Fire creator of ice| Wallace Stevens' "Auroras of Autumn"

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THE FIRE CREATOR OF ICE:
WALLACE STEVENS' "AURORAS OF AUTUMN"

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The poem, "The Auroras of Autumn," is examined as a reworking of creation mythology, in particular the Judeo-Christian, or Biblical version, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Special attention is paid to the ways in which the "Auroras of Autumn" alters the terms and characters of the earlier stories and to the possible paradigmatic implications of those alterations, within the context of the poem, Stevens' oeuvre, and a post-Christian sensibility.

"The Auroras of Autumn" is also examined as a farewell to Platonic idealism and an attempt to find a satisfactory construction of reality within a phenomenal universe as symbolized by the Aurora Borealis. The conclusion is that such a construction is not found by Stevens, given the constraints of human perspective, but that by creating possible constructions Stevens is able to resolve himself to uncertainty and mortality, on a day to day, poem by poem basis.

The third major theme of the thesis is an examination of the self-referential possibilities, implications and results of the poem's use of open-ended deictic morphemes, particularly the morpheme "this," (which is compared to Wordsworth's use of "this" in opening *The Prelude*). Attention is also given to the way in which ambiguous pronomial usage plays a part in the poem's self-referentiality.

Finally, the question of the extent of Stevens' "Modernism" vs "Romanticism," is considered, the conclusion being that he is radically modern in technique but romantic in his valuing of "the idea... alone/ in the sense against calamity."
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Chapter One: Polar Green

The greater part of the imaginative life of people is both created and enjoyed in polar circumstances. (Stevens Letters 470)

In the Autumn of 1954, Donald Davie, eminent modernist critic, published "a painstaking, deliberate... elucidation" of Wallace Stevens' 240 line, ten canto poem "The Auroras of Autumn" "from first to last." This elucidation came to the awkward conclusion that, despite numerous instances of "pointless vulgarity," of "obvious, rather vulgar effects," the poem might best be summed up in the single, italicized word "splendor." Somehow the work that in its particulars seemed to Davie to be made up of equal measures delicacies and crudities, of "scrupulous" brilliances and "the taint of the precious" mixed, nevertheless stood to be characterized as a whole neither by delicacy nor by crudity but by "splendor," by "a power... which makes itself felt immediately, when we have hardly begun to understand" (126-136).

Such critiques, admitting of an indecipherable power while making a score of pedantic complaints, reveal the flashings of appreciation in the pupil of
prescription, a sure sign that the work in question is succeeding by its own lights, however they may make the critic squint. And the lights of the "Auroras of Autumn" are those of the Aurora Borealis, "with its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps. And gusts of great enkindlings," lights of the night on winter's cusp, not of autumnal dawns, as Davie mistakenly assumed (from aurora, Latin for dawn [125]--- the misreading prompted a politely pointed correction from the poet [Letters 852]).

Davie's comments based on his mistake, suggesting rays of a new beginning suffusing a late hour, were not that far off-base, however. The "Auroras," written by an aging heir to a long tradition and set at night, approaching winter, in the north, echoing masterpieces religious and secular, contains, as Helen Vendler has noted, "scarcely a line not reminiscent" of Stevens' own earlier works: "almost nothing is unfamiliar" (On Extended Wings 246). It is not that any dawn is here at the end or just around the corner: the winter night has not yet reached the furthest extent of its extinguishings; renewal will not come until another spring, by which time this present world will be destroyed. It is that this poem of the end constitutes in itself a complex new genesis, a compacted new mythos made up of the old creation myths, self contained, much
the way the human genome, descendant of a long evolution, is both a hodge-podge of its history and a new, self-sufficient encoding of an original conception (1). "The Auroras of Autumn," with its serpent, its proto-family, its final arrival, "among these unhappy," at "hail harridan, not hushful paradise," is a reappraisal of creation by creation, in a time of maturity approaching death.

In a sense, it as if Stevens were rewriting the Book of Genesis as a summation encompassing all time. Certainly the "Auroras" can be read as a poem that sweepingly surveys the universe, the inhuman and the human place within it, in order to come to some conclusion on human fate. No critic, to my knowledge, has yet been so simple, so literal as to suppose that the poem is about the Northern Lights, that it is speaking exclusively of a particular serpent, a particular cabin, a particular mother, etc. Such heresy is unheard of in this century, although one must assume there is always room for a snake-handling fundamentalist. Few explicators, however, in examining the poem’s symbols and referents, have concerned themselves much or at all with the poem’s self-referentiality, preferring to read, for instance, the lines "This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,/ These fields, these hills, these tinted
distances" as referring to the physical world which we and "the serpent" inhabit (and they do indeed refer to that), while neglecting the sense in which the lines refer to themselves, these "fields," these "hills," these "tinted distances" (2).

The key to the "Auroras" is the deictic morpheme "this." Once again, Vendler, preeminent among many, has noted the "insistence on the formula 'This is:'" and, more importantly, has pointed out how much it distinguishes the "Auroras" (along with "The Credences of Summer," which she considers to be the "Auroras'" companion poem, the "allegro" to its "penseroso") from the majority of Stevens' poems (OEW 230,246). The other great distinguishing feature, beyond question, is the choice of the Aurora Borealis as central image: "Stevens' restless modulations need an equally restless symbol" (Vendler OEW 246). The "Auroras" is so rich, so self-contained, so probably the greatest of Stevens' long poems because in the Aurora Borealis Stevens saw the external phenomenon most like, in his experience, to the experience of his poetry---and, perhaps to an even greater extent, because he found a way to speak of both simultaneously through the use of "this."

Like the never-clarified "this" opening the Wordsworth poem that would become The Prelude ("---Was it for this"), Stevens' "this" is exploited for its
deixis: its exact referent kept unspecified (via absence in Wordsworth and via an intentional inexactness in Stevens), it is universal in scope, as if, overwhelmed, one swept out one's arms muttering "this... this." Stevens, however, engineers his usage, as will be shown, to create a semantic ouroboros (the serpent is not the property of Eden alone), to wit: the phenomenon of the Aurora Borealis engulfs the phenomenon of the poetic imagination; the poet, struck by this and by the Aurora Borealis as rich symbol-set for flux, extinguishings, and the paradoxes of creation by extinguishings, a lavish nature that gives no warmth, creates a poem to embody in words these extraordinary leaps; the poem in turn describes itself in describing the indescribable: "This is form gulping after formlessness."

The "Auroras," then, in speaking of Stevens' world, speaks of itself, "the white creator of black." The deconstructionist fascination with mise-en-abyme could certainly find ample playspace here (3). Before one goes spinning off, however, bear in mind that the beauty of this closed system is more than a little dependent on its model, its meal, its effulgent devourer, the Aurora Borealis. Self-referentiality in text being much like a mirror held up to a mirror,
there still must be light to form the reflections, "the color of ice and fire and solitude."
Chapter Two: The Serpent

Has there ever been an image of vice as a serpent coiled...? ...Then the serpent triumphing, horrible with power, gulping, glistening. ---from Stevens' journals, 1906

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless. ---"The Auroras of Autumn"

Why "the serpent?" A few good reasons were touched upon in the preceding chapter, but before going blithely onward from there, a moment's pause to consider that Northern Lights and "serpent" are not inevitably associated. It will be the method of this explication to first take into account any possible external referents of which the explicator is aware, then also to examine how the textual elements interact with each other. The assumptions are that external and internal contextuality together inform any reading, that the text controls explications roughly to the extent that a window controls descriptions of the scene outside, that of the infinity of possible explications those are most rewarding that stick to peering through the window, from however many perspectives and with
whatever prejudices, the more diverse the better. So, to start with, why "the serpent"?

The biblical overtones are impossible for anyone at all familiar with the Judeo-Christian tradition to miss, particularly as the term being used is "serpent," not "snake," thus echoing the language of the King James Version of the Bible. Davie, among the earliest explicators, asserts that "the snake is... inevitably the serpent of the Garden of Eden" (126). Vendler, among the best, calls the "Auroras" (in contrast to the "Credences") Stevens' "true paradise, where he finds the serpent" (231). In the biblical sense then, what is "the serpent"? First and foremost he is wise and deceitful: in the biblical creation myth the serpent was the most subtle of all God's beasts; backreading from the Christian viewpoint, the serpent was possessed by the fallen angel Lucifer, "Son of the Morning," the guise in which he deceived Adam and Eve into eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In particular, from the viewpoint of a poet writing in English at any time after the Seventeenth Century, the Miltonic version of this Christian reading of the myth is important. In that version, i.e., the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, the story begins with the rebel angel Lucifer ("Th' infernal Serpent," Book 1.35) and his hosts having just been dropped down into Hell after
being routed by the loyalist army of heaven. Note also that it has been a subject of longstanding fascination, that Milton's Satan (Lucifer, Serpent) comes off as a more vital character in Paradise Lost than Milton's God.

The "Auroras" first canto then, which opens in consideration of "the serpent's" dwelling place, is not without its strong Miltonic overtones. Moreover, Stevens, who is not at all constrained by Protestant Christian orthodoxy, beyond its existence for him as an imposed insufficient fiction, significantly chooses a serpent that is in no way defeated, a serpent in heaven, not (or perhaps, as well as) Hell. Three items of "the serpent's" context in the "Auroras" are thus especially notable vis-a-vis both the Judeo-Christian creation and fall myths and the Miltonic retelling: first, that Stevens' "serpent", like Milton's Satan, is given pride of place in the poem, the more so for being still in the heavens; second, that Stevens' "serpent" has his identity blurred with that of Stevens' "Father" and "Imagination" in subsequent cantos (IV and VII particularly) as the three figures share the terminology of paternity ("master," "origin"), royalty ("throne," "crown") and flux ("flashing," "leaps," "extinguishings"); third, that Stevens' "serpent," like the Judaic serpent of Genesis, is not fully
anthropomorphized, which leaves us unable to pass moral judgment on him and simultaneously emphasizes his alien nature, his inhumanity, even his enmity.

