that threaten to foil desire's fulfillment, and the culminating colloquy which, in the absence of an orthodox deity, is usually represented in Romantic poetry by a consummating marriage between the poet's voice and the earth's divinity. The importance assigned to the imagination in the meditative process exerted such a strong influence on the Romantic poets that it came to be one of the defining characteristics of the Romantic movement. According to Martz, meditation "was a discipline devoted to developing exactly the state of mind which Coleridge described in that famous account of the Imagination which has become the foundation of modern literary criticism," and which, "in all its details, becomes a perfect definition of the soul in successful meditation" (68). The emphasis that the Romantics placed on the imagination leads Martz to suggest that the tradition of religious meditation, understood as an imaginative process of the mind, should include poets who are not concerned with orthodox religion:

The term "meditation" designates a process of the mind, rather than a particular subject-matter: a full definition of the meditative poem, it seems, should be broad enough to include certain poems that are not concerned with the religious or supernatural, in our usual sense of those words. The genre of meditative poetry should be broad enough to include some of [...] the later poetry of Wallace Stevens, as well as the unorthodox, though still religious, poetry of a Yeats or a Wordsworth. It must include "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." (324)

In becoming a meditative poet who characterized the poem as an "act of the mind," Stevens was deeply influenced by Coleridge's theory of the imagination. Legget has shown that Stevens' oft-cited notion of the "mind in the act of finding / What will
suffice” (CP 239), with its psychological overtones, developed into the idea that “It Must
Be Abstract” in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” a development engendered by
Stevens’ close reading of I.A. Richard’s *Coleridge on Imagination.* After closely
studying Stevens’ personal library, Legget concludes that “There can be no question as to
the care with which Stevens followed Richards’s argument” (27). According to Legget,
Richards achieves a “rather creative reconstruction” of Coleridge’s primary ideas
concerning the imagination,

redefining both mind and nature in such a way as to violate neither
Coleridge’s intent nor a contemporary materialist’s more skeptical
epistemology. [...] What must have interested Stevens most in his close
reading of the work was that, in the process of adjusting romantic theory to
contemporary thought, Richards claims to have solved the epistemological
dilemma that had provided Stevens with one of his principal poetic
themes, that is, the opposition of two seeming irreconcilable views of the
relation between mind and world. (28-29)

These two seeming irreconcilable views are described by Richards as “a

projective outlook, which treats imagination’s products as figment, and a realist outlook,

which takes the imagination to be a means of apprehending reality,” two views that
correspond to Stevens’ notion of the “imagination-reality complex” (Legget 29). Legget
explains Richards’ conclusion as follows:

In order to escape contradiction [in the projective/realist dilemma], one
must avoid “the transformations that inevitably occur in deriving the
doctrines from the ‘facts of mind.’” Since any prose description will seem
to choose one doctrine over the other, it “is better to say, with Coleridge,
that our concern is with the fact of mind itself; the immediate self-
consciousness in the imaginative moment which is the source of the
doctrines.” (31)

According to Richards, the choice between a projective view of the imagination and a
realist view of the imagination is a false choice forced upon us by the failings of language
when we attempt to prosaically theorize the “fact of mind” in purely epistemological terms. It is important to note, however, that Smith characterizes ritual in such a way that it can be viewed as an epistemological process sanctioned by religious belief: “There is a ‘gnostic’ dimension to ritual. It provides the means for demonstrating *that we know* what ought to have been done, what ought to have taken place. Nonetheless, by the very fact that it is ritual action rather than everyday action, ritual *demonstrates that we know* ‘what is the case’” (110, emphasis mine).

For a poet like Stevens who was intent on creating a valid substitute for religion through secularized meditation, Richards’ description of Coleridge’s “fact of mind” can be understood as an internalized and abstracted ritual act through which the imagination simultaneously produces figments and provides a means of apprehending reality without giving over, finally, to one or the other. The imagination expresses the poet’s “Blessed rage for order” (CP 130) while rhetorically drawing attention to itself as an ordering force and thus distinguishing itself from “the wind that lashes everything at once” (CP 358).

On the one hand, the poem demonstrates a knowledge of what ought to be. As the poetic fiction successfully engenders this knowledge, it also engenders belief: “one’s final belief must be in a fiction” (L 370). In “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself,” the finale of Stevens’ *Collected Poems*, this belief makes it possible for the “scrawny cry” of nature’s reality to be regarded as “A chorister whose c preceded the choir” (CP 534), and thus for reality itself to be ennobled:

> It was part of the colossal sun,  
> Surrounded by its choral rings,  
> Still far away. It was like  
> A new knowledge of reality. (CP 534)
On the other hand, by the very fact that this is a poetic act rather than an everyday act, the poem demonstrates a knowledge of 'what is the case': the “scrawny cry” comes “from outside”; “It would have been outside”; “The sun was coming from outside” (CP 534). The simultaneity of this dual knowledge was once engendered by ritual; through his close reading of Richards, Stevens was able to adopt Coleridge’s theory of the meditative imagination, and thus to secularize the ritual act by transferring it to the realm of the mind.

