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Stanza my Stone: On the Death of God and the Nature of Poetry

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Stanza My Stone
On the Death of God and the Nature of Poetry

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division and Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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*Even Nietzsche found happiness in the Swiss forests and Nietzsche was one of the inventors of
the dark nights of the soul.*

-Wallace Stevens Letters 863

INTRODUCTION

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

Wallace Stevens didn't particularly enjoy his desk job in Hartford, Connecticut. Yes, he found a quiet kind of happiness in poring over case files at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, a domestic peace in tending his rose garden, and the steady, lukewarmness of his family life on Westerly Terrace. All these gave to the poet a very necessary tether to the real, and he did enjoy that reality and the anonymity that came with his life of little consequence in Hartford. But in truth, he was rather more fond of walking. Stevens never drove a car and instead chose every single day to walk from his home to his office, striding nearly two and a half miles in his daily gray suit along Hartford's sunny sidewalks. He often skipped lunch, and instead walked briskly through Elizabeth Park. And in his notebooks, Stevens records walks of prodigious length, including one from Manhattan to Fort Montgomery, almost reaching West Point. It's a 45 mile trek that would take between 15 and 17 hours, one-way. He rode the train back.

Head hung upon his chest, muttering soundlessly, his walking took on the metrical cadence of language as he composed his poetry upon these private and deeply meditative walks

through town. Occasionally, he would pause and retrace a step, working through some sticky metric, or pull a small scrap of paper from his trouser pocket, scribbling a line or two. Arriving at the office, the Vice President would delve into the complex work of acuity insurance, often foisting his morning compositions upon his no-nonsense secretary, who would type them up into coherent lines, but who had no real idea of what was going-on. In fact, even when Stevens was at the peak of his career, winning several major awards, no one in the office really paid much attention to his literary habit. After his death, several co-workers were actually surprised to learn that Stevens exercised creativity at all, having thought of the man only as an excellent acuties analyst and a rather closed off, formidable personality. Everything about Stevens' very private outer life suggests a perfectly ordinary, and rather dull man who occasionally went on very very long walks. There was not much of anything about the Stevens who lived in a white, unremarkable house, who walked daily in his three piece suit to work, and who declined any and all invitation to eccentricity to suggest the kind of unbridled, tortured passion that one might associate with one of the greatest poetic minds of the 20th century.

Perhaps Stevens' poetry is all the more consummate because it was an indulgence of an otherwise prude, buttoned-up type of man. It was not his every waking minute, not his only recourse day and night. Stevens had his very own puritan-like life, complete with separate bedrooms for him and his wife, a wooden desk in a cramped office-room, and an unflinching clockwork-like daily schedule, roast beef and martinis at the club on Wednesdays, the occasional business trip, but rarely leaving Connecticut. In Stevens' marriage to Elsie, who preferred a more social life to Stevens' quiet one and who never really understood her husband's creative tendencies, he did not find a muse or a confidant. He remained faithful to her until his death, just as he continued to show up to work even after his retirement. Stevens' affair was, in every

sense, an affair with poetry. And Stevens met with his poetry daily on his walks to and from the office. “And for what, except for you, do I feel love?” In this way, Stevens chooses to begin “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” the ultimate poem about poetry, and what many consider his masterpiece. Usually, this kind of blank address would be cast at a muse, at the poet’s impetus for rhyme, that mythic or very real figure who makes the work of poetry-writing possible, even enjoyable. It is altogether fitting that Stevens’ muse is poetry itself, and that he should address it so adoringly, lingering through light and shadow as he walks step for step with the love of his life, with those cadences delicately murmured, hastily scribbled, the continual surprise of words and lines that accompanied him daily to the office.

I first met with Stevens’ proclivity for walking while walking myself. I was buried in this very same poem, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” and came across the lines, “Perhaps/ the truth depends on a walk around the lake.” Now this speaks not only to a fundamental element of Stevens’ poetic theory, but also to the central place that walking has in it: “The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.” Perhaps this line would not have caught my attention in this way had I not been walking myself when I read it. And when I began to learn about Stevens’ life in Hartford and about the importance of his commute to his creative output, it brought me to thoughts of my own daily commute across campus and the way that this mile-long walk has shaped my semesters here, and has provided a both a very real and a symbolic framework for my senior project. Every footfall to this very deliberate route I have committed to memory: out the side door, weaving between two giant oaks, across the parking lot, along the grassy path through bits of thicket, a sloping/rolling sidewalk, through the wood-chipped graveyard, past the fountain, over alternating patches of grass, pavement, and mud toward my morning class. As I walk, a liberated mind welcomes what might come out of fresh air. The

feeling of composing while walking is describable for me only as a kind of abstracted alertness, a wakefulness in dreaming that breeds thoughts and fancies only possible out of doors.

Like Stevens, I love city-walking. I could trek Manhattan top to bottom—and I have, once. But it is only fitting that the other essential half of this project was also prolific walker, one who enjoyed his fresh air a little crisper, and from a greater height. In fact, Friedrich Nietzsche might more accurately be called a hiker. On these hikes, Nietzsche carried small notebooks in which he wrote some of his foremost works in their entirety. The mountain-man, Zarathustra, came to Nietzsche while walking and scrambling in the Swiss Alps, “6000 feet beyond man and time” (*Basic* 751). Nietzsche walked for sometimes more than six hours a day as part of his creative process and also to alleviate the painful migraines he suffered almost daily for most of his life, finding that the fresh air around the countryside and at greater altitudes helped to dull the pain in his head. Nietzsche made clear his affinity for hiking frequently in his journal entries and in his philosophical works themselves: “It is our habit to think outdoors—walking, leaping, climbing, dancing, preferably on lonely mountains or near the sea where even the trails become thoughtful” (*The Gay Science* 366).

The philosophy of the future, for Nietzsche, is comprised of thoughts born of the open air. French philosopher, Frederic Gros, devotes an entire chapter of his book, *A Philosophy of Walking*, to Nietzsche. The chapter is entitled “Why I am such a Good Walker,” a humorous reference to the section headings of *Ecce Homo*. In it, Gros tracks several of Nietzsche’s prodigious climbs and collects some of his journal entries such as this one in which Nietzsche writes, “I am walking a lot, through the forest, and having tremendous conversations with myself (15).

Hiking has only more recently become a part of my life, but already I find that it provides me with the kind of clarity that Nietzsche extolls. I find that, upon great height and in pure air, ideas form freely and in their entirety, and that larger scenarios are much easier to unfold when viewed from above. In the earliest stages of this project, I had written its outline on a trail map of the Devil's Path, a 24 mile-long hike in the Catskill mountain range. Like Nietzsche, I also find that a sweeping view and a good bit of rock scrambling can help distract a migraine for a time. There is a singular feeling to composing one's thoughts in the open air, upon a winding, upward mountain trail.

"Only thoughts that are reached by walking have value," Nietzsche writes in *Twilight of the Idols*. I am dealing, in this project, with two profound minds who were both quite literally "forward thinking." Stevens and Nietzsche, in their own overlapping corners/genres/oeuvres of walking-compositions, served to propel faith and language into the modern age. This is a project about moving on, and that its creative stimuli—in the act of composition—could neither of them be content to sit still, is in fact quite significant/telling. Is there any better way to move on than simply to keep walking, and to write into the future as one walks? Nietzsche needed these great ascents and descents to scale the situation, to gain a fuller understanding of a problem that was only just being realized. Stevens, in his time, was familiar with Nietzsche's philosophy and knew God's death for what it was. Both sought to compose a lasting comfort for a humanity that found itself at a loss, and both—as an integral and complementing detail—did so while walking.

This is a thesis about God's death, about its implications, consequences, and about what comes after for life's redemption. It does not seek to proliferate any specific worldview, nor does it mean any disrespect or irreverence to faith and to the faithful. Indeed, it recognizes faith, in its manifestations, as a fundamental necessity to all human life, and seeks, through a new kind

of faith—this time a trust in metaphor and its ability to re-enchant the world—to illuminate a path toward mastering the threat of nihilism, chaos, and meaninglessness/that has plagued Western thought since the 19th century. Finding this path is of utmost importance and, furthermore, necessitates the recognition that humanity must, as a matter of urgency, place its earnest faith in something greater than itself to achieve lasting health.

CHAPTER ONE

Nietzsche and the Artful Ubermensch

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I seek to engage with the death of God in its Nietzschean context, dispelling with some common interpretive oversimplifications and defining it more abstractly as a potent force of secularism within the world characterized by an inability to believe that feels both rampant and inexplicable. I seek also to illustrate how the death of God leads almost inevitably to a confrontation with nihilism, one that has demanded the attention especially of existentialist philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus. After, I turn to Nietzsche and to an exploration of his own antidote to nihilism through art, a stance that he at once advocates and shows a weariness of through his philosophy of depth and his complicated stances on language, truth, and poetry.

Section One: “God is dead.”

What it Doesn’t Mean

Nietzsche’s famous dictum, “God is dead,” has lent itself to numerous interpretations, from invocations in pop culture to ruminations in the writing of contemporary philosophers and theologians. In this section, I will survey some of these varied interpretations that fall outside the scope of this project for two basic reasons. First, some express a simplified or limited understanding of Nietzsche’s words in context with his extended body of work, choosing to engage exclusively with this single phrase. This category of interpretation—which belongs largely to pop culture—I will approach first. Others use the death of God as a jumping off point to propel another agenda, often a theological project aimed at rescuing a deity displaced by modernity. Nietzsche’s death of God pronouncement has garnered myriad interpretations, many

of them earning merit in their own right; it is necessary to recognize the colossal arrangement of cultural engagement and criticism surrounding it. But in this project, it is my intention to engage Nietzsche on his own terms, using his argument to its most basic, unappropriated, and widely accepted ends. It is therefore necessary to leave behind certain readings that burden the Nietzschean pronouncement with either too much or too little baggage, and to *attempt* a work-through that engages Nietzsche's own ideas solely.

Differing interpretations of the death of God often point to a response that is more emotional than logical, to a very human propensity to cling to a dying thing for fear of the unknown. It is just as Nietzsche predicted in his very first invocation of God's death in *The Gay Science* section 108:

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown (*GS* 108).

And indeed, there are those philosophers who, in the very attempt to interpret these words, reveal that they themselves are, in some sense, still in the cave watching shadows on the wall.

To my mind, there are three overlapping categories into which these interpretations may be placed. The first is the belief that God's death is *literal*, that Nietzsche is saying that God once was, but that he no longer is because we *did something* to him as an entity. A big part of this is a movement called the "Death of God Theology," a group that gained traction in the 1960's as a theological response to Nietzsche's invocation. They invariably had as their goal to overcome the Nietzschean critique from a Christian perspective, but differed mostly on how they sought to preserve God through creative interpretations of Nietzsche's words. Christian existentialist, Paul

Tillich, accepts a certain kind of God as dead in his book, *The Courage to Be*, but asserts that one must go on theologizing and in search of a new deity, a God above God. Proponents of the theory tended to take Nietzsche's words in stride, not fully coming to terms with the difficulty Nietzsche intended. Martin Buber summarizes, "Nietzsche saying that God is dead, that we have slain Him, dramatically sums up the end situation of the era. But even more eloquent than this proclamation...are the attempts to fill the horizon that has been declared empty" (20-21). Many of these theories sought to prove that God's death, or his metaphysical crucifixion, was somehow just a marker on the path to a new, yet more sacred God-figure.

The popularity of Nietzsche's Death of God has, unfortunately, subjected it to much lackadaisical scrutiny from the pop cultural and pop philosophical community, a community whose tendency is almost always to take things to their most literal extreme. Think of the poster hanging in every vaguely philosophical student's dorm room that reads "Nietzsche: 'God is dead' 1883," then underneath "God: 'Nietzsche is dead' 1900." Again this humorous rendering of the phrase rests on a false assumption that Nietzsche was writing about God as an actual entity. In fact, whether or not God exists is completely irrelevant to Nietzsche's claim, regardless of Nietzsche's own staunch atheism.

