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Michael A. Hahm

The University of Montana

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A LOT OF TALK ABOUT NOTHING: WALLACE STEVENS AND EASTERN THOUGHT

by

Michael A. Hahm

B.A. University of Wisconsin-Parkside, 1996

B.A. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1989

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2003

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date

6-2-03
My thesis explores Wallace Stevens’ poetry from a Zen Buddhist perspective, which offers a growing catalogue of Stevens criticism. Stevens has long been regarded as a meditative, often detached poet who at times seems almost clinical in his observations. Some critics, including Vendler and Bloom, have seen this and, unfamiliar with meditative psychology, focused on themes of failure, despair, and evasion. Through a Zen Buddhist perspective we can see how his movement is rather a movement toward affirmation of life, toward a complete integration with it.

“The Snow Man,” which sparked my own interest in reading Stevens from a Zen Buddhist perspective, is one of his most controversial poems in this regard and offers an excellent forum for discussing the divergence of “Western” and “Eastern” perspectives. The matter of “nothing,” which the West seems to keep at arm’s length, provides the perfect centerpiece for beginning this conversation, in which Zen Buddhism is quite comfortable. Through it, we begin to see that an inclusion of both perspectives invigorates our criticism and helps us come apace with Stevens.

It is not enough, though, to single out one short, early poem, identify a classic meditative progression in it, and argue convincingly that Stevens is a closet Buddhist. For along with the meditative dimension of his poetry, there is a clear Romantic thread in it; his work was a bit more elaborate than haiku. And Stevens was nothing if not a wanderer; his circulations alternate between the deeply meditative, the rigidly logical, and the fantastically romantic. I look, then, mainly at three poems: “The Snow Man,” “Landscape with Boat,” and “The Rock.” They are, respectively, of short, medium, and long length, appearing in the early, middle, and later stages of his career. And each follows a different progression, perhaps surprisingly in the case of “The Rock,” toward ultimately arriving at the life-affirming integration of man with life: through meditation, through comic observation, and through the imaginative and finally creative efforts man engenders in his effort to find meaning in life.

This covers a wide enough spectrum of Stevens’ work to credibly demonstrate a consistent applicability of an Eastern perspective to his poetry as a whole.
If we are, as critics have suggested, still catching up critically to Wallace Stevens' poetry, it seems appropriate to explore interpretive avenues that will bring us into a step-by-step stride with his work. Stevens criticism has been disproportionately informed by traditional methods and thus has not fully illuminated the essence of his poetry. Virtually all great poetry is a kind of synthesis of intellect and sense — effectively, a balance between rationality and intuition — and is most deeply understood through a mode of reading attuned to these same levels. As a poet exploring the impalpable line between reality and imagination, fact and illusion (realms correlative to those of intellect and sense), Stevens writes within a romantic tradition but also clearly ranges beyond it into a meditative, a-romantic poetry whose interpretation traditional critical methods do not fully accommodate. Infusing our criticism with eastern thought as a complementary method oriented more immediately to sense than to intellect enhances it significantly, as Bevis, Qian, and others have shown. Stevens’ poetry beckons to a unified center of life; through various and sometimes ironic methods — the casual wanderings of “Landscape with Boat,” the mapping of man’s imaginative, survivalist proclivities in “The Rock,” and the meditative “The Snow Man” — he arrives finally at an integration of intellect and sense as the realization of this center. As Stevens criticism evolves his eastern sensibilities are acknowledged more, and his affinity with the East becomes apparent if not unavoidable. Applying Zen Buddhist concepts to his correspondence and poetry deepens our understanding of his work and resolves problems only half-answered by the traditional eye.

By now we know it is not a stretch to assert that Stevens was acquainted with
eastern thought; in fact, we are finding that on the academic level he did encounter it, if in moderation, and that at least on the experiential level, his sensibilities were quite in line with it. Bevis, for example, recently showed after researching Stevens’ library that Stevens’ consideration of the East was far from perfunctory. He found that Stevens read Max Muller, who edited *Sacred Books of the East* and whom he regarded as “the conspicuous Orientalist of the day” (Stevens “Letters” 381), in 1905 read Schopenhauer, who provided some of the initial, rough western translations of sanskrit, and probably heard Ernest Fenollosa lecture at Harvard after Fenollosa had returned from Japan; additionally, Bevis says Stevens acknowledged “that James and Bergson were his major philosophic influences” (Bevis “Buddhism” 152). He most likely read James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which James does not discuss Zen per se but in which meditative concepts are addressed. Bergson, it is worth recalling, offered a philosophy of intuition that philosopher William Barrett reminds us held the conceptualizing intellect as the barrier to reaching reality (Suzuki xv). This is directly in alignment with Zen. Finally, Bevis says Stevens had long conversations in 1909 with friend Witter Bynner, who was interested in Oriental philosophy and aesthetics (Bevis “Buddhism” 152). In such conversations and texts it is likely that Stevens encountered any or all of the fundamental Buddhist concepts of nothingness, impermanence, duality, unity, attachment, detachment, and more. Given the depth of Stevens’ writings and temperament, it would seem inaccurate to conclude that the encounters were superficial or inconsequential; it is apparent that ideas landing appealingly in this man’s consciousness received thorough consideration.
Qian presses the point further. He tells us that by 1953 Stevens “had befriended Peter H. Lee. His vigorous correspondence [occurring over the last four years of his life] with the Korean poet is sufficient proof for his sustained interest in the Far East” (Qian 165). He adds that Lee gave Stevens two Korean scroll paintings which “no doubt rekindled an old passion in him,” and that Stevens in 1950 “professed to Earl Miner a greater interest in Oriental art” (166).

So, interest in the East swirled through Wallace Stevens’ consciousness over many years. We may not have evidence that he engaged in rigorous study of eastern texts, but his academic understanding is perhaps not the point, as Qian’s and Bevis’ observations suggest. As Bevis says, “While Stevens’ intellectual knowledge of the Orient, his knowledge in ‘ordinary waking consciousness’ as we call that state, was much less than Eliot’s or Pound’s ... his experiential knowledge of meditative practice, though he would not necessarily have thought it ‘Oriental,’ was profound (unlike Eliot’s or Pound’s)” (Bevis “Buddhism” 153). In fact it is entirely appropriate to identify Stevens in this way, and a further exploration of Stevens’ experiential affinities with eastern thought will illuminate our study.

We find, for example, that in Buddhist temples where students study intensely for monkhood, experiential understanding realized from meditation is heavily favored over intellectual machination, which is in fact spurned. D T. Suzuki, a Zen master who helped lead the introduction of Zen to the West, tells us,

> When T’sui, governor of Ch’i District, asked the fifth patriarch of the Zen sect — that is, Hung-jen — how it was that while he had five hundred followers, Hui-neng, in preference to all others, was singled out to be given the orthodox robe of
transmission as the sixth patriarch, the fifth patriarch replied: 'Four hundred and ninety-nine out of my disciples understand well what Buddhism is, except one Hui-neng. He is a man not to be measured by an ordinary standard. Hence the robe of faith was handed over to him.' (Suzuki 27)

Hui-neng himself, asked how he came to succeed the fifth patriarch, said "Because I do not understand Buddhism." An intellectual, textbook understanding of Buddhism or Zen (the words are in this context interchangeable) is really not necessary, then, is not even the point.