Stevens was also deeply influenced by Wordsworth’s poetry and his conceptualization of the Romantic project. According to Abrams, Wordsworth’s belief that the “main region of his song” should be “‘the Mind of Man’” (55) was an idea that profoundly influenced Stevens’ resolution to write “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (CP 239). Wordsworth conceived of himself as the visionary poet who would fulfill Milton’s prediction that once paradise is restored, “the earth ‘shall all be Paradise’” (Abrams 26). In order to make “such realms […] available on this earth, […] we need only to unite our minds to the outer universe in a holy marriage, a passionate love-match, and paradise is ours”:

That Wordsworth commits himself deliberately to this figure of a culminating and procreative marriage between mind and nature he makes unmistakable by expanding upon it with pomp and circumstance. “I, long before the blissful hour arrives, / Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse / Of this great consummation.” The plot envisioned by the aid of the “prophetic Spirit,” then, will end in the marriage of the protagonists, and Wordsworth’s song is to be the “spousal verse,” or sustained prothalamion, of its anticipated “consummation.” This song will be an evangel to effect a spiritual resurrection among mankind—it will “arouse the sensual from their sleep / Of death.” (Abrams 27)
Abrams goes on to summarize Wordsworth’s primary poetic project in terms of his visionary stance: “The vision is that of the awesome depths and height of the human mind, and the power of that mind as in itself adequate, by consummating a holy marriage with the external universe, to create out of the world of all of us, in a quotidian and recurrent miracle, a new world which is the equivalent of paradise” (28).

Stevens was too evasive and skeptical to see himself as a prophet, and he was too disjunctive a poet to create the kind of narrative, autobiographical myth that is characteristic of Wordsworth’s longer poems: “Among modern poets none stays so close to some of Wordsworth’s formulations as Stevens does, so that his departures from his predecessor stand out with special prominence. […] Stevens deliberately rejected both the prophetic stance and the epic voice” (Abrams 69). In a statement to similar affect, Bloom suggests that Stevens maintained something of an “antimythological bias” (Introduction 4). This is not to suggest that Stevens avoided a mythological or prophetic stance altogether; Stevens simply did not embrace the audacity of Wordsworth’s visionary hope. For example, at the end of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens’ most ambitious effort to formulate a poetic mythology, Stevens qualifies his prophetic hope for revolution; the final prediction of future transformation is introduced with a tone that is more reservedly wry than confidently apocalyptic: “They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne” (CP 407). Stevens seems to have recognized that getting it straight one day would necessarily be a momentary achievement, because myth must inevitably change to provide revitalized sanctions for being. The necessity that remains

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6 For a full discussion see Chapter 4, Harmonium: Crisis and the Comedian, in Bloom’s Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate. Bloom argues that in the final section of the poem, Stevens largely fails to bring his myth to fruition, and consequently “It is the poetic future that is projected and so cast away” (82).
constant for Stevens is not the myth itself, but the heightened consciousness of incongruency provided by a ritual structure, which must repeatedly be performed by an act of the mind. This heightened consciousness of incongruency is succinctly captured in the section of “Notes” entitled “It Must Change,” where Stevens provides an apt elaboration of relative difference that results in a rapturous sense of freshness:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined
On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come. (CP 392)

The allusion to a rapturous embrace in these lines provides further proof Stevens was, like Wordsworth, intent upon consummating a holy marriage with the external universe in a quotidian and recurrent miracle, which is a perfect description of the secularized ritual process in Stevens’ poetry. The Wordworthian formulation Stevens most frequently uses to depict such a marriage is the moment of heightened or visionary consciousness. Abrams argues that “Wordsworth is preeminently a poet of the revelatory and luminous Moment. […] In the completed [Prelude] of 1805 the overall plot of mental growth moves in leaps of discovery, at encounters when a natural or human object unexpectedly shows forth a meaning beyond propositional statement” (390). When a poem’s development depends on the creation of a poetic structure in which such “encounters” can be created or discovered, ritual’s significance becomes more apparent: “Ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful” (Smith 109). In Stevensian terms, such moments
occur when a natural or human object is sanctioned and a revitalized sense of nobility is affirmed.

Morris provides an apt summary of the meditative mind in Stevens’ poetry: “the image of the mind is the meeting place of imagination and reality: there, in a process of thought figured by poetry, imagination’s conceivings become the mate of reality’s productions. The moment of highest poetry, the moment in which reality and imagination balance, is for Stevens the moment of grace” (165). Pack reaches a similar conclusion as he explores Stevens’ attempt in “The Auroras of Autumn” to “hold the idea of creation and the idea of nothingness simultaneously in his mind, trying to unite the concept of presence and the concept of vanishing” (98):

Within the limits of physical reality, there are, nevertheless, infinite human possibilities for creating structures of meaning. The ‘whole’ that Stevens seeks to contrive includes the innocence of physical reality and the human need to create a sense of the holy that is not, however, dependent on an authorizing divinity. […] The physical conditions of the world constitute the awesome, indifferent, and inescapable reality that our imagination must contrive to humanize as we attempt to “choir it with the naked wind” (CP 415). (114)

For Stevens, the efficacy of the imagination, like the efficacy of the ritual environment, does not rely solely on its ability to order nature’s reality, but also on its ability to establish a vital boundary that acknowledges nature’s otherness, and thus to heighten the tension that exists between human desire and nature’s indifference. In “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” Stevens contends that “One is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry and it is this that produces the tension characteristic of poetry” (OP 227). Stevens’ secular term for what results from this tension is “nobility”; tellingly, however, Morris refers to these moments of heightened tension in Stevens’ poetry as
moments of "grace," and Pack contends that for Stevens such moments engender "a sense of the holy." Such characterizations again suggest that nobility is for Stevens a secular, post-Christian rearticulation of the religious content of poetry, and that poetry's sanctions must be realized in a poetic environment whose function parallels that of a ritual environment.

