

Restating Romance for the Modern World

Stephen Sicari, St. John's University

The following essay was part of the manuscript that became *Modernist Humanism and the Men of 1914* (University of South Carolina Press, 2011). "We" (that is, one of the two readers, the editors, and I) agreed to take the last chapter out of the book for two main reasons: one, it shortened the book (the Stevens chapter was as long as the Joyce chapter), which pleased the Press; and two, it allowed the book to have a sharper focus, on Joyce, Lewis, Pound and Eliot as "the Men of 1914." Stevens was not part of the group – he was too busy working his way into financial security in 1914 to be an iconoclast,-- and he was an odd addition in some ways, even if my argument was attempting to describe his body of work as another installment of "Modernist Humanism."

What appears below is the opening section of that long final chapter, and it now stands as a sketch of an opening chapter in a bigger project on Stevens that I am tentatively calling "Stevens's Modernist Theology." I am happy to have this "work in progress" appear as my first contribution to the modernist edition of the HR.

Chief among the various purposes of Wallace Stevens's 1936 collection of poems, *Ideas of Order*, is the poet's careful and sustained effort to redefine romance and the romantic as relevant once again to the political and cultural crises facing America and the West in general in the mid-1930s. Six years after this volume was published, in a lecture delivered

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Stephen Sicari is a Professor of English at St. John's University, where he has been Chairman of the department since 1997. He received his Ph.D. from Cornell University and has published numerous of works, including Pound's *Epic Ambition*, Joyce's *Modernist Allegory*, and his most recent work, *Modernist Humanism and the Men of 1914*.

as the U.S. was entering World War II, he says, "The spirit of negation has been so active, so confident and so intolerant that the commonplaces about the romantic provoke us to wonder if our salvation, if the way out, is not the romantic. All the great things have been denied" (*Necessary Angel* 17). The logic of this statement requires attention: it implies that the "spirit of negation" recognizes the romantic as the "way out" and is deliberately working to reduce its power and its scope; almost as if that spirit is a conscious agent working against "the great things." I would like to use this remark as the beginning of an investigation of Stevens's understanding of precisely what romance is and what it is capable of.

It is worth noting, right here at the beginning of this section of my analysis, that Stevens in 1948 will be questioning the term "romantic" in ways that make much of what I will be saying here appear problematic. In "Imagination as Value," he rather famously says, "The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is to the imagination what sentimentality is to feeling. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling" (NA 138-39). We must be careful about dates and terminology, because the language of *Ideas of Order* and even "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" predate the language of "Imagination as Value," the first by more than ten years and the second by more than five. My point is this: Stevens will develop his terminology and his critique as he continues to work on his project, and his dissatisfaction with the term "romantic" in 1948 does not cancel out its earlier place as a significant way into *Ideas of Order*; rather, this later evaluation of the term serves as a signal that the critique of romance that begins with this volume will have a later life and serve a different end. In fact, I want to place "Ideas of Order" as the first stage of Stevens's development of his humanism, serving as a base for the later articulations and complications and eventual great achievements.

"Sailing After Lunch" is the poem in *Ideas of Order* that most fully displays the poet's ambivalence about romance and the romantic. He certainly feels the almost desperate need for the romantic to prevail, or at least be still viable, in an age in which the term has become merely pejorative, as the first line of the poem acknowledges: "It is the word pejorative that hurts." This is a comic opening but also one that shows awareness of the history of the word "romantic," how it was originally applied pejoratively to Wordsworth and company and how in the mid-thirties, thanks to the "spirit of negation," the word has become so once again. And the poet does not quite know how to feel about the word himself:

Mon Dieu, hear the poet's prayer,
 The romantic should be here.
 The romantic should be there.
 It ought to be everywhere.
 But the romantic must never remain,
 Mon Dieu, and must never return.

Reading very closely, we may note that the romantic ought to be everywhere but must never return; that, morally or ethically or as an ideal state of affairs to be desired, romance should be present and should prevail, but that, according to some more necessitous will, it must not remain for long if it does appear on the scene and that it must not return. The language is clear and precise: the poet wants romance but the state of affairs won't permit it much of a hearing.