In 1966, the death of God was reintroduced into pop culture in the cover article of an April issue of *Time Magazine*. The long-form article, "Toward a Hidden God," uses Nietzsche's words as a jumping off point for casual observation about an increase in atheism in the current age. What Nietzsche is actually saying is much less passive than a lethargic and removed remark that there are rather more atheists than there used to be. The article goes on to offer the "Death of God Theology" as a possible solution to Nietzsche's conundrum of life without faith.



What it Does Mean

Nietzsche was not the first person to proclaim the death of a deity, but the concept as we understand it now philosophically is very much his own. No one before Nietzsche intended the death of God quite the way he did. In his book, *Culture and the Death of God*, Terry Eagleton writes:

Perhaps it is with Nietzsche that the decisive break comes. He has a strong claim to being the first real atheist. Of course there had been unbelievers in abundance before him, but it is Nietzsche above all who confronts the terrifying, exhilarating consequences of the death of God (Eagleton 151).

What exactly does Nietzsche mean by the death of God? What he is saying is that within the world, God has been supplanted by a way of thinking that renders belief an untenable position. He spoke of God not as an entity, but as an idea; “God is a conjecture,” Zarathustra said, and this is the way in which Nietzsche speaks of God (85). Whether or not that conjecture is backed up by anything true is of little consequence. The problem inherent is not the atheism, it is that man stands yet atop a structure he does not seem to be aware that he himself has already toppled. When he wrote “God is dead,” Nietzsche had in mind our idea of God, mostly the conception of the Judeo-Christian God. In this way, it is not a stance of atheism or a comment about paradise,

but a position in the world. “Godlessness is a force in the world,” wrote Karl Jaspers in his book, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity* (437).

Despite what some of his more vivid metaphors would have us think, Nietzsche is not writing of some ichor-bleeding immortal who falls out of the sky or upon a knife. Rather, he is speaking of a disbelief that has slowly infected the world, and further, an inability to believe. It is not simply a kind of atheism, but a general movement toward a growing incapacity to place complete faith in something so doggedly and purposefully unknowable. Nietzsche speaks of the phenomena by which the theology of the old gods comes to ring false in modern ears. In a world where nothing can be believed absolutely, it is unnatural to think that a god can save humanity any longer.

Nietzsche argues that humans have come to a point when they can no longer put faith in these things, these networks of deities and ethical imperatives that soldered together a disconnected, amorphous, and untrustworthy universe. Because that is what they did: they provided a faith system through which to untangle the world, to make life more manageable, and to firmly delineate categories of right and wrong. He is proclaiming the death of God within the world as the dramatic finale to a way of life, as the windup and release of everything mankind had, since nearly the beginning, thought to be true and just. With the Nietzschean line of argument, philosophy enters its most terrifying phase, one marked continually by the threat of nihilism, an era in which the natural path for humankind verges on disillumination. “He recognized nihilism for what it was and examined it like a clinical fact,” Camus writes of Nietzsche (*Rebel* 855). Nietzsche is among those philosophers courageous enough to examine, for what it is, the terror of a world forsaken by God.

Section Two: The Imperative

Modern secular societies...have effectively disposed of God but find it morally and politically convenient—even imperative—to behave as though they have not...God is too vital a piece of ideology to be written off... (Eagleton 157)

Another crucial realization in all of this is that, when Nietzsche proclaims the death of God, this is a death after which we cannot just go on living as before. Nietzsche is all deadpan. He realizes the gravity of the situation at which God is—was—at the very center, holding up rather precariously an innately fabricated structure of values and ideas. And when God departs from the scene, or is thrown out of it, there is a sudden retreat and utter disappearance of other kinds of meaning. The philosopher calls out hoping to find some vestige of the divine lurking somewhere near, and is met with the world, silent, predatory, animal. It will not be met with reason. Eagleton writes on this graveness with which Nietzsche speaks of the departing God:

Nietzsche sees that civilization is in the process of ditching divinity while still clinging to religious values, and that this egregious act of bad faith must not go uncontested. You cannot kick away the foundations and expect the building still to stand. The death of God, he argues in *The Joyful Wisdom*, is the most momentous event of human history, yet men and women are behaving as though it were no more than a minor readjustment (156).

There is a realization that God's death is a slow process. As Nietzsche says, it may take thousands of years, even. But when the realization does hit, the reaction of the madman is no exaggeration. It is a sudden and unwanted confrontation with the silence of the world, with existence itself and its arbitrariness. Not only the state of utter disorientation, but the sheer gravity of the deed, command attention. The madman appears:

‘How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (*The Gay Science* 125).

The words of the madman foreshadow a stance that Nietzsche will take in his philosophy toward man and his project within this new, emptied world. But they echo a sentiment of panic felt all over by a people lacking a guide, a people suddenly embedded with chaos. From this feeling, from the response to this momentous event, springs nihilism. It happens when enchantment is withdrawn from the social, linguistic, and perceptual world. When God is dead, humanity loses much more than a deity. Lost are the virtues and vices wrapped up with him, the theology and the morality upon which entire civilizations and social structures are built. When God is dead, giant networks built around faith come crumbling down. They are networks that Nietzsche thought were “sick” anyhow, but cities nonetheless. In Nietzsche’s words, “The trust in life is gone. Life itself has become a *problem*. Yet one should not jump to the conclusion that this necessarily makes one gloomy. Even love of life is still possible, only one loves differently” (*The Gay Science* 37).

Section Three: Existentialism and the God Conundrum

Nietzsche says that, despite the crumbling of God and his kingdom, love of life remains a possibility. But it must be a different love. It is important to note, also, that other relative contemporaries of Nietzsche devoted much of their energy toward finding solutions to the God conundrum. It was their way of stepping in as humanity, without God, found itself continually at

a loss. There are two in particular upon whose work I would like to concentrate in this section: Søren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus. I do not plan to go deeply into either of their philosophies, but think it is necessary to show two differing responses in order to, if nothing else, elucidate the unique and bold strokes of Nietzsche's philosophical undertaking.

Kierkegaard was a rather curious type of philosopher, coming out of Denmark in the early 19th century. He is perhaps best known for his use of elaborate pseudonyms, which he continually insisted were completely separate from himself. Noteworthy, is the maddened and abysmal way in which Kierkegaard confronted what he called "despair." In "The Sickness Unto Death," Anti-Climacus writes on the stages with which a God-lost society confronts despair, ranging from those who lie to themselves, to those who despair defiantly, who feel the sorrow all the way to their core. Some other philosophers, including Camus—ever the proponent of a good rebellion—praise Kierkegaard for his candid and austere confrontation with despair, yet find his final resolution quite puzzling, even cowardly. Kierkegaard became known for his "leap of faith," or the point at which he decided that, to move forward, it is necessary to accept God. It is fascinating to see a philosopher who both understood the gloom of an unceremoniously dumped society and who found a way to still accept a God.

Camus was a direct opponent of Kierkegaard's leap of faith or "philosophical suicide," as he called it. Camus was basically an existentialist in that he thought the most fundamental decision in life was the choice—having seen the state of an absurd world—to live or die. He recognized that choice as a hard one. Nevertheless, he felt no qualms about calling out those who he thought had made the wrong decision. Camus found Kierkegaard's acquisition to faith was little more than a way of giving up, of acknowledging the world as a problem too complex for him.

Camus sought almost the opposite. He spoke of rebellion just as Kierkegaard did in “The Sickness Unto Death,” but Camus would never allow for the acceptance of God. Like Nietzsche, he felt that society had seen and experienced far too much for it. The world, for Camus and for many others, was absurd, meaning that it is completely silent always, refusing to give any reason, any explanation for existence. The acceptance of this is difficult; Camus speaks of absurdity as a feeling that one comes up against quite suddenly, disallowing one from seeing the world, as it once was, in the veils that covered it. Camus’ solution, quite contrary to that of both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, is to accept the world exactly as it is, painful as it is, and to leave it completely unadorned, uncolored by things that might make its acceptance easier. Camus’ model man is one who practices an uncommon rebellion, a rebellion through accepting the unacceptable. He gives the example of Sisyphus grinning, mocking his punishers, as he rolls the rock over and over again.

Section Four: A Skeptical Faith

Art. That is the Nietzschean proposition against nihilism. And what Nietzsche proposes, furthermore, is an art that is deified as the proud marker of the creative achievement of man. With art, the death of God moves from a lamenting and confused declaration to a celebration because of what it makes possible, because of the way it makes room for the elevation of man. In the earlier sections of *The Gay Science*, including the first declaration of God’s death in section 108 and the madman from 125, Nietzsche reveals an uncertainty about how to proceed. In 108, the death of God comes more as a prediction that will come to be realized over thousands of years. And in section 125, the madman comes too soon, frantically declaring it an act to great for man and says, “Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?” This is a

foreshadowing of where Nietzsche's estimation of man is indeed headed, but in this moment, the madman reveals a sentiment that humankind has overstepped its abilities.

But in the fifth and final section of *The Gay Science*—which was amended to the book after he had completed *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—Nietzsche speaks of God's death in a completely new light. In fact, section 343, the first section of part five is actually called "*The reason for our cheerfulness-*." Nietzsche speaks of the death of God, calling it "the greatest recent event." He writes, "Are we perhaps still too much under the impression of the *initial consequences* of this event—and these initial consequences, the consequences for *ourselves*, are quite the opposite of what one might perhaps expect: They are not at all sad and gloomy but rather like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn (*The Gay Science* 343). Here, he acknowledges the "*initial consequences*," even putting it in italics to set out the seriousness of the dilemma that God's death proposed. After those consequences, after the threat of nihilism is wholly realized, the death of God can become a celebration because realized through it is mankind's incredible capacity to create. Art, for Nietzsche, is an exercise that places incredible agency back into the hands of man. As Nietzsche goes on to write in section 343, "At long last the horizon appears free to us again..." Thus the death of God transforms into a cheerful event through which mankind reclaims the world and reasserts itself as the most central entity within it. This cheerfulness is what proclaims Nietzsche to write in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the book that is his transition between *The Gay Science* and the amended section five, "...for I love even the churches and tombs of gods, once the sky gazes through their broken roofs with its pure eyes, and like grass and red poppies. I love to sit on broken churches" (227-228).

When there is no God, divinity can be translated back into man, and his creative outpourings become the ultimate testament of what he is capable of accomplishing. God made man in his image and likeness but, in this version of the story, the roles are reversed.

In “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche writes of the Greeks divvying up the heavens and placing there “conceptual gods” residing “within their own sphere.” “Here one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius of construction, who succeeds in piling an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, on running water” (4). Nietzsche acknowledges here the human tendency to try to fix in place a moving thing, or, in this case, the tendency to place a rigid set of doctrines atop a perpetual motion, the world. Nietzsche calls for a “reckless amoral artist God” because art is something that acknowledges and celebrates change. He calls for art as a “mobile army of metaphors,” a truthfulness that celebrates the world as a thing that changes, transfigures, ripens, diverges.