In other words, while Eliot might impress and even dazzle with his use of a once-obscure sanskrit in “The Waste Land,” in Stevens we see a decidedly different mold. The important point, the heart of the matter, is one’s experiential understanding, understanding that is not exclusively intellectual but which dwells or is grounded in one’s whole being and is inevitably not in need of terms such as eastern, western, Zen, or Buddhism. The logic of Zen says such terms — indeed all terms — are ideas about experiences or things, ideas that ultimately cut us off from a full experience of them; they are ideas about the thing and not the thing itself. Here we cannot help but recall the title “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself,” and the confluence here between Zen and Stevens’ poetry is, at the very least, compelling. As Barrett adds, “Zen holds that it is not the abstract or bookish truth but the lived truth that counts” (xix). Or, as Suzuki states it, Zen works “by directly appealing to facts of personal experience and not to book knowledge” (7). He adds that

by personal experience it is meant to get at the fact at first hand and not through any intermediary, whatever this may be. Its favourite analogy is: to point at the moon a finger is needed, but woe to those who take the finger for the moon; a basket is welcome to carry our fish home, but when the fish are safely on the table
why should we eternally bother ourselves with the basket? Here stands the fact, and let us grasp it with the naked hands lest it should slip away — this is what Zen proposes. ... Zen abhors anything coming between the fact and ourselves. According to Zen there is no struggle in the fact itself such as between the finite and the infinite, between the flesh and the spirit. These are idle distinctions fictitiously designed by the intellect for its own interest. Those who take them too seriously or those who try to read them into the very fact of life are those who take the finger for the moon. (8-9)

To grasp the naked fact as it stands — this fundamental proposal of Zen is the very proposal so explicit and abundant in Stevens’ poetry. “Credences of Summer” appears as an exquisite example: “Let’s see the very thing and nothing else. / Let’s see it with the hottest fire of sight. / Burn everything not part of it to ash” (Stevens “Poems” 288).

Stevens may have known no sanskrit but needed none to modulate his proposals; the naked experience, not the finger pointing at the moon, was his focus. It is on this level — the level, as Bevis aptly articulates, of Stevens’ “naive, unsought, unrecognized meditative experience” (Bevis “Mind” 14) — that Stevens articulated so many of his meditations.

These meditations are not confined to his poetry. We have the great advantage of being able to peer into this man’s consciousness through his letters to deepen our understanding of his paradoxical affinity with the East. If Qian’s general reference to Stevens’ relationship with Peter Lee establishes his interest therein, a more pointed look at their correspondence, and at Stevens’ with others, reveals more evidence of an indelibly if subtly eastern tone. The indications, as a rule, are not grandiose; they occur with the same economy and characteristically cool, studied, even clinical detachment of the rest of Stevens’ writing. But they illuminate his psychology. For example, after reviewing some of Lee’s poems Stevens wrote to him that “These poems are all singularly free from
abstractions and perhaps that is why they are so moving and attractive” (Stevens “Letters” 826). Zen cuts itself from a similar cloth, most attractive to it, or most in line with it, is an antipathy for the abstract. As Barrett puts it, “Zen eschews abstractions, or uses them only to get beyond them. ... what Zen seeks above all is the concrete and simple that lie beyond the snarled tangles of intellectualization. Zen is the concrete itself’ (Suzuki xiv). We might paraphrase the aforementioned passage from “Credences of Summer” for a poetic description of this psychology: Zen seeks to look at the thing itself with the hottest fire of sight, burning all things not part of it — abstractions, for example — to ash. It strives to see “nothing that is not there,” to invoke another familiar and provocative Stevens passage.

Abstraction is often the very pulse of theory and explanation, and to these Stevens displays a correlative aversion. To Mr. Carl Zigrosser he writes: “There’s no symbolism in the ‘Earthy Anecdote.’ There’s a good deal of theory about it, however; but explanations spoil things” (Stevens “Letters” 204). Stevens’ perspective is shared by Suzuki and Zen: “No amount of wordy explanations will ever lead us into the nature of our own selves. The more you explain, the further it runs away from you. It is like trying to get hold of your own shadow. You run after it and it runs with you at the identical rate of speed” (Suzuki 11). While it is appropriate to acknowledge that the context of Suzuki’s words here revolves around the matter of seeing into one’s nature and Stevens’ context revolves, at least explicitly, around the matter of symbolism in a poem, still we are hardly in separate worlds. The spirit of both person’s words is consonant in its distaste for explanation and abstraction; for Stevens they “spoil” things and for Suzuki they take us
farther and farther away from things, which constitutes its own spoiling.

A quick look at a recent *Wallace Stevens Journal* article in which “Earthly Anecdote” is discussed underscores the converse in action. Despite Stevens’ admonition against a symbolic reading, Rainer Emig, who refers directly to the admonition, proceeds to unleash a wild multiplicity of abstract ideas wrested from the poem:

In this early poem again seemingly nonsensical images display order, dominance, and potentially violence. Although superficially engaged with bucks and a firecat, the text again specifies a location in its second line 'Over Oklahoma'. The anonymous 'bucks' (an ambiguous term that also refers to young men) 'went clattering, / Until they swerved / In a swift, circular line / To the right' and later 'to the left.' These images once more recall military formations and maneuvers, and the confusing term *firecat* also invokes the fire to which soldiers are exposed. The earth of the poem’s title once again recalls the attachment of the poem’s complex metaphorical plot to the (home) ground — and evokes what becomes of individuals killed by fighting. (Emig 74)

But for the psychology behind them, the poem’s images are “seemingly nonsensical” to Emig. Here is a perfect example of looking beyond the thing to the realm of ideas behind it. What is in any sense nonsensical about the images? Stevens powerfully displays his ability here in a scene whose economy and richness of imagery, it is worth noting, seem not far removed from Buddhist poetry. Not unlike Bloom, who has also contended with Stevens’ stated poetic purport, Emig calls Stevens’ claim to no symbolism here “facetious” and steers into a reading that seems almost defiantly antithetical, claiming “The poem is clearly not interested in pure denotation or the impressionistic reproduction of perception” and attempting to demonstrate its repleteness of symbolism. Such is the refinement of the intellect. It is not that Emig is wrong; this is hardly the point. The heart of the matter is perhaps best understood when we consider whether such wrested
abstractions bring us closer to the poem's purport or take us farther from it, as notions of
dering, violence, anonymous bucks, military formations and maneuvers, the
"confusing" term firecat, fire, soldiers, a complex metaphorical plot, and the fate of
individuals killed by fighting riddle our attention, all within the space of exactly fourteen
lines.

Such hyper-intellectual practices contrast with Stevens' Of one of the scrolls Lee
gave him he said it "made the same impression on me when I first looked at it that a
collection of Chinese poems makes: an impression of something venerable, true, and
quiet" (Stevens "Letters" 742). "The scroll pleases me more than I can tell you," he wrote
as he began to describe its appeal with remarks on its neutrality of tone, in contrast to "the
tormented constructions of contemporary art." Neutrality in poetry also appealed to
Stevens. We see this in a letter in which he comments on Walt Whitman: "The good
things, the superbly beautiful and moving things, are those that he wrote naturally, with an
extemporaneous and irrepressible vehemence of emotion" (871). This clearly shows his
conviction that the most beautiful art is without the wranglings of so many modern
constructions. This too is very much in line with Zen in that there is a gravitation toward
the concrete, toward absence of complexity and ornamentation, toward an art in which
simplicity is a seminal ingredient of beauty.

This is the direction in which this man meant to take his poetry. Particularly in his
later years Wallace Stevens' strongest push, his main thrust, was away from abstraction,
texture, and ideas and toward the thing itself, to the venerable, the true, the quiet. If he did
employ the former, it was, as Zen uses them, to get beyond them and closer to the thing
itself; as Suzuki says, "Let the intellect alone, it has its usefulness in its proper sphere, but
let it not interfere with the flowing of the life-stream" (Suzuki 9).

Here we see a key dynamic in Stevens criticism that is a main cause of its general incompleteness. Not unexpectedly, western critics have typically read his work inside of a western cultural and intellectual idiom, but Stevens' idiom is at least a step removed. It is by no means wholly eastern, but neither is it wholly western. This is a crucial point. The Occidental predisposition is at beginning and end to deduce, conclude and explain, using evidence to objectively prove a theory or philosophy — essentially using philosophy to create more philosophy — and its final product is theory or is theoretically grounded. Let it not go unnoticed that it often arrives at its theory, which is by nature subjective, proffering objectivity. The East moves in another direction. Barrett articulates the matter with remarkable succinctness:

Buddhism takes up philosophy only as a device to save the philosopher from his conceptual prison; its philosophy is, as it were, a non-philosophy, a philosophy to undo philosophy. A comparison of the mind of Buddha and Plato — probably the greatest intellects of East and West — may make us understand how sharply East and West diverge on this crucial point. For Plato philosophy is a discipline that leads us from the lower to the higher world, from the world of the senses to the world of ideas, to leave us abiding in this latter world as much as is humanly possible; for the Buddhist, philosophy should lead us beyond the intellect back into the one real world that was always there in its undivided wholeness. (xvi)

As Hubert Benoit — an Occidental psychiatrist intimately familiar with Zen — states, "The Zen masters do not make dissertations in reply to the questions that they are asked; more often they reply with a phrase that is disconcerting, or by a silence, or by repeating the question asked ... It seems that, in order to enlighten an Occidental, dissertations are, within a certain measure that is strictly limited, necessary" (Benoit xiv). Where the West
is inclined to extract from the thing a philosophy or prove a theory about it, Zen turns away from such machinations, which invariably imbricate themselves ad infinitum. It holds, essentially, that once one has realized the wholeness, the fullness and completeness of life exactly as it is, one has reached the final "goal"; there is nothing to do there but experience the fleeting profundity of the moment. This is, to allow a soft, early whisper from "The Rock," "the final found, / The plenty of the year and of the world" (Stevens "Poems" 364).