The other principal mythic echo of "the serpent," as was suggested in Chapter One, is that of the Ourobouros, the snake with its tail in its mouth, symbolizing the nature of the universe. The essential significance of this image, to the way the Aurora Borealis is seen by the poet (and the reader) and to the nature of this self-referential poem itself have already been noted.

Beyond its mythic antecedents, Stevens’ "serpent" is also tied neatly into a Socratic paradigmatic heritage. In stanza two we are introduced first to the Aristotelian and then to the Platonic apprehensions of reality: "Or is this another wriggling out of the egg" (Aristotle, eventually to be justified by genetic biologists, held "the egg" to be the creator of the adult), "Another image at the end of the cave" (cf. Plato’s famous "cave" analogy, where reality as we experience it is likened to shadows on the walls of a cave). The two apprehensions resonate with the image of the Aurora Borealis, which, along with the text, is the principal unspecified antecedent for "this," as in "wriggling" as something would in escaping its egg, or as might a play of light at the end of a dark cave.
They are also resonant with the image of a serpent, often a swallowor of eggs and a dweller in caves.

That these are offered as possible alternatives to the assertion "This is where the serpent lives" finds significance in the final line of the stanza: "Another bodiless for the body's slough." Aristotle's mysterious, invisible genetics and Plato's illusory cavelights are conceptions of "bodiless" realities. In the first stanza, it was asserted that "the serpent" is "the bodiless." Should it be that "this," meaning the Aurora Borealis, the physical universe, the text, the "serpent's" "nest," is "another bodiless," then the distinction breaks down, "the serpent," as it were, vanishes. Steven puts by the Platonic and Aristotelian paradigms, just as he mutates those of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in order to make his own, reasserting in the first canto's third stanza that "This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest." The implications will require the whole poem to be developed.

One implication, to be drawn from Stevens' variations on mythic, poetic, and philosophical heritage as just discussed, is of a distinction, questioned but maintained, between "the serpent" and the "this" where he lives. In the division between "body" and "bodiless," "the serpent" is seen as having
the former but being the other. In fact, as stanza four reveals, "the serpent" is distinguished from his "skin," which is sloughed-off, and his "body" both: "Skin flashing to wished for disappearances/ And the serpent body flashing without the skin." Both are, syntactically, "form gulping after formlessness" (from the stanza's first line), which is to say, "this." Somehow the serpent is both present (after all "this is where he lives) and not; he is a part of the text, in that the text contains him, and yet he is also radically other, in that the first half of the canto labors to distinguish him from "this." By the end of the first six stanzas, such sweepingly inclusive statements have been made for "this" ("these fields, these hills, these tinted distances," etc.) that, as far as the text is concerned there is nothing other than "this," except "the serpent."

This duality, this otherness of "the serpent" embodied by "the serpent's" "bodilessness," is a crucial theme to the "Auroras"---otherness will appear in guises besides "the serpent," but "the serpent" is its essential image. It is the need to examine a sense of otherness that must have been the driving force behind the choice of "the serpent" by Stevens to head his poem, which concludes with an unequivocal assertion of duality within the "whole." Certainly, there is no
great sense of kinship with the genus micrurus among
the family homo sapiens, and the biblical prophecy of
enmity between snakes and humans was in all probability
an inventive explanation of an already extant fact. In
any case, Stevens exploits this family prejudice for
all it is worth in the second half of the first canto,
where he plays on the nature of snakes as we experience
them--- tangible, venomous predators--- not merely as
they glitter, distantly malevolent, in myths.

Vendler has commented on this shift, which she
sees as a sort of jumpiness:

There are... two serpents, one on the earth
and one in the sky, and the motion of the
canto is a nervous ascent and descent and
reascent and redescent, a vertiginous
uncertainty expressed in antiphonal rhetoric.

(QUEW 247)

While having to disagree strongly with her
characterization of this motion as "nervous" and
repetitive, the fact is that "the serpent" undergoes a
radical shift of locus, or rather, encompasses such a
shift, in the first canto's closing stanzas. First, he
seems to ascend: "These lights may finally attain a
pole/ In the midmost midnight and find him there."
Wherever "there" is, it is "another nest," where, as
"master of the maze," "the serpent" remains
"relentlessly in possession of happiness." "Master of the maze" is surely an important title, and the term "master" in particular carries weight in light of the poem's biblical/Miltonic echoes, as it is here describing not an anthropomorphic God, but a serpent (in canto IV, "master" will be used so as to suggest "the Father" as its antecedent, as well as "the serpent").

Of equal importance is the use of the adverb "relentlessly" to modify the phrase "in possession of happiness." A legitimate initial reaction may be to object that the poet has betrayed himself: happiness that is "relentlessly" possessed is obviously not truly possessed. Bear in mind however that the poet is not speaking for himself, nor hopefully of some attainable heaven, but of "the serpent." Stanza seven, immediately following, begins, "This is his poison, that we should disbelieve/ even that." A child that is relentlessly in possession of an ice-cream cone is a child that is determined not to share it. As we should recognize by now (and if not by now, certainly by the time we reach canto VII and the "imagination") "the serpent" is in some way the essence of the universe, as opposed to its existence: he is bodiless, yet he permeates it, he is the "master of the maze." Here that essence is being malicious in a petty way,
witholding, in some "midmost midnight" nest, happiness. More, we are poisoned into disbelieving "even that," which may be taken to mean that we are poisoned into disbelieving even that there is or may be happiness and that it is being withheld from us.

It is at this point, after we are made to realize the nature of his poison, that Stevens' "serpent" takes his utterly abrupt fall. In fact, the fall is already fait accompli by the time we have covered the blank space in the typography between "even that," and "His meditations in the ferns," a shift of perspective swift as any of Pound's, a forewarning of many more sudden juxtapositions to come, and a major critical stumbling block. Over the final five lines, the scene has switched from a view of the Northern Lights at night, to a view of a snake "in the ferns" on a sunny day:

His meditations in the ferns,
When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun,
Made us no less as sure. We saw in his head,
Black-beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
The moving grass, the Indian in his glade.

As an example of the kind of problems this passage has caused critics, here again is Davie:

It is difficult in places to make expressive sense out of the rhythms... [which are]
important however to the meaning. Sure of what? Of some constant principle behind the elusive metamorphoses of the natural world as proffered to us by our senses? Or of there being no such underlying constancy to look for?.. the poem [sic] ends in a cluster of images which are thoroughly and... deliberately ambiguous. (126)

One way of resolving the difficulty of this passage, consonant with our comments so far, is aided by recollecting something of human perception and reptile behavior. It is unlikely, although possible, that Stevens was making a "deliberately ambiguous" philosophical assertion concerning the possibility of surety, of "constancy," in using the word "sure." It seems more reasonable to assume that he was using it in the sense of "certain": a cold-blooded reptile is sunning itself and moves to make certain of the sun on its body as the shadows shift with the day. The motion however, meant to warm "the serpent," freezes us. Humans evolved on the savannahs of Africa, and our instincts for self-preservation developed in us a notable ability for detecting, even defining, form from motion, as when catching a glimpse of something moving through the trees out of the corners of our eyes. Stevens' is careful to place "the Serpent" "in the
ferns," not exposed up on a rock. Thus, when it moves, the motion alerts us to it, and in our first panic we imagine multiple possible threats: "the flecked / an mail, / The moving grass, the Indian in his glade."

Stevens' "serpent" is very much meant to be seen as frightening. Later Stevens will set a scene of desolation, but at the moment he must begin the poem by stressing the awfulness of the Aurora Borealis, over and above its delightful beauty. "The serpent" is a powerful figure for Stevens because he ties in all the themes of pseudo-deity (via the twist on the opening of Paradise Lost) and enmity, of eminent grandeur, even universal essence, and of immanent danger. The very word "serpent" is full of mythological baggage and physical import which Stevens, far from being frightened off, is able to effectively play upon, first making "the serpent" awesome, then malicious, then startlingly immediate. Serpents are the enemies of humanity; the choice of such a universal "serpent" here implies conflict, a struggle, "skin flashing to wished-for disappearances," yes, but also "the serpent body flashing without the skin." How we are supposed to interpret this writhing image, given that the self-referential capacity of "this" enables us to see "the serpent" as dwelling in the text itself, is difficult to ascertain, although remembering the
importance of the intertwined terms "imagination" and "reality" to Stevens, as well as his blurring of "the serpent" and the "imagination" in this poem, helps.

Among previous explicators, Harold Bloom has chosen to espouse, rather melodramatically, one possible pole, asserting that, in this poem, "Stevens reenacts the central Romantic confrontation between the power of the poet's mind and the object-world or universe of death" (254). This is grand, but confuses rather than clarifies, as it does not seem to be the physical "universe of death ['] alone that threatens the poet (and us), but also, even especially, "the bodiless." Else Stevens would not have chosen such an incarnation as "the serpent" for it.

Another, earlier (and it seems, underestimated) critic, James Baird, chose the opposite extreme in trying to understand the nature of the conflict the first canto establishes in the figure of "the Serpent":

In "The Auroras of Autumn" the mortal is dared against the illimitable... The figure of the serpent is the human self. The self is the agent of faith in the humanly possible. It bears within it, the paradox of human existence, its own poison. (295-298)

Both these readings "find a pole." Both of them are at least part of the whole. The best observation
to make however, on the question of conflict in the "Auroras," is that the poet is struggling with something other, something pervasive, that is both within and outside, something essential, that is both awesome and awful and that, however elusive, must be grasped.
Chapter Three: Blank, Dark and Brilliant

What does it mean--- for life, for poetry--- that we cannot rest in the present, in any present? It means that the desire for change is more deeprooted than the pleasure of any permanence. ---Vendler, "Stevens and Keats' 'To Autumn,'" (185)

Farewell to an idea...