The disappearance of the gods is reflected in the ruination and failed efficacy of their temples—"the strength of the church grows less and less until the church stands for little more than propriety" (L 348)—and yet for Stevens the function of those temples in the life of humanity remains necessary. In "Of Modern Poetry," Stevens' secularized temple is figured as a theatre, and the priest is figured as an "actor" who plays the role of "A metaphysician in the dark" (CP 240). When temples were physical structures sanctioned by gods, "the scene was set; [the mind] repeated what / Was in the script" (CP 239). With the disappearance of the gods, however,

[...] the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

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. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear [...] (CP 239-40)

Stevens turns repeatedly—one might say ritualistically—to the same latitudinal regions in his poems, set as so many of them are in either the cold bareness of the north or the exotic fullness of the south; but for every successful poetic act that results in the heightened consciousness of a revitalized poetic vision, a new poetic theatre must be constructed
through an imaginative “act of finding” so that words can be spoken with original freshness. In “Of Modern Poetry,” this process is finally described as the “finding of a satisfaction” (CP 240). For Stevens, satisfaction is attained during moments of fresh vision, or new seeing, which are also moments when nobility is realized and life is sanctioned; but Stevens admits elsewhere that “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” (CP 247). Viewed from this perspective, Stevens’ later and increasing insistence on flux as a vital element of his poetry does not arise solely from an empiricist’s knowledge of entropy; it arises as well from the abiding human need to rescue from that knowledge a counter-force that is thoroughly secular while maintaining, in a broad sense, the possibility for the sanctioning of human life that was previously provided by religious ritual. The continual need for an imaginative revitalization of this counter-force is captured in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” where Stevens says, “Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end” (CP 469).

One way to understand the connection between seventeenth-century religious poetry and modern secular poetry is to consider the subject that most frequently propels the meditative imagination into poetic activity. As the Romantics developed their own meditative poetics, the contemplation of death, which for seventeenth century poets had been secondary to meditations on God and the mysteries of the Christian faith, became the primary meditative subject. For the Romantics, and subsequently for Stevens, meditations on death provided the catalyst for the spiritual crisis that Abrams cites as the defining characteristic of Romantic poetry.
In a chapter entitled “Self Knowledge: the Spiritual Combat,” Martz argues that although “Self-examination is not, properly speaking, meditation in the sense that dominates [his] study,” it is nevertheless “inseparably related to the art of meditation” (118). For seventeenth-century religious poets, “the most widely and intensely cultivated” means of self-knowledge was generated by “the meditation upon death”:

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries proceeded to develop the meditation on death into a brilliantly imaginative exercise. The Jesuit “composition of place” and “application of the senses” brought their intensifying beams to bear upon the death-bed scenes and wormy circumstance which the medieval *Ars Moriendi* had simply envisioned. (Martz 135-136)

Mediation on death, as a means of self-knowledge, has a long history in Western culture; it can be traced back at least as far as Socrates’ meditation on his own imminent death in the *Phaedo*. Like Socrates, seventeenth-century religious poets tended to focus on “‘two voyages’ to be made […], of which [the] voyage of the body to the grave is the less important. The other, toward which the major effort of the meditation should be directed, is to ‘follow after the soul’” (Martz 139). For the Romantics and for Stevens, the non-bodily voyage is achieved by following after the mind. The connection between self-knowledge and death is captured in one of Wordsworth’s early manuscripts of the Prospectus:

\[
\text{Not chaos, not} \\
\text{The darkest Pit of the profoundest hell} \\
\text{Nor aught of [blinder] vacancy scoop’d out} \\
\text{By help of dreams can breed such fear and awe} \\
\text{As fall upon us often when we look} \\
\text{Into our minds, into the mind of Man. (Abrams 449)}
\]

One of the primary difficulties Stevens faced in the middle of his poetic career involved his belief in the mind of man, or the “essential imagination” (L 370). By
inheriting so many Romantic formulations, Stevens was prone to believe that the power of the mind is adequate in itself. The danger inherent in such a belief is that the mind will grow rigidly satisfied with its own creations and become a vehicle for escapism. This danger appears in “The Poems of Our Climate” as “The evilly compounded, vital I” (CP 193), and in “The Motive for Metaphor” as “The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” (CP 288). Stevens expands on the problem posed by essential imagination in “Asides on the Oboe,” a poem composed in 1940, where he attempts to affirm the efficacy of the philosopher-poet as central man:

If you say the hautboy man is not enough,
Can never stand as god, is ever wrong
In the end, however naked, tall, there is still
The impossible possible philosopher’s man,
The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up. (CP 250)

Stevens hedges his claim that the central man is enough in himself by referring to him paradoxically as an “impossible possible”; but he continues to elaborate his affirmation of the central man’s self-sufficiency in the second canto of the poem, claiming that the poet “is the transparence of the place in which / He is” (CP 251). Though Stevens admits that the philosopher-poet can be “cold and numbered,” he also has the poet cry out “‘Thou art not August unless I make thee so’” (CP 251). In this poem, nature does not contain its own opaqueness. The reality of summer’s fecund heat presents an affront to the poet’s generative imagination, so that the pun on “August” denies nature’s inherent grandeur, reducing it to a transparent means by which the poet’s power can be realized. Stevens goes on to say in the third and final canto of the poem that we gain self-knowledge—“the
sum of men,” the “central evil, the central good”—“without external reference” (CP 251). Passages like these, which can be found throughout Stevens’ middle period, are often cited by critics who read him as the Nietzschean artist-hero exercising his will-to-power through a valorization of the essential imagination. In 1942, however, Stevens makes a sarcastic reference to Nietzsche in answer to a critic who had written to ask about the poet as hero in Stevens’ poetry: “My interest in the hero, major man, the giant, has nothing to do with the Biermensch; in fact, I throw knives at the hero” (L 409). That Stevens defensively overstates his case only proves the extent to which the difficulty of the essential imagination had plagued him.