Section Five: On Language, Truth, and the Poet

Why is the question to truth so relevant to the death of God? Jaspers gives this explanation, calling on a passage from *The Gay Science*: “Belief in the truth was simply a consequence of the belief ‘God is the truth and the truth is divine... But what if precisely this becomes increasingly incredible and nothing any longer proves to be divine except error and blindness and lies—when God himself proves to be only our most persistent lie?’” (214). In an time of disbelief, there is a real question of whether truth is any longer a tenable way to measure the merit of a thing. And there is indeed a question of whether untruth, or uncertainty is of more worth to humanity. Nietzsche’s relationship to truth, which is complicated by many twists and turns through the progression of his philosophic canon, is a crucial component to his advocacy

(and sometimes disavowal) of art after the death of God. As Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “...know that no philosopher so far has been proved right and that there might be a more laudable truthfulness in every little question mark that you place after your special words and favorite doctrines (and occasionally after yourselves) than in all the solemn gestures and trumps before accusers law courts” (25). Throughout his work, Nietzsche is skeptical of philosophers before him who presume a kind of certainty about the nature of reality and truth, charging them with a fearfulness of the unknown. Nietzsche himself revels in the anxiety of the question mark, referencing some higher truth in uncertainty. Nietzsche at the same time renounces truthfulness as indecent and regressive, while praising a “more laudable truthfulness,” a seemingly contradictory stance, to proclaim a greater depth of truth in untruth. Nietzsche’s argumentative lines are purposefully irresolute and subject to constant vacillation for the greater purpose of his indirect philosophical discourse, as he attempts to write that which—in his view—language cannot communicate.

In all corners of his philosophy, the stances Nietzsche takes are ever-changing and purposefully performative. His philosophic method is partially a way to fight against perspectiveless seeing, the kind of sight embodied by a god. Therefore he must not allow statements to stand without reevaluation. As Jaspers writes:

His thoughts about truth, since they deny what it required for their formulation, must run into incessant contradictions. Such thoughts would be nothing more than a nonsensical confusion, did they not enable us to experience limits that can be revealed only indirectly. When the concepts which his theory of truth generates attain these limits, we experience the fulfillment of a kind of thinking that unavoidably uses even contradictions as indirect indicators (190).

This quality in Nietzsche's writing at the same time makes him very difficult to interpret, and also effectively communicates a below-the-surface skepticism about the merits of truth itself, or at least the truthfulness of which one can speak. Because it is not possible, in Nietzsche's view, to achieve an absolute, unmediated transference of truth through language, it is necessary to approach from different sides, grasping at the thing indirectly.

It is in his philosophy of depth and in his mottled relationship to the truth that Nietzsche can be related most to some of the fundamental facets of Taoism. "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao," writes Laozi in the *Tao Te Ching*, meaning that the essence of the Tao is something that exists decisively outside of language (1). This is something that Nietzsche struggles against in his own philosophy. He is fighting to write something that cannot be written, that can only be hinted at through an indirect form of communication. From this springs many of the unique qualities of Nietzsche's philosophic composition, his use of depth, veil, secrecy, metaphor, and in some cases, lies, in order to elucidate his complex stance on the merits of truth.

Nietzsche's philosophy is one of depth, a philosophy that calls upon only those with the ears to hear, those capable to reading beneath its enchanting languages of surfaces. His philosophy can indeed be palliative and supply aesthetic satisfaction for those who read him at all depths, but Nietzsche is fostering some sort of secret group of higher men, of "good Europeans" as he calls them in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche is a philosopher who would prefer not to be understood, because for him, there is great value to the void of understanding, to holding one's tongue, in keeping secret (*The Gay Science* 381).

Nietzsche's difficulty with language is that it must necessarily lie. It is inefficient in that it is trying to put boundaries on an ever-moving, amorphous thing. Despite its weakness,

language is the only way to communicate. In section 93 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes that he is ashamed of his own need to write, but that he must because he knows no other method to rid himself of his thoughts. And, at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche shares a lament that his thoughts, once beautiful, must inevitably be weakened as they become words, truths:

Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colorful, young, and malicious, full of thorns and secret spices—you made me sneeze and laugh—and now? You have already taken off your novelty, and some of you are ready, I fear, to become truths: they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull!” (237).

What we call truths are merely metaphors that have lost their potency and have come to be accepted as real. Nietzsche here does acknowledge this supreme type of beauty to his thoughts, as they are in their “morning,” but knows that their integrity will be crushed immediately once they are released into the world. They will become hard, uncaring fixtures, perspectiveless and dull, “pathetically decent.” Nietzsche uses the word ‘decent’ elsewhere when he writes about the truth in *The Gay Science*:

No, this bad taste, this will to truth, to ‘truth at any price,’ this youthful madness in the love of truth, have lost their charm for us: for that we are too experienced, too serious, too merry, too burned, too *profound*. We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this. Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything

naked, or to be present at everything, or to understand and ‘know’ everything (38).

It is interesting that Nietzsche speaks of the desire for truth here not as a matter of right or wrong, but as a matter of decency. He aestheticizes it, proclaiming that this will to truth is in bad taste, poor form. The veil and the mystery and the enchantment of the world are very much a necessity for Nietzsche. Even something like reality itself is deeply perspectival. One of Nietzsche’s methods philosophically is to take something serious, something taken as truth, and aestheticize it, or make it a matter of preference. Take, for example, the way Zarathustra speaks to his men about a rite of sacrifice, purposefully undercutting the biblical: “But man does not live by bread alone, but also of the meat of good lambs, of which I have two. *These* should be slaughtered quickly and prepared tastily with sage. I love it that way” (285). Here is Nietzsche’s tastefully playful brand of hedonism, quoting an iconic biblical passage, then immediately throwing it to humorous subjectivity.

To return to the final passage of *Beyond Good and Evil*, “my written and painted thoughts,” it seems a strange, at the end of a text that purports to point toward a philosophy of the future, to issue a lament about the weakness of his own words, of their communicative ability.

But, of course, Nietzsche is not to be believed based only upon his surface philosophy. He is playing a definite game of irony here, undercutting his sentiment with rich metaphor. Nietzsche writes about the sorrow when words come to be captured, painted, molded, transformed, like tired birds caught by hand. He expresses sorrow that his words can never adequately express their origin in his mind. Yet this grievance comes in the form of a striking

passage that is written precisely to illustrate the profound power of words, to incite an animated response at his exquisite use of metaphor. Simply that it is written down, by an author who openly values the silence of the hermit who never betrays his concealed philosophy through language, is what calls all of this into question, into irony. Nietzsche, merely by writing all of this down, proves that he is at least struggling with this notion that the best way to stay profound is to keep silent. He writes in Book Two of *The Gay Science* that “Every choice human being strives instinctively for a citadel and a secrecy...” and calls for a “burial in silence” (37, 51). But Nietzsche, as evidenced by his prolific career, could not keep silent; this was something that he alternately rejoiced and bemoaned.

Nietzsche looks toward the citadel, the tower, because it would be perhaps easier, but if Nietzsche valued so much this kind of silence he would not belabor himself to speak out at all. No, Nietzsche seems to call for a kind of silence within a masked, multiflorous, and highly perspectival speech. When Nietzsche writes in praise of silence, it might be read as a warning against the danger of being ‘understood,’ being dogmatized and made to stand still. He writes in another place that, “Corruption is merely a nasty word for the autumn of a people” (*The Gay Science* sec. 23). What is really ‘nasty,’ for Nietzsche, is the overtaking and ugly need of humanity to maintain stasis, their fright over change. Nietzsche is perhaps unsure about his project at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*, but he has no qualms about painting question marks at the end of his texts.

The weight of Nietzsche’s writing purposefully speaks to something more profound than his dissatisfaction with the pull of language and he does everything he can to ensure that his philosophy does not transform itself into the very kind of project for truth that he warns against.

So he questions himself constantly, contradicts everything he has said, and has it out for every other philosopher who assumes truth, who deign to speak the nature of reality.

CHAPTER TWO

Wallace Stevens: The Man with the Supreme Fiction

Chapter Introduction

This second chapter will address Stevens' letters, essays, and lectures in an effort to better discern his conception of God's death and the role of the poet in a disenchanted civilization. The chapter will culminate in Stevens' own philosophic reimagining of the world through a mode of enchantment he called the supreme fiction.

Section One: Stevens and Philosophy

I am very much interested in your preoccupation with Nietzsche. In his mind one does not see the world more clearly; both of us must often have felt how a strong mind distorts the world. Nietzsche's mind was a perfect example of that sort of thing. Perhaps his effect was merely the effect of the epatant. The incessant job is to get into focus, not out of focus. Nietzsche is as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink (Letters 431-432).

Nietzsche was by no means a commonplace character in the writings of Wallace Stevens, but his influence likely extended much further than Stevens would ever admit. When Stevens did refer to Nietzsche, he had a comic and rather curious penchant for comparing the self-proclaimed hermit of Sils Maria to various alcoholic beverages. In addition to connecting his effect to that of drunkenness, Stevens wrote letters also in which he referred to Nietzsche as the "Biermensch" and imagined Zarathustra enjoying a tasteful cocktail:

It is finished, Zarathustra says; and one goes to the Canoe Club¹ and has a couple of Martinis and a pork chop and looks down the spaces of the river and participates in the disintegration, the decomposition, the rapt finale. Murder...and adieu; assassination...and farewell (*Letters* 622).

This is a letter Stevens wrote to Jose Rodriguez Feo, a young Cuban scholar and regular correspondent, but most of the allusions to Nietzsche in the gigantic volume, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, come out of the collection of correspondences between Stevens and Henry Church. Church was a close friend of Stevens and great admirer of Nietzsche who brought him up frequently in his letters, provoking several bizarre and diverting responses from his friend. In his book, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, B.J. Leggett looks closely at Stevens' correspondences, pulling up several letters from the Huntington College Archives unpublished in the *Letters*. Much chatter between the two--Stevens and Church--relates to their trials, failures, and successes in procuring specific volumes of Nietzsche's work in German. Peppered throughout are fervent attempts from Church to get Stevens to admit an appreciation of Nietzsche, and Stevens' tone of disinterested incredulity at Church's appreciation of the man's philosophy. In one 1944 letter, for instance, he writes, "...I read only the first volume of *Human, all Too Human*, and didn't think a great deal of that: not nearly what you thought" (Leggett 39). In another letter, Church enlists the help of Stevens to interpret aphorism 34 from *Beyond Good and Evil*, which posits some conception of the fictiveness of the world. Stevens responds, offering up an interpretation of the passage, then drawing comparison between it and

Stevens was a prolific letter writer of a quite uncommon disposition: it was not unusual for Stevens to assemble artful and capacious responses to inquiries about his own writing,

¹ It is of interest to note that this is the same club where Stevens himself ate lunch every Wednesday (Nichols)

frequently composing letters that both clarified and complicated his work; the universe of Stevens' exuberant correspondences is at once delightful and mystifying. "That Nietzsche's texts are in some manner absorbed into many of Stevens' may have first been recognized by Stevens himself, or at least the Stevens who is the many-sided persona of *Letters of Wallace Stevens*," writes Leggett (32). And Milton J. Bates writes of the letters persona and beyond, "Stevens both discouraged and invited comparison with Nietzsche during his lifetime" ("Major Man..." 812). The fact remains, however, that for an insurance executive-poet who claimed to have had not much interest or understanding of philosophy, Stevens shows a remarkable proclivity for philosophic thinking in his poems, essays, lectures, even in his letters.

With respect to the letters, when Leggett writes that "Stevens' letters on Nietzsche reveal in their gaps and contradictions evidence of evasion and suppression..." I am inclined to believe him. For a poet whose work is undeniably philosophical and shares almost uncanny similarities with Nietzschean formulations of truth, the *ubermensch*, the death of God, eternal return, the three metamorphoses, and others, Stevens' protestations of influence and even animosity toward Nietzsche and philosophers calls attention to itself. Bart Eeckhout in his essay, "Stevens and Philosophy," makes an argument that Stevens' own pushback against philosophy is in itself telling:

For one thing, Stevens was not quite consistent in his attacks on philosophy and its practitioners. For another, the urge he felt to set off his own writings from those of philosophers already betrays a number of shared concerns and interests. Most poets, after all, are not much inclined to dwell on the topic of how their poetry relates to philosophy; they simply take this to be a non-issue (*Cambridge* 103).