If, when addressing the poetry of the moderns, there is one question of universal importance, as a matter of both philosophy and form, it is--- "Continuity?" Commenting on "The Auroras of Autumn" in his letters, at first while the poem was still in progress, Stevens' himself is insistent:

What underlies this sort of thing is the drift of one's ideas. (Letters 636)

It would have nothing to do with the weather; it would have to do with the drift of one's ideas. (Ibid 637)

It is much easier to make progress on a single long poem, in which one goes ahead,
pretty much as one talks, as one thing leads
to another. (Ibid 648)

If Stevens' ideas are drifters, they are drifting over some remarkable falls and rapids. This is most especially true of the "Auroras," the shortest, most condensed, and, in its shifts of perspective, subject, and image, the most abrupt of Stevens' major long poems. The most obvious reason for this is that the choice of the Aurora Borealis as leitmotif and of "the serpent" as its occupying force, when combined with Stevens' habitual concern with examining poetry by poetry (which is here seen through the Auroras) and an implicit self-referentiality ("This is where...") has encouraged the poet to mimesis; having found the ideal image for his poetry, his poem vigorously mimics the essential nature of that image, its vivid colors, its stark contrasts against backdrop, its lavish flux, its "half-thought of forms" "gulping after formlessness." All this is most directly explored by the poem in cantos II-IV, each of which begins, "Farewell to an idea...," and will be the focus of this chapter.

The mimetic thesis is not the only explanation for the "Auroras'" form, and most critics largely ignore Stevens' own assertions, perhaps as being too casual a way of accounting for such a not casual work, perhaps as being applicable to the process of writing such a
poem but not to the poem as finished fact (an exception to this is Bevis, who reads the longer poems as being records of a particular meditative state, the very intent of which is to allow the mind's show-and-tell to flow through, uncoerced). What the critics are apparently, and rightly, responding to is the destructive, the "extinguishing" aspect of creation reflected in the structure, as well as in the subjects, of the text:

The progress of the poem is the breaking down of all forms, all containers... all shapes within which a man may have a sense of place and an ease of possession. (Brown, Merle 187)

The 'Auroras' is a crisis-poem, the culmination of that Wordsworthian tradition and the most directly personal and even dramatic of Stevens' poems... [it is] as if the poet's lifelong anxieties had flooded in on him at once. (Bloom 254)

In 'The Auroras of Autumn' an inquisitor of structure--- his own--- stands in prospect of both the house to be abandoned and the shape of himself, which, remaining as process until he dies, now moves inexorably to its own 'unmaking.' It is, nonetheless, the
realization of the structure, the frame, that preserves meaning in the meaningless.

(Baird 9)

The unfortunate tendency of such observations is towards melodrama, something which Stevens does not indulge in. There is a powerful apprehension, in the "Auroras," of the role of destruction, and yet that role is intimately wrapped, just as "the serpent," in creation, even in the idleness of creation, as is seen in cantos VI and VII. This is a fact which explicators, probably led astray by the knowledge that Stevens was an old man when he composed this poem, tend to overlook in favor of a sense of immanent "disaster" (even Vendler is caught by that bitter word in her reading of the ninth canto). Of those quoted above, Baird, with his—architectural approach to Stevens, makes the most intriguing comment when he brings up the all-important question of "the frame" (emphasis his).

When it comes to modern innovations in "the frame," the title of revolutionary leader usually goes to Pound, and certainly his use of visual structures, prompted by Chinese ideograms and facilitated by typewriter, was revolutionary. But when it comes to juxtapositioning, to exploding traditional requirements of temporal continuity, the title again goes usually to Pound, and that is not wholly correct. Pound's visual
sense, as with Williams' and Cummings', leads him to make concrete his breaks and leaps. Stevens, contrarily, looks plenty traditional when pasted on the wall. But though his typographic presentation may seem bland, and even his vers libere (Pound's term) lines live on the skeleton of five iambic feet, Stevens' matter, Stevens' language, Stevens' images lie atop an active fault zone. The result, as with the plummeting serpent in canto I, for the reader is akin to finding oneself in the rocks and foam before one ever noticed the drop. In short, Stevens' leaps are all the more startling and disconcerting for having occurred without the visual warnings one becomes accustomed to when reading Pound.

Before moving on to the reading of cantos II-IV, two more comments are in order on continuity and disjunction in Stevens and particularly in the "Auroras," the first distinguishing between methods of "drift," the second making a note on the form of the "farewell" cantos. First, Stevens' texts have two very distinct ways of moving from here to there. One method, the more noted, is by beginning with a simple assertion (positive or negative) and then exploring it by repetitions with changes, as in "The Reader": "All night I sat reading a book,/ Sat reading as if in a book/ Of sombre pages." This technique, writing "the
phases of this difference," can cover a surprising
distance in a little space, and is very notably used in
the second canto ("reminding, trying to remind, of a
white That was different, something else," etc.) and
occasionally elsewhere in the "Auroras." A descendant
of Wordsworth's technique of polypoton, Stevens'
technique has the virtue, assuming the reader reads
linearly, of taking the reader along with it, of
creating "the time and place" in which the poetry
breathes. In contrast, Stevens' drifting thoughts, as
has been said, sometimes shear very abruptly, which is
his other method of locomotion, a quintessentially
modern one. A good example of this is the shift in
locative perspective in stanza seven of the first
canto, or that shift of tense and tone, so sharp as to
make the text almost flatly contradictory, in stanza
five of the third canto:

The house will crumble and the books
will burn.

They are at ease in a shelter of the mind

This has the power, heightened not diminished by its
framing in an arbitrary verse form, to create warring
states of image, sensation and sensibility,
simultaneously in the reader's mind, as the reader has
not been forewarned to put one tableau or idea aside in
preparation to receive another.
Second, the pattern of these three cantos beginning with "Farewell to an idea..." is more set than might at first appear, and is instrumental to Stevens' attempt to comprehend this "boreal night's" natures and significances. Both canto II and III begin by trying to move away from the spectacle of the night, from where the serpent lives, via "the accomplishment of an extremist in an exercise," the first one in severity of white, the second in comfort of dark. Both attempts collapse, although the second proves more satisfying in that it establishes a sense of family that will suggest a way of coming to terms with "the serpent." In each canto, the movement away from night is attempted through the first six stanzas; night comes sweeping back in with its "brilliances" and "grandeurs" in the final two stanzas. This leads, in the fourth canto, to an attempt to reconcile humanity with the awfull universe through anthropomorphism, which in its turn collapses in a plea, as the actors come trooping in.

"Farewell to an idea..." As a segue, this dismissal is problematic. For one thing, is it dismissive of what came just before or what comes immediately after? Or is it titular, each of the three sections demonstrating a "farewell to an idea"? And why is it only used in these three sections and never
again? These are questions that yield only a little to analysis, but much to plausible assumption. For example, if it is assumed that the dismissal is genuine and retroactive, then the poem has, in effect, four beginning cantos (I-IV), the first three of which are waived to try and begin again. Or, using typography and verse form as a guide, if the "farewell" is to the canto it heads, being obviously more closely joined to it by form, then the three cantos represent three ideas (which they presumably embody or exemplify) that are being dropped as no longer sufficient or relevant in the face of the boreal circumstances. Or, if the "farewell" is titular, then these cantos represent a process of divestiture, they are themselves dismissals of themselves, a stripping away, as if on a lathe.

It will be the assumption of this reading that there is a single "idea" being bid adieu, that that "idea" may in some sense represent Platonic idealism (this point gets sticky in canto VIII, when Stevens speaks of innocence "existing in the idea of it alone"), that the three cantos are efforts to replace that "idea" (and thus posit rather than negate), and that the spectacles of the fifth and sixth cantos which are ushered in by the final stanzas of canto IV are creations of a world without "an idea." The attraction of such a reading resides in its resolution of the
question of why Stevens repeats the "farewell" three times and then drops it (once he has succeeded in divesting the "idea") and in that it does not put Stevens in the way of saying "ceci n'est pas un cigare."

A look then, at the first attempt to replace the fiction of "an idea." Canto II is a beautiful piece of lyric poetry, but its importance lies primarily in the abandonment of the scene it so carefully determines. Here Stevens turns toward a kind of severe existential purity, away from an ideal world and a boreal world both, toward a world absolutely reduced to bone. In it "being visible is being white,\ Is being of the solid of white." The alert reader should immediately detect in this deliberate colorlessness, in this turning of statement ("As by a custom or according to/ An ancestral theme or as a consequence/ Of an infinite course") and in this weeded diction ("a little dried, a kind of a mark") the hallmark style of "The Snow Man" or "The Course of a Particular" as well as elements of the still lifes, such as "The Poems of Our Climate" and "Opusculum Paedagogum." Stevens is positing one of his harshest, perennial solutions, the creation of a world (which is to say the creation of a poem and a state of mind) that carves to approach the essence it denies with a paring, disciplined sense of existence. No
question but that the result is "the accomplishment. Of an extremist in an exercise."

Indeed the very acknowledgement of this in stanza five gives the poet pause, and following a long ellipsis and a stanza break (still more whiteness), "the season changes." Sensation intrudes itself: the wind is no longer something distanced, something seen "blowing the sand across the floor"; it is "cold." The poem becomes aware of a gathering darkness, a menace that renders moot any purity of vision---white cannot be dwelt on without light. The perspective pulls back cinematically, and we no longer see through the man; we see the man, isolated on his barren beach, turning "blankly on the sand." The pun is a gamble, but here its twofold meaning is so nearly one, that the French semantic resonants (blanc=white) reinforce, rather than cross, the English morphology (blank=null, tabula rasa). The intrinsic flaw in such purity as method glares luridly as the Northern Lights are "enlarging the change": a perception of existence that approaches abstraction is a vacuum for the "frigid brilliances" to rush into, and lonely at that. "The color of ice and fire" is, to the blank man beached, also the color of "solitude."