As Stevens’ poetry evolved through the 1940’s and into the 1950’s, he came to see that the power of the mind is adequate to producing sanctions for life only when that which escapes the mind is invited into the poem and held in close proximity to that which is produced by the mind. In Peter Brazeau’s Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered, the Reverend Arthur Hanley recalls a death-bed conversation during which Stevens professed a belief in the “absolute idea of God”: “‘Everything,’” Stevens purportedly said, “‘has been created. There is only one uncreated’” (294). In Stevens’ poetry, the one irreducible otherness that consistently escapes the mind’s creative reductions cannot be an ontological God; since Stevens believed that the gods had disappeared into the abyss, nothingness itself comes to represent the force of an irreducible other. In terms of Stevens’ naturalism, otherness also includes nature’s entropic movement toward dissolution. Irreducible otherness thus appears in Stevens’ poems through meditations that acknowledge the unknowable outer blank of the universe as well as the poet’s inevitable death.
These figurations of otherness appear prominently in “Esthétique Du Mal,” which appropriately begins with the meditative composition of place: Naples provides the imagined physical setting in which the poet can then enact a meditation on death. As the poem’s unnamed character writes letters home from Naples, he listens to the “terror of the sound” of Vesuvius: “The volcano trembled in another ether, / as the body trembles at the end of life” (CP 314). A full reading of “Esthétique Du Mal” is not possible within the limits of this thesis, but the poem is important because it demonstrates one of Stevens’ first attempts to fully develop an internalized ritual structure within a single poem. If meditation is to provide sanctions for life, it must, like ritual, provoke a heightened consciousness of the incongruency between desire for what ought to be and knowledge of what is.

The terrifying sound of the volcano disrupts a solipsistic conception of what ought to be by “express[ing] / What meditation never quite achieved” (CP 314). What meditation had never quite achieved for Stevens was an adequate otherness. As an immense and unavoidable example of what is, the volcano appears as a geological reality which quite literally contains nature’s imminent threat of death. Stevens expands upon his acknowledgment of a disquieting otherness in the second canto:

The moon rose up as if it had escaped
His meditation. It evaded his mind.
It was part of a supremacy always
Above him. The moon was always free from him,
As night was free from him. The shadows touched
Or merely seemed to touch him as he spoke
A kind of elegy he found in space. (CP 315)

The moon represents the “cold [...] vacancy” that emerges “When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist / First sees reality” (CP 320). By evading the power of the mind to
reduce it to a non-threatening order, this supreme otherness provides the grounds on
which the poet can continue to compose his poem; the moon may be a cold vacancy, but
the acknowledgement of that vacancy provides an occasion for elegy. While elegy may
mark disappearance or negation, the very fact that it requires speech reinforces the
promise of continued life. At the end of the eighth canto, Stevens explicitly affirms that
he has faced a supreme otherness without being silenced by it:

Again, in the imagination’s new beginning,
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must
Say yes, spoken because under every no
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken. (CP 320)

In the ninth canto, Stevens retraces his poem’s development through the first eight
cantos. The poet first experiences “Panic in the face of the moon” because the moon
cannot be reduced to a transparency that reveals the power of the essential imagination; in
fact, it cannot be reduced to “anything” at all, and “nothing is left but comic ugliness / Or
a lustred nothingness” (CP 320). As Stevens brings the adjectives “comic” and “lustred”
to bear on “ugliness” and “nothingness,” however, he begins to create a heightened sense
of incongruency, signaling that the poet’s passion for “yes” is beginning to take form. By
the end of the poem’s thirteenth canto, panic has resolved into stoic acceptance as the
meditation on death becomes “an adventure to be endured / With the politest
helplessness. Ay-mi! / One feels its action moving in the blood” (CP 324).

In the fourteenth canto, Stevens explicitly acknowledges that his former
conception of poetry—the construction of “A promenade amid the grandeurs of the
mind”—had made him, like Konstantinov,

the lunatic of one idea
In a world of ideas, who would have all the people

68
Live, work, suffer and die in that idea
In a world of ideas. (CP 325)

This argument is carried through to the beginning of the fifteenth canto, where Stevens contends that “The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one’s desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair” (CP 325). Nothing in Stevens’ poetry comes closer to demonstrating his discovery that the imagination must overcome solipsism by functioning like ritual space. The acknowledgement of an irreducible otherness through a meditation on death creates a moment of seemingly inescapable crisis: an inward movement implies escapism, but an outward movement threatens with a silence akin to death. The only available resolution depends on the elaboration of a vital boundary between the mind’s imposed order and nature’s incessant otherness; with the establishment of this boundary, creation and nothingness can be drawn together in the mind. The resulting poem makes the ambiguity between desire and despair precise, which leads to a transcendent and celebratory moment in which the ordinary gains nobility:

The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals
Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat,
The rotund emotions, paradise unknown.
This is the thesis scriivened in delight,
The reverberating psalm, the right chorale. (CP 326)

Even as the fields and their seasonal fecundity are freshly envisioned, the presence of the “unknown” remains, and the resulting tension reverberates in song.