The way each of us takes toward seeing the "undivided wholeness" of life, the method by which each individual might arrive there, is as unique as each personality. And the methods by which Stevens arrives are similarly unique and various. Through detailed readings of "The Snow Man," "Landscape with Boat," and "The Rock," we will see that however divergent the methods and movements these poems engender, they conclude at the same essential place: the affirmation of life by man's integration with it. "Landscape with Boat" is innocuous enough, being so casual and comic and simply enjoyable as to not require for proof of this argument the contentions its counterparts "The Snow Man" and "The Rock" do. For there are both similarities and sharp contrasts between these two poems. Their first lines — "One must have a mind of winter" and "It is an illusion that we were ever alive" — share the evocation of a starkness, perhaps a coldness. Bareness/barrenness is a key element of both poems. On the other hand, where it suffices for integration in "The Snow Man," requiring no projection or additional thought of any kind, in "The Rock" it is insufficient, so frighteningly that in desperation man projects
fictive leaves – a sort of imposed vitality – onto the bareness of death and in that way survives. Where “The Snow Man” finds the “final” in bareness, it is initially more a source of despair in “The Rock,” a ground from which man begins to will his imaginative creation of fictive leaves into being. Clearly, the paths these poems take to this final integration seem so fundamentally different as to appear antithetical; however, the key point is that they do arrive there. In terms of Zen, method is secondary to the actual experience, so whether man finds his peace by listening in the snow and beholding or by stoking the furnace of imagination, by relaxation or exertion of will, the matter of first importance is the quality of one’s experience. In this context, we will examine how Stevens circulates through these poems on radically different paths but ends with a consonant affirmation of life.

To arrive there, Zen turns toward immediate, pure, unornamented experience, which is the way Stevens meant to turn in his poetry. “The Snow Man” appears as an early manifestation of this, seeming even blatant, and yet many critics have missed the point. Stevens said, “Every poet’s language is his own distinct tongue” (Stevens “Letters” 873). If he tells us, then, that his poem “is about the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it” (464), there can be little sense in our not adopting this declaration in our criticism of his “distinct tongue.” It is only sensible to study how the poem bears out this clue, even if it seems suspect, rather than fight in denial of it. And yet, instead of doing so, critics have gone to great lengths to ignore and resist this simple direction. Harold Bloom comes to mind as perhaps the most audacious
contender, having dubbed Stevens' reading of his own poem "the worst possible reading" (Bloom 63). Vendler, commenting on the detachment and withdrawal apparent in this poem, judges it evasive and even considers it "sinister" (Vendler 285). She sees Stevens' eye as "turned away from the imaginative and social alike, evading poems and feelings and even, finally, evading the human, the poet's own will." The state of mind that Stevens himself posits as conducive to union with reality Vendler deems categorically evasive. One wonders what labyrinthine form Emig's theoretical constructions would take here. And in general, as Bevis says, there are those who argue that "nothing is not really nothing" (Bevis "Buddhism" 151). Such readings consistently attempt to reconstitute the poem's purport and predictably deny the existence of "nothing," which is of course its point of greatest contention, and they seem resistant to a way of thinking that is to them unconventional.

Here too a Buddhist approach is in line with Stevens' approach to "nothing" and gives relief to our analysis. Predicating the listener's attainment of his state of mind at poem's end are two conditions: one "must have a mind of winter" and "have been cold a long time." Out of these conditions one can then regard the frost and boughs, behold the shagged junipers, not think of any misery in the sound of the wind and, finally, behold "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." These conditions occur in the poem, resulting in a fully progressive trope; each leads to another, and the culminating point is the listener's beholding "the nothing that is." The reading that affirms Stevens' articulated intention holds that we are talking about a meditative state in the beholding of nothing, one in which the listener is united with reality and experiencing things as they really are in
the barest sense, without the ornaments of description, explanation, and words; to recall "Credences of Summer," the listener is seeing the thing itself — in this case, it is "nothing" — with the hottest fire of sight. We can liken this progression to the Buddhist doctrine of "dependent co-arising," which Morrison tells us in *Nietzsche and Buddhism* "states that all things, whether material, biological, mental, or spiritual, come to be in dependence on conditions, and when these conditions cease what came to be also ceases" (Morrison 47). In other words, "All phenomena ... come to be only in dependence on other conditions, conditions that are themselves dependent on other conditions ad infinitum" (128).

Implicit in all of this is the assertion that all things are impermanent: all is in constant flux, all conditions will eventually cease and lead to new conditions which too will cease. The logical extension here is that when this is realized one sees a connectedness in all things and ceases to need to differentiate between them as permanent and separate from each other. One sees the world in its *undivided wholeness*, one is "seeing and knowing things as they really are (yatha-bhuta-nana-dassana)" (48) in a wordless and undramatic beholding.

The attainment of a certain state of meditative concentration, which is a condition dependent on conditions that led to it, is necessary for this to occur, and the meditative reading asserts that the listener of "The Snow Man" has attained this state. It and Buddhism would say that whatever a mind of winter is, however long the listener has been cold, these conditions have been met and are directly antecedent to his not hearing misery in the sound of the wind and beholding nothing. Intellectual activity is conspicuously diminished in what Bevis calls "a classic meditative progression" (Bevis "Buddhism" 151).
The poem's imagery and "action" are consistent with this assertion. In the first half we have frost, boughs, pine-trees, snow, junipers, ice, spruces, and the glitter of the January sun. It's a busy picture, actually. In the second half, however, we have a much barer picture; the prevailing image is the sound of the blowing wind, which, in a distinctly consistent lack of differentiation on the part of the listener, is simultaneously the sound of the leaves and land in a unifying progression. It is a highly effective, even brilliant construction: the leaves, being land themselves by having grown from trees, are swept up with the wind so that, really, what we are seeing is an image of the land blowing over itself. Thus, the differentiation between land and wind is destabilized: what do we call the blowing leaves — land? Not-quite-land? Land-in-limbo? Whatever we may decide to call them, they become part of the wind itself as action in the poem; the very idea of land as an inanimate entity exclusive of the leaves and wind is in essence deconstructed. They are wholly interrelated and interdependent, so that distinguishing between them is an intellectual effort that collapses in its exertion and is ultimately beside the point.

We can note additionally that the referent for the person in the scene, "One," which here is a relatively 'self'-oriented referent reinforcing rather than diminishing the idea of an individual separate from his environment, shifts to "the listener," who is fully integrated with his environment not just by the anonymous referent "listener" which structurally connects him and the sound of the wind, but by the verb "listens." Silent, the listener listens. The snow man "listens in the snow." Noun and verb, subject and action, are inseparable at the conclusion. Thinking clearly abates — he does not "think of any misery" in the sound of the wind to which he is integrally connected — and self finally is
negated as he becomes "nothing himself." Robert Pack suggests that in this concluding state "the snow man represents the failure of the human mind when it responds to its place in the physical landscape without projecting anything of itself" (Pack 98). But are listening and beholding the actions of failure? It seems odd to say that we "behold" our own failure. Does the human mind fail by not projecting, by not thinking? The number of people who yearn to just slow the incessant flow of thought, even briefly, is legion. In this non-imaginative state, then, the mind that does not project anything of itself, rather than being judged as a failure, can be seen as having aligned itself with life as it is; it is not drafting dissertations and abstractions on its experience. This reading resonates with Stevens' claim that the poem is about the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand and enjoy life. Pack is accurate in saying the listener does not project anything, but a negative evaluation of this clashes with Stevens' purported intent. To the Buddhist mind, it would be considered a wholly intellectual contrivance, an artifice unnecessarily fabricated. The listener beholds nothing. And in terms of Buddhism, that is enough. No evaluation of this is necessary. Listening, beholding, diminishment of thought and self — these are the marks of a meditative consciousness.