But the poet does not buckle under this awesome sky; the poet goes home, to mother. The retreat is not
a sentimental one, and the poet harbors no illusions as to the efficacy of the mother's protection in the face of such a universe. But "the mother's face" is, after all "the purpose of the poem," and that is the poem's most vital recognition. Allegorically the mother is earth, by a long tradition of association, and in fact, the canto can be physically sketched as the face of the earth, with humanity huddled on it, under a starry night, the whole scene figured as a "house" (if "the house is evening" then it makes sense that the earth would be dark and that "only the half they can never possess [i.e., the heavens] remains [visible], Still-starred"--- this also makes figurative sense of "upstairs/The windows will be lighted, not the rooms"). The "mother's face" is "the purpose of the poem" because, if humanity is to deal with its place in the universe, understanding of that place must come from an understanding of our perspective, of earth.

That "the mother" is also the mythical mother of humanity, an "Eve," remains important. "And I will put enmity between thy seed and her seed," Jahweh admonishes the serpent in the Garden of Eden (The Book of Genesis, chp. 3, KJV). It is to the source of humanity, and therefore the source of humanity's sense of alienation from a vast and serpentine universe, that
the poem turns for an alternative to an unsatisfactory "idea" of that universe. Two aspects of this turning are of importance. First, that it is a turning back, toward mythologizing as opposed to rationalizing, to softness of vision, in a warm dark, as opposed to austerity of vision in a cool blank. Second, that it is a turning toward family, toward togetherness ("together, all together") and away from isolated contemplation of the universe, as a colonial American might have turned from staring out over "the forest primeval" to look back at and find comfort in his town.

As regards the first aspect, the turning of this canto in order to replace "an idea" fails. Looking back at the mythological mother the poem realizes that "she too is dissolved, she is destroyed." The problem is that mythology will no longer suffice, at least not for the mind of this poem: "she has grown old./ The necklace is a carving not a kiss./ The soft hands are a motion not a touch." This beautiful but strange passage has been admired and then glided over by the bulk of its readers. Vendler, however, elucidates it well as an allusion to Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." To paraphrase her reading, the "necklace" is a "carving" as it would be on an urn, ditto "the soft hands" as "a motion" but "not a touch." She sees in this allusion a reference to Keat's fascination with
the urn's temporal displacement at the price of inconclusion, and correctly adduces to Stevens a complaint about the unapproachableness of such beauty ("Ecke" 186). Here, it can be further asserted that Stevens is expressing dissatisfaction with the comforts of myth at the same time as he expresses appreciation of them and even longing for the security, however transparent, they bestow. Later this longing is explored at length in the quest for "a time of innocence" in cantos VIII and IX.

As regards the second aspect, the canto's turning is more successful, because in turning to the family, the poem has found some comfort ("they are together here and it is warm") and a source of sustenance. The paradox is that even as "the house will crumble and the books will burn," the family remains "at ease in a shelter of the mind." Ultimately this comfort, this sustenance will not suffice to cope with the "boreal night," although "they" will not have to face it alone, as was the prospect for the solitary man at the end of the second canto. Ultimately, the "wind will spread its windy grandeurs round," and for all their sheltering it will still "knock like a rifle-butt against the door" and "command them with invincible sound." There is no question, and no critic has asserted otherwise, that Stevens is figuring the
arrival of death in these lines, as in others elsewhere in the poem. But it is existence that remains the uppermost problem in Stevens' mind, because it encompasses deaths, indeed, as canto VII asserts, creates itself by extinguishings. The nature of existence, wrestled with and resolved, includes the nature of extinction. And in the third canto, Stevens finds one possible way, both mythological and familial, of apprehending that existent universe and its "serpent" directly in its brilliance: anthropomorphism.

The final of the "farewell" cantos begins by asserting that "the cancellings,/ The negations are never final." This is not only a corollary to the assertion at the end of "The Well Dressed Man With a Beard" that "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never" (Palm 190). It is also a pointing toward the Aurora Borealis itself as figure for an endlessly changing and therefore endlessly creating, as well as destroying, universe, rather than a pointing away from it, as the last two cantos attempted. The method by which Stevens engulfs "the serpent" so that it can be grasped directly is anthropomorphic. In canto IV, he follows ("drifts" he would say) from the suggestive "mother," children and universal "house" of the third canto, to a "father" that figuratively pulls the alien auroras into the family just as the "house" did, only
more intimately. "The father" is, like "the mother" and "the serpent," both a biblical and a pagan echo: "as one that is strong in the bushes of his eyes" (although "the father" is the most biblical of the three, aided by canto IV's references to "bad angels" etc., perhaps because the Judaic tradition is so much more exclusively paternalistic in its deity than that of the polytheistic Greeks). In Stevens' version, "the father" is confused with "the serpent," the two put on equal footing (the use of the address "Master" and the placing of both in the heavens), because Stevens proceeds from the notion that there is something alien about this universe, a notion that the poem as a whole is exploring, from the first through the final canto.

The most vital achievement of this fourth canto and the figuration of "the father" is its redirecting of the poem's view straight at the colorful sky which allows, at last, the "farewell to an idea" to be accomplished. Ironically, it is only in open apprehension of the phenomenal universe, willing to perceive and misperceive, that the poem escapes finally, from the hold of "idea"—ironically, that is because it exposes the poem to the vagaries of the phenomenal universe. And it soon appears, despite the successful recreation of the family to partly assimilate that phenomenal universe, and despite the
escape from a sterile, abstract and therefore brittly insufficient "idea" approach to "the serpent" through the vivid persona of "the father" who seems almost in control ("He assumes the great speeds of space and flutters them") the poem is outgunned. By the end of the fourth canto the poem is moving into a new phase of perception, as the actors arrive "in company, in their masks" and the poet cries out in response,

Master, 0 Master, seated by the fire
And yet in space and motionless and yet
Of motion the ever-brightening origin,

Profound, and yet the king and yet the crown,
Look at this present throne. What company,
In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?
Chapter Four: The Theatre Sans Idea

The auroras are a figure for the impossibility of language to trace back to an origin a governing power that can control the force of writing. (Kronick 15)

...there are no lines to speak? There is no play.

Or the persons act one merely by being here.

From the first stirrings of the Protestant Reformation to the bursts of the nuclear age, the history of Western Thought is largely a record of the long, bumpy tumble from an ideal comprehension of the universe. Platonism and Christianity linked together assume the existence of ideal forms, essential forms, of which the experiential universe is a corruption, and as orthodox Christianity and divine providence have come under attack, as well as our commonsense notions of macroscopic reality and our assumptions about our own capacity for objectivity in perception, thoughtful westerners have struggled to reconceive the universe.

Part of that reconception is "The Auroras of Autumn," the creation-myth echoes of which have already come to our attention. In cantos V and VI, Stevens,
who has to some extent recapitulated the western
"farewell to an idea," answers his own question at the
end of canto IV with a fable of human existence as
festival, tumult, theatre. In these cantos it as if
the universe is attempting to give an accounting of
itself by sheer massing of phenomena. "The mother
invites humanity to her house" and "the father"
provides the entertainment, such as it is, such as it
can be. The entire section (i.e. cantos V and VI) is
crucial to the poem as a turning whole, being the
midpoint congruently of physical text, linear
progression, poetic imagery and inquiry into the nature
of things as they are. These cantos are the most
vigoruous of the poem in their language and images and
are a struggling with the universe as a theatre sans
idea.

To satisfactorily deal with his sense of "the
serpent" Stevens first must come to an accurate sense
of the serpent's "nest." That is primarily what these
two cantos are up to, and the poet's reaction to them
and their world directs the remainder of the poem,
particularly the following three cantos, VII-IX, which
attempt to find a principle, an idea in which even "the
oldest and coldest philosopher" can believe. Canto V
begins the examination with an invitation to the
show-and-tell, as it were, of human existence on mother
earth, conjured by father sky (in this case the Heavenly Father is in some ways more solar than stellar—note particularly the reference to his "unherded herds" in canto V, stanza five, a probable allusion to the Homeric cattle of the sun). The end result of this is the poet’s protest that the tumult, for all its spectacle, is without lines. Canto VI follows this protest with an examination of the theatre (as opposed to the play). The canto is visually rewarding in its observations of flux, of change without purpose beyond the continuance of change, but the effort grows wearisome and the speaker breaks off from imagery to a direct statement of (qualified) negation: "This is nothing until in a single man contained." The movement in the final stanzas is first a movement inward, ingesting the universe by invoking man’s adamic prerogative of naming (and unnaming), and then outward in recognition of the fact that the universe overwhelms the single man with its "artic effulgence flaring on the frame/ Of everything he is." At this point the frightened speaker/scholar/poet will turn from things as they immediately are and redirect himself to the problem of the generative principle and "the idea... alone," which he turned deliberately away from in cantos II-IV.
All this, meanwhile, can be read as a discussion of poetry and this poem itself, as well as of the nature of the existent universe, human and inhuman. The different concerns addressed by the different readings are not at all incompatible. The poem creating itself within a universe that is also creating itself without "an idea" is exemplary, or can be, of the processes and limitations that universe exhibits, much the way a fractal geometry produces similar, never identical, complexities of form at every scale. This chapter will examine in particular the interrelations between the allusions to the adamic myth of naming, the turns cantos V and VI take (as do all ten cantos) about the sixth stanza, and the reappearance of the referent-unspecified deictic morpheme "this" that occurs simultaneously with that turn.

Canto V opens with a bustle of activity, as if the children (humanity) are being gathered to witness mother and father's staging of an answer to that question ending canto IV. The vocabulary of the theatre used by Stevens in cantos IV-VI (and in V especially, strongly suggestive of a medieval festival replete with feasting and music and companies in masks), serves throughout to create a pervasive sense of the unreality of mere reality. The Shakespearean cliche of the world as stage is developed by Stevens to
imply a certain fakery, a kind of mummery, a riotous over-the-top overdoing of things in the experience of existence as existence—and, by deictic blur, in the experience of "this" poem as well.

