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THE GODS THAT BOUCHER KILLED: A STUDY OF THE USE OF CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVEWS

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THE GODS THAT BOUCHER KILLED:

A STUDY OF THE USE OF CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Division in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science

By

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KANSAS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE
Pittsburg, Kansas
July, 1958

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Dr. Rebecca Patterson

Dr. John Q. Reed

With thanks to Dr. Ellis Gale Shields

and Dr. Charles E. Guardia

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PREFACE

"Poetry is my way of making the world palatable. It's a way of making one's experience, almost wholly inexplicable, acceptable."[1] Thus spoke Wallace Stevens, 1879-1955.

Friar and Brinin in their Modern Poetry state:

> The use of metaphysical and symbolist devices has grown out of the modern poet's search for a mythology which might replace that of the degenerating Christian culture, and which might offer him some concrete body of belief for metaphor and metaphisic.[2]

Wallace Stevens in his search for a satisfying answer to man's existence and his method of adapting himself to that existence has developed a mythology of some three hundred characters, including Biblical, classical mythological, historical, and standard fictional characters. His *dramatis personae* also includes over one hundred original creations, such as Chief Iffucan, Canon Aspirin, Professor Eucalyptus, Augusta Moon, etc. Speaking of modern poets in general, and of Wallace Stevens in particular, Lloyd Frankenberg surmised, "Inventing an imaginary world, an idol of reality, we enlarge our ideas of reality, a true form of worship."[3]

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[1]"Prize Pies," *Time*, LVI (September 25, 1950), 110.

[2]Kimon Friar and John Malcolm Brinin, *Modern Poetry: American and British* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), p. 421.

[3]Lloyd Frankenberg, *Pleasure Dome: On Reading Modern Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), p. 257.

No one has made a study of the mythology of Wallace Stevens. Scattered comments among the numerous periodical articles refer occasionally to the characters in the poem being analyzed, but no concentrated effort has been made to amass his characters and view them as a whole. It is the purpose of this study to present the classical mythological characters of Stevens' personae: to evaluate their importance in the poetry as a whole and to fix their relationship with the other members of Stevens' imaginary world. To achieve these points, four steps shall be followed: (1) an analysis of the poem which involves one or more mythological characters, (2) an identification of the god or hero and his chief attributes, (3) an interpretation of his qualities in the specific poem, and (4) a statement of his relationship to other classical mythological figures used in Stevens' poetry.

"We use analysis properly," states Blackmuir in his Form and Value in Modern Poetry, "in order to discard it and return that much better equipped to the poem."[4] This, to some extent, shall be the purpose of this study as it has been in the very few studies published concerning the works of Wallace Stevens. In "A Prefatory Note" to his critical study of Stevens, The Shaping Spirit, William Van O'Connor declares:

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[4]R. P. Blackmuir, Form and Value in Modern Poetry (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1957), p. 186.

> My purpose in publishing this examination will be served if it makes Stevens' poetry understandable in a fuller and more coherent way for those among his readers who have not had occasion to examine it in its entirety, or having read it entire wish to compare their understanding of it with another reader.[5]

O'Connor's valuable book discusses the major poems of the poet written up to 1950, five years before Stevens' death. "Despite its importance," O'Connor comments:

> the poetry of Wallace Stevens had not received critical attention of the kind lavished on the poetry of T. S. Eliot or W. B. Yeats. . . Although a few critics have recently begun to give his poetry more careful scrutiny, and many younger poets, as students of his work are greatly in his debt, further detailed studies such as those undertaken by the late Hi Simons are needed before this definitive and exhaustive assessment of his poetry will be possible.[6]

Samuel French Morse, a poet, the editor of Stevens' Opus Posthumous, and a personal friend of the poet, is at work on a critical biography.

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[5]William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), p. vii.

[6]Ibid.

CHAPTER I

A cursory glance at any contemporary poetry anthology will reveal a quantity of classical names. The modern poets are, of course, not the first to incorporate the classical mythologies into their work. The classicists themselves used the characters of their religion as active actors in narrative poetry and in those myths explaining natural phenomena. The neo-classic poets used these same characters as masks or allegorical figures. The romanticists used them primarily for purposes of allusion, while the realists and naturalists oftentimes purposely avoided these creations of an earlier civilization. The <u>poet moderne</u>, however, once again makes use of this vast cultural expression of early Western civilization. To examine the use of classical mythology in modern poetry, the works of Wallace Stevens have been studied and analyzed with this view in mind: Where does classical mythology fit in the scheme of modern poetry?