Being and beholding nothing, the listener projects nothing, does not wax philosophical, and ornaments the sound of the wind with no unnecessary, dramatic thought of misery (as if misery could possibly be implicit in such a sound). And this bare beholding of nothing is probably the sharpest point of divergence between eastern and western readings. Whether we resist or affirm the purport of this poem depends largely on our interpretation of nothing; as Bevis sees, "Immediately the subject becomes cultural as
well as critical. We have hardly begun to define Stevens’ detachment because our culture
has had very few categories and concepts for apprehending meditative passivity” (Bevis
“Mind” 7). No wonder, then, that our culture has habitually resisted the assertion of
“nothing” in this unconventional context and sought to redefine it in familiar, logical
terms. Typically the result has been that its “interpretive arguments disguise a moral
judgment on a condition — being and beholding nothing — which our critical tradition has
not yet described or explained” (26). Not irrelevantly, we might consider that western
science has in fact arrived at an understanding of the universe which can enrich our
culture’s comprehension of “nothing” and perhaps moderate its propensity for moral
judgment of it. MIT cosmologist Alan Guth, commenting on the origin and structure of
the universe, recently stated that it “could come from nothing because it is, fundamentally,
nothing” (Lemley 36). This is obviously not a reading of “The Snow Man.” But let the
western literary mind ingest this and surely “nothing” will begin to seem less “sinister.”

Through another door Buddhism has arrived at this understanding, having spent
millennia considering “nothing” as a staple of its study of existence. We have seen, for
example, Suzuki’s illustration of the finger pointing at the moon: no thing is the name we
give it, and if language ultimately can but point to it, it is beyond language, it is nameless,
it is in essence nothing. In this way we can see that the listener, knowing the ineffability of
what he beholds, beholds the ineffable, appropriately, in silence. “Nothing” ... is in a fully
affirmative tone reminiscent of Molly’s uplifting “Yes” that ends Joyce’s Ulysses; as
imprecise as “is” and “yes” may be as words, their tone is unmistakably affirmative.

Intellect faces difficulties here in that its most potent instrument — language — is
destabilized. The pivotal issue is one's willingness, first, to acknowledge the limits of language's descriptive power and, second, to accept the validity of an a-linguistic reality without issuing moral judgment on it. This allowance opens new interpretive avenues.

This becomes again a cultural as well as critical question. But the West is not without its own examples of this suggestion. The French symbolists offered the well-known phrase “To name is to destroy,” which dovetails with the words of Nah-ch’uan: “Everything that has a name thereby limits itself” (Suzuki 28). And Magritte’s “The Treachery of Images” illustrates with its image of a large pipe and the phrase (translated) “This is not a pipe” below it that the pipe is not the word we have assigned it. Like “nothing,” it is what it is, and words can only point to it.

There is an additional component to this talk about “nothing” that will further clarify the matter. In a combination of the conceptions of impermanence, interconnectedness, and the finger pointing at the moon, Hui-neng said “Not a thing is” (Benoit 213). Complementing the compelling likeness between this declaration and Stevens’ “nothing ... is” is the sense behind both. Benoit makes clear in Zen and the Psychology of Transformation that Hui-neng does not offer his declaration as a condemnation of all things but as an affirmative conception, which is of course the sense in which the meditative reading interprets Stevens’ nothing. In saying this Hui-neng “refutes my belief in the Reality of a fixed image which pretends to ‘be’ by the exclusion of the contrary image. Hui-neng does not condemn the affective point of departure of the idolatry, but he refutes the idolatrous intellectual belief” Keeping in mind the poem’s purport — identification with reality — we also read that “I cannot perceive anything as it
is in reality as long as any one of its connections with the rest of the Universe is cut; and all the connections of anything are concentrated in its relation with the opposite thing, antagonistic and complementary” (212). In other words, when the listener beholds, he comprehends the quite literal connectedness of each thing to the other: land to leaves, leaves to wind, wind to sound, sound to listening, listening to beholding, etc. All the images are integrally relational. He beholds the ineffable in this state, which Bevis has suggested is a state of enlightenment (Bevis “Buddhism” 154), in which words would only remove him from this reality and act as a divisive force on unity. Everything as a connected whole becomes everything, ineffably, and if words are insufficient here, if all things are ultimately nameless, if the connections of any thing are concentrated in its relation with the opposite thing, then everything is at once nothing. The intellectual duality that sees everything and nothing as definitely antagonistic is contra-indicated here.

In a literary context, then, we arrive through this door at the same realization at which western science has arrived factually. Everything — as Guth would say, the entire universe — is fundamentally nothing. It can indeed be a daunting prospect to consider, uncomfortable and unwelcome to the intellect.

It is the dualistic perception of “nothing” as an absolute absence — which is the basis of the anti-meditative reading — that Hui-neng addresses. If X is unalterably our definition of “nothing,” we are in the idolatrous intellectual belief he means to defuse. Believing completely that “nothing” is X, the intellect distrusts any suggestion that it is Y and counters with rational explanation, which keeps one a step removed from the heart of this poem. Bloom, for example, insists that the listener, “reduced to nothing, remains
human because he beholds something shagged and rough, barely figurative, yet still a
figuration rather than a bareness” (Bloom 63). This reading provides little help. We
already know the listener remains human in beholding a “figuration.” There is no assertion
that he is anything but human. And the same dualistic psychology applied to “nothing” is
at work here on bareness. Obviously requiring an absence of any visible objects at all for
bareness to exist, Bloom resists the apparent incongruity of a “bare place” where trees are.
He offers the nearly apologetic “barely figurative, yet still a figuration,” but how is it
“barely” so? Is there evidence that the listener beholds only three or four or five of these
spoiler trees? No. There could be 30, 300, a forest — there is no evidence either way.
How, then, do we define bareness? There is a clinging in Bloom’s words, an
unwillingness to consider any but established definitions. To Buddhism, which pays little
heed to the stability of definitions, bareness is fully possible, fully understandable in this
setting; it observes Stevens here in his early efforts to deconstruct duality and the
unacknowledged fragility of intellectual certainties, while Bloom practices an inflexibility
of which he is not aware.

Such is the straining of the intellect to cling to its idolatrous belief. This duality
Hui-neng challenges, not in condemnation but in an invitation to break, “by means of
understanding, the enslaving exclusivity of our idolatrous ‘opinions.’ This breaking aims
only at limiting intellectual forms .... It is possible for me, by means of understanding, to
feel value in this or that particular thing without persisting in implicitly proclaiming the
anti-value of the contrary thing” (Benoit 213). The result of this limiting of intellectual
forms is articulated in the Zen text “Inscribed on the believing mind” and is evident in the
listener's concluding state of mind: "When no discrimination is made between this and that/ How can a biased and prejudiced vision arise? / ... In not being two all is the same / All that exists is comprehended therein" (Benoit 214). This is the manner in which the listener "beholds"; there is nothing that suggests he discriminates between 'this' and 'that.'

With such constructions (e.g. nothing as everything) Stevens seeks to call attention to our idolatrous intellectual beliefs and deconstruct them, the contrived finalities of the dualistic mind. We see again in his letters strong evidence of this inclination. He tells two doctoral students writing dissertations on his work that "As both you and Mr. Wagner must realize, I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion. Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that" (Stevens "Letters" 710). These are primary topics for him, but as we see in "Another Weeping Woman" he is aware of the slipperiness of a singular, encompassing identification even of these concepts: "The magnificent cause of being, / The imagination, the one reality, / In this imagined world" (Stevens "Poems" 55). More forcefully, on the notion of arriving at a supreme fiction he writes to Pack, "That a man's work should remain indefinite is often intentional. For instance, in projecting a supreme fiction, I cannot imagine anything more fatal than to state it definitely and incautiously" (Stevens "Letters" 863). One wonders if these comments were received by the hopeful critics as good news. Indeed, Stevens is quite content with being indefinite, inconclusive, indeterminate, and at times he seems even playfully so; surely, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" has a strong romantic flavor, but it too is not without Stevens' penchant for the
paradigm deconstructed. In a humorous tickling of the western allegiance to intellect, he writes: “They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne. / We shall return at twilight from the lecture / Pleased that the irrational is rational” (Stevens “Poems” 233). As Bevis says, “Such constructions and deconstructions of certainty are the rule in the long poems” (Bevis “Mind” 154).