Leggett takes a similar line of argument, positing that we might read Stevens' insistence that his work is not impacted by Nietzsche--especially when it is him and not his interlocutor who brings Nietzsche into the conversation--as a tacit admittance of Nietzschean influence. Leggett's reading of the Nietzschean allusions and shadows calls upon work from both critics Harold Bloom and Milton J. Bates to clarify and set aside his claims. He also makes clever to Freud's notion of denial in relation to a letter in which Stevens responds to Jose Rodriguez Feo's question, "Excuse my ignorance: who are the *major men* so consistently present in your last poems?" (Leggett 45). Stevens responds rather defensively, insisting that the major men in his poems are not "Nietzschean shadows," an interpretation which was not even brought forward by Feo. Calling on Freud's essay, "Negation," Leggett writes, "When patients voluntarily bring forward certain associations in a negative form, as in Freud's example of the man who says of one of the people in his dream, 'It's *not* my mother,' we may amend the response to: 'So it *is* his mother'" (45).

Some of Stevens' push-back against insinuations of Nietzschean influence, as well as against influence from other writers can be read an extension of the very natural concern of a poet, of any thinker, over the prospect oweing their voice entirely to someone preceding them. It is a concept expounded by Harold Bloom in his book, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Leggett's book, on the whole, seeks to provide a thorough reading of Stevens' early poetry as deeply philosophical and deeply influenced by Nietzsche, despite Stevens' own protestations, despite his insistence, as he cites in one letter to Church, that he has only a dim memory of Nietzsche from boyhood, or his aphoristic proclamation in *Adagia*, "Perhaps it is of more value to infuriate philosophers than to get along with them (*Letters* 409; *CPP* 906).

Leggett sums up his justification for comparing the two in the introduction to his *Early Stevens* book:

According to the perspective we adopt, we may say that Stevens is a Nietzschean poet because he exemplifies qualities we associate with Nietzsche, because he has been a frequent subject of critics who are themselves influenced by Nietzsche's theories of language, because his poetry may be glossed usefully with passages from Nietzsche, because his concepts, ideas, tropes parallel Nietzsche's in striking ways, because certain of his assumptions, values, themes, images have their source in Nietzsche, because his concepts and figures are generally identified with Nietzsche even if Stevens acquired them elsewhere--there are presumably a number of other possible combinations and nuances (18-19).

It is true that there are some remarkable and quite uncanny similarities with Nietzsche to be found in the work Wallace Stevens, but it is not my endgame, my objective, to argue for a Nietzschean reading of Wallace Stevens, or to insist that Stevens is a poet whose can be somehow encapsulated by the term, Nietzschean. That is Leggett's aim in his book, and he does--to my mind--a thoroughly fair, convincing, and comprehensive job of it. But I do not find that line of argument very provocative and further, I think that there are some purposeful statements in both Stevens' prose and poetry indicating his very intentional self-separation from Nietzsche and from the world of philosophy, such as in "Adagia," when he indicates, "The poet must not adapt his experience to that of the philosopher" (CPP 909). Or when he writes in his essay, "The Figure of Youth as a Virile Poet," "The philosopher proves that the philosopher exists. The poet merely enjoys existence...the poet says that...*la vie est plus belle que les idées*" (CPP 677-678). As with Nietzsche, is crucial to move beyond the surface with Stevens, to move beyond his

criticism of philosophy and of Nietzsche, recognizing a deeper level of connection that is both inherent and directly indicated by Stevens himself. In Stevens' own words, "...no one is needed to tell us that poetry and philosophy are akin" (*CPP* 661). And certainly, some connections, as in the letters, have to be dug out through intuition and analysis. But, it is also crucial to take into account Stevens' own conception of his end task as necessarily poetic, but of a poetics that finds much of its foundations in philosophy. As he writes in a letter to Henry Church, "There is no reason why any poet should not have the status of the philosopher, nor why his poetry should not give up to the keenest minds and most searching spirits something of what philosophy gives up and, in addition, the peculiar things that only poetry can give" (*Letters* 292). Philosophy is that standard by which Stevens chooses to measure the rightful merit of the poet. He also charges poetry with similar goals to philosophy and as providing some similar satisfaction. But poetry, for Stevens, is a moving beyond philosophy. It is a moving beyond thinking and overthinking into sensing and feeling. It is, as I imagine Stevens would see it, a gathering and a culmination of philosophical ideas into an aesthetic order. This has much to do with Stevens' notion of the "status of the poet in a disturbed society" and the nature of poetic truth, which I will come to later (*Letters* 292).

But, doubtless, Stevens' most philosophic flirtation in both his prose and poetry is his career-long interaction with Nietzsche's death of God. Stevens clarifies it, expounds upon it, even builds an entire poetic theory atop this Nietzschean model. J. Hillis Miller, in his book, *Poets of Reality*, examines six authors to trace the movement of a twentieth century poetics. Of Stevens, one of the six, he writes, "From one end of his work to the other he reiterates a single idea, and all his work is an attempt to explore the endlessly variable perspectives from which reality can be viewed by the imagination. He is resolutely carrying out Nietzsche's injunction

that man the survivor of God should experiment tirelessly with new truths, new representations, new life forms” (Miller *Poets of Reality* 225). From this angle, Stevens’ aims take on an unmistakably Nietzschean mood. Stevens is a poet writing in Nietzsche’s wake, contending with the various problems that the death of God brings into a culture and into a body of poetry.

Section Two: Poetry and the Death of God

My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe (Stevens, *Letters* 348).

Nietzsche leads the wide-eyed, contemptuous crusade of the godless, skeptical of all that is mild and faith-filled. While Stevens accepts and carries on the Nietzschean dictum, “God is dead,” he avoids the typically Nietzschean tone of disdain toward religion and toward the religious, instead electing to exhibit a strong sense of nostalgia at an event after which humanity can never be quite the same, treating the event as “...a dissolution which happens as naturally and irrevocably as the falling of leaves in autumn” (Miller *Poets of Reality* 221). For Stevens, as for Nietzsche, the death of God does make room for something new and fictive, something light, cunning, masterly, and artful. And, in this aspect, Stevens recognizes a necessity, even a pleasure, in the freedom that a retired deity leaves to the inventive order of man. Yet, with Stevens, there is also a bit of nostalgia for that great and “benign illusion” called religion (Stevens *Letters* 402). He writes in a letter, “The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God” (*Letters* 378). This sounds like the Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* section ____, who recognizes the undeniably utilitarian origins of art, the purpose of which was always to assist humanity in its connection with the divine. But, unlike Nietzsche, Stevens is not bothered by the abiding and profound interlacing of poetry and theology. For Stevens, the gods were not the symptom of human sickness, of a world that had lost its health. Unlike Nietzsche,

he found very little fault in religion. The problem was not that Christianity was indicative of something deeply awry or unhealthy in society, but that it had become obsolete: “Christianity is exhausted culture,” he writes in *Adagia* (914). Though Stevens certainly recognizes the necessary end to an exhausted religious age, he speaks of the gods and of their time with in a tone tinged with pride, emphasizing the lucidity of that great era when fictive gods ruled the earth and emphasizing with reverence the somber and wreckful event of their downfall.

In the lecture, “Two or Three Ideas,” from the collection, *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens engages deeply with his own perception of God’s death and with the consequences it brings into the world of poetry. He states, “To speak of the origin and end of gods is not a light matter. It is to speak of the origin and end of eras of human belief...the gods were personae of a peremptory elevation and glory. It would be wrong to look back at them as if they had existed in some indigence of the spirit. They were, in fact, as we see them now, the clear giants of a vivid time. The kind of moving on of which Stevens participates holds no contempt for that which came before it, but is nonetheless a thorough and outright lunge forward.

For Stevens, “the death of one god is the death of all,” (or, “What is true of one metaphysical term is true of all”) and this death catalyzes a very honest check with reality, a standoff between man and a world now unfilled, desolate, and shadowless. (*CPP* 905, 727). Miller summarizes this mood after God’s death as a fundamental theme in the poetry and prose of Stevens, writing, “This vanishing of the gods, leaving a barren man in a barren land, is the basis of all Stevens’ thought and poetry. His version of the death of the gods coincides with a radical transformation in the way man sees the world. What had been a warm home takes on a look of hardness and emptiness, like the walls, floors, and banisters of a vacant house” (Miller *Poets of Reality* 219). And Stevens does indeed make that same comparison himself, using the

absent gods to draw a parallel between empty heaven and an abandoned house. He announces, “It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amicable rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness” (*CPP* 842). The sentiment and symbolism of this passage both so perfectly express the kind of trial that Stevens is trying to emphasize in the lecture, “Two or Three Ideas.” Even for the non-believer, God existed as one of the greatest and most adamant stories ever told. The tales and traditions of the world built around faith were products of an enormously uplifting imagination, a cosmic illusion “produced on the highest level of the cognitive” (*Stevens Letters* 50). In the project of God-building, humanity’s ingenuity and imagination pushed far beyond the celestial possible.

“The people, not the priests, made the gods,” writes Stevens (*CPP* 843). Stevens spoke of the gods as colossal figures of the human imagination, figures created by humans, in the likeness of humans: “...all gods are created in the images of their creators” (*CPP* 846). The gods, in the rich world of Stevens’ poetry and prose, are projections of human ideals and desires. This idea calls to mind German theorist, Ludwig Feuerbach and his book, *The Essence of Christianity*, in which he speaks of “the true anthropological essence of religion” and argues that “the personality of God is nothing else than the projected personality of man” (288). Theology, by this characterization first put forth by Feuerbach and backed by Stevens, is really a kind of anthropology that is not yet aware of its earthly origins, making religion the projection of human nature outward upon a constructed heaven. This idea translates to Stevens poetry as well. In his masterwork, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens proclaims that the biblical Eve “...made the air the mirror of herself,/ Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves/

In heaven as in a glass; a second earth,” implying that they projected themselves, their own image and likeness, onto a heaven which mirrors the earth (*CPP* 331). And in another poem, “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,” Stevens calls upon the “God of the sausage-makers,” naming him “...the merest patron saint/ Ennobled as in a mirror to sanctity” (*CPP* 127). Here is the same language of mirrors to suggest that, maybe, the “God of the sausage-makers” is a projected patron for the sausage-makers on earth. When understood from this angle, faith in God is actually a disguised faith in humanity. And when God ceases to mediate this exchange, when he falls away, the immense power of human agency and creativity can finally come to light.

Faith in God was not a sign of human exhaustion or infantilism, but was, in fact, a great feat of human inventiveness and gumption. No wonder that, when God, as he existed in the imagination, disappeared from the world, humankind is stricken quite unexpectedly by an intense consciousness of its abandonment. Stevens chooses, aptly, to adopt the typical metaphor of humans as the children of God, equating his absence in feeling to that of a parent leaving their child alone in an empty house, the house that was once the house of God. Churches stand, in fact, as the visible symbols of something very real what once touched our lives but which no longer breathe the same glory.

In Stevens’ version of God’s death, or at least the version presented in “Two or Three Ideas,” the event is sudden, mid-sentence even. The death of God is an all-at-once, abrupt act of vanishing:

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences...It is simply that they came to nothing...What was most extraordinary is that they left no mementoes behind, no thrones, no mystic rings, no texts either of the soil or of the soul. It was as if they had never inhabited the

earth. There was no crying out for their return. They were not forgotten because they had been a part of the glory of the earth. At the same time, no man ever muttered a petition in his heart for the restoration of those unreal shapes” (*CPP* 842).