So here we are, on earth, at home, being entertained by "tellers of tales," by "musicians who mute much, muse much on the tales," by dancing "negresses" "like curious ripenesses/ Of pattern in the dance's ripening": in short, surrounded by the arts, the "company" that will mime the universe and make it enjoyable. The first sign that all is not harmonius (and this canto does suggest, with its "hospitaliers" and its sound coinages, "A-dub, a-dub," the tumult of Stevens' first book, Harmonium, ) comes as a discordant note in stanza three, in which the musicians are said to make for the dancers "insidious tones/ Clawing the sing-song of their instruments." Long before the speaker finally protests the barbarity of the "festival," the language of the canto insinuates a Bosch-like atmosphere into the family party. What is there that is awry, what is the source of "the jarring sounds? The poem never makes this explicit, nor should it. The implication is certainly that a world that has bid "farewell to an idea" is more than merely chaotic, it is in some sense willfully "insidious;" it contains some bodiless serpent withholding meaning and
happiness. Or, the fact of its meaningless, its happiness that seems to be a matter of gaiety and invention, not satisfaction, causes it to seem "insidious."

In stanza four the children are treated to still more spectacle as the father brings on all the props, the special effects: clearly this is not to be a choiring "with the naked wind." These are "scenes of the theatre," not of truth, and at this point the masks are multiplying. All of the oblique comments being made through the vocabulary used here ("insidious," "clawing," "jangle," "tinny," "naive pretence") are negative, even vicious, and can be read plausibly as references to modern existence, to human history, to mimetic art, to the failure of our attempts to illumine our existence, to Stevens' early poetry (Harmonium) and/or to this poem itself. (And any and each of said readings could probably support a full explication, but the proof would require tedious expansion here, therefore the absolute truth of this suggestion is not insisted upon).

Before moving on to the crucial turn in the final two stanzas of the fifth canto, a brief comment on the "instinctive poem" in stanza five is in order. No critic, to my knowledge, has ever responded to this curious item, and that is curious in itself. In the
context of Twentieth-century art's fascination with the primitive, the subconscious and the "instinctive," the definition of "instinctive poem" in Stevens' erudite mind would be well worth knowing. Is it the savage poem? Is it the poem struck instinctively in the midst of the hullabaloo, that may be missed? Is it good or no? Certainly the possibility exists that Stevens is poking satirically at modern art's pretensions to instinctual, primitive creation---given the line's context, placing the "instinctive poem" in the hands of the "musicians" who were just making "insidious tones" and "among" the theatric-properties folderol of stanza four. Whatever it is, "the instinctive poem" is surely not satisfactory, and the poem moves on.

The father, with all his fetching of this and that, simply overdoes it. By the time we have finished with stanza six, "we stand in the tumult of a festival." The "company" the father has brought has done nothing to clarify or comprehend matters; he has merely made a grand mess of feasts, children, artists, scenery, cattle and what-have-you. Again the speaker protests the poem: "What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?" This protest signals the shift, and it occurs at precisely the same point where it occurred in cantos III and IV. In fact, all ten cantos undergo a sudden shift of voice, tone and perspective following
either the fifth (cantos I and VIII) or the sixth (all other cantos) stanzas, a motion that defines the form of the cantos more significantly than the fact that Stevens made the arbitrary decision (one assumes) to fit each canto into exactly twenty-four lines divided into eight three-line stanzas. Here, and in canto VI, the shift is from "the" to "this" as well, and the poem moves more explicitly to allow a reading of its lines as self-referential. Stevens is criticizing simultaneously (and again, it is the inspiration of the Aurora Borealis as poetic figure that enables him) the world without an ideal, without essence, and his own creation, a smaller creation within the greater, as "this loud, disordered mooch." He has created musicians "dubbing" (i.e. adding sounds, as in film, with a play here on "dabbling" and "daubing" also) at a tragedy, but he has written no lines for them to speak; they are merely making noises, "a-dub, a-dub." He has written no lines for his musician's because "there are no lines." Any lines he did compose would be more fakery, more "insidious tones" ("instinctive poems"?), more noise because he cannot know what the ideal lines are. Stevens has insistently bid "farewell to an idea," not the idea, and the idea, if it exists, remains unknown. The canto concludes, at exact midpoint in the physical text, with Stevens flattest
statement of existentiality—Shakespeare's stage and players, but without a script. "There is no play. / Or, the persons act one merely by being here."

Stevens turns away from the "mooch." Apparently there is no "company in masks" capable of choiring "this present throne," not without a script. Stevens' descriptive eye drifts off of the unsatisfactory hubbub of canto V and back to the sky, an act of perception that once again isolates the perceiver and heightens his sense of otherness in the perceived. The first line of canto VI, "It is a theatre floating through the clouds," signals the change of perspective ("floating through the clouds") while linking the canto to the canto preceding it ("theatre"—note the change of focus from the "company," the "scenes," the "play").

Most intriguing is the use this line makes of a pronoun, "It" leads off the entire canto and is a pronoun without an antecedent, a deliberately induced ambiguity in a poem chock-a-block with such ambiguities. Just as the deliberate ambiguity of the referent(s) for "this" is used to break down the distinction between external and internal reference, a vertical blurring, if you will, so does the ambiguity of antecedent(s) for the poem's pronouns create a blurring between the "company" of figures within the poem, a horizontal blurring. Part of the reason for
this, it was suggested earlier, is to realign the forces of old myths and allegories, as in the blurring of the distinction between "the father" (the "he" in the heavens) and "the serpent" (the "he" in the heavens). Part of the reason also may be mimetic of the auroras' shifting shapes with very blurred lines of distinction between them, both spatially and also temporally as they emerge. The characters---mother, father, serpent, children, humanity, scholar, solitary man, imagination, innocence, rabbi, etc.---flow in and out of one another throughout the poem via shared descriptive vocabulary, forms of address, allegorical roles, and, as in this case, blurred pronomial antecedents.

Here the antecedent-unspecified pronoun serves well as both divider and link. As the divider, "it is" stands in contrast to the "this is" passages of the first canto. In canto VI, to a greater extent than anywhere else in the poem, the poet will seek a certain descriptive objectivity, a maintaining of the boundary, however invisible, between the witness and the witnessed. In doing so he continues the canto by canto process of seeking a satisfactory approach to dealing with "the serpent," the sense of the alien, of the inimical pervading experience. Having abandoned "an idea," our presumption being that the indefinite rather
than definite article makes "idea" unsatisfactory, he sought comfort in family and "company." That having proven chaotic and distasteful, he now stands apart, or at least looks away, as if to sniff, with Wilde, "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." What follows is a more pointedly mimetic poetry, which is not to say it does not transform its data. Stevens pursues the asking of "what is it" by recreating "its" appearances. The method reveals some insights and much beauty but ultimately proves as unsatisfactory as the "loud, disordered mooch."

As a link, the initial "it" of canto VI is a stepping-stone between the specifically masculine sky-masters that have gone before, "the serpent" and "the father," and the one that is to come, the "imagination." One wonders why "the serpent," which is such a powerfully alien figure, is ever called "he" in the first place, and one suspects that it was to reinforce the Christian/Miltonic allusions and to link "the serpent" even more closely to "the father." If that is the case than the "it" in canto VI, which does eventually transform back into "this," is not only a transition between "the father" and the "imagination" but also a dehumanizing of the royal "master" principle: with canto VI, the anthropomorphic "father" is effectively dead; he never reappears. At this point
the movement has begun toward isolating humanity and
the human family, which is apparently made up only of
brothers and mother, from the universe, and thus toward
the "an unhappy people in a happy world" assertions of
the final canto--- implying that there seems to be
something pervasively alien to the universe by our
lights because we are somehow alien to it, a contrary
principle within it, however much a part of "its"
"whole."

Canto VI is attractive for its extraordinary
visual effects, and, like the auroras themselves, one
can enjoy simply watching them play. In a way, it is
as if Stevens took Pound's vorticist concept of the
image and, inspired by his subject, set a number of
vortices to flowing in and out of each other. This is
the most purely pleasurable canto of the poem to read,
and it reinforces the reader's experience by asserting,
in a use of pathetic fallacy that the "it" "likes
magnificence/ And the solemn pleasures of magnificent
space." Actually, attaching the tag, "pathetic
fallacy" to these lines is somewhat risky because,
given all the horizontal and vertical ambiguities of
referents, what Vendler calls Stevens' "dissolving
equilibrium" (OEW 232), Stevens' inhuman figures in the
"Auroras" are never fully inhuman--- as his human
figures are never fully human. The "Auroras," like the
auroras, are "of cloud transformed/ To cloud transformed again, idly, the way/ A season changes colors to no end." And again one is struck by the perfect congruity of the controlling image, the Aurora Borealis, and the poet's conception of his own creation. Note the similarity in Stevens' description of the auroras as being "transformed...idly" to his description of the process of writing the "Auroras" as following "the drift of one's ideas." Note also the comparison of the changes in the Auroras to "the way/ A season changes colors to no end," seasonal change being probably Stevens' most important career-spanning figure.

Stevens himself does not seem entirely comfortable with this congruity however, and canto VI bails out of idle change that changes simply for the pleasures of changing (cf. "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" Palm 96), following the apparently requisite six stanzas. Upon consideration, that the poet takes pleasure here at all may seem strange in light of the dark circumstances (so to speak) and of the sense of immanent danger, even universal threat, the source of which will not be hypothesized until the next canto. A relevant comment on this very point is Stevens' own, to the effect that, "these lights symbolize a tragic and desolate background" (352). After canto V, it is the
foreground that seems most tragic or at least absurd and cacophonous in its plotless tragicomedy. The use of the word "background" is important, as is the use of the word "theatre." What is tragic and desolate to a human is that which is inhuman, not alive, not organic. It is not, of course, tragic and desolate in itself, any more than "it likes magnificence/ And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space." The true pathos of the pathetic fallacy lies not in our fallacious attribution of human characteristics to inhuman phenomena, but in the fact that there is no perception of inhuman phenomena that is not human in the characteristics of that perception. Stevens' abrupt recognition of this takes the form of a brave assertion, "this is nothing until in a single man contained."