“Esthétique Du Mal,” like most Jesuit meditations and many meditative Romantic poems, adheres to the structure of internalized ritual by delineating a poetic space in which the variables of ordinary life are felt to be overwhelmingly present and powerful.
The primary elements that comprise this structure—the subjective imagination's promise of generative creativity; the objective universe's threat of disintegration, chaos, and nothingness; and the consummating visionary moment—can be found throughout Stevens' *Collected Poems*. Beginning in the early 1940's, however, Stevens grew increasingly concerned that any limited version of this structure—any poem that did not include each of these elements and make his readers "feel the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous" (CP 524)—would indicate that he, like Ludwig Richter in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," had "lost the whole in which he was contained" (CP 358).
In "Metaphor as Degeneration," published in The Auroras of Autumn, Stevens attempts to provide a poetic sanction for being by making incongruency beautifully precise. The catalyst for this sanctioning act is a meditation on death:

If there is a man white as marble  
Sits in a wood, in the greenest part,  
Brooding sounds of the images of death,  

So there is a man in black space  
Sits in nothing that we know,  
Brooding sounds of river noises;  

And these images, these reverberations,  
And others, make certain how being  
Includes death and the imagination. (CP 444)

"Brooding" suggests the sustained mental attention that characterizes meditation, but it also suggests the incubation of eggs, so that the "river noises" of the second stanza are paradoxically hatched from "black space," which is noiseless. Pack provides a helpful explanation of this paradox as he explicates a similar paradox in "The Auroras of Autumn": "Although the opposite of creation may be thought of as destruction, as in the relationship between order and entropy, it is equally meaningful to conceive of nothingness as the dialectical antithesis of creation in that it can be the womb of creation, the realization of the possible" (98). Pack goes on to suggest that when Stevens is able "to hold the idea of creation and the idea of nothingness simultaneously in his mind," the result is "Poetic creation" (98).
In “Metaphor as Degeneration,” the dialectical relationship between imagination’s desire and death’s nothingness results in the poetic creation of the river, which becomes the primary metaphor of the poem. As in ritual, however, the dialectical arrangement does not resolve into a singular synthesis; even if the two figures trade places, “The marble man remains himself in space. / The man in the black wood descends unchanged” (CP 444). Although the two poles of the dialectical arrangement may be held in the single consciousness of the poet, and the poem itself can be viewed as the synthesis that results from the dialectical relationship—just as ritual can provide the singular space in which the awareness of both order and order’s undoing can be held and heightened in the mind of ritual observers—the incongruency cannot ultimately vanish into perfect unity; it must somehow be reflected in the poem, or the heightened consciousness of insurmountable difference will not be maintained.

The river that is created from this dialectical arrangement “Is not Swatara” (CP 444), which is an actual stream in Pennsylvania near the region where Stevens was born; rather, it is a metaphorical river, or the river of meaningful sound that emerges from the poet’s meditation on death. However, the presence of the Swatara suggests that metaphor is not born in empty space alone, but also, like the poet, in a specific earthly location. The birth of metaphor, then, relies on an earthly man, presumably from Pennsylvania, who sits in the “greenest part” of a “wood,” which is usually the low lying area next to a body of water such as a river, and meditates on death; this meditation leads to the imaginative figure of another man, who, though he sits in the unknowable blackness of space, paradoxically meditates on the life-sounds of earth. The poem itself hatches from the tension between these realms—the green realm of the earth and the black realm of
space—which interact like “Two parallels that meet if only in / The meeting of their shadows” (CP 407). The heightened consciousness of incongruency provided by this meeting gives birth to nobility in that it results in the sanctioning of being: in the sixth tercet of the poem, Stevens says that the poem’s river—its flow of poetically meaningful sounds—“is being” (CP 444).

Stevens then wonders how this can be, how metaphor, as the living offspring of the imagination, can also contain the entropy associated with death and empty space: “How, then, is metaphor degeneration, / When Swatara becomes this undulant river / And the river becomes the landless, waterless ocean?” (CP 444). The answer comes in the poem’s final tercet, which suggests that it is not a matter of the one becoming the other. The Swatara does not simply evaporate into the waterlessness and soundlessness of space, just as the nothingness of black space does not simply take on the life of the river; instead, the “river noises” named in the second stanza are poetically enacted as a river of heightened lyricism: “Here the black violets grow down to its banks / And the memorial mosses hang their green / Upon it, as it flows ahead” (CP 445). Even within this lyrical arrangement, however, the pitch of the poem’s incongruency is heightened without being overcome, as the imagination holds “greenest” earth against “black space.” “Here,” meaning here in this final stanza of the poem, the “black” of empty space, as an adjective, modifies “violets,” which are not only spring flowers that suggest earthly florabundance, but also flowers that exhibit the color in cosmological spectroscopy toward which the light of a space-object shifts if it is drawing closer to the earth. Similarly, the word “memorial,” with its elegiac connotation of death, modifies the “mosses” that tint the life-giving water of the river “green,” drawing images of death and life into such close
proximity that they appear to touch. Additionally, the sharp final consonants of “black,” “violet,” and “bank” in the first line of the stanza reverberate in their close proximity to the softer consonants of “memorial,” “mosses,” and “green” in the second line of the stanza. If poetic metaphor is to sanction being’s nobility, it must include the harsh reality of degeneration even as it creates life-giving sanctions. In this poem, the blackness of empty space, with its suggestion of death’s nothingness, is placed in the imagination of the meditative man from Pennsylvania, where it is drawn ever closer to the violets, the mosses, and the river noises of the actual green wood in which the man sits. As in ritual, the reader is invited to think deeply about the one “now” in terms of the other as the resulting reverberations become the metaphoric river-song of the poem, which in turn provides “those sanctions that are the reason for [...] being” (NA 35).