And, suddenly, humanity is alone. In the Nietzschean tradition, God leaves in his wake an enormous shadow that, strikingly, is nearly absent in Stevens’ version of the tale. While Nietzsche suspects that it will take thousands of years to root the vestiges of divinity out from our culture, Stevens seems surprised at how quickly and unceremoniously God has vanished, and describes a humanity that does not call out for a great return. Nietzsche’s philosophy is full of admonition a a culture he views as clinging on the coattails of a sickly and retreating deity. But in Stevens, “The is no rich echo of nuance and meaning from the poetic tradition as in Eliot or Yeats. God is dead, and with him died the heaven of consecrated symbols coming down through the Christian or Platonic ages. Stevens’ earth is flat and bare, and a bowl of flowers is just a bowl of flowers” (Miller *Poets of Reality* 230-231). With Nietzsche, there is a long process through which humanity, a little at a time, comes to see the world in its irrefutable barrenness. In Stevens, though, it seems that humanity is quite suddenly endowed with that knowledge; he does not partake in the Nietzschean story that the gods perished after a long, slow illness, and instead describes the gods as, one day, just slipping away. Miller, here, also disassociates Stevens from other modernist poetic traditions, likely drawing allusion to “Burnt Norton,” the first part of T.S. Eliot’s grand philosophical poem, “Four Quartets,” in which Eliot alludes to “a bowl of rose-leaves” as a metaphoric impetus for the movement of the whole poem. Stevens, Miller asserts, is writing his poetry upon a blank slate, upon a world that certainly has memory of God, but that is unhallowed by his specter.

As in Nietzsche, the death of God creates conditions in Stevens' world that are unlivable. In other words, before the opportunity arises to celebrate God's death and the creation it makes possible, there is a necessity to quell a kind of chaos that arises when humanity is loosed from its godly tether.

In the frenzied words of the madman, ““Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down?”” (Nietzsche *The Gay Science* 181). And as Stevens writes in his poem, “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” “There is order in neither sea nor sun... There are these sudden mobs of men,/ These sudden clouds of faces and arms..” (*Collected Poetry & Prose* 100). Stevens calls these mobs “An immense suppression freed,” but writes that they are helpless, crying out for something they cannot describe, for “order beyond their speech.” Both Nietzsche and Stevens keenly recognized the problems inherent in God's death. They felt the acute loss of God, the ordering force, the mechanism of defense against solitude and purposelessness. For Stevens, God was one of those benevolent lies, however grand, humanity had told itself about the world. For Nietzsche, the idea of a God is treacherous, sickly, and anything but benevolent. What both agreed upon, however, is that the departure of God created an absence, an enormous void of belief that needed to be filled, and that the artist, the man who seeks language on a higher plane, has a unique ability to alleviate the pain of abandonment.. Stevens writes, “...in an age of disbelief, when the gods have come to an end, when we think of them as the aesthetic projections of a time that has passed, men turn to a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style of bearing themselves in reality. They create a new style of bearing in a new reality” (CPP 844). To define this new style of bearing, he turns to art, specifically poetry, to investigate its role in a godless society.

Section Three: The Purpose of Poetry & the Role of the Poet

The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary (Stevens *Letters* 378).

The death of God, the most major and abiding poetic ideal, brings into poetry a vacuousness, and heaps a new responsibility onto the poet. The poet is charged, ultimately, with the creation of new values, with the task of ordering and imbuing old words full of new faith, so that the “mobs of men,” to whom Stevens alludes in “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” can go on living. “The role of the poet is to help people to live their lives,” writes Stevens (*CPP* 661). And of poetry itself, he writes, “The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man’s happiness” (*CPP* 908). The death of God leaves the world, as Stevens sometimes sees it, disenchanted and even hostile, shadowless, and the poet has the unique capability to reintroduce to the world the mysteries and illusions it once held. Stevens writes in a letter to arts patron, Hi Simons, “If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else” (*Letters* 370). The role of the poet, then, is to add to life that necessary drop of fantasy, illusory faith, which is the only kind of belief, in Stevens’ view, that can any longer hold a modern society.² In another letter, he writes, “I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction” (*Letters* 430). This is the very kind of fiction that the poet can supply, “in

² The poet also has the task of protection. Stevens writes in *Adagia*, “The poet represents the mind in its act of defending us against itself,” calling to mind the role of the Freudian watchman over the unconscious mind, who protects the sensibilities of consciousness from certain kinds of knowledge deemed too much for it (*CPP* 911). It evokes, also, comparisons with Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, in which he uses the metaphor of digestion to explain the necessity of forgetting and of separation of the conscious mind from the unconscious mind. Here, too, in Stevens, there is a sense that there are certain details, such as the overwhelming quality of a godless world, that the poet can help man to forget.

his measure and in his style” (*CPP* 780). The poet gives to humankind “that for which it was searching in itself and in the life around it and which it had not yet quite found,” a certain order, which “means peace” (Stevens *CPP* 661; *Letters* 293).

Stevens repeatedly emphasizes that this is an exceptional skill the poet has to instill reality with greater significance, and that the role and status of the poet is of “paramount” importance (*CPP* 660). Stevens writes, in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” on the priority and beauty of poetry in everyday life:

The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them (*CPP* 662).

Stevens intentionally stresses the crucial power within the grasp *only* of the poet to provide certain kinds of basic and indispensable satisfactions to a society. With the death of God, the most critical essence of value and understanding, the role of the poet takes on a greater significance as humanity searches its language for the most orderly and coherent strain of words, and also for something uncanny, mysterious, and imbedded with enigmatic significances.

Stevens writes, “...what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (*CPP* 662). Here, Stevens hints at his philosophic conception of a transcendent order of poetry called the supreme fiction, a new belief in language that only the poet can supply.

Stevens' rich conception of poetry confers a certain kind of dignity unto the poet, a superiority that had not formerly been granted him. "There is no element so conspicuously absent from contemporary poetry than nobility," he writes in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (*CPP* 664). Stevens, in calling for the elevated value of poetry, echoes the sentiment of 19th century cultural theorist, Matthew Arnold, who writes similarly in his 1895 essay, "The Study of Poetry":

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us (Arnold 2).

Stevens is deeply engaged with this task of heightening the status of the contemporary poet, likening his deserved nobility not only to that of philosophy and philosophers, but also to the figures of the divine. Stevens asserts, in a 1940 letter to Henry Church, "The figures of the essential poets should be spiritual figures" (*Letters* 378). Further, Stevens identifies his task in the lecture "Two or Three Ideas," as "to elevate the poem to the level of one of the major significances of life and to equate it...with gods and men" (*CPP* 845). Poetry itself, in the work of Stevens, accrues an unprecedented yearning and appreciation. Helen Vendler, in her book, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire*, has high praise for the poet: "Never was there a more devout believer—in love, in the transcendent, in truth, in poetry—than Stevens" (41). A great deal of Stevens' writing, both the prose and the verse, turn inward upon poetry itself, theorizing, elevating, conferring praise and importance. Stevens sees his own task as a spiritual one. He says, "I want to try to formulate a conception of perfection in poetry with reference to

the present time and the near future and to speculate on the activities possible to it as it develops itself throughout the lives of men and women. I think of it as a role of the utmost seriousness. It is, for one thing, a spiritual role" (*CPP* 842). There is a deep sense, in Stevens' work, that the act of poetizing and theologizing are deeply intertwined and, in some senses, are simply extensions of one another. The project of the poet is a generative and fundamentally theological project of creating new values.

Though he insisted on the nobility and singularity of the poet, even asserting, "There is not a poet whom we prize today that does not address himself to an elite," Stevens' notion of nobility differs immensely from Nietzsche's idea of higher men (*CPP* 661). Stevens, like Nietzsche, did describe an overman-like figure in his notion of the noble poet. Bates, in his essay, "Major Man and Overman: Wallace Stevens' Use of Nietzsche," argues for a comparison that Stevens himself contested (twice, in *Letters*), but that I think is undeniable, between Stevens' conception of the hero and his "major man," and Nietzsche's *ubermensch*. Bates writes of Stevens' work that it "records his lifelong effort to suspend disbelief in a significant, if old-fashioned, value--the heroic ideal" (Bates "Major Man" 811). Stevens writes to Henry Church, "What is terribly lacking from life today is the well developed individual, the master of life, or the man who by his mere appearance convinces you that a mastery of life is possible" (*Letters* 518). Stevens indeed searches for some higher order of man, a "master of life," and makes the poet into a redemptive, heroic, spiritual figure who is alone capable of giving to society what it needs. But it is precisely in Stevens' purpose for poetry and of the poet, where he differs decisively from Nietzsche, whose hero is engaged in a much more isolated process of 'going over.' Stevens' poet, his "noble rider," is given the purpose, "to help people to live their lives,"

to defend, and to “contribute to man’s happiness” (*CPP* 661, 908). Bates clarifies this distinction:

Stevens was far more tolerant than Nietzsche of the general run of humanity. Though he clothed his hero in the imagery of sun and mountains and ice, he also insisted that major man be grounded in the common man and not exceed him by too much. Whereas Nietzsche had considered the study of ‘average man’ the most disagreeable of the philosopher’s duties, Stevens admonishes the apprentice of ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ not to neglect the most pathetic and disoriented minimum of humanity in composing the heroic ideal” (“Major Man” 837).

Bates refers to the final section of “It Must Be Abstract,” in which Stevens describes a tramp-like figure, a Vladimir or Estragon in his “old coat,/ His slouching pantaloons” (*CPP* 336). He writes that this figure is “Looking for what was, where it used to be,” like the voices crying out for order in “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz.” Stevens addresses his apprentice, saying, “It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect/ The final elegance, not to console/ Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.” It is of this figure, “pathetic and disoriented,” that the poem springs. He is the impetus for the poem, and it is for the poet to take him, as he is, and to raise him up. As opposed to Nietzsche’s hero, who enlists a small elite to follow him into the mountains, Stevens’ poet is indeed noble,--and sometimes depicted also as a mountain-dweller--but also must be “grounded in the common man.” The enchantment that is the task of the poet is not only for an elite, but for everyone.

Section Four: On Truth, The Imagination, and Reality

*The most provocative of all realities is that reality of which we never lose sight
but never see solely as it is (CPP 848)*

Apparent in both Stevens' poetic and personal life, is a ceaseless commitment to the lawless, stormy, yet vital bond between the imagination and reality. "It gives a man character as a poet to have this daily contact with a job," Stevens told a reporter during a rare interview he granted in 1950, emphasizing the vital tether that the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company provided Stevens to the facts of existence. (*New York Times*). And what could be a better embodiment of the tug of war between the imagination and reality than the "surety poet," who is all insurance executive at the office, but who carries to and from work a vivid internal world of metaphor (Nichols)? "I don't divide my life, [I] just go on living," says Stevens, affirming the necessary truce between two opposing forces. But, even for the insurance executive-poet, the apparent master of dual worlds, this truce does not come easily. The poet, for Stevens, is the figure agilely poised between reality and imagination, who must--in order to provide righteous illusions--affirm reality with all that he has.

In 1951, Stevens accepted an honorary degree from Bard College and gave a short speech of which the subject was the relationship of the poet to reality. In the speech, he asserts, "The poet finds that as between these two sources: the imagination and reality, the imagination is false, whatever else may be said of it, and reality is true; and being concerned that poetry should be a thing of vital and virile importance, he commits himself to reality, which then becomes his inescapable and ever-present difficulty and inamorata" (*CPP* 838). Stevens speaks of "the way of the poet as the way of the truth," "a way through reality," and insists upon reality as "the ultimate value," asserting the necessity for the poet to establish his rhetorical inventions upon a

basis of truth (*CPP* 838, 906). “This decision to commit oneself to reality does not lead to an immediate victory,” writes Miller, and quotes from Stevens’ *Opus Posthumous*, “I must impale myself on reality” (*Poets of Reality* 235). Stevens portrays this aspect of the poet’s life as laden with a genuine spirit of self-discipline, but vows that the poet’s struggle with his “ever-present difficulty and inamorata” is not unrecompensed. “In all his poems with all their enchantments for the poet himself, there is the final enchantment that they are true,” says Stevens in his Bard College address (*CPP* 838).