The poet prays for romance to return because he is, "A most inappropriate man/ In a most unpropitious place." This is a poignant, precise, and somewhat comic expression of alienation, of feeling that one does not belong in the place in which he finds himself. He is inappropriate, and the place is unpropitious: a double problem, much like what we will hear about us all collectively in "Auroras of Autumn," that we might indeed be "An unhappy people in an unhappy world." Romance then is what creates the feeling that we belong and fit, that this earth on which we live is a home for us.

Joseph Carroll, in his book on Stevens that has the subtitle *A New Romanticism*, had devoted much energy in locating Stevens's relation to particular Romantic poets, and at times names one or the other as the influence on this or that poem.¹ But it is clear to me that the Romanticism that Stevens wants to renew owes most to Wordsworth mainly because of the way the two revere nature, in particular the earth, and see in it the source of our deepest human emotions, maybe even the source of our humanity itself. Very precisely, perhaps even narrowly, what Stevens learned from Wordsworth was a reverence for the world itself, to learn how to look at the world in such a way that he could hear it speak back to him "the still, sad music of humanity"; Wordsworth is the poet who wanted to sing the "spousal verse of this great consummation" of "the discerning intellect of Man" "wedded to

1 Carroll does a lot more than this, of course, and his book is a valuable contribution to Stevens scholarship in trying to understand the nature of Stevens's commitment to "a new romanticism," a phrase from a famous letter from Stevens to the literary critic Hi Simons (LWS 352). My own argument owes much to Carroll for laying out a general landscape and for sketching the great goal of reviving a romanticism for the modern era, but I see the "new romanticism" in a more precise and limited sense.

this goodly universe." Wordsworth marvels, "How exquisitely the Individual Mind / ... To the external World / Is fitted -- and how exquisitely too, -- / Theme this but little heard among men -- / The external World is fitted to the Mind."² Wordsworth feels that he has accomplished something great: indeed, he invokes comparisons to *Paradise Lost* for his project, claiming that it is his "High Argument" to sing of how humanity and nature, the mind of man and the external universe, are fitted one to the other. Stevens's understanding of romance is similar to Wordsworth's, in that he too wants to feel as if the earth is his home, and that he fits.

In "Sailing After Lunch," Stevens expresses the feeling that the imaginative power romance provides has become ineffectual -- "My old boat goes round on a crutch/ And doesn't get under way." The question I want to pose at this point is this, what is it that has made romance and the romantic seem so ineffectual in the mid-1930s? In this poem, the answer is clear but also quite general: there is a "heavy historical sail." It appears that history is to blame! But this little poem is quite complex even here, for no sooner than we see that there is this problematic sail preventing the boat from moving along, that we hear that it is "wholly the vapidest fake." The rest of the poem tries to ignore history and insist that "It is only the way one feels" that matters, that we can "expunge all people and be a pupil/ Of the gorgeous wheel and so ... give/ A slight transcendence to the dirty sail." If we can expunge people, and in so doing expunge the dirtiness of history, we might be able to achieve a "slight transcendence" (and a slight transcendence is, I presume, better than none).

We achieve this "slight transcendence," "by light, the way one feels"; feeling will be central to Stevens's supreme fiction: indeed, the supreme fiction will be celebrated as "the fiction that results from feeling." I will return later to develop some of the possible implications of the phrase, "the way one feels," not simply a description of the feeling but of the process of attaining to feeling. But at this point in my argument I want to sustain a focus on romance and history. In the first poem of the volume, Stevens announces that he must say "farewell" to Florida (whatever that stands for in his own life and private mythology) and be willing to return to the North. This poem is based on the reversal of normal expectations, that we would

2 This first citation is from "Tintern Abbey," and the lines following this tell how the poet, hearing nature speak back to him in a human voice, has "felt/ A presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts"; such elevation is essential to Stevens's entire poetic project. The other citations are from "The Prospectus to *The Recluse*." One can turn to Emerson, especially in his essay "Correspondence," for the American version of this concept and the American influence on Stevens. Harold Bloom devotes much energy to Stevens's relation to Emerson in *Poems of our Climate*, but I will be tracing a Wordsworthian influence.