In a writing career of approximately forty years, Wallace Stevens used thirty-four mythological creatures in thirty-two poems. Friar and Brinin define mythology in the following terms:

> Myths are projected dreams of the deep subconscious of a race, expressing the needs, fears, wishes, and aspirations of a people. Although symbols differ, all myths are representations of the same basic compulsions. When they are most complete, myths define the relationship of man to himself and to God

> in such a way that there is no distinction between symbol and meaning. A poet may then use the mythology of his age to present, in concrete symbols embodying a metaphysic, the most complete expression of his time. As a civilization declines, the chasm between symbols and their meaning widens until symbols become decorative form and their meaning becomes abstracted into philosophy. . . . A mythology may serve as a guide, explaining conduct and regulating ethics on both material and spiritual planes.[1]

Many modern poets find that the Christian mythology for them has become decadent and unsatisfying. Frankenburg reflects this in his statement, "The myths that have come down to us do not suffice, since we no longer 'believe' them. We either deny or make dogma of them; both pretensions to 'knowledge.'"[2]

Stevens tried neither to deny nor to make dogma of the Christian mythology: instead he incorporated the meaningful-to-him parts of it into a new and personal mythology. "After one has abandoned a belief in god," he states in his Adagia, a notebook which he did not intend to publish, "poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."[3] Again in this notebook, we find such philosophies as: "God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry."[4]

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[1]Friar and Brinin, *loc. cit.*

[2]Frankenburg, *loc. cit.*

[3]Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 158. Hereafter this work is referred to in footnotes as *Opus Posthumous*.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 167.

"God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)";[5] "There is no difference between god and his temple";[6] and "It is the belief and not the god that counts."[7]

But Stevens also found a place in his philosophy for the ancient gods and heroes of classical mythology. "The greatest piece of fiction: Greek mythology," he states in his Adagia. "Classical mythology but Greek above Latin."[8] He set out to make an imaginary world in which imagination itself was the chief virtue, but "eventually an imaginary world is entirely without interest."[9] Poet Robert Lowell in an essay, "Imagination and Reality," states that "The subject throughout Stevens' poems is the imagination and its search for forms, myths, or metaphors that will make the real and the experienced coherent without distortion or simplification."[10] William Van O'Connor also states this idea in his Shaping Spirit.[11] "Stevens' paganism is a world view believed in and lived by," comments Warren Garrier in a discussion of Stevens.

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[5] Ibid., p. 172.

[6] Ibid., p. 164.

[7] Ibid., p. 162.

[8] Ibid., p. 178.

[9] "Stevens' Adagia," Poetry, XC (April, 1957), 44.

[10] Robert Lowell, "Imagination and Reality," The Nation, CLXIV (April 5, 1947), 400.

[11] O'Connor, op. cit., p. 30.

> It accepts the meaning of Greek beliefs while aware of all that has meaning fully transpired in man's experience since the Greeks; and it uses the trappings (pagan as well as some Christian) much as the later Greeks used them, in their symbolic or poetic sense.[12]

Stevens identifies his use of the classical gods in an essay entitled "Two or Three Ideas," which appeared first in the College English Association's Chapbook in October, 1951.[13] In it he states that "in an age of disbelief, when the gods have come to an end, . . . men turn to a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style of bearing themselves in reality."[14]

It is logical that Stevens should make great use of the sun gods since the sun is an almost constant symbol of reality in his poetry. Apollo and Phoebus, as well as numerous heroes and gods who have lost their identity as sun personifications to most moderns, appear periodically throughout Stevens' writing career. His most popular image, however, is the moon as a symbol of the imagination, which finds less identification with the classical gods in his poems. All too often he merely calls imagination the moon, although it occasionally appears as Medusa or some similar character no longer associated with the moon in popular conceptions. His moon often appears under Christian guise; his sun, pagan.

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[12]Warren Carrier, "Wallace Stevens' Pagan Vantage," Accent, XIII (Summer, 1953), 167-68.

[13]Opus Posthumous, pp. 202-16.

[14]Ibid., p. 209.

"Stevens' central problem has always been the same," diagnoses Louis L. Martz. "It is the adjustment of man to a universe from which the supernatural and mythical have been drained, and in which the human imagination is consequently starving."[15]

Quite often in his works Stevens mirrors the jotting in his Adagia, "The death of one god is the death of all."[16] This reiterated theme reflects Stevens' apparent sorrow that the world's most imaginative religion was dead. He treats the subject of the death of the gods in his essay, "Two or Three Ideas."[17] Stevens concludes this essay with the idea that a man creates his poetry just as he creates his gods--in his own image.

Stevens' "companions, a little colossal," include thirty-four classical mythological figures. They may be placed within the categories of major gods, minor gods