But truth, for Stevens, as for Nietzsche, is a beast of a most fickle nature. Stevens emphasizes the critical separation between philosophic and poetic truth in “The Figure of Youth as a Virile Poet,” contending that philosophic truth is a matter of logic, and that poetic truth is a matter of empiricism, or stemming from experience of the senses (*CPP* 676).³ Steven Shaviro writes on “Stevens’ logic,” calling it “repetitive and accretive, not dialectical or progressive,” as in traditional philosophy (Shaviro 231). Poetic truth, “all the truth we shall ever experience,” is ingrained in the senses and is deeply perspectival (*CPP* 662). Stevens clarifies his definition of poetic truth by explaining that “poetic truth is an agreement with reality, brought about by the imagination of a man disposed to be strongly influenced by his imagination, which he believes, for a time, to be true...” (*CPP* 676). Truth in poetry, then, is a momentary agreement with the real brought about, seemingly, by a powerful wave of imagination.

Stevens shares the Nietzschean attitude that humanity has harbored an unseemly overenthusiasm for ‘the truth.’ In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” he writes, “We have been a little insane about the truth. We have had an obsession” (*CPP* 663). Stevens favors,

³ This contrast strikes me as a bit dubious. By this definition, many of Stevens’ own poems are engaged with philosophical truth. Nonetheless, these clarifications do seem to make some sense, and they provide a basic conception for how Stevens sees poetic truth as distinct from philosophic truth.

rather, a kind of perspectivism, a “willed metamorphosis,” and the reality of which he speaks is quite different from the cultural norms (Miller *Poets of Reality* 235). “The thing in itself,” is not of terrible concern to Stevens. What is of concern, is the way in way in which the poet genuinely portrays reality within the enchanting sphere of the imagination. Miller expounds upon this view of reality: “It is impossible to speak directly of the thing in its barrenness, but a new aspect of the thing can be put into words, and therefore reality is never the thing in itself, only some new view of it” (Miller *Poets of Reality* 238). There is no perspectiveless seeing. Reality is viewable, but only through a necessary imposition from the imagination. “A poet’s words are of things that do not exist without the words,” writes Stevens, meaning that the poet’s words do not simply portray reality, but create it (*CPP* 663). The poet, as the “orator of the imagination,” is has the responsibility of providing palliative illusion in an era of disbelief, but also has the equally--if not more--important task of holding a firm grip on reality, only a rethinking of reality in accordance to satisfactions only the imagination can supply (*CPP* 730). He must provide a fit between the mind and the world.

Stevens writes, “The real is only the base. But it is the base.” The imagination is a rich world build atop its necessary foundation, reality. And the poet is charged to “create his unreal out of what is real” (*CPP* 679). In “Imagination as Value,” Stevens calls the imagination “the power of the mind over the possibility of things...” (*CPP* 726). The imagination is a gathering of substance, of reality, and a directing of creative energies toward an authentic whole. The imagination is a force pressing constantly against reality, the “expression of” which, “the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives” (*CPP* 665). For Stevens, the poetic process is one he calls “psychologically an escapist process” (*CPP* 661-662). It is a fictiveness that is part of a necessary story one tells about the word to make living in it a bit easier. These fictions are, as

Stevens would say, “benign illusions,” because they are “extensions of reality” (*CPP* 430). They are believable because they have basis in the real, but they are believable still because they are not *all* real, but rather, are imaginative interpretations of reality.

Stevens conceived, for a time, that the imagination itself could be his supreme ordering force, a remedy to the chaos of godlessness, but recognized that it needed more reachable and concrete manifestation, one that poetry provided:

The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination, as the highest objective of the poet, appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and, for that matter, greater, if the idea of God is only one of the things of the imagination...Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination. A good deal of my poetry recently has concerned an identity for that thing (*Letters* 369-370).

Stevens raises pure poetry up to, and beyond, godliness, proclaiming it as the ultimate value, and disclosing that he has been embroiled in a project to define an essential poetry. This task of which he speaks in this letter is that poetic idea which will carry him for the rest of his career, the supreme fiction.

Section Five: The Supreme Fiction

I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction (*Letters* 430).

In an era defined by God’s failure to arrive, the poetic mind is tasked with the creation of an order, however illusory, however fictive. With the death of God, the great value and truth-creating force that he was, shuffles in an intense feeling of social and cultural anomie, the feeling of detachment from a fundamental agent of order. Stevens asserts that belief, even the great

belief in God, “has always been in a fiction” (*Letters* 370). Poetry is no less a fiction, but its major difference is that it is “recognized” as such. This is the basis for Stevens’ conception of the redemptive nature of the poem. It is that which springs from the pressure between the imagination and reality, embodying both.

He defends his fiction in the lecture, “Two or Three Ideas,” asserting, “In an age of disbelief...it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style” (*CPP* 841). After the death of God, poetry is that force which takes upon itself the responsibility of reordering the world, and the poet is the ennobled figure with capacity to create this “new reality” (*CPP* 844). In the *Adagia*, he writes, “After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption” (*CPP* 901). After God, poetry becomes the ultimate value because of the curative and cleansing myths it is capable of spinning. Miller rightly points out that, “In defining poetry as a substitute for religion Stevens is joining himself to a tradition extending from the romantics through Matthew Arnold down to our own day” (Miller *Poets of Reality* 24). Arnold predicts in 1895 that “...most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” (3). Stevens’ conception of the poem and its redemptive qualities is very much the same, though less of a prediction than a reality, one that Stevens embodies himself in his poetry.

Stevens first finds a name for the redemptive satisfaction of the poem in 1923 with the publication of *Harmonium*, his first collection of poetry. In the poem, “To a High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” the narrator addresses this woman of faith and, in the very first line, bluntly announces, “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame” (*CPP* 47). Stevens writes, in a letter, “By

supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry”⁴ (*Letters* 407). This is the supreme fiction, Stevens’ new experiment with poetry that brings a much-needed order back into a society suffering under a lack of focus and a total lack of belief, but a fervent need for both. Poetry is supreme in that it is light, life affirming, earth affirming, playful, enchanting, mysterious, and, most of all, aware of its own fictiveness. And further, the poem is such an effortless and agreeable thing in which to believe. Stevens proclaims, “...how easy it is suddenly to believe in the poem as one has never believed in it before, suddenly to require of it a meaning beyond what its words can possibly say, a sound beyond any giving of the ear, a motion beyond our previous knowledge of feeling” (*CPP* 845).

Stevens’ poetic development of the supreme fiction, of this new kind of poetry that rises to sit upon God’s vacated throne, re-enchanting reality by introducing order and fresh metaphor, has to it an integral component that is necessarily performative. And in his great poem, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens gets at the nucleus of the matter, informing and illustrating, “in his measure and in his style,” how the poem weaves its magic. As Stevens writes, “It is implicit in the title that there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction,” and in “Notes,” he sets out to show us how (*Letters* 430).

⁴ It is perhaps worth noting, or, at the very least humorous to note, that Stevens had a bit of an argument with himself as to the exact definition of his supreme fiction, whether or not he meant precisely and only poetry. There is not much to be gained by examining his rhetoric in the body of this project because he seems so uncertain with himself, and because overall, he does imply the supreme fiction as poetry. I am copying here a series of letters in which Stevens examines and reexamines the definition of his fiction:

-“By supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry” (407)

-“I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take...Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction...” (430).

-“I ought to say that I have not defined a supreme fiction. A man as familiar with my things as you are will be justified in thinking that I mean poetry. I don’t want to say that I don’t mean poetry. I don’t know what I mean” (435).

CHAPTER THREE

Notes on The Supreme Fiction

Wine and music are not good until afternoon. But poetry is like prayer in that it is most effective in solitude and in the times of solitude as, for example, in the earliest morning (CPP 903).

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

In his essay on Stevens, “The Realistic Oriole,” Northrop Frye rightly states, “Wallace Stevens was a poet for whom the theory and practice of poetry were inseparable” (Frye 161). His poetry and prose meld together in that they so perfectly inform each other, achieving a final eloquence of a single fulfillment, their collective movement toward the supreme fiction. Stevens felt perfectly comfortable composing deeply fraught and complex essays on the nature of truth, of reality, of poetry. He felt equally comfortable letting his poetry communicate these same theoretical messages themselves, in addition to the other satisfactions they were tasked with providing as fulfillments of the supreme fiction.

In “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” a poem in thirty-three cantos, he writes, “Poetry is the subject of the poem,” and this is continually true for Stevens (CPP 144). No other poet writes so tirelessly and with such constancy about little else but poetry, so that his poems are themselves a central part of his vast poetic theory. Stevens insists, also, that all of his poems be read, as he states in “A Primitive Like an Orb,” as one “central poem,” in which “one poem proves another and the whole” (CPP 378). Critics and commentators call this the “grand poem,” a title Stevens had originally proposed for *Harmonium*, but that was rejected (Chiasson). This is the way I will treat Stevens’ poems, as parts of a larger whole.

I am interested in the qualities of a poetry that takes the place of God, of a supreme fiction. In Stevens' words, "What, then, is the nature of poetry in a time of disbelief?" (*CPP* 846). In this analysis, it is my aim to take the themes provided in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," hereafter referred to as "Notes," and to cast a wider net, pulling in new themes, and other poems that embody these themes, in whole and in part. For each Stevensian imperative of the supreme fiction, I will analyze one shorter poem in its entirety that encapsulates some essential characteristic of this imperative. Beneath the section heading, I will reference one or two short stanzas from that theme in "Notes," without commentary. I will also bring in parts of longer poems, brief vignettes, to elucidate and expound upon that theme. When necessary and instructive, I may also refer to some secondary source, to a critic who provides a well-thought reading of a particular poem.

I will include a brief section to draw parallel between each imperative of the supreme fiction and a belief Nietzsche embodied, or a value he held. My aim here, is decidedly not to insist upon a Nietzschean reading of Stevens, neither is it my intention to oversimplify or underappreciate either Nietzsche or Stevens. I have established, already, several points of divergence between the two, and those will also be apparent in the poems. Instead, I seek to bring Stevens and Nietzsche together, for the purpose of this project, into a final coexistence, however loose, incomplete, or inconclusive the connection may seem.

I want, finally, to acknowledge that these are "Notes" and are essentially incomplete. My goal is to widen Stevens' scope, to begin the long process of ordering the grand poem, of conceiving "the opposite of chaos in chaos," as is the task of the poet (*CPP* 737).

Section One: It Must be Abstract

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

...

*There was a muddy centre before we breathed,
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.*

Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz

The truth is that there comes a time
When we can mourn no more over music
That is so much motionless sound.

There comes a time when the waltz
Is no longer a mode of desire, a mode
Of revealing desire and is empty of shadows.

Too many waltzes have ended. 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 order in neither sea nor sun.
The shapes have lost their glistening.
There are these sudden mobs of men,

These sudden clouds of faces and arms,
An immense suppression, freed,
These voices crying without knowing for what,

Except to be happy, without knowing how,
Imposing forms they cannot describe,
Requiring order beyond their speech.

Too many waltzes have ended. Yet the shapes
For which the voices cry, these, too, may be
Modes of desire, modes of revealing desire.

Too many waltzes—The epic of disbelief

Blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant.
Some harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music

Will unite these figures of men and their shapes
Will glisten again with motion, the music
Will be motion and full of shadows.

Analysis

I see this poem as lending itself to be broken roughly into three parts. Together, they express the chain of events in a world newly freed of its deity, the world in which the poet must learn to build a new language. The metaphor of the waltz is utilized to make a very abstract concept, that of the particular satisfactions supplied by poetry, expressible in language. The first four stanzas form the first part of the poem. These lines have an expository strain and feel a bit like taking stock. There is an awareness that something ‘has ended,’ that there is a disenchantment going on, that the world is being emptied of its shadows. Lost is the “mode of desire” and the “mode of revealing desire.” This is the waltz.