normally be glad to say good-bye to the cold of the North and be heading South, on holiday, to Florida. But while the Florida of the poem is described in happy terms, the speaker makes it clear that he is glad to be leaving. He claims to have hated all the things we would ordinarily associate with a happy place, and he expresses relief to feel free from her bondage. It is interesting to see what it is he is glad to be returning to:

My North is leafless and lies in a wintry slime
Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds.
The men are moving as the water moves,
This darkened water clover by sullen swells . . .
To be free again, to return to the violent mind
That is their mind, these men, and that will bind
Me round, carry me, misty deck, carry me
To the cold, go on, high ship, go on, plunge on.

He is returning to violence, to "a slime of men in crowds," to the cold: these images all present a stark contrast to the holiday terms describing the place he is glad to be leaving. He is returning on a "high ship" to a specific moment in what we may call history, to the violence of the urban north during the Depression when men were indeed in crowds and on the verge of violence. In this first poem of a volume that is responding to the totalitarian calls for order with poetic or imaginative versions of the same, Stevens announces that the poetic imagination cannot be forever on holiday, or on holiday at a moment of social and political crisis. The imagination must return to the North, where images of the violence of the era must be confronted. This confrontation will make romantic transcendence difficult indeed.³

This may be the best way to approach Stevens's modernist version of romanticism, as an equivalent longing for the return home that Wordsworth expressed but made much more difficult by the weight of history's dirty sail. This may indeed help us explain his eventual dissatisfaction with the romantic in "Imagination as Value," that the romantic as practiced in the nineteenth century too easily avoided the historical and became too easy, too much like sentimentality. And Stevens the modernist poet feels compelled to face history, to return to history, to

³ Carroll is in good company when he expresses his doubt about how "Farewell to Florida" is the appropriate introduction to *Ideas of Order* (87-88), which it was not in the 1935 edition of the volume. Stevens added the poem and placed it as his opening when he expanded the volume slightly in 1936 for Knopf. It seems clear to me that in his effort to restate romance, Stevens feels compelled to bring the imagination back to contemporary social problems and confront them: a new romanticism cannot evade the heavy historical sail.

confront the mobs of men that threaten the equanimity of the poet's mind and his hopes for transcendence.

Ideas of Order is a book of poems that reflect Stevens's anxiety about the rise of totalitarian regimes throughout the world, as vigorous calls to order that prompt a poet's more modest and more pluralistic response: there are many ideas of order, not just one, and some may be happier than others. If this volume does have as its titular theme a response to the politics of his day, then his deeper purpose, the restating of romance, is part of that purpose: the only way out is the romantic. "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" continues and develops the theme of the poet's response to the urgency of public affairs of the day. This poem enacts another farewell, this time not to a place but to the waltz, which no longer is appropriate to the conditions of the world in which the poet walks. It's also a farewell to an attitude that an earlier poem presented, the solipsistic extravagance of Hoon, who claimed in that earlier poem that he was "the world in which he walked":

And then
There's that mountain-minded Hoon,
For whom desire was never that of the waltz,
Who found all form and order in solitude,
For whom the shapes were never the figures of men.
Now, for him, his forms have vanished.

There is an urgency to the conditions of real men and women in the mid-thirties that won't allow for such evasion, for such inward and merely personal transcendence. The old forms, epitomized by the waltz and its regular, gentle rhythm, no longer suffice, because "There are these sudden mobs of men, / These sudden clouds of faces and arms, / An immense suppression, freed." The word that might do most to indicate Stevens's sense of the historical process here might just be "sudden," repeated perhaps for emphasis; suggesting that, no matter how historians might, in retrospect, impose a design upon events that would make the appearance of mobs in urban centers in the north in the mid-thirties seem inevitable, the actual experience of these mobs, for the poet at any rate, was sudden, more like a rupture and a fissure than a seamless continuation of a necessary process.⁴ Suddenly, out of the