The motion now is back inward, back to the solitary figure, like the man on the beach. The assertion just made is pure solipsism, reflective of an assumption that if man cannot observe the ding an sich, cannot perceive at all without coloring the perceived with something of his own unique perception, then that perception is all that there is, and man is the creator of all he surveys. The same assertion is also reflective, in this case, of a certain desperation, a certain bravado, an attempt to make it so by saying it
is so. And this brings us around to the fundamental problem of language, the problem of naming. The poet has here become an Adamic figure and a creator figure combined, he makes what he has named. The process of naming has a way of calling attention to itself and creates the perception of gaps as surely as the perception of phenomena: Adam in the garden came to recognize his loneliness by naming all the animals and realizing that no named creature besides himself was not actually a brace of creatures, companions to each other ("what company...?").

In the sixth canto, seventh stanza, of the "Auroras" the boast, "this is nothing until in a single man contained," does not survive even its dependent clause: "nothing until this named thing nameless is/ And is destroyed." The speaker reveals a poignant awareness of the separating powers of naming, of its ability to call into keen focus the gap between the namer and the named, the distinction between the witness and the witnessed, and the isolation of the perceiver from the creations of his perception. This is a vital part of the back-and-forth tug, the wriggling throughout the poem between a longing for pure perception and a need for comfort and security. Here the two competing tugs are complementary: to make the named thing nameless is to reach pure perception,
and to break down the boundaries that make one, like Adam, aware of one's solitude. The desire to break down those nominal boundaries, in the case of the auroras, is of a piece with the passage in the opening canto of the "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," in which the poet, echoing MacLeish (and, perhaps, an entire era in poetry) claims that "Phoebus was/ A name for something that never could be named/. . . The sun/ Must bear no name... but be." In proportion as our confidence in our ability to perceive with certainty declines, as our confidence in some absolute thing to perceive declines, our desire to perceive, to be that certainty increases.

The motion inward thus is reversed in a motion outward, and the enormity of comprehending a purely phenomenal universe, without "an idea," of understanding the perception of that universe is overwhelming: "He opens the door of his house// On flames." The enjambment of the line across two stanzas and the place of its break is meant to give as much impact as possible to the delivery of the final two words, symbolizing the poet's sense of the situation, all bravado gone. Strong as it is, the image suggests another, more resonant in its trope, and that image in turn leads the poem at last to the flat statement that
best sums the motivation for naming, for seeking comprehension:

...The scholar of one candle sees

An artic effulgence flaring on the frame

Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.
Chapter Five: Imagination, Innocence and Imminence

If the end of the philosopher is despair,
the end of the poet is fulfillment, since
the poet finds a sanction for life in poetry
that satisfies the imagination.

(Stevens NA 43)

It may come tomorrow in the simplest word...

Contra Davie, contra Vendler, contra everyone,
cantos VII-'X are the finest of the "Auroras." These
are the cantos of inquiry, of abstraction, of
"mournful making moving to find" what can unmake the
tragedy of a tragedy with "no lines to speak." The
"farewell to an idea" accomplished, the "Artic effulgence"
is at the door. The
poet/scholar/Adam/solitary man who "feels afraid" now
seeks out directly the source of his fear, which is the
source of extinguishings, which is the source of
creatings, hence of namings. Cantos II-IV constituted
a sequence of three 120-degree turns away from the
serpent's "nest," all the while remaining in the
immediate here and now. Cantos V and VI gathered
together and then looked up and away, then inward, then
peeked outward "on flames." Cantos VII-'X will move in
all directions, including, eventually, the directions of nostalgic past and apprehensive future. The dominating theme is now more explicitly extinction; the dominating actor is "it," against which are posed "we" and "she." The conclusion of the search is that extinction is not such a horror after all, a conclusion that clears the way for the final canto's refocussing on the problem of existence, inclusive of extinctions.

"Is there an imagination that sits enthroned...?"

The speculative query may be seen to arise directly out of the scene at the end of canto VI, to be posed by the panicked scholar. The important lexical item is "imagination," which is an interesting choice as subject of a sentence one might reasonably expect to have as its subject some word denoting deity. In the face of the universal "effulgence" and its apparently random, idealess behaviour, however glorious, the natural, the primary philosophical response is to ask after a source, a generator of all this flux.

It is of vital importance to note that all Stevens' farewells, his festival, and his theatre, have led back, at the end of the sixth canto to the essential perception that prompts this primary philosophical response: creation, as was noted of naming in the preceding chapter, is the essential prerequisite for decreation. Stevens began with the
apprehension of the serpent, a complex trope, then revolved through a number of responses, a number of figurations of the situation the poet confronts, all in order to wind down to the first emotion evoked in the face of the "effulgence," simply and directly expressed: "And he feels afraid." This clears the way for a new beginning, a new construction.

It is also of vital importance to see that in choosing the term "imagination" Stevens reconnects to the past, to the already created, to former conceptions of what might be the generator of the phenomenal universe, and selects from among them: the question then, in its primary clause, is primary; the subject however has a history. First of all, "imagination" is connected very obviously to the other sky figures, or "master" figures, in the poem, i.e., "the serpent" and "the father," through its spatial placement (in the sky, of course) and through its association with terms of royalty ("enthroned") and mastery ("as grim as it is benevolent") and flux ("it leaps through us, through all our heavens leaps"), all of which have already been associated with both of the earlier figurations. Eventually, all these avatars of the mysterious, essential, creative and dangerous in the universe will be summed in the phrase "the spectre of the spheres" of the final canto.
Secondly, "imagination" as a term has a central significance to Stevens' thought and poetry (and thought on poetry). It is Stevens' term for the human creative force, very closely linked with the terms "fiction" and "metaphor," and he alternately revels in it and tries to perceive without it, impossible task. That he chooses it as subject in a question of the kind most people ask of "God" is not at all surprising if one considers only that he saw it as a term for creative force. If, however, one considers its associations with human creativity in Stevens' works, often in polar apposition to the term "reality," its choice here might seem a little stranger, especially given the apocalyptic powers Stevens attributes to it throughout the canto. The key is to remember that Stevens often experimented, before and after writing the "Auroras," with poems ostensibly in pursuit of a rinsed-clear perception of the ding an sich ("The Snow Man," "The Course of a Particular," and "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself" being notable examples), and that even those poems, relatively bare of fanciful tropes and dazzling diction, exhibited the poet's creative powers. The problem with "imagination," like the problem with naming, lies not in any lack of enabling, but in its barrier of unabling, in that it is impossible to perceive without
"imagination" distorting the perception. That impossibility, even if it only applies to humanity, by its own fact makes "imagination" the essence of the human perception of the universe. Hence Stevens' question regarding its primacy, a question that must be answered in the affirmative.

Canto VII, the canto of this examination of "imagination," may be safely be called the colorless canto, which seems odd. Why, in the perception of the phenomenal universe are we flooded by "color to no end," and yet when it comes to considering the source of that color, calling it "imagination" no less, the poem becomes black and white? Such "why" questions, as any toddler can demonstrate, never lead to any unassailable answer. A possible explanation, however, for this curious trick of Stevens' may be that his intent was to emphasize the polarity of the opposition between creation and extinction and to balance it and subsume it under the term "imagination." The spectrum, after all, is summed in white, and white then is the representative of all colors against black, which is the representative of none. Furthermore, the white-black polarity/balance calls to mind more Oriental paradigms of good-and-evil and of creation-and-destruction, paradigms that emphasize and celebrate balance, as in the Zoroastrian schemata and
the Ying-Yang mandala. All this is perfectly appropriate in a poem aware of the decreation implicit in creation and necessary to new creation, "nothing/ until this named thing nameless is/ And is destroyed."

It is precisely that destructive aspect of creation (creation=change=time=destruction) that is the focus of this canto. The source of the scholar's fear in the face of overwhelming vitality is the instinctual realization of the vitality of its "extinguishings." Surely it must still be a staggering thought to realize in the bones that creativity is not the enemy of death, that information is not the opposite of entropy, but that they are complementary, that, if anything, creativity is the source of death, that creativity is indeed "the white creator of black." Worse, perhaps, for the poet of the "Auroras," whose poem itself is another "white creator of black," is the sense that this essential principle, this source of existence, this "imagination," is a deliberate destroyer, a self-aggrandizing Shiva, "jetted/ By extinguishings" of just about anything "except as needed by way of majesty." (Note that the extinguishings include "even... sight, in snow," an allusion to Stevens' "The Snow Man" and to the possibility of perceiving the ding an sich.)
The poem reaches its most apocalyptic moment in the seventh canto’s fifth and sixth stanzas, presaging the next sudden shift which will close the canto:

It leaps through us, through all our heaven's leaps,
Extinguishing our planets, one by one,
Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where
We knew each other and of each other thought,
A shivering residue, chilled and foregone,
Except for that crown and mystical cabala.

At this point, humanity has been hypothetically eliminated from the universe by the "imagination," a most curious situation, owing to the fact that the "imagination" is the enabler of the hypothesis, a human the maker.

The final two stanzas of the "imagination" canto have the most difficult task of any turning point in the poem, that of returning from total apocalypse. They are qualifying stanzas, that is to say, having given the "imagination" all the powers of a self-glorifying, omnipotent deity/force/monarch, these stanzas must convincingly issue a retraction, a neat trick to pull, as any presidential spokesman can attest. What is there that the "imagination" cannot,
or at least "dare not" do? "It dare not leap by chance in its own dark," begins the seventh stanza. Frankly, this seems a bit unconvincing, and is not helped by the additional restriction that follows: "it must change from destiny to slight caprice." What is being said here? What could make it convincing?