If the first four stanzas carry an explicating force and are taking stock of the shadowless world, then the second part pertains to the chaos that ensues when the waltzes have ended. There are “mobs of men” crying out, yet not knowing what for. Stevens describes this time as a time of freedom, of “an immense suppression, freed,” as though the waltz had humanity in chains. But this was a myth, a suppression, of an immense ordering force, allowing humanity to operate under pretenses that seemed its own. When the ordering force of the waltz is toppled, there is a freedom so immense that it actually binds. If man had constantly to operate under the burden of existential awareness—staring infinity in the face at every moment—even the simplest tasks would likely prove impossible. There is a necessary ordering force, allowing man to focus on the menial, everyday, and file away these other, grander thoughts. When that ordering force—in this case, the waltz—disappears, one must come face to face with the indifferent silence of a

world. That is the business of this second part of the poem, the masses in plea for some kind of structure, “requiring order beyond their speech.” But these masses don’t have the words to order their universe, are not even aware that it is order they seek.

In the third part of the poem, comprising the final three stanzas, there emerges the figure who can produce order. There is a sense, in this eighth stanza, that the voices and the crying become “modes of desire, modes of revealing desire.” These cries, perhaps, do have some ordering force, like the waltz, but are not grand enough, don’t cover enough ground. Stevens, in a letter, writes, “In trying to create something as valid as the idea of God has been, and for that matter remains, the first necessity seems to be breadth” (435). The voices from these “sudden mobs of men” trace some outline, but they have nowhere near the breadth necessary to order a world, to create the sense of purpose necessary for all. Stevens writes that these voices are crying for “shapes,” undoubtedly for the forms they have lost, their gods, their idols, their law on golden tablets. Again, in part three, there is a sense of a certain death of meaning, a disbelief blaring “oftener and soon.” In the final four lines, the hero emerges to “unite these figures of men and their shapes.” This hero is that same mountain-minded Hoon from stanza three. He is Wallace Stevens himself. He is the poet of modernity re-enchanting the world, filling it with all the little shadows and mysteries that man needs to survive. He is Zarathustra, descending the mountain to preach a new message to his flock.

Nietzschean Veil

For Nietzsche, finding pleasure in difficulty is paramount, and this is evident in virtually all of his philosophy. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche concentrates a good deal of his energy on sorting out his position on silence, secrecy, and a kind of willed misunderstanding. He writes, “Whatever is profound loves masks” (40). The mask, in Nietzsche is a playful imposition

between the self and the world, a concrete affirmation of the unknowable. Rather than lamenting the mask, as might be typical of the very philosophic truth-seeking project Nietzsche despises, Nietzsche celebrates the mask for the beauty it brings to the world and for the questions it refuses to answer. “Every profound thinker is more afraid of being understood than of being misunderstood,” writes Nietzsche (*BGE* 290). Profundity, for Nietzsche, strives for a “citadel and a secrecy,” for a “burial in silence” (*BGE* 26, 40). Nietzsche praises the idea of--and in some ways embodied--the hermit philosopher who violently refuses to be understood, who favors silence as a safety and great preserver of profundity.

Also a part of his depth philosophy is an appreciation for surfaces, for their beauty, their protection, and for the hint they provide of something underneath. Nietzsche extols the endless surface, the perpetual continuum of layer and veils. “Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live,” he exclaims in the Preface to *The Gay Science*, “Those Greeks were superficial--out of profundity!” He praises the Greeks for their construction of an intricate, personal heaven filled with imperfect gods hopelessly muddled in human affairs, sometimes part human themselves. He praises, even, the forms, the idea of an ultimate surface upon which all others are based. Profundity is the goal, continually, in Nietzsche. But a stopping-off to admire and appreciate the surface for its enchantments and its mediation is also crucial and a key impetus for Nietzsche’s appreciation of art.

Section Two: It Must Change

*Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths
Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause
In a universe of inconstancy.*

The Motive for Metaphor

You like it under the trees in autumn,
Because everything is half dead.
The wind moves like a cripple among leaves
And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
With the half colors of quarter-things
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon--

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
Of things that would never be quite expressed,
Where you yourself were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound--
Steel against intimation--the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

Analysis

First, the “Metaphor” in the title can be read as a metonymy for poetry. In “Adagia,” Stevens’ collection of aphorisms, he writes, “poetry is metaphor.” and hence, the “Metaphor” in the title is actually just poetry (*CPP* 973). The “motive for metaphor,” then, is the poet’s reason for writing poetry.

This poem is written entirely in the second person, addressing an unidentified “you.” Stevens may mean to address the poet (himself) or the imagination; regardless, the “you” seems a clear reflection inward rather than a statement toward some separate character just outside the frame of the poem. Stevens is referring, here, to his own imagination, his own poetic faculty, which thrives “under the trees in autumn.”

The opening three stanzas of the poem are occupied with states of incompleteness, of being in-between, or ambiguous. The poem opens upon Autumn, a season of change or of transition, nestled between the harshness and severity of summer and winter. The subject, this poetic imagination, clearly enjoys this place of flux, dwelling in things “half dead.” Now the wind rushes through these fall leaves and “repeats words without meaning.” Perhaps here there is an implication that words need not have meanings, that even the rustling of leaves can be gathered into words, though they may not signify anything recognizable.

The poem continues, skipping over the extreme winter. In the second stanza, we experience spring, filled with incomplete images of the “half colors of quarter-things.” In the same way the poet loved the fall, he loves the spring, with “the slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds.” These clouds are in the process of melting. The sky is simply a little brighter than before. There are no absolutes here, but instead solace in a world of flux states. Stevens deliberately makes no mention of summer or winter and through this omission, it is clear that his

interest in primarily in these states of flux; this poem is about a poet's appreciation, that which pushes him to write. He has little interest, at the moment, in the static extremes that either season has to offer and would rather float in the moderation of fall and spring. It becomes clear, in this second stanza, that Stevens is dealing with the imagination and reality dichotomy. As a poet, Stevens is engaged deeply with both and, in certain poems, they come to represent seasons. The imagination, in this poem and in others, are the seasons in flux, that which must change like his supreme fiction. Reality, which Stevens pronounces as "the ultimate value" in his Adagia is also a crucial element in his poetry. But the imagination, here, is that which creates the impetus for metaphor, for poetry.

In stanza three, Stevens provides this image of "The obscure moon lighting an obscure world,/ Of things that would never be quite expressed." Here is the metaphorical realm, the imaginative dreamland full of inconsistencies and ambiguities, a world where nothing can be defined. Further, this is not a world in which one is himself. There is no necessity, or want, for revelation. This "obscure world" is something to be celebrated. It is a place where the poet can be the poet, and does not have constantly to be a citizen of the world. This is Stevens' own world of the imagination, where he is not rooted firmly in reality, working as an insurance executive in Connecticut. It is a place where he can celebrate the mastery of metaphor and live in uncertainty, perhaps even travel to Basel.

Here is the explicating force in stanza four. The motive is finally revealed. Stevens writes, "Desiring the exhilarations of changes:/ The motive for metaphor." First, the repetition of the title draws attention to itself, and the colon after the first line indicates space for a definition. "The Motive for Metaphor" is change and the excitement it brings. Poetry is inspired, thus, by things in flux, such as they are in fall and spring. This is the central statement

of the poem. In a letter, Stevens writes about how this poem expands upon one of the sections in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”: “This [The Motive for Metaphor] is an illustration of the last remark that the essence of change is that it gives pleasure; that it exhilarates...” (*CPP* 430).

Here, in the middle of the fourth stanza, there is a marked shift in the poem’s language, suggesting a shift in subject. Words like “leaves,” and “spring,” and “clouds,” become “temper,” “hammer,” “steel.” There is a threat, something from which to “shrink.” These images that follow are all oppositional to the poet’s metaphorical realm. First there is “the weight of primary noon.” Like middle C on a piano, “primary noon” refers to the absolute midpoint in the cycle of a day. Though it is an in-between period, Stevens is emphasizing its position as the peak of the day, its climax when all events are in stasis, neither rising nor falling. The poet “shrinks” from this definitive and static reality.

Next, there is “The A B C of being.” He wants to dwell in an obscure world where nothing can be understood completely, even himself. However, “A B C” suggests a simplicity that is utterly contrary to Stevens’ complex vision of reality. It implies a breaking down of the self into its basic parts, and denying the beauty of intricacy. Additionally, when Stevens’ uses “A B C” here, and the letter “X” at the conclusion of the poem, the polarity of these letters represents the very extremes that he shrinks from, like summer and winter.

In this fifth and last stanza, Stevens continues to list the images of reality that interrupt the metaphorical musings. These images become increasingly harsh and abrasive as they overwhelm the poet’s more subtle, imaginative side. The only semblance of his metaphorical world remaining in this stanza is the image of “intimation,” a subtle and intricate hint, battling against “steal.” This in addition to the other jarring images of “temper,” a “hammer,” a “hard sound,” and a “sharp flash,” suggests that reality is winning a battle against metaphor. These

harsh images, especially the sharp sounds, also suggest an unpleasant sort of waking up to reality.

And after all of these clashing and discordant images comes one last rendering of “The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.” This is the reality that ultimately takes hold in the end. Stevens acknowledges here, perhaps, that it is not possible to live solely in metaphor. Even though reality can be vile and unpleasant, it is still both “vital” and “dominant,” a necessity for a livable life. But poetry must change, must be constantly in flux, ready for this battle with reality, with the hammer. The “X,” in addition to representing in this poem an extreme, is also a metaphor for reality, a necessary reality. It is a necessary reality from which there is also a need for a necessary angel, the poet, to take humanity away into a world that is constantly in flux and that, therefore, gives pleasure. Stevens is engaged in this poem with the supreme fiction and with its performance, bringing out a poem that celebrates the metaphorical world, but places it beside reality, which is also necessary. Reality is not everything, yet it is the basis of everything, and there is, after the satisfactions of the poem, a necessary return to the real. But the poem makes that more possible.

Nietzschean Metamorphosis

I would like to write a few words on the Nietzschean concept of the Three Metamorphoses from the very beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as they so perfectly encapsulate this idea of the necessity of change. The three metamorphoses of the spirit is the process by which the spirit becomes the camel, the camel becomes the lion, and the lion becomes the child. The camel is an ascetic, Christ-like figure, abandoning the comforts of life to wander deep into the desert. The camel must learn to love those who despise him and to take on the greatest burdens of life. Next, the lion is the creature of independence, of the will, who battles

and vanquishes the old values of the dragon on whose scales shines “values, thousands of years old” (27). But, the lion can only destroy; he cannot create. The child is the final step of the metamorphoses; the child is the new creator of value and the symbol of innocence and a new beginning. The child is the yes-sayer.

In some ways, the three metamorphoses follow rather uncannily the path to the death of God. First, there is the obedient camel, who learns to face the burdens of the old structures without question. Then, the lion wills and questions, and ultimately sends the gods tumbling out of the sky. But then, there is the unbearable chaos. In Nietzsche’s philosophy, that is where art, namely poetry, finds its purpose; it saves us from the overwhelm emerging out of the truth. The child, by this line of analysis, might even be taken for the poet, whose role is to create new and skeptical illusion.

Section Three: It Must Give Pleasure

*And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look*

*At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
But he that of repetition is most master.*

...

*Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
How is it I find you in difference, see you there
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?*

The Man on the Dump

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.
The sun is corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho... The dump is full
Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems
Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.

The freshness of night has been fresh a long time.
The freshness of morning, the blowing of day, one says
That it puffs as Cornelius Nepos reads, it puffs
More than, less than or it puffs like this or that.
The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green
Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea
On a cocoanut--how many men have copied dew
For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
Wit dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
One grows to hate these things except on the dump.

Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),

Between that disgust and this, between the things
 That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
 And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
 One feels the purifying change. One rejects
 The trash.