“The Rock” is an extraordinarily moving elegy, and its power arises in part from its strangeness. Unlike “To An Old Philosopher in Rome,” another late elegy Stevens wrote for his longtime friend and mentor, George Santayana, “The Rock” is simultaneously an elegy for Stevens’ own life, for his own poetic fictions, and for time’s incessant negations. The first section of the poem, “Seventy Years Later,” begins with the despairing assertion that memory, whether personal or poetic, has been negated or rendered meaningless by the passage of time. Stevens was seventy as he wrote the poem, and a consciousness of death implicitly propels the opening stanzas:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of air.

Regard the freedom of seventy years ago.
It is no longer air. The houses still stand, 
Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness. (CP 525)

The crisis in these lines is a crisis of belief. Stevens' allusion to "houses of mothers" evokes both the literal habitations of youth and the figurative habitations of poems, since "mothers" recalls Stevens' own religious mother as well as the third canto of "Auroras of Autumn," where "The mother's face, / The purpose of the poem, fills the room" (CP 413). Stevens' poems, like the houses he has inhabited, still stand; but they appear to have been emptied of their purpose, which means that they no longer provide sanctions for life. "Illusions" is a pejorative word at this point in the poem, indicating the illusions of stale, orthodox fictions, which are the opposite of living, ennobling fictions. The "freedom of air" is the freedom to breathe revitalized meaning into the words of a poem; but the poems of the distant past have long been breathed into existence and now stand rigidly on the page. Stevens is aware that after his last breath, new arrangements of words will no longer be possible, and he must confront the possibility that his sanctions for life, like those previously provided by religion, will become static and be emptied of their power.

As the negations continue, the lines register subtle shifts in tone:

> Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain. 
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end. 
They never were . . . The sounds of the guitar

> Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken 
Were not and are not. It is not to be believed. (CP 525)

The sense of despair is heightened with the word "Even," and the shadows that no longer remain are the shadows in the epilogue of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," where
Stevens instructs the soldier to gladly accept his death, because in the “war between the mind / And sky,”

_The two are one._
They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,
Two parallels that meet if only in

The meeting of their shadows. (CP 407)

In this passage, death’s nothingness—represented by the emptiness of the sky—must be accepted as one of the essential parallels if we are to live “on the bread of faithful speech,” which is the same as believing in “the poet’s lines” (CP 408); Stevens seems to admit in “The Rock,” however, that his own advice has become nearly impossible to follow once death threatens to silence his own poetic speech. “They never were” and the repetition of “Were not and are not” tonally evoke a dreary sense of despairing resignation; but with the quiet assertion of “Absurd,” the tone shifts to bitterness and then, with “It is,” to something that hints ever so slightly at defiance, as if a willfulness is beginning to sprout from hopelessness.

The poem’s cadence begins to reverberate as Stevens commences to trope on his own negations; the lines stretch out with accumulating vigor before shrinking down again with renewed intensity:

_The meetings at noon at the edge of the field seems like_

_An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod
And another in a fantastic consciousness,
In a queer assertion of humanity:_

_A theorem proposed between the two— (CP 525)_

The meeting in these lines is the rendezvous between Stevens and his interior paramour. Though “desperate clod” continues to convey a sense of despairing loss, and “theorem”
suggests the stasis of a formulaic truth, “invention,” “embrace,” “fantastic consciousness,” and “queer assertion” signal the first major shift in the poem, a shift that culminates in the dash following “two—”:

Two figures in a nature of the sun,
In the sun’s design of its own happiness,

As if nothingness contained a métier,
A vital assumption, an impermanence
In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired

That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,
That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned,
Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,

In a birth of sight. The blooming and the musk
Were being alive, an incessant being alive,
A particular of being, that gross universe. (CP 525-26)

Again, Pack’s assertion that nothingness “can be the womb of creation, the realization of the possible,” provides a helpful gloss on the incredible return of vitality in these lines (98). I have been unable to locate another poem in Stevens’ oeuvre that moves so rapidly or so forcefully from an apocalypse of faith to the rebirth of belief. As the sun breaks into the poem, it brings its hopeful vitality along, allowing Stevens’ hope in a continued poetic vocation to re-emerge from nothingness.