⁴ I mean to suggest Michel Foucault's critique of traditional historiography in his seminal essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." Design is imposed retrospectively -- "a retrospective arrangement," if you will -- working from the present as telos back, through a series of seamless continuities, to an immaculate origin. This is dangerous in that it enshrines the present as an inevitable result of a necessary process, whereas "true history" appears with breaks and fissures and might have went in any number of directions. Stevens wants us to feel the "suddenness" and uncer-

blue as it were, the complacency of the solipsistic Hoon is shattered and his forms vanish. When all forms vanish, we may presume, a condition approaching chaos emerges; and out of this chaos, these men become "voices crying without knowing for what, / Except to be happy, without knowing how, / Imposing forms they cannot describe, / Requiring order beyond their speech." A new form is needed, one that these men cannot express themselves. Someone will have to do it for them; perhaps it will be the poet.

But that would be a happy ending that I think this poem rejects. Instead, the poem ends ominously in the prophecy that "some harmonious skeptic" will provide this order, "will unite these figures of men and their shape" in an "epic of disbelief" that "blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant." Many critics want this "harmonious skeptic" to be the poet, but I can't help but hear in the verb, "blares," the suggestion of a Hitler or Mussolini, his voice amplified through loudspeakers and blaring the call for a new order. The crux here is in how one wants to receive the notion of the skeptic and his epic of disbelief. Some readers would welcome such skepticism in the face of the true believers, both then and now, who would impose their forms and their idea of order on the mobs of men, who are eager to receive what these strong men impose. But in light of later poems, the reader who demands a wholly secular Stevens championing disbelief would have to pause over lines that I think Stevens intended to make a pivot in his oeuvre: "The prologues are over. It is a question, now, / Of final belief." If Stevens is moving his poetic project toward a fiction in which we can to some extent and in some way believe, we must not be hasty in evaluating these lines. A poet's voice would not blare, while the voice of a despot would. The epic of disbelief is more or less a cynical project, uniting men through ideas or feelings in which one cannot believe.

We have arrived at a central problem for this volume of poems: how do we discover a voice capable of providing some order in a world that has suddenly grown violent and chaotic? We seem to have a choice between the kinds of order a politician's blaring voice can provide, and a different kind of order that the poet can discover and point us toward. In the poem he often cited as his favorite from the volume, "How To Live. What To Do," Stevens continues his romantic project of trying to find -- or trying to hear -- the right voice. Despite the title, the poem does not contain precise and detailed dictates of how to live and what to do; indeed, the title playfully conjures up the notion of a tyrant with total control over every aspect of our lives that the poem itself never depicts or desires. The poem instead describes "a man and his companion" on a journey away from a place with "the flame-freaked

taint of what is erupting in the mid-1930s.

sun / To seek a sun of fuller fire." It's not as if the place they left was so bad -- "the flame-freaked sun" is certainly an image suggesting a vital and bright place -- but they were apparently unsatisfied with that and wanted something fuller. Seeking a "sun of fuller fire," they find something else that does nevertheless provide the satisfaction they sought: "Instead there was this tufted rock/ Massively rising high and bare/ Beyond all trees." And there seems to be nothing but this bare rock: "There was neither voice nor crested image, / Nor chorister, nor priest. There was/ Only the great height of the rock/ And the two of them standing still to rest." The image of "the rock" begins in this poem a long and fairly complicated development in Stevens's poetry, and it is an image that comes to such significance for him that the last volume of poems he publishes will bear this title.

The rock will become the earth itself, something hard on which we live and must try to make more comfortable and more like a nurturing home; it is also perhaps an image for the Church that Christ founded when he addressed Simon as Peter, the Rock upon whom he will build his Church. It already bears this possibility here in this poem, indicated in a negative way, because we are told that there is no priest or chorus here on this rock; it's just this massive and bare rock with no human traces or meaning.⁵ Until, that is, the end of the poem, when they hear a sound that the cold wind makes playing on this rock, "heroic sound/ Joyous and jubilant and sure." This is a human sound, or at least a sound with human meaning, the joyous and sure sound of heroism. It is at this point in his career that Stevens is becoming interested in the concepts of heroism and the noble; and in this poem, the human couple had to leave the place where they were in order to be able to look upon the natural world in a new way and hear it make this heroic sound as its response to their journey and their looking. While Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy hear "the still, sad music of humanity" when they look upon nature, this pair hear this sound, something high and noble and inspiring.