Call to mind earlier remarks on the poem's self-referentiality, as well as the more recent comments on naming, creating and human perception. "Imagination" is essential to human perception, yes. "It leaps through us, through all our heaven's leaps." This essential creative force, as a human perceives it, is necessarily a human perception, and as such is not omnipotent. In any case, an "imagination" that can wipe out anything can wipe out itself; "it dare not leap" accidentally into its own extinguishing, as the poem effectively did in stanza six. Thus, "imagination" seeks out an antidote to itself, and its seeking, not its destroying per se, constitutes its "tragedy." The end is a paradox, for what "it" seeks is what can "unmake it," what can eliminate the tragedy of its seeking. The poet suggests "a flippant communication under the moon." Flippancy, "slight caprice," is and has been and will continue to be even to his last poems, the solvent in Stevens' imaginative
constructs—which makes him, ultimately, in the classical sense, comic, not tragic.

The next canto, the canto querying "innocence," actually stretches through to the middle of the ninth canto, and, while the form is roughly maintained in these two cantos, of a progression along one axis or idea for the first five or six stanzas, followed by a sharp change in tone and direction, that form is blurred by other movements. Time moves from the immediate present, where the poem has remained from the opening stanza, to the very hazy, even hypothetical, past in canto IX and then shuttles for four brief stanzas between past, present and future. By the end of the ninth canto, the prevailing sense is of imminence.

Having grappled with the source of extinction and creation, the "imagination," Stevens might have moved on directly to the tenth canto and its summing up of the balanced "phases of this difference." It would not have hurt the poem's symmetry; it may even have helped it. Even Vendler, who explicates the "Auroras" as the finest of Stevens' long poems, takes issue with the lengthy examination of "innocence," finding it unconvincing and a little desperate in its repetitive insistence on the existence of "innocence," and she notes that "to the extent that 'The Auroras of Autumn'
remains a poem of the sky and motion, it is a dazzling performance. Indoors, it weakens, and it falters in its regressive motion toward childhood" (OEW 249).

Stevens is, however, intent on exploring the possibilities, and those must not be confined to the possibilities for comprehending (and by so doing, gaining some sort of mastery over) the creating-destroying source of the phenomenal universe---they must also include the possibilities for being comforted within that universe, for finding an existence that is in no wise alien. In point of fact, cantos VII-IX can be seen as the extreme extensions of the poem's most basic back-and-forth movement, containing all the smaller turns and pivots etc. within. There are only two ways to eliminate entirely a sense of displacement, of otherness, of the alien, in the universe, as here figured by the Northern Lights of a late autumn night: comprehend its source and thus engulf it, or, move away, back, from it to a universe, or at least a time-place in this universe, that is home. Victory or nostos, thesis and antithesis, these are the options, and it is with the "wriggling" explorations of these options that the "Auroras" struggles to slough off the old dead skin of an ideal, orthodox conception of the universe that will no longer fit. Thus, following the extremest reach and
rejection of his "thesis" (forgive the pseudo-Hegelian terminology), the attempt to comprehend the universe as an "imagination" which, insofar as a human comprehends it, is flawed by the possibility of self-immolation, Stevens requires an extreme "anti-thesis," and the passivity, the companionship, of "innocence" is the logical choice.

Sky-earth, serpent/father-mother, solitude-companionship, cold-warm, alien-home, out-in, white (color)-black--- these are the dualities the mind "drifts" between in the "Auroras." Yet there is an unbalance, in that the one creates the other, in that the poet finds the "serpent" alien and all-powerful and to be dealt with, the "mother" familiar (pun intended) and to be believed in. That is the strain that Vendler's sensitive antennae detect in the "innocence" section's response to the "imagination" section. It is also the strain that will dictate the terms of the "synthesis" arrived at finally in canto X: the balance achieved is still entirely and necessarily from a particular, human perspective, and is therefore relative to that perspective. Meantime, in canto VIII, Stevens' exploration of "innocence," after all of his sloughing off of "an idea," seems to try to reestablish a sort of neo-platonic construction to validate even the assertion that "innocence" may exist:
There may be always a time of innocence.
There is never a place. Or if there is no
time,
If it is not a thing of time, nor of place,
Existing in the idea of it, alone,
In the sense against calamity, it is not
Less real. For the oldest and coldest
philosopher,

There is or may be a time of innocence
As pure principle. Its nature is its end,
That it should be, and yet not be, a thing
That pinches the pity of the pitiful man,
Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue,
Like a book on rising beautiful and true.

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.

This is beautiful formal language, dignified and
insistent, but in the nature of assertion, not of
proof, although it attempts a proven assurance.
Assertion without accompanying proof (in the classical
sense of a geometric proof) being commonplace in
poetry, Stevens seems unnecessarily emphatic in the
final line of stanza five, and by doing so, he seems to
undermine, rather than strengthen the very proposition he asserts. Would Vendler have taken issue with his insistence, with the unsatisfactory assurance of this passage, had Stevens not stamped his foot quite so many times? The question is raised to suggest that Stevens knew exactly the effect that his insistent repetition would have, that he intended to demonstrate the nature of "innocence" as something that only exists in the words that insist upon it. Stevens was not in the habit of stamping his feet, nor of misunderstanding the difference between saying so and doing so, between writing "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and living on a rural island.

Fair evidence that this is indeed the case, that Stevens intentionally called attention to the tenuous nature of his assertion of the existence of "innocence" by repeating it, can be found following the canto's shift in voice beginning the sixth stanza. In stanza seven of this eighth canto there is a tense switch accomplished illustrating the nature of "imagination" and "innocence" and poetic assertion by demonstration swifter and more convincing than any rhetorical proof. If the lines immediately preceding the switch proceed out of an assumption of "innocence," the description of "innocence" that follows, that obliterates the present moment, is strictly an act of the imagination, a
sleight of language accomplished via "as if," not "if... then":

...That we partake thereof,

Lie down like children in this holiness,

As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep,

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark
Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,
Created the time and place in which we breathed... [emphases mine]

This is the nature of "innocence," that it should be "an idea" "that pinches the pity of the pitiful man,/
Like a book."

What comes of this imaginative reconstruction "as if" of an innocent "time and place" is, in some ways, the most difficult passage of the poem, and is suggestive of Eliot’s "The Wasteland" in its fragmentations of voice and perspective, obscure allusions and even some of its imagery. It is even possible, perhaps, to read it as some kind of response to "The Wasteland," or to the mentality of a generation of poets and intellectuals infected by "The Wasteland."

To begin with, a look at the curious second stanza is instructive: "We were as Danes in Denmark all day long/ And knew each other well-hale hearted landsman."
These lines appear within the context of the dream of an innocent "time and place" created by the invisible mother's music. It is typically Stevensian in that it hints at the comic, and one can get a sense of its import by assuming that the simile is a trope of homeyness, as Danes are at home in Denmark. It is to Baird, however, that we owe the best hypothesis as to the specific allusion. He points out a passage in Stevens' essay "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" in which Stevens quotes an anecdote from the life of Coleridge. Coleridge, dressed all in black, is mistaken, while on a sea voyage, for "un philosophe" by a group of Danish fellow voyagers. The mistake (one which has, on occasion, been made in identifying Stevens), was objected to by Coleridge, who found the title distasteful. To this objection Danes replied by pointing at that they too were philosophers, all of them, and the end result was that Coleridge and the Danes spent the rest of the night feasting, drinking and dancing on the deck. Stevens uses the anecdote to illustrate his thesis that poetry, as shared by Coleridge and the Danes that evening and as opposed to philosophy proper, is "an unofficial view of being" (Stevens NA 40-41; for discussion of passage in explication of the "Auroras," see Baird 29). And that is exactly the strength and limitations of Stevens'
projections of both "imagination" and "innocence," that they are "unofficial" views "of being."

The scenes of that lost, hypothetical "time and place" break down in a confusion of the tenses in stanza four as the innocent brotherhood of the Danes falls asleep, and it almost becomes a question of who is dreaming whom---the poem the brothers, or the brothers the poem---à la the famous rock-sitter's speculations as to whether he is a man or a rock dreaming that he is a man: "This drama that we live---We lay sticky with sleep./ This sense of the activity of fate---." The following, utterly mysterious fifth stanza, with its "rendezvous" of the antecedent-less pronouns "she" and "they," has never been directly explicated, although I suspect there may be an allusion in it as revelatory as the one in the "Danes in Denmark" passage. Imaginative readings suggest, given the context, that it could refer to Eve meeting the serpent in the garden of Eden in order to discover the knowledge of Good and Evil. Certainly that is the traditional end of innocence and of "the innocent mother."

Stanza six of the ninth canto seems at first glance to be both the bleakest of the poem and perhaps oddly out of place in its Eliotic imagery. No one has yet suggested otherwise, and even the more sensitive
readers have read it strictly as an apprehension of apocalypse (Vendler OEW 259, for example). It is possible, however, if one pauses to consider what might be the answer to its unanswered question, to see this stanza as the segue to an understanding of the fear "the scholar" of canto six experiences, an understanding that comprehends that fear and sees past it without denying its force:

Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?
Of what disaster is this the imminence:
Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt?

Given the Fraser-like formulation of the hanged-man image and the querulous apprehension of imminent disaster (the etymology of "disaster" suggesting a galactic apocalypse in this context) this has to be considered as a possible allusion to Eliot. But answer the questions, and consider also why Stevens' tragedy is not "but a whimper." What is found hanging in the trees each spring? What starry apocalypse does the turning of another season necessitate? The most immediate answers are: blossoms; none. The tragedy is not diminished locally for being local, for being personal, but it is vital to understand that personal tragedy is but a part of a universe that "creates
itself by extinguishings." Eliot, in April, calls it "the cruelest month." Stevens, in November, understands the transmutations that will make him part of another spring, when he is no longer himself. Universal existence encompasses local extinctions: for a local race, that is both tragic and comforting:

The stars are putting on their glittering belts.
They throw around their shoulders cloaks that flash
Like a great shadow's last embellishment.

It may come tommorrow in the simplest word,
Almost as a part of innocence, almost,
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part.