This re-emergence is qualified by “As if;” which implies that the return of belief might merely be an assumption; but the assumption contains its own vitality as it leads Stevens out of a permanent apocalypse and back to desire. Once again, the final no is implicitly followed by a yes, and Stevens begins to re-assert a belief in poetic creations as desire confronts despair. The green leaves represent the return of life, but also the return of the sanctions for life provided by poetry: the allusion to Whitman’s famous elegy for
Lincoln and the word “Exclaiming” both indicate that the leaves, in addition to being actual leaves of the earth, are also the pages of Stevens’ poems. These leaves have accumulated to such an extent that they came to cover the rock, which is not surprising in light of the fact that the rock appears more than forty times in Stevens’ Collected Poems. As Morris suggests, in the Christian tradition “the rock represents the revealed truth of Christ promised by the church” (139), so that in this poem the stage is set for the cleansing of blindness; this allusion to one of Christ’s miracles also evokes the poem’s first allusion to poetry as secular cure, and the resulting “birth of sight” represents an emerging potential for the renewed vision provided by nobility. After “bloomed” and “blooming” call to mind a return of life, “Being” is repeated three times in the final two lines of the first section, as if revitalized desire has led Stevens to willfully chant the life of his poems and their sanctions for being back into existence. At this point in the poem, however, the chant is not entirely successful; being is still described as “that gross universe,” which suggests that being has become glaringly evident, but also that it remains unrefined: the particulars of this poem’s sanctions for being have yet to emerge from the incessant fecundity of the earth.

The second section of the poem, entitled “The Poem as Icon,” refines the emerging vision of being. Despair lingers in the first stanza:

    It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.
    We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground
    Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure

    Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness. (CP 526)

Stevens first calls for a cure of reality and then for a cure of essential imagination (as long as it is equal to a cure of reality), because the poetic fictions that cover the rock are
prone, like the poet, to grow old and be forgotten. If a cure is to be beyond forgetfulness, it must be permanent, and the solid reality of the ground is the greatest permanence we know. “Cure” has many meanings, all of which gain significance in this passage. To cure can mean to deal with in a way that eliminates or rectifies; to free from something objectionable or harmful; to restore to health, soundness, or normality; and to prepare or alter especially by chemical or physical processing for keeping or use. What we must be cured of is not the rock itself, but the rock covered with the leaves of past poetic fictions. A healthy vision of the rock will be a fresh vision of the rock, which can occur only if rigid old figurations of the rock are re-imagined. Significantly, the poem contains a latent religious element that is never far from the surface: a cure is also a spiritual charge, or the care of a pastoral parish, suggesting that the process of elimination will allow for a restorative re-imagining, which will culminate in a new sense of nobility and a revitalization of the sanctions for being.

The fifth line of the second stanza appears to test the possibility that the cure will come from neither the ground nor ourselves:

And yet the leaves, if they broke into bud,
If they broke into bloom, if they bore fruit,

And if we ate the incipient colorings
Of their fresh culls might be a cure of the ground. (CP 526)

The repetition of “broke” prevents the return to poetry-as-cure from being a simple return to past poetic fictions; if Stevens’ past fictions are to bear fruit, they must break into new bloom in this poem. That Stevens chooses to place breaking and eating in such close proximity seems not to be a coincidence, since the sacrament of communion had been an implicit feature of several previous poems. In “The American Sublime,” for example,
Stevens confronts “The empty spirit / In vacant space” by asking “What wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?” (CP 131). In “The Rock,” the possibility that poetry can cure an empty spirit in vacant space is affirmed at the very moment when the poem begins to accumulate transvalued ritual symbols:

The fiction of the leaves is the icon
Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness,
And the icon is the man. The pearled chaplet of spring,
The magnum wreath of summer, time’s autumn snood,

Its copy of the sun, these cover the rock.
These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man.
These are a cure of the ground and of ourselves,

In the predicate that there is nothing else. (CP 526-27)

An “icon” is an image, a sign whose form suggests its meaning, and a conventional religious image used in the devotions of Eastern Christians; “blessedness” connotes a quality of something held in reverence or honored in worship; a “chaplet” is both a wreath worn on the head and part of a rosary; and a “magnum” is a container that holds wine. Considered together, these words strongly suggest Stevens’ discovery that nothing but a secularized ritual structure—delineated by the space of the poem—will simultaneously cure the imagination and reality.

The remainder of the second section reinforces this idea. Poems that successfully enact a ritual structure can, like a ritual environment, be returned to repeatedly: “They bud and bloom and bear their fruit without change” (CP 527). This is a strange statement from a poet who had so often insisted that “It Must Change”; but Stevens seems hopeful in this poem that at least some of his poetic fictions would continue to bear the fruit of nobility. He remains certain that his poems transcend empirical naturalism: “They are
more than leaves that cover the barren rock” (CP 527). And, by transcending empiricism, such poems create a visionary consciousness of imagination and reality: the final five cantos of the poem read like a celebratory litany of the possibilities engendered by ritual space. Stevens becomes so exuberantly hopeful that he finally says,

In this plenty, the poem makes meanings of the rock, Of such mixed motion and such imagery That its barrenness becomes a thousand things And so exists no more. (CP 527)

This is a stunning statement for a poet who had returned so faithfully to bareness, blankness, darkness, and nothingness; but the thousand things provided by the poem is precisely the “Affluence” Stevens’ hopes his poems will bear in “The Planet on the Table.”