It is worth noting, I think, that the rock is bare and the wind cold: these images hardly make us feel as if the man and his companion have found a satisfying place, no less a home; nevertheless, the play of the cold wind upon the bare rock produces heroic sound, and that is satisfying. The rock, which at this point may simply represent the external world that stands alien to us and our efforts to

5 A very early journal entry from 1902 contains an interesting note: "Last night I spent an hour in the dark transept of St. Patrick's Cathedral where I go now and then in my more lonely moods. An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses" (Letters of Wallace Stevens 58). The rock in the poem, in being the natural object that produces a sound to which we respond as heroic, as both Church and Nature.

humanize it, is brought into the human world by the sound the wind makes upon it. The external world is no longer entirely alien to the human couple, but can speak back to it with a meaningful and uplifting sound. This poem presents perhaps the tightest connection between Stevens and the Wordsworth who wrote "Tintern Abbey."

"The Idea of Order at Key West" also depicts the strenuous efforts of humanity to find a satisfying way to relate to nature. This time, the human agent takes a more active role, singing a song designed to make her one with the sea besides which she walks and exhibiting what the poem calls in its last lines "a blessed rage for order," a "maker's rage to order words of the sea." This poem seems to doubt whether the songs we sing can accomplish the romantic correspondence the other poems have been seeking and claiming as possible. There is a stricter separation between the sea and the singer, between nature and the poet, here than in the previous poems, and her song may not be able to bridge the gap that makes us feel like aliens: "But it was she and not the sea we heard."

This poem seems more excessive and more one-sided than "How to Live. What To Do," more like a poem written by Hoon: "She was the single artificer of the world in which she sang." But there is some success here, I think, or at least something to take seriously, in the lines that follow this solipsism: "And when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker." The sea takes on the self that the singer makes in the song, but this seems markedly and significantly different from the happier conclusion to "How to Live. What To Do." In this poem, there is an identity between the singer and the sea -- and not a correspondence -- when the sea takes on the self that the singer gives it in the song, "whatever self it had." She transforms the self of the sea into something she has constructed, and this is a mighty achievement perhaps, but not the happy climax of the other poem where the spectator couple hear the sound from nature, where it has a human sound and a human meaning on its own, without the strenuous work of the poet to make it so.

Despite its lofty reputation with many critics and its being the titular poem, I do not think that this poem holds the key to Stevens's hopeful resolution of the problem of alienation as much as it does indicate the extent to which it is an urgent poetic problem as well as a problem in the political world around him: there is an urgent need for order, indeed a rage for order, that the poet feels every bit as strongly as the politician does. There is an idea of order at Berlin, or at Rome, or at Moscow, and there is one also at Key West; this last is every bit as excessive as

the others. The appeal to Ramon Fernandez may clinch this reading: as a French formalist literary critic known to Stevens as an anti-Romantic, he is the person to address such an excessive and solipsistic poem, for a critic like "pale Ramon" might agree that such is the fate of the romantic.

But Stevens is certainly not abandoning romance in this poem. A beautiful vision is attained, even if it is accomplished with some violence. Stevens indicates as much when he notes that the lights from the fishing boats in the harbor "mastered the night and portioned out the sea"; it is a mastery that is celebrated. But these lights, which are not natural ones but part of the human world, are responsible for "Arranging, deepening, enchanting night." Three consecutive verbs, one stronger than its predecessor, ending with the achievement of a vision of enchantment.

The chaos and violence of the mid-1930s make the idea of order, at Key West or anywhere for that matter, seem urgent, but the poet is anxious about the violence that attends the imposition of order. He seeks a more subtle, more personal adjustment of our hearing, of our singing, of our seeing, and in that adjustment something satisfying may occur. The poem that immediately follows "Key West" is quite direct in asking a question that I think we can make central to much of Stevens's poetry from this point on: "How does one stand / To behold the sublime . . . ?" The poem is entitled "The American Sublime," and we may presume that it is Stevens's belief that his country -- even in the midst of a terrible economic depression and with threats of war looming -- is capable of sublimity. But his question is not where but how does one stand, implying that "The American Sublime" is not accomplished by being in a special place but in knowing how to stand, how to look. The opening stanza continues by identifying an obstacle one must overcome if one is to behold the sublime: one must "confront the mockers, / The mickey mockers / and plated pairs." As it was for Joyce and for Yeats before him, mockery is a problem for Stevens, as a seemingly good-natured wit that in reality aims at the reduction of the noble, the debunking of anything we try to elevate.