Stevens’ power in these poems and his later years can be largely attributed to the increasing freedom with which he administered these deconstructions, circulated between reality and imagination, played in “a law of inherent opposites, / Of essential unity” which was to him “as pleasant as port” (Stevens “Poems” 167). “Landscape with Boat,” for example, begins as an apparently negative effort but through a variety of deconstructions and circulations ends in a playfully affirmative, even comic tone. “An anti-master-man, floribund ascetic” (176) — ironically enough, a blossoming doubter — begins by brushing away the thunder, the clouds, and “the colossal illusion of heaven.” A seemingly ambitious enough task, but even this is not enough for him; the sky is still blue, and “He wanted imperceptible air, / He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see / And not be touched by blue. He wanted to know ....” Blue represents intellect here as the ascetic “looked for the world beneath the blue, / Without blue, without any turquoise tint or phase, / Any azure under-side or after-color.” Like Buddhist monks, who have historically been called ascetics, this man wants to negate intellect itself, wants to strip reality of the labels intellect gives it, wants to strip away all coloration in order that the eye might meet wordless reality and “arrive / At the neutral centre, the ominous element, / The single-
colored, colorless, primitive.” “Single-colored” would reduce the blue sky to one minimalist shade, and “colorless” deconstructs that, anticipating the “primitive” wordless reality he seeks. He finds that reality (worded as “the truth”) does not “lay where he thought.” This may mean that he mistook the ‘location’ of truth or simply that truth as reality is not found in intellect. Whatever the case, truth becomes a supposition at most as Stevens dives into this particular circulation, an airy, playful wandering through the matrix of intellect, reality, and imagination:

It was easier to think it lay there. If
It was nowhere else, it was there and because
It was nowhere else, its place had to be supposed,
Itself had to be supposed, a thing supposed
In a place supposed, a thing that he reached
In a place that he reached, by rejecting what he saw
And denying what he heard. He would arrive.
He had only not to live, to walk in the dark,
To be projected by one void into
Another. (176-77)

Suddenly, all is a definite maybe.

This is not the case with the ascetic’s practice of rejecting and denying in his search for truth. Somewhat ironically, he senses that he will definitely “arrive” by remaining in the indefinite; that is, he will arrive by not accepting as definite what the world tells him is. Clearly, by brushing away the “colossal illusion” of heaven, so unquestioningly accepted and monolithically asserted by religion, he is thus inclined. As to when he will arrive, well, that too is indefinite; the poem is inconclusive. We only know that he will arrive at some point by his asceticism. In the meantime, “It was his nature to suppose, / To receive what others had supposed, without / Accepting.” For him there is
“A truth beyond all truths.” And the beautiful comedy of this poem is that as we seem to be on course for some wondrous revelation of it, Stevens pulls that rug from under our feet, leaving the poem in a suspended potentiality. The arrival remains pure potential. The determined ascetic, intent on rejecting others’ truth for the discovery of his own, remains a ‘supposer.’

In fact, the announcement that “He would arrive” is the climax of the poem; from there it unwinds uneventfully. If there is a serious message to the poem, an attempt at the profound, it is that extreme asceticism — denial on principle of everything — costs one dearly, costs life, really. In so denying the ascetic is an essentially passive nihilist and denies himself the sort of wisdom our more fortunate narrator shares:

He never supposed
That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
That the things that he rejected might be part
And the irregular turquoise, part, the perceptible blue
Grown denser, part, the eye so touched, so played
Upon by clouds, the ear so magnified
By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
Parts, and more things, parts. He never supposed divine
Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
And that if nothing was the truth, then all
Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth. (177)

After the declarative “He would arrive,” we find exactly how he did not arrive. All the “parts” he denied for a truth beyond were in fact the truth, their own truth, which he missed. In Buddhist fashion the narrator asserts divinity in these “parts” that do not look divine. One is reminded of Mother Theresa, who, though not Buddhist, is known to have said that she saw God in every human being she encountered, including the most destitute
lepers who came to her door. The divine, it follows here, is found not in ideas about the
thing but in the thing itself regardless of appearance, which as we have seen is a primary
object of Buddhism.

What nags a bit is the irony that Buddhism is predisposed to asceticism, and yet
here the ascetic flounders in his. But this is easily reconciled. Buddhism above all remains
wary of intellect. An extreme asceticism such as we see here, rather than being considered
a liberating force, is considered yet another form of intellectual self-imprisonment and is
averted. Buddhism considers such nihilistic tendencies a punitive devaluing of life, which
is antithetical to its essence. The poem reflects this disposition. As Bevis says, it “rejects
a nihilistic theory of nothing” (Bevis “Mind” 295). Like this poem, while Buddhism
questions, doubts, denies, rejects, it does so with the implicit intention not to condemn but
to affirm life. As it uses philosophy to undo philosophy, it rejects to get past rejection. It
leaves behind anything that would keep one from liberation, anything that does not affirm
life.

Like “nothing ... is” in the affirmative sense in “The Snow Man,” the
decomposive everything - nothing paradigm, which we have already outlined, is invoked
here. The irony — which enhances the comedy — is that though the wisdom to be
gained from the deconstruction is gained by relinquishing idolatrous belief in intellectual
forms, it is articulated here like a logical hypothesis: “if ... then ... if ... then.” In any event,
regardless of phrasing, the outcome is the same. Through these deconstructions all things
are found to be divine, all things are found to be the truth, and the world itself, finally, is
the truth.
Alas, this bright affirmation the supposing, rejecting ascetic misses. Completely.

And yet Stevens seems totally unconcerned with passing judgment on this. He is perfectly at ease with the ascetic not “arriving” during the poem, which resonates with his claim to Pack that he is not necessarily concerned with coming to a conclusion. That he will, someday, is enough. Had he ended with “the world itself was the truth” — and he easily could have — we would gain some sense of the definite and read it as another solemn meditation on the profundity of life, on the shifty line between imagination and reality, etc. But given the ending he did write, we see that would have been tragic, nay, cataclysmic. Stevens’ circulation is appropriately extended, for its extension allows for an ending as indefinite and comic as the beginning is definite and serious. The spectrum between them is fully spanned — and this must be the intention of this circulation — as the initial center of the poem, the ascetic, is displaced for a meditation on what might have been. He remains part of the poem only passively. The primary action becomes a sort of “what-if” about him:

Had he been better able to suppose:
He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
Above the Mediterranean, emerald
Becoming emeralds. He might watch the palms
Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
A yellow wine and follow a steamer’s track
And say, ‘The thing I hum appears to be
The rhythm of this celestial pantomime.’ (177)

Stevens has moved into the hypothetical about the hypothetical. Had he been better at supposing, he might sit on a sofa, watch the palms, observe a yellow wine, follow a steamer’s track and say about the thing he hums that it appears to be the rhythm of this
celestial pantomime. If this had been the case — if the ascetic's asceticism had not been so extreme — then he might have had a better life. Of course Stevens means that he would have had a better life; as to what he would have done in that life Stevens offers these hypothetical actions which clearly show enjoyment of the divine "parts" of life. He supposes with carefree detachment that the ascetic might have understood life itself as a "celestial pantomime" — life itself as the biggest supposition, an improvisational performance among the stars, under the colossal illusion of heaven he has brushed away. Nothing is certain at the conclusion. And this is sufficient for Stevens. There is a carefree sense of wonder as we envision this last scene, a casualness highlighted by a complete absence of judgment, a sense that, as Zen would put it, "Life as it is lived suffices" (Suzuki 9).