That's the moment when the moon creeps up
 To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
 One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.
 Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
 (All its images are in the dump) and you see
 As a man (not like an image of a man),
 You see the moon rise in the empty sky.

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail,
 One beats and beats for that which one believes.
 That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
 Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
 To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
 Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
 Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,

Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds
 On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
 Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
 Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
 The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
 Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.

Analysis

“The Man on the Dump” is an “ars poetica,” a poem completely about poetry. In it, Stevens actualizes the work of his new poetics. The poem itself follows the process of the creation of a supreme poetry, showing its reader—through one extended metaphor, the dump, and several smaller ones—the kind of transformations and distinctive breaks a supreme poetry must make from its predecessors.

Evening is arriving on the dump. The dump is the place where all the images of the world are retired and go to die, to rot. They are stale, trite, overused. In the first stanza, Stevens interjects a mocking “Ho-ho...” to express actual recoil from the bland image he has just presented, a “bouquet” of flowers. “The dump is full/ Of images.” Here is just the scene, the dump, in evening, teeming with images. As the stanza closes, there are some more attractive and compelling images. “The cat in the paper-bag,” expresses both on its own a curious sort of image, but also carries with it association of metaphor: “let the cat out of the bag.” Or maybe it is Schrödinger’s cat.

“The freshness of night has been fresh a long time.” The way poets write about the beauty and newness, the excitement of the nighttime has itself become stale, caught in a loop of poetic tradition. Yes, the night is fresh and lovely. But it has been *fresh* for an exceptionally long time, in exactly the same way. The “blowing of the day,” “puffs” in a rather indifferent way, uncaring or unaware of its own puffing. Now, the reader is literally hit in the face with an image, “The green smacks in the eye.” That nature is “green” and full of “dew,” the “dewiest dew,” is so often articulated that it has become an invasive metaphor, an image so used that reading it reproduced *again* is an actual blow to the eyes. Stevens pokes fun, here, at the attempt to get at the thing one wants to express by using the same words to their extremities, by trying to out-do the poetic tradition, so to speak, without fundamentally changing anything: “...heads/ Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.” This stanza ends, however, with an actual sense of freshness, of a new poetic vitality. There is the possibility that on the dump, these images can be appreciated differently, perhaps even transformed.

Springtime arrives. Amid these stale metaphors, the “azaleas and so on,” “One feels the purifying change.” How? “One rejects/ The trash.” One would assume it was all trash, but

there is a distinction here between “the trash” and the rest of what is on the dump, that which is producing this “purifying change.” Presumably the trash is that collection of images that has been completely emptied of significance and washed up in poetic practice, such that it can no longer be of any use to this man on the dump.

“That’s the moment...” There is a moment, present, crystallized in time, drawn out from the rest as a defining occasion. It is another moonrise, but unlike the one at the beginning of the poem. The moon is not compared to anything; again it creeps up, but “as the moon.” There is no need to clothe it as anything other than what it is. This man on the dump, who is the poet, the artificer in all of this, concocts a new and pristine image: the “bubbling of bassoons.” It is a purposefully obscure, unused image. As are the “elephant-colorings of tires,” a metaphor that operates on the places of both sight and touch, texture. Crucial to note, also, is that the sky is “empty.” The image of the clear sky is one Stevens sometimes uses to mark the absence of gods. There are no longer any gods clattering around above the dump. It is a place of purity, where “Everything is shed.” The man can see the moon as it is because he has dispensed with all its images.

Here is a primal image, madly beating at “an old tin can” for “that which one believes.” The stuff that is on the dump, the trash that is not really trash, is portrayed here as essential, as somehow all that man has. This belief for which one beats and beats is suddenly “what one wants to get near.” But this is a new belief, with new images, an essential imagination. Stevens takes this chance to poke fun at the poetic tradition of Romanticism, which had an obsession with the nightingale. Now that the nightingale is “peevisish,” the poem moves to an unmediated place. It seems as though the reader has caught up to the man, has grabbed onto the train of his thought and followed it directly to its source. His questions are genuine and immediate.

What is it “one finds/ On the dump?” The answer seems to be something like creation. In the final stanza, there are hints of a new creation story affirming new values that is composed by this man, right on the dump. He mutters to himself among piles, taking on a linguistic power over naming that is attributed Biblically to Adam. His whispers at the end of the poem are extremely difficult to unpack, and are intentionally so. “*Aptest eve*”: If the man on the dump is some, new manifestation of an Adam, his first task would be to name Eve. “*Invisible priest*”: Perhaps this place is still haunted by the shadow of a divinity. Another possible interpretation is that the priest, mediator between man and his God, has fallen away. “*Stanza my stone*”: The poem becomes the new base, the new immortality, taking the place of the philosopher’s stone, the religious man’s rock.

“Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.” It would be impossible to provide a sure interpretation of this final line of “The Man on the Dump.” It is interesting to approach it, though, from the angle purely of language. Nietzsche writes, in “Twilight of the Idols,” “I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have grammar” (*Portable* 483). This poem wholly embodies the supreme fiction, in its abstractness, its transformations, and its strong sense of affirmation. It is poem about the task of the poet to create new values through fresh image and metaphor. It is also a poem in which God is absent. It is curious, then, that the structural components of language seem to be falling apart at the finale. Perhaps this is Stevens experimenting with that very idea, using the conditions brought about by the absence of God to bend other kinds of order, such as grammar.

Nietzschean Affirmation

Nietzsche affirms pleasure just as much as he affirms pain. In fact, he usually views the two as fundamentally intertwined, one as a necessity for the other. Only through the often-

painful experience of certain extremes—a kind of pain Nietzsche describes in *The Gay Science* as a kind of burning “over green wood”—is it possible for man to affirm pleasure in this new way, after rejecting all that is mild. This is central to Nietzschean philosophy. He depicts this phenomenon of rebirth in section four of *The Gay Science*:

...From such abysses, from such severe sickness, also from the sickness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before.

This descent Nietzsche describes is an essential part to his philosophy of overcoming. One thinks of Zarathustra's task of continually climbing so that he can again descend to his depths, and to a people he must direct. Also, of Zarathustra's long, painful acceptance of the eternal return, culminating in “The Convalescent,” where he achieves a new sensitivity, becomes like a child again. This is the process of which Nietzsche continually speaks, a health and a pleasure that comes out of sickness and suspicion.

Nietzsche's philosophy is one of affirmation, of a final yes-saying to the body and to the world. He is interested in breaking those old tablets of religion he views as saying “no” to these things and hiding behind the shame of a pious dogma. Zarathustra proclaims, “And we should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once. And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh” (210). It is not surprising, then, that when Nietzsche attempts a criticism of his own work, he expresses a wish that he would have sung his words and not written them. For Nietzsche, there is a certain gaiety made possible

through great pain, a delight in the surfaces which only becomes possible after descending to the depths.

CONCLUSION

Here I am, finished, with so much more to be said. But I guess that is not so uncommon a predicament, neither is it such a terrible place to find oneself. There is always more to be said, especially in a project framed by the inexpressible, whose premise to grasp at—through the limits of language—a something metaphysical, redemptive, godly, a something that is axiomatically beyond explanation.

Nietzsche recognized the necessity of language as both a freedom and as a burden, a limit, and a threat. His fundamental concern was to keep words in flux, to prevent them, at all costs, from standing still. What he hated above all else were words and metaphors that became canonized, truthful, and dogmatized, in other words, mild: “What then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms-...” (“On Truth and Lie”). His aim in the essay, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” is to call to attention the fictiveness of words, to articulate how they are invented to express the thing in itself, but are eventually confused for the thing in itself and crowned as truths. Language is a moving target, a “mobile army of metaphors,” a continual falling short, the painting of a shadowy question mark at the end of every certitude. Nietzsche’s project was the project of the madman, swinging a lantern into the streets at noontime, and of the philosopher swinging a hammer by night. His task was to break into apathy, into all that was slow, lethargic, sanctified, crystallized in a castle of infallibility. He took a swing at philosophy and its project for truth, and at poetry for its inability to let go of old, dead gods.

Stevens believed equally in the necessity for language, for a poetics that would overcome nihilism in the wake of a departed God. But Stevens saw this not as a matter of sickness, health, and moral value, but simply as a desperate need for order, for a reworking and re-enchantment of

the world through the “benign illusion” supplied by poetry. Stevens, responding to this need, works out for himself a poetic theory and practice, the supreme fiction, a poetics of freshness, a poetics that “rejects the trash” (*CPP* 185). And Stevens’ conception of the supreme fiction has some important points of intersection with Nietzsche, specifically in how they both choose to deal with God’s death through art that takes up an almost celestial importance, but that carries a crucial element of skepticism and lightness. Each confer praise upon art that is abstract, that changes, and that gives pleasure. The art emphasized by both Nietzsche and Stevens carries key affirmations of the world, the body, and of some third category of shadow, a perpetual movement that takes the place of mysticism and has as its mission to re-enchant the world.

But Nietzsche simply extols this. He is the bridge, the harbinger, the one who delivers an the important message: “God is dead.” He exists and writes in a world that is fading away just as he fades, disappearing behind his text. Stevens embodies a step beyond the message. His poetry is actually the embodiment of a new kind of faith, wholly irreverent, gaudy, skeptical, metaphoric, and necessarily redemptive. Poetry, the supreme fiction, is that essentially artful belief to which Nietzsche points. With Wallace Stevens, in his prose and in his poetry, the Nietzschean injunction for a deified art is at last realized. Stevens is the poet of the future, not wholly Nietzschean, but certainly responding to a Nietzschean fearlessness and commitment to uncertainty

In my project, I have discussed the Nietzschean dictum, “God is dead.” I have explored its interpretations, its consequences, and the threat of nihilism that inevitably follows in its wake. I have looked at the varied responses of existentialist philosophers, culminating in the Nietzschean response, the movement toward a deified art. I have examined the thought-project of Stevens, studying his relationship to philosophy, his version of the death of God and of the

nobility of the poet, and the productive agitation between reality and the imagination. And I have given a reading of the theoretical framework supreme fiction, the invented faith system which is abstract, changes, gives pleasure, and which ultimately supplies the satisfaction of belief. All of this lays the groundwork for the necessarily performative work of the supreme fiction, work that Stevens explains in the prose and accomplishes, or rather, undertakes, in the poetry.

I wanted, presently, to write a project that was deeply investigative, wholly embroiled in the poetry. But the context called for attention, much attention. Nietzsche's death of God was not clear on its own. That needed explaining, as did Stevens' conception of it. The problems presented by God's disappearance, both to poetry and philosophy, were not obvious. They needed explaining. The individual approaches of Nietzsche and Stevens to truth and to language warranted attention, as well. The chapters printed here have been a very necessary foundation for the work of this project, but, with regard to the poetry, I fell short of what I ultimately wanted to accomplish. I would have liked to have cast a wider net, to have given myself time to analyze more of Stevens' poetry.

This project is complete. It stands as a whole. But, given time, I hope to make it part of a larger whole, of a project that not only lays out the groundwork for a poetic theology, but also investigates and assesses the supreme fiction in practice, in its performative aspect. The consequent section to this project, as I see it, would be composed of several sections, each an intricate study within the poetry of a single component to Stevens' fiction, each connecting back to a key facet of Nietzschean philosophy, such as perspectivism, yes-saying, affirmation of the world, of the body.

The premise of this project, all that I have said and tried to say, is this--that language, however imperfect, lying, and illusory, creates truth and is everything we have. Cling to words, even as they wax, wane, disappear entirely. Cling to words and delight in their transformations, their volatilities, their flightiness. Cling to words and know that they are not real nor are they perfect. But also know that they are exactly what is needed in every moment. I chose for the title of this project, "*stanza my stone*," because it so perfectly encapsulates a belief in poetry, a feeling of affection and of love, that I have long shared, but struggled to put into words.

*In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and the images and rhythms with all your capacity
to love anything at all*

-Wallace Stevens

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