Why are they "mickey mockers?" It's my guess that this is a reference to what has become an American icon but in Stevens's day was only beginning his (too) long career, Mickey Mouse. By the mid-thirties, Mickey Mouse was already enormously popular and Walt Disney had already received a special Oscar honoring him for its creation; but there was another side to Mickey's success, a now forgotten sense of outrage that a mouse could speak with a human voice, thus mocking what it means to be human. This diminishment, this reduction of the human, is

something that must be overcome if we are to "behold the sublime."

He then turns to an image he will have recourse to quite often, in his poems and in his prose, the image of an heroic sculpture of a great man, in this case, of General Jackson. After telling us that the general "knew how one feels," he then asks a pointed question, "But how does one feel?," which is not quite as simple a question as it first appears. As we have already seen in "Sailing After Lunch," where the poet asked, "how does one feel," he is asking less for a description of one's feeling than for a description of the process of feeling, and it is this latter angle I want to emphasize as the poem's main meaning. The statue is a sign from the past that a man once knew what it was like to feel the sublime, but we do not know this feeling any longer, and we do not know how to recover it. We have grown "used to the weather, / The landscape and that," too familiar with the very things that at one time might have stirred the feeling of the sublime in us. But just after the lines that register the bored complacency, a sudden and marvelous event occurs: "And the sublime comes down / To the spirit itself." A sort of Pentecostal descent, perhaps, is indicated here, as the sublime comes down to the spirit of the one who has found the right way to stand and the right way to feel.

While these "right ways" are never spelled out, and perhaps meant to be left as a blank, the poem does end with an unexpected suggestion that what one needs for this descent to occur is something akin to the Eucharist: "What wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?" I can see these questions being taken to imply that something different from the bread and wine of the Eucharist must be found now for the sublime to come down, as if the Eucharist no longer suffices -- "what wine does one drink now, what bread does one eat now?" If read this way, the Eucharist once did suffice, and we need something like it now. No matter how skeptically one wishes to read these questions, they introduce the need for the sacred into the poem and connect the sublime to the holy.

The poem that follows this one, "Mozart, 1935," seems very different in theme but responds to the problem raised by the questions that end "The American Sublime." The poem is a most poignant rendering of what Perry Meisel, in *The Myth of the Modern*, calls the modernist sense of belatedness, especially in the lines, "We may return to Mozart. He was young, and we, we are old." The title indicates the gap between Mozart and us, between Mozart and the present. The poet is directed to be seated at the piano and play the present, while a body is brought down the stairs in rags: the poet alive and in the present, while Mozart's dead body is brought out for burial. Mozart is "that lucid souvenir of the past," the one who can

remind us clearly of what the past was like. All this marks the gap between Mozart and 1935, between the past and the present. But as the poem progresses, it is not Mozart who is to be brought into the present by being played in concert halls in 1935, but we who must make the effort to return to him, to his youthful vigor and his airy dream of the future. "He was young, and we, we are old." There was something in the past, Mozart here and bread and wine in the previous poem, that felt something and knew something that we no longer feel or know.