At the end of the day, this is one of the strongest currents running through the spirit of Zen and Stevens' poetry. If there is a casualness to this poem's import that emanates from its comedy, the same affirmative compass is more arrestingly rendered in Stevens' later, longer work. In "The Rock," for example, he is at his most sophisticated. Tompkins sees in it Stevens' "illimitable insight" and considers it "the point of greatest tension in Stevens thought" (Qian 165). This seems accurate, largely due to the refinement of the affirmation-through-negation progression, which we have examined in "The Snow Man" and "Landscape with Boat." As titanic as the brushing away of "the colossal illusion of heaven" is, it seems eclipsed by the first words of this poem; we begin in media res "Seventy Years Later" as the speaker has determined that "It is an illusion
that we were ever alive” (Stevens “Poems” 362). One would be hard-pressed to come up
with a more negative statement. Stevens seems here to strip existence itself to nothing.
Like Buddhism, he calls into question the most basic, seemingly obvious human
perceptions. Evaluatively, dualistically, one is unlikely to find promise here. The notions
of our having “lived in the houses of mothers” — the very nests of our childhood — and
of our freedom of movement, even our ability and will to “arrange ourselves / By our own
motions in a freedom of air” within and out of those nests, are coldly denied. That
freedom is “no longer air,” is no longer touchable; the air we felt whish over our young
bodies as we first composed ourselves in motion has disappeared and its absence leaves
the memory of our houses standing, vacuum-packed, “in rigid emptiness. / Even our
shadows, their shadows, no longer remain. / The lives these lived in the mind are at an
end. / They never were ....” The very music of youth — “the sounds of the guitar” — and
“The words spoken / Were not and are not,” declaratively

A conventional reading would, accurately, see despair in these lines. Certainly,
given matters such as Stevens’ rift with his father and his subsequent, largely mirthless
marriage, much of this opening is rightly read as Stevens lamenting his past. But is there
only despair here, do we pack up and go home here? The poem has only begun. Is there
no promise in these lines? The Buddhist answer, the meditative answer, is that there is
promise in them. There is also a primary dynamic to keep in mind here. On one hand,
unlike the detached, third-person speaker observing the listener and the floribund ascetic
in “The Snow Man” and “Landscape with Boat,” here Stevens directly incorporates
himself into the poem in saying it is an illusion that “we” were ever alive. Clearly there is
an intensely autobiographical dimension in this poem; the leaves and all that follows grow out of his apparent despair, perhaps out of the fear of an empty life in its own late autumn. On the other hand, though this is unmistakably a personal account of his effort to cope, to survive, to live and ultimately die in peace, Stevens also transcends the individual here, alternating in degrees between it and a sublime meditation on the integration with life that can be realized through suffering.

This surely is a moment of great tension in Stevens’ thought, partly because of this dynamic and partly because a kind of shiftiness in narration, meaning, and symbolism drifts in a subtle circulation that dominates the poem after the first few stanzas. Bevis too observes this, considering the first section “a lesson in how to go from the sterile to the fecund and from the alienated to the cosmic (for here the nothingness of nonexistence is feared) in a single sentence” (Bevis “Mind” 253). The circulation begins after the assertion that the guitar’s sounds were not and are not: “Absurd.” A peculiar placement, this word. And then, at the assertion that the words we spoke were not and are not, again we read a contention: “It is not to be believed.” Note that before these interjections we were in the purely declarative: it is ... it is no longer ... houses still stand ... they are rigid ... are at an end ... were not and are not .... But with these short interpolations we shift instantly to a less firm grip: “The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like an invention.”

What, then, do we make of the peculiar protests? Clearly, they cut against the grain of the poem’s initial rhythm. Before them comes an essentially Buddhist acknowledgment that the things we take as real are fallible mental perceptions, and after
them we veer onto a path of less certainty. Things seem like ... it is as if .... The protests are narrative shifts, pivots, as Bevis would say. As they occur, there is also a shift from “we,” “our,” and “ourselves” to the more anonymous, less sure-footed “one desperate clod / And another.” Another voice enters the poem here. Buddhism would recognize it as the voice of intellect, vanguard of the ego. For while the object of Buddhism is reconciliation with the illusory nature of all things, intellect — Buddhism and Stevens understand this — searches intractably for the definite, for certainty; it wants nothing to do with the uncertainty “were not and are not” create for it. Thus, in confronting these assertions, it responds with “Absurd” and “It is not to be believed.” It resists the uncertainty much as western critics resist “nothing” in “The Snow Man”; it wants to make “nothing” anything but “nothing.” for as it approaches nothingness it fears it has no grist for its mill.

In other words, Buddhism recognizes that to be comfortable is after all a fundamental human impulse and asserts that within that drive the function of the intellect is to perpetually construct a knowable, determinate reality, one that it can define, rationalize, contextualize. Intellect — not in the absolute sense but clearly in this context — is the domain of ego, which, let us be aware, is useful in that it is “a control structure we develop for purposes of survival and protection” (Welwood 37). In this impulse, then, in compensation for a perceived reality it finds undesirable, it will construct a reality it finds desirable, believable, not absurd; it will inevitably create out of “an illusion so desired” the green leaves that cover the rock, the fiction if finds comfortable.

Of course, to consider this movement purely intellectual is both inaccurate and
irresponsible, for clearly the covering of the rock with leaves is a movement involving imagination, as well as feeling, which anyone could easily argue as the antithesis of intellect. But to consider these two realms mutually exclusive, beyond not being the point at all, is also an error that can quickly ensnare us in an unnecessary semantic debate that keeps us from penetrating the heart of this poem. Zen, for example, never claims that intellect is exclusively rational, hyper-logical, devoid of feeling, emotion, imagination, nor does it claim that imagination is without a shred of intellectual componentry. In fact Zen is not concerned with such metaphysical distinctions and is unshaken in the event that it contradicts itself. As Benoit says, "Worshipping no formal conception, it is free to wander among all the formal ideas imaginable without worrying itself about their apparent contradictions; this utilisation, without attachment, of conceptions allows Zen to possess its ideas without being possessed by them" (Benoit xv). It remains intent on essence. Ultimately, then, whatever shares intellect and imagination may hold in the covering of the rock with leaves, it is the central anatomy of the "act" of covering that Zen wishes to address. And clearly, it would consider the covering of the rock a compensation, a creation of the mind that comes from a fearful perception of nothingness or emptiness.

Benoit pays close attention to the matter of compensations, describing them as "systems of images which we borrow from our sensory and mental perceptions — from the material of images stored up by our memory — and which we arrange as we please .... These constitute our inner personal world" (210). Hence the all-too-human and yet entirely appropriate conspiracy, this "meeting" at the edge of the field at noon, when the sun exposes the realities of our lives with no shadow, no immediate refuge, when we are
under “The weight of primary noon” (Stevens “Poems” 240). An invention itself, this meeting within ourselves and with the world is an embrace between “desperate clod[s]” to create this palatable reality in a reassuring alliance. The tone of stanzas five through seven reinforces the emerging fictive dynamic: the meeting is an invention born of desperation. It occurs in a “fantastic consciousness,” evoking the element of fantasy, and it results in “a queer assertion of humanity: / A theorem proposed between the two.” If our ever being alive, the guitar sounds, and the words we spoke are mere illusions and this seems unacceptable to us then we will create “the fiction of the leaves” as compensation.

The affectedness, the contrived-ness, of this process contrasts with the naturalness represented by the sun: we see

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

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

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

In a birth of sight. (363)

The sun exists here in nothingness, in its own naturalness, uninvolved in language and intellect and contrivance. Yet in that environment stand two figures — humanity, preparing its theorem of theorems — and as this occurs it is as if the nothingness contains a me’tier, a calling. This calling, which is a calling to create, rises out of a vital assumption, a human conception of life that asserts itself against the obduracy of a
permanent cold or, likely, of death. For life, as we have read from Suzuki, is inherently a move to affirm, an effort to assert and validate itself however queer its exertion may seem. And indeed we do move here from the sterile to the fecund — from a permanent cold to a birth of sight — within just a few lines. Hollingworth comments powerfully here in an article that seems to court the eastern perspective: “The nothingness, the blank that has no existence without an individual consciousness, suddenly gives rise to awareness and life, a ‘vital assumption.’ This ‘impermanence,’ this point of temporary distinctness in an otherwise ‘permanent cold,’ is an illusion, yet it is” (Hollingworth 49).