In the final section of “The Rock,” Stevens follows the structure of ritual as he composes “Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn” through a heightening of incongruency. As in the second prelude of Jesuit meditation, this heightening of incongruency involves elaborately argued paradox: “The rock is the gray particular of man’s life, / The stone from which he rises, up—and—ho, / The step to the bleaker depths of his descents” (CP 528). By the end of the second section, the poem has risen to such affirmative heights that incongruency nearly disappears along with the rock’s bareness. The color gray provides a sobering moment—a reminder that reality’s particulars must be held in the mind against the imagination’s desire to order those particulars—so that the rising up is halted: “up—and—ho” signals the climax of rising affirmation, and “ho” serves as a breathlessly clipped version of the command “whoa,” which Stevens must speak to himself lest he be carried away into an affirmative indifference. In order to remain within
the confines of ritual structure, he must consummate a marriage between his mind and the outer universe by recognizing that “The rock,” which is now the poem and the icon and the man, “is the habitation of the whole” (CP 528). This whole is the whole of incongruencies, of which there are many in this final section: “rises” is held against “descents”; the rock is both a “mirror of the planets” and a vision seen “through man’s eye”; “silent” modifies the exuberant “rhapsodist”; “Turquoise,” “redness,” and “rightness” are posited against “odious,” “evil,” and “difficult”; “the things illumined / By day” is followed by “that which night illumines”; and “vivid,” with its connotation of alertness, prevents “sleep”—and possibly death—from becoming a dulling narcotic (CP 528). By bringing these opposing elements together, the poem functions like a ritual space: the reader is invited to think about imaginative fictions in terms of reality’s particulars, and reality’s particulars in terms of imaginative fictions.

As the sublime achievements of this poem are brought to a close, Stevens explicitly acknowledges the vital boundary that delineates the mind as an internalized ritual space: “the rock” is also

the main of things, the mind,

The starting point of the human and the end,
That in which space itself is contained, the gate
To the enclosure, day, the things illumined

By day, night and that which night illumines,
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,
Night’s hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep. (CP 528)

By creating a vital boundary—“the gate / To the enclosure”—Stevens figures the mind as a site where “the stern particulars” of reality gain the distinction of nobility. Within this enclosure, imagination is married to reality in such a way that the darkness of night is
paradoxically illuminating. The affluence Stevens desires in "The Planet on the Table" is captured in this poem by the phrase "midnight-minting fragrances," where "minting" is both a heightening of sensual perception and the creation of wealth that transcends empirical perception. This wealth is evidenced by song—"Night's hymn of the rock"—which is the elegiacal song of the poem. The hymn of night, like the choiring of voices that appears throughout Stevens' poetry, represents the final phase of meditation, where, through a visionary moment, the voice is lifted up to speak in colloquy with nature. "The Rock" begins in the depths of despair as the crisis of death looms near; but through a transvaluation of ritual, the poem finally offers up one of Stevens' most powerful poetic sanctions for life.
“St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside,” the poem that follows “The Rock” in Stevens’ *Collected Poems*, provides an apt conclusion to this thesis in that it summarizes Stevens’ attempt to create a secularized poetic form that could replace orthodox ritual structure. The poem begins with a meditative composition of place, which leads to the admission that “St. Armorer’s was once an immense success. / It rose loftily and stood massively” (CP 529). As the site of ritual worship, the cathedral once provided a site where the profane was made sacred, and believers could be joined with God through the observation of the sacraments. Its efficacy in these matters ensured that upon death, believers would continue to live in permanent union with God in heaven: “to lie / In its church-yard, in the province of St. Armorer’s, / Fixed one for good in geranium-colored day” (CP 529). With the disappearance of the gods, however, the church has become an empty and decaying shell: “What is left has the foreign smell of plaster, the closed-in smell of hay” (CP 529). What remains for Stevens is the isolation of an earth unsponsored by a deity, as well as the “cindery noes” of nature’s entropy, from which he must create a new divinity, or “An ember yes” that ennobles and sanctions life (CP 529). If nobility is to be achieved, it requires a receptivity to nature’s writhing fecundity: “A sumac grows / On the altar, growing toward the lights” (CP 529). But empirical receptivity is not enough; in a process that mirrors religious ritual, ordinary objects must be placed into the meditative imagination. In this poems, the sumac is placed in the poet’s “chapel of breath,” where it can be “seen / In a mystic eye” (CP 529). The act of placement makes the ordinariness of nature reveal a meaning beyond propositional
statement, or "the intelligible / In that which is created as its symbol" (CP 529). This visionary moment occurs when the mind is married to the outer universe, which creates "a new account of everything old," so that "A new colored sun" can "change forms / And spread hallucinations on every leaf" (CP 529). As this ennobling vision takes shape, however, it must avoid solipsism by continuing to acknowledge "the outward blank" and "The need to be actual" (CP 529-30). By heightening a consciousness of the incongruency between visionary desire and blank nothingness, nobility is attained: "A sacred syllable rising from sacked speech" (CP 530). In a poetic process that can be ritualistically repeated, the sacred syllables breathed by the poet provide the sanctions for the freedom of life. By delineating the whole of ritual structure within the mind, and by conceiving the poem as a secularized temple, Stevens is able to create

this dizzle-dazzle of being new
And of becoming, for which the chapel spreads out
Its arches in its vivid element,

In the air of newness of that element,
In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness,
That which is always beginning because it is part
Of that which is always beginning, over and over.

The chapel underneath St. Armorer’s walls,
Stands in a light, its natural light and day,
The origin and keep of its health and his own.
And there he walks and does as he likes.
WORKS CITED


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