This is modernist nostalgia, to be sure; but I do not want to let the nostalgic element here go unexamined for its potencies. Modernist nostalgia would be not worth pursuing if it were no more than a backward-looking fixity, an indulging in sentiment no longer active and powerful. But with the modernist poet like Stevens, it is more than wistful regret; it is the feeling that motivates his search for "what will suffice." With Stevens as with Pound, we are meant to make it new not by inventing the wholly new but by renewing the holy.⁶

Stevens uses humor to show his awareness of the potential for pathos in nostalgia. "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)" has a great comic opening: "Panoramas are not what they used to be." Images of old folks engaged in ludicrous stories about past glory rush to mind, and we smile at this silly expression of nostalgia. But as the opening stanza continues, we see the more serious idea from the Mozart poem return, as the gap between us and the great landscape painter Claude "forbids" apostrophes on the funicular. And the cause: "Marx has ruined Nature, / For the moment." "Marx" fits the rhythm of the lines better, but one could equally blame Darwin for ruining Nature (it's Stevens's capital "N," not mine): the intellectual developments of the nineteenth century -- Darwin, Marx, and Nietzsche, with Freud as their twentieth-century heir -- have indeed "ruined" nature by ruining our ability to see, or at least feel, the sublime.⁷ It is no longer Wordsworthian Nature speaking to us, but a Nature that has become something to conquer and use to produce more goods (Marx), or an arena in which we struggle for survival (Darwin). The poem

⁶ So many critics want to denigrate modernism for its nostalgia, as if Nietzsche and Derrida advanced exhaustive critiques that ended the issue once for all. But it seems quite clear that the modernists do not regard nostalgia as an impotent and empty posture but as a motivating force, a source of desire that moves their projects forward toward renewal and not backward toward repetition.

⁷ Grey comments on Stevens's "immense ambition to rewrite the *Divine Comedy* for those who 'live in the world of Darwin and not the world of Plato'" (86). This comment by Stevens certainly brings Darwin's challenge to our sense of human dignity and human destiny into play, and it is interesting that he considers Dante's time "the world of Plato" and not, say, the world of Aquinas. For as we see, Stevens is going to be refreshing philosophical, that is, Platonic idealism as he moves ahead with his project, and this idealism will culminate in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*.

wants us again to return to Claude, to return to a different attitude toward nature and allow it to be something that inspires and uplifts us. This kind of nostalgia is not meant to lead us to wistful regret and impotence: "Yet the panorama of despair / Cannot be the specialty / Of this ecstatic air." There is something too happy in the landscape to lead us to despair: the earth can still be the source of an ecstasy even for those of us in the age of Darwin and Marx.

The companion poem to this, "Botanist on Alp (No. 2)," complicates our understanding of the relation of past and present. We are somehow poised in mid-air, and we are told that everything down below is in the past as well as everything that's above, "As sure as all the angels are." The angels return in the next and most important poem in the volume, but may it suffice to say here that we are called upon to reject them as part of a dated mythology that no longer works to bring us delight. In a complex command, the faithful are called upon to sing: "Chant, O ye faithful, in your paths / The poem of long celestial death; / For who could tolerate the earth / Without that poem, or without / An earthier one, tum, tum-ti-tum, / As of those crosses, glittering." We are meant to hear the trace of the Christmas carol here ("O Come, all ye faithful"), but what is to be chanted is the poem of celestial death, of long celestial death, a poem that stretches out the dying of the angels so we can indulge, as we chant of their death, in that feeling of faith-filled joy.

With all this talk of bread and wine, and angels, and crosses, I think it is worth posing this question: what is the status of religious belief in these poems? After all, it is the faithful who are called upon to chant the poem that allows us to tolerate the earth, to bear living upon this planet. So what do the faithful have faith in? While using traditional symbols from Christianity, even Catholicism, to indicate religious longing, Stevens leaves the object of that longing open, a blank to be filled in later, perhaps. Those whom he calls "faithful" here are chanting the "poem of long celestial death," an odd poem for the faithful, no doubt, who would be sad, one presumes, about the death of celestial things. But by prolonging the death, by drawing it out and savoring it, those who want to believe can at least still feel the pleasures and comforts that accompany faith as they mourn over its gradual loss. Stevens is positioning himself in the very poignant space of a profound religious nostalgia, savoring the joys of faith while waving adieu⁸. And this poem of

⁸ There is of course in this volume a poem entitled "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu," in which we are asked to say farewell as a way of seeing something, of beholding and of being beheld. Stevens likes to capture the moment of saying farewell, freezing it to savor what we are saying goodbye to. It's also worth noting that we are bidding adieu to something but also perhaps waving "a Dieu, to God."

long celestial death allows us to tolerate the earth. Maybe not a home, but at least something we can tolerate.