Again, from negation come creation and affirmation. If the rock, at this moment, represents the unsavory hardness and coldness of life, we will assuage that hardness and coldness with fictive green leaves and blooming lilacs. Certainly, such adornments seem more comfortable. With these our blindness — our unwillingness to accept the alternative — is cleaned, exclaims bright sight, is satisfied. As Hollingworth says, “The birth of the leaves and the blooming of the lilacs are Stevens’ own movement toward consciousness and creation.” Indeed, their image and their musk are being alive itself, are life itself. They constitute the immaterial “particular of being” that confirms human life. As Hollingworth adds, “In this passage, one can feel Stevens’ joy of connection with the great mass of being” (50). There is after all promise, much promise, in the wholesale negations of the first section.

Curiously, we read at the beginning of the second section, “The Poem as Icon,” that “It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.” In its desperate collaboration, humanity has by covering the rock with leaves and blooming lilacs created a pleasing
enough reality that its blindness is cleaned; there is this revelatory birth of sight, this “incessant being alive,” and then suddenly, inexplicably, this is insufficient. What? Writing about the longer poems, Bevis finds that Stevens “was writing a poetry of the mind in the act of finding, losing, looking, finding and losing the sufficient. The process is endless and essentially goal-less” (Bevis “Mind” 255). He adds that “the mind is always in the act of finding the sufficient insufficient and the insufficient sufficient.” This is what we see at the beginning of section two, calling to mind another mighty, uniquely Stevensian stroke: “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” (Stevens “Poems” 190). This whole movement is integrally Buddhist, and its endless progression is articulated here by this sudden shift into a perceived insufficiency which, to recall the notion of impermanence, will too shift into sufficiency, and on and on.

Like Buddhism, Stevens understands that the mind’s compensatory circulations are endless and integral to life, that they are part of human wiring. Were we to chart them on a long enough timeline we would observe that the fluctuation between them acquires a kind of rhythm, a balance; interdependent, they establish and perpetuate each other, defining each other such that their relation forms a whole that essentially deconstructs their “separateness.” Their occurrence is the whole of life itself, is the human endeavor, and, as Buddhism would say, is a necessary and appropriate condition in humanity’s evolution. Benoit speaks to this, saying that “our compensations are necessary to our total realization since without them we could not accept existence and we would destroy ourselves at once; they are on the way of our correct evolution towards satori [enlightenment]” (Benoit 212).
For the moment, covering the rock with leaves is found insufficient. In this effort of creation and connection, Stevens offers a solution. He is calling for a fuller integration between man and life, between rock and leaves, between illusion and perception. A “fiction of the leaves” is a collection of words and ideas about life — ideas about the thing and not the experience itself — and leaves us still one step removed from the unified center toward which Stevens is moving. Certainly, by creating an agreeable fictive reality we achieve a particular end: we survive. But this project, as we have seen, is born of the desperation resulting from the fear of nonexistence. Indeed its compensatory nature underscores an implicit avoidance of the suffering that is undeniably part of life, ultimately perpetuating the cycle of suffering. This life is an option and has its place in human evolution, but inevitably there is a calcification to it, more a hardened veneer of integration than a fluid integrative depth, and Stevens is proposing that an actual harmony with life — “Night’s hymn of the rock” — is available. We may survive, yes, by engendering the cycle of covering the rock with leaves, but is life to be merely survived? Suzuki says that “Life, as most of us live it, is suffering. There is no denying the fact. As long as life is a form of struggle, it cannot be anything but pain” (Suzuki 5). Stevens proposes, as does Zen, that life does not have to be this way, that a fuller integration with it is possible:

We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground
Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure

Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness,
And yet the leaves, if they broke into bud,
If they broke into bloom, if they bore fruit,

And if we ate the incipient colorings
Of their fresh culls might be a cure of the ground. (Stevens “Poems” 363)
This integration is the cure of which he speaks. As nature, the ground exists, like the sun, in its own a-linguistic happiness and represents — literally and figuratively — the ground of this integrative cure. It is the source of the cure of ourselves. It is the connective tissue between the reality humanity invents and the reality that lies outside invention, the balance between thought and no-thought that is “beyond forgetfulness.” Buddhism would articulate this as the counter-balancing forces of intellect and intuition, which, fully actualized, open the way to full integration with life.

The leaves’ budding and blooming and bearing of fruit, then, represent the possibility of our actualizing this integration. The leaves, as our fictions, our stories about life, can after all bear fruit; as we have considered, the stories we invent have meaning in that they help us survive, explore who we are, and enjoy life. Fruit here also represents the knowledge and understanding we can gain from them, and if we eat the incipient colorings of these fresh culls, if we ingest these fruits, they become part of ourselves and provide nourishment. The metaphor is among Stevens’ most powerful: in the figurative ingestion of the fresh culls we experience their decomposition, but this decomposition nourishes us — it is something gained from making the fruits of the ground part of ourselves — and, finally, this integrative cure of the ground is at once a cure of ourselves. So, while the covering of the rock with leaves is held as not enough, it really is enough. Life as it is lived suffices; the best humanity has to offer is, at the end of the day, enough. And — always, always, always — a deeper integration is available.

Perhaps it is that humanity always yearns for that deeper integration; indeed, even our “queer assertion of humanity” is an attempt at integration with life. It is just that a
more refined attempt is possible. Stevens recognizes the perfection of this dynamic and moves into a deeply reverential passage to acknowledge and honor it:

The fiction of the leaves is the icon

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

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

In the predicate that there is nothing else.
They bud and bloom and bear their fruit without change.
They are more than leaves that cover the barren rock. (363-64)

Our fiction — whatever story we invent about life — becomes “the figuration of blessedness.” This story is the material out of which we create our most eloquent expression. It is the icon of the poem, the blessed Madonna and child. As it is about ourselves and all our striving for an agreeable life, it becomes humanity’s deepest and most authentic expression of itself. It becomes man. Hence, “the icon is the man.”

Man adorns himself with these fictive leaves through the seasons of life: “The pearled chaplet of spring,” summer’s “magnum wreath,” and “time’s autumn snood” carry us metaphorically through these seasons. The metaphor of the “pearled chaplet of spring” is particularly riveting. One can hardly ignore the allusion to Jesus and his crown of thorns, and while this adds any number of interpretive tangents to the poem, the relevant point at this moment is that it deepens the reverential nature of this passage. These leaves, then, “cover the rock,” which here represents man and his head, throughout his life. And inasmuch as covering the rock with leaves is the human endeavor, the leaves become
man’s life, become “the poem, the icon and the man,” because, Stevens seems to propose, what else is there? Really, “there is nothing else.” The separateness of poem, icon, man, budding, blooming, and bearing of fruit, and spring, summer, and autumn, while recognized contextually, ultimately collapses as their interconnectedness is affirmed; these are, finally, the endlessness, goal-lessness, and impermanence of life’s progression. They are like the leaves from “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,”

... leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
Together, said words of the world are the life of the world. (338)

This casual litter, this intricate matrix of things, actions, and seasons, constitutes the life of the world.

As this is revealed, we shift again from the unsure footing of what “seems like” and what is “as if” to the firm stance of the declarative. The fresh culls that might be a cure of the ground if the leaves broke into bud and bloomed and bore fruit are, finally and resolutely, a cure of the ground, are the poem, icon, and man. They are “more than leaves that cover the barren rock.” This is the nascent integrative solution. Stevens circulates into a kind of illustration of their budding, blooming, and bearing of fruit, remaining in this declarative state: “They bud the whitest eye, the pallidest sprout,” “They bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love,” and “They bear their fruit so that the year is known.” Let us note that in customary fashion, he is not romantically swept away in this;
retaining his somewhat clinical nature, he recognizes that while the leaves bud the whitest
eye — the purest vision — they also bud the pallidest sprout. Both are equally part of life.
Both offer "New senses in the engenderings of sense." In this integrated understanding

... the year is known,

As if its understanding was brown skin,
The honey in its pulp, the final found,
The plenty of the year and of the world. (364)

We locate ourselves, locate our place in the world, in such integration. There, as adults,
we can understand the world as "brown skin," a metaphor which evokes the image of our
having arranged ourselves "By our own motions in a freedom of air" in the newness of the
large, suntanned summer days of youth. There we find the honey in its pulp. The final is
found. In the source that is the purest honey, the final, the end, is found. The full "plenty"
of life and the world is found.