Extinction is extinction, but it has been qualified as partial. The about-to-be-extinguished may now extract from his perceptions his bittersweet synthesis, his "hall harridan," if "not hushful paradise."
Chapter Six: Contriving a Balance

According to Rosenthal, Stevens longs for rather than rejects a Platonic world, but Rosenthal bases his conclusion... on the ultimate happiness Stevens supposedly found guaranteed by Platonism. Stevens was hardly so nostalgic as Rosenthal would have us believe. (Willard 135)

An unhappy people in a happy world---

A meta-metacritical comment, beg pardon for the term, on the above quotation from Abie Willard's Wallace Stevens: The Poet and His Critics: Rosenthal may have mistaken the desire to affirm for affirmation; Willard has mistaken the absence of affirmation for an absence of any desire to do so. Among Stevens' primary concerns is the possibility of an ideal "reality," a concern that motivates his explorations into the nature of reality and imagination and perception and expression. And Stevens' poetry makes potent, as has been seen, the inherited figures of the idealized, personalized, orthodox Platonic-Judeo-Christian cosmology he pointedly rejects. "The Auroras of Autumn," with its awful glories and apprehensive
celebrations, its posing and abandoning of propositions 
in search of an affirmation that may hold, is excellent 
evidence that Stevens is a poet who longs, as a human, " 
for a certainty, a fixity, a "supreme fiction" to which 
one would be able to entrust unquestioning credence.

The "Auroras" is also, as is the body of Stevens' 
work, excellent evidence that Stevens is strong enough 
to reconcile himself to living without certainty, 
without blind faith in a fixed fiction, finding instead 
"what will suffice" from moment to moment, 
reconsidering and readjusting from poem to poem, 
tacking into the gusts across his "sea surface full of 
clouds" "wave on wave/ Through waves of light."

The balance of an even keel at sea is not, 
however, a given thing. It is the nature of a 
post-platonic, post-christian poetic that it can 
envisage no ultimate closure, that, conscious of being 
unbalanced by inevitably limited and limiting 
perspective, it seeks constantly to contrive "a balance 
to contrive a whole." As fine a contrivance as any he 
makes, is the balanced closure Stevens manages in canto 
X of the "Auroras."

The canto begins with its conclusion in its mouth: 
"An unhappy people in a happy world---" and then 
reenacts the steps, the soundings, leading to this 
assertion of difference, the difference that all the
poem's writhings and sheddings of skin and body have sought to discover, "the bodiless." In line two, a new character is introduced (new to this poem, not new to Stevens' writings), the "rabbī." This character extends the poem's column of self-reference by giving direct instructions to a hypothetical reader that is also a form of the author and of the text itself.

A very helpful elucidator of this "rabbī" figure in Stevens' writings is Kronick, who examines it in relation to genealogy and "the book" ("Of Parents, Children, and Rabbis: Wallace Stevens and the Question of the Book" is his essay's title). Kronick points out revealing comments in Stevens' letters re rabbis, to wit:

I am beginning to feel like a rabbī myself. I have never referred to rabbis as religious figures but always as scholars. When I was a boy I was brought up to think that rabbis were men who spent their time getting wisdom. And I rather think that that is true. One doesn't feel the same way, for instance, about priests or about a Protestant pastor, who are almost exclusively religious figures. (Letters 571)

And again, in a very late letter discussing the figure of the rabbī in his 1930 poem, "The Sun This March," a
poem which is, as Kronick observes, "a particularly important poem because it broke six years of silence" (Kronick 148):

Frankly, the figure of the rabbi has always been an exceedingly attractive one to me because it is the figure of a man devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes. (Letters 736)

Kronick observes in discussing the final canto of the "Auroras," in which he finds the rabbi-figure "appears most forcefully," that "the rabbi is the reader situated not only between man and world, but also between language" (150). Curiously, however, Kronick neglects the rabbi's role as creator of his own text ("When, as a child, I wrote my name for the first time, I knew I was beginning a book" -Reb Stein), which Stevens obviously implies in his letters. And, of course, this "rabbi" has a particular significance in this late reworking of the genesis myth, the conclusion of which he is enjoined to "read to the congregation." Through the "rabbi," Stevens commands himself as "reader" of the phenomenal universe the Aurora Borealis symbolizes and of his own, human, sense of perturbing "difference" between himself and that universe—- and
commands the reader of his poem as well to read "the phases of this difference."

"This difference," of course, is the discrepancy felt by "an unhappy people in a happy world," but it is also the "Auroras" itself, a poem of phases of exploring "this difference" which finds a rightness, as it were, in the final phase, which is the only one "that will suffice." Revealing by practice the key distinction between poetic, "unofficial," inquiry and proper philosophical inquiry, Stevens' theorem finds its proof by sounding out the alternatives, like a blind piano tuner plucking a wire and frowning, rejecting by ear, not by rhetoric:

An unhappy people in an unhappy world---

Here are too many mirrors for misery.

A happy people in an unhappy world---

It cannot be. There's nothing there to roll

On the expressive tongue, the finding fang.

A happy people in a happy world---

Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar.

Turn back to where we were when we began:

An unhappy people in a happy world.

Now solemnize the secretive syllables.
This result is both startlingly simple and clear in its assertion—that we are unhappy in a happy world turns the problem of difference inside out, shifting its perspective from seeing unhappiness resulting from difference, to seeing difference resulting from unhappiness. That the poet rejects out of hand the jarring discord of "an unhappy people in an unhappy world" while taking a toothsome satisfaction in the contrived "balance" of "an unhappy people in a happy world" is as good a measure as could ever be found of the extent to which Stevens is a Romantic and not a Modern, just as his innovative lexicon, imagery and unexpected-as-broken-glass-in-water juxtapositions are the best measures of the extent to which he is a Modern and not a Romantic.

The poem ends in a climactic building to a vivid image, a pure victory for the imagination over the blank, the phenomenal real over an ideal real. The great, creative-destructive, paternal-alien sky figures are summed in the phrase "spectre of the spheres," echoing the elusive illusiveness of the universal essence as Stevens perceives it, or has been trying to perceive it. The very phrase "spectre of the spheres" is an imaginative projection and thus a graceful yielding to the distortions of human perspective, the unavoidable pathetic fallacy that allows the
poet-creator to link himself figuratively with the self-creating universe (a rejection, for the moment, of the discipline of "The Snow Man" and its listener who sees "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is"). In the final echoings of self-and-other-referent deixis, "these unhappy" resonates as reference to humanity and to language and to this text in particular, all products of "the spectre of the spheres," all somehow alienated from their background.

The very final line of the poem accomplishes one last inversion of image, a negation by creation, of the perspective of the entire poem. Vendler has suggested that this finale is "an implicit boast," seeing in its "summer straw" the bold and brave destruction of the "hay" in "Credences" ("S&K" 131,137), but she is never very explicit herself as to what that boast implies. It would seem in fact, that the line is quite the opposite of a "implicit boast," being an accomplished feat of poetic image: "Like a blaze of summer straw in winter's nick." This is particularly true if one tries to hold in mind the poem's previous imagery of the Northern Lights simultaneously with this final metaphor. What actually is implied, however, is a radical inversion of all those previous images. That is to say, throughout the "Auroras" the awesome, overwhelming sensation of the immediate, of phenomenal
flux, of "the white creator of black," of "the serpent's body flashing without the skin," has emphasized a sense of a universal creativity that is, one can become at any time, a threat to local existence, but that is not ever threatened in toto itself. Here, at the end, that schema is turned inside out, the phenomenal universe, it appears, is a brief flare bursting and guttering in "winter's nick." The immediate reason for the last minute inversion is easily located by moving up to the poem's penultimate line and the phrase "by these lights." The end of self-reference really is "too many mirrors for misery," meaning that it allows for an infinite of extension of unhappiness, like a reflection caught in facing mirrors. For as the human text is a local phenomenon in danger of being engulfed, so self-reference in the text, when it can be read as referring also to the external phenomenal universe, has the power to strongly suggest that that external also is in danger of being engulfed.

But why the inversion? The overall development of the poem leads to a conclusion, as stated at the end of the previous chapter, that local extinction is itself a phenomena, a creation of the self-creating universe, and therefore more poignant than apocalyptic, and, perhaps, not nearly so difficult to deal with as
existence, which includes many extinctions. It may be that the table-turning image at the close is, then, a kind of twisting-off to close and an indicator as well that "the drift of one's ideas" is about to take a new direction. That this is so will be amply demonstrated by the poems to come, particularly the miserly "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." And yet, by their very existence the late poems are the best demonstrators of why the overwhelmingly creative auroras were Stevens' most appropriate symbol for the reality of his "polar green" poetry: it is existence that is the overwhelmer, the demander of endless responses, continual genesis, never wholly sufficient, never wholly sufficed:

Inescapable romance, inescapable choice
Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,
Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended...

(Palm 333)

It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

(Palm 190)
End Notes

1. Enck has suggested that Stevens is creating a mythos of his own making (183). Willard's metacritical comment on this suggestion is, I think, apt: "He [Enck] argues that in "The Auroras of Autumn" Stevens... explores the area between separate images and undefined mythology. The point is an interesting one and might have been fruitful had Enck explored it" (45).

2. Actually, the closest critics have come, to my knowledge, to exploring self-referentiality in the "Auroras" is to point out that Stevens is presenting the mind in the act of creating as well as its creation (cf., Riddle) or that Stevens is presenting a combination of imagined (i.e., the embellishments of the text) and perceived (i.e., as recorded in the text) reality (cf., Doggett).

3. See Miller on Stevens' "fluid transformations in which objects modulate into one another" (226-27) in a search for reality through metaphor that eventually collapses in an infinity of extending tropes, such that "the world is transformed into an expression of the poet's mind" (245). A perceptive metacritical comment on this has been made by Joseph Kronick, to wit:
Despite all his appeals to the endless series of interpretations opened by the modern poem, Miller's metaphors, particularly that of the *mise en abyme*, return literature to a genealogical sequence and set the text on solid ground. The *mise en abyme* is... the mirror image of genealogy. (126)
WORKS CONSULTED

ESSAYS


-----, "Why Read Wallace Stevens?" Emory University Quarterly. 1962 Summer; 18:84-85.


BOOKS