But maybe another kind of poem can be written that is earthier, more a drum-beat, that comes from the merely glittering of the crosses on the housetops down below. This is the beginning of a major movement of Stevens's poetry, the perhaps melodramatic gesture of sweeping away the old and the now clichéd objects, ideas, fictions that no longer suffice. But in his sweeping away, he has hopes that he will be able to find something still there, something that can take the place of the old fictions, or something that was the ground for those old fictions and so the ground for a possible new one.

The most important poem in *Ideas of Order* in this regard, and perhaps the most important poem of the volume in general, is "Evening Without Angels." This poem announces clearly, starting with its title, that we no longer have angels to comfort us or console us. And we do not need the angels, either, whether we never needed them or just don't need them now, I'm not sure. For as we sweep away the nonsense of angels, we are left with the bare earth, and that's enough:

Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare,
Except for our own houses, huddled low
Beneath the arches and their spangled air,
Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire,
Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,
Where the voice that is great within us rises up,
As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.

We are left with the bare earth and the bare night, but that does not pose a problem for the spectator of evening; perhaps having achieved this bareness is what makes possible the greater achievement of this poem, and of this volume: the "rising up" of a voice within us. We can finally speak, on our own and in our own way, and we make what the poem calls a "true response" to nature and to evening. I will take up the question of truth in the next section, but I want to pause over the phrase, "the voice that is great within us," for the double meaning here is powerful. The analogy is to a pregnant woman, who is "great with child": the voice within us is alive and yearning to be released, and perhaps what allows for its "rising up" is the sweeping away of the old dead myths that have become just so much trash and clichés. The voice has been inactive and has been revived, renewed, resurrected. But the voice is also "great" in and of itself: a great voice, one that sings of greatness,

one that is uplifting and high.

This is Stevens's version of Romanticism, as a quest to find the right way, or a right way, to "relate" to "nature." If we only know how to stand, or how to wave, or how to hear, we might be able to achieve that "union" with nature that is the usual romantic goal. Stevens very explicitly takes on the task of explaining his version of the romantic quest in the comically titled poem, "Re-statement of Romance." I say this title is comic because it sounds like an academic critique of a poem and not a poem itself, but that is often Stevens's way, to present his poetry as part of academic discourse. His re-statement of romance consists largely of insisting on the separation of the "I" and the "you" in the poem, which I take as the subject/spectator and nature. The poem begins by separating the self from night, and in this separation from night the "I" can best perceive itself and "you." Then night becomes just the "background of our selves, /Supremely true each to its separate self." There is a double separation, then, of the self from night and then of the self from nature. It is in this radical alienation, with only night as background, that the two -- the self and nature -- can "interchange / each in the other what each has to give." His "re-statement of romance" insists on an extreme loneliness for both the self and for nature, as the condition that allows for the interchange and eventual union: "Only we two are one." Just the self, just "you," and just the night as background: it is a minimalist romance, a romanticism achieved by reduction to the essentials, by the sweeping away of all but "bare night" and "bare earth."

I cannot end this section of the analysis of Stevens's work without anticipating the role that "angels" will be playing later in his poetry. In the last of the three sections of Notes, Stevens has reached a climax in which he addresses the one angel he permits in his world, "To find the real, / To be stripped of every fiction except one, / The fiction of an absolute -- Angel / Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear / The luminous melody of proper sound." Stripped of all fictions except the fiction of the absolute, the poet identifies with this angel who hears "proper sound"; that is, sound that is appropriate and sound that is one's own. I will end with lines the poem that ends *Auroras of Autumn*, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," in which "the necessary angel of earth" makes his appearance.

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,
Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,

And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingering,
Like watery words awash.

The Necessary Angel, this fiction of the absolute, is what allows us to see the earth again and hear its "still, sad music." Stevens will even title his book of essays and lectures, *The Necessary Angel*, as a tribute to this figure and his role in his oeuvre. Stevens's oeuvre is dedicated to finding how to enter the real (how "to step bare-foot into reality," as another poem from *Auroras*, "Large Red Man Reading, puts it). This is his modernist version of the great romantic quest.