In this plenty we write the poems that are our lives and ourselves affirmed. In this
plenty we make "meanings of the rock" — of life — "of such mixed motion and imagery /
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things / And so exists no more." As we have
seen, man will cover a perceived barrenness of life with fictive leaves; out of a "permanent
cold" and "an illusion so desired," he will make barrenness anything but barrenness. He
will make of it a thousand things, so many things that in essence it disappears. There the
plenty of the source and the end is experienced. He will enjoy its fertility, ornament life
and its events such that barrenness exists no more; it becomes so many things that to
attempt to even define it loses its purpose. Is it X? Is it Y? Is it Z? It is all of them and
none of them.
Most important is the final experience. As Stevens exhorts us in “Credences of Summer” to see the thing with the hottest fire of sight, which is where we experience the greatest integration, we can have this experience in barrenness, or come to it from bareness. In “The Snow Man” it occurs in bareness, and in “The Rock” it emerges out of bareness. A bit farther into “Credences of Summer” we see a beautiful collapsing of bareness and its compensation in a passage in which they become one and the same:

Look at it in its essential barrenness
And say this, this is the centre that I seek.
Fix it in an eternal foliage

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
Of change still possible. Exile desire
For what is not. This is the barrenness
Of the fertile thing that can attain no more. (288)

As with the “nothing” of “The Snow Man,” we are free to engage in rationalization and moral evaluation of “barrenness,” but this again conflicts with Stevens’ intention in that it does not affirm as he affirms, for, we must remember, barrenness is now addressed in “the plenty” and not in the cold depths of despair. The moralizing approach does not touch Stevens’ movement but moves against it. It is its own dubiety, is its own covering of the rock with leaves, even if it too is perfectly human and acceptable. In any event, with the barrenness becoming so many things that it exists no more, Stevens declares again, resolutely, “This is the cure / Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves.” At this point the leaves themselves are cured. These fictions that were once not enough finally are wholly sufficient. As the invented connection between the ground and ourselves, they are both the conduit to our integration and our experience of integration itself,
Hollingworth comments that “The poem is both the thing and the icon of the thing, the description of the process and the process itself” (Hollingworth 52). Having become infinite, the leaves too are essentially deconstructed; they are not claimed to no longer exist, but like their counterpart, barrenness, they are a thousand things, so numerous and plentiful as to be implicit — indistinct, finally — in life’s pulsation, and labeling them inevitably loses its relevance.

So, we have this intricate diagram of human passage, this poetic anatomy of man’s behavior, and in the last section Stevens asserts the function of mind as the source and the end of all of it, of man’s very existence:

The rock is the gray particular of man’s life,
The stone from which he rises, up-and-ho,
The step to the bleaker depths of his descents ...

The rock is the stern particular of the air,
The mirror of the planets, one by one,
But through man’s eye, their silent rhapsodist .... (Stevens “Poems” 364-65)

The rock here is man’s mind, the gray matter of the brain, in which man’s “celestial pantomime” takes place. It is the stone, the one stern particular among the endless illusions of life and among the vast cosmos, the one solid locale where life occurs. In a sense it is the source of life toward which Stevens has been moving; at the least, it is the point where the source can be experienced. By it man rises, and by it he steps down to bleaker depths; by it, he buds the “whitest eye” and the “pallidest sprout.” As the silent rhapsodist of the cosmos, it sings the song created by “the sounds of the guitar,” creates the illusion that we are (or were) alive, creates the leaves that are his fictions. Mind endlessly creates the poem that is the leaves, icon, and man, or the leaves that are the
poem, icon, and man, or the man who is the leaves, icon, and poem, and so on through the budding and blooming and bearing of fruit that occur endlessly in the springs, summers, and autumns of life. It becomes “the habitation of the whole,” the “strength and measure” of all these interwoven parts that are conceived and expressed through it.

It is onerous and beside the point to attempt to identify a beginning and an end of this circulation. As Hollingworth says, these images “suggest not an endless regression but an endless rotation, a circular figure, renewing rather than receding. If the perspective begins again at B, C, D, and so on, then one must eventually return to A, just as spring, which leads to summer, autumn, and winter, will return again to spring” (Hollingworth 53). It is through the mind that

... tranquil must adduce
Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,

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

By day, night and that which night illumines,
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,
Night’s hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep. (Stevens “Poems” 365)

Ultimately, the mind is where tranquil is acknowledged as authentically tranquil; the mind must demonstrate its tranquility to itself. Within the gate of the mind, that spacious “mirror of the planets,” is all it experiences and the proof of all it experiences — the light of day and all it illumines and the dark of night and that illumined by it. Whatever adduces itself to the mind, whether it be the bud of the whitest eye or the pallidest sprout, becomes the poem man creates, the hymn he sings.
Again Stevens moves into a deeply reverential tone, a tone as profoundly so as we see in his work. As Hollingworth says, "In the nature of hymn, this is an affirmation of and a rejoicing in presence" (Hollingworth 53). The presence celebrated is tranquility — integration of source and end. We actually move away from the rock as the operating subject; instead, Night itself sings a hymn “of the rock,” which here represents both the mind and life. If the rock is “That in which space itself is contained,” still Night is the space that contains the rock, the space capacious enough to sing a hymn of the limitless, wholly unquantifiable matrix of mind. They deconstruct each other, really, by their interrelation. If the mind generates thought and makes its reality based on that, Night, as the nothingness out of which thought and life rise, is its counterpart that exists beyond thought in an uncreated reality. It is the a-linguistic reality which, like the “ground” and the sun in its “design of its own happiness,” signals our deepest connection and integration with life. This is the balancing of intellect and intuitive sense which we have considered, the “unmediated relation to reality” (Suzuki xvii) that is the central object of Zen. Modern art’s “tormented constructions” and explanations that “spoil things” are appropriately absent here. There is a deepening sense of stillness and quietness and peace, a sense of drifting through space — indeed, through the “universal” — as concepts, metaphors and ideas collapse into a song, a hymn of the “celestial pantomime” that is life. As coldly as we were told at poem’s beginning that life is an illusion, we are warmly reminded of this in as affirmative a manner as possible at its end; Night's hymn of the rock, and all of which it sings, occur “as in a vivid sleep,” as in “a wakefulness inside a sleep,” in a consciousness that is complete in an integration of sleep and wakefulness, light and dark, emptiness and
fullness, everything and nothing.

The extension of this trope points also to the realms of intellect and sense. As we read Stevens’ poetry an integration of western and eastern methods — the former representing intellect and the latter representing sense — makes available our deepest understanding of his work. There is after all a place for the kind of abstraction of which Stevens was skeptical and which the West prefers, and in fact he employed abstraction regularly, as does Zen. But we err in considering it the end of his effort; like Zen, he used it to get beyond it, or, as we have considered, he used “philosophy to undo philosophy” and get to the thing itself. As shorter, mid-length, and longer poems that span the length of Stevens’ career, “The Snow Man,” “Landscape with Boat,” and “The Rock” stand as columns of this collective effort. Though by different routes, they drift at last subtly and profoundly into the same realm. The rich metaphors and constructions created by imagination in “The Rock” bring us to their deconstruction and to that a-linguistic life-hymn that is beyond opinion, intellect, evaluation, and the starker imagery beheld in non-imaginative meditation by the listener of “The Snow Man” brings us to that silent realm by the everything - nothing deconstruction. “Landscape with Boat” arrives there happily via casual, comic tone. Stevens’ imagery and method, then, are in a sense incidental to the center toward which he means to move. As in Zen, ultimately with Stevens method is secondary and fullness of experience the only thing; as Aldous Huxley puts it, “I can help myself from the Zen point of view, in my search for the truth, without dressing myself up in a Chinese or a Japanese robe, either in fact or in metaphor. In the domain of pure thought labels disappear and there is no dilemma as between East and West” (Benoit xiv).
This is a level to which our criticism might aspire. If Stevens wore a suit in his practical life, his experiential understanding of Buddhism was the robe he comfortably wore over that suit in his poetic life. Wearing both, in his poetry he circulated far and wide, through Elizabeth Park and on throughout the cosmos, brushing against an integrated center that was "a feeling capable of nothing more" (Stevens "Poems" 289), a life-affirming center that pulsed in permanent evanescence.
Works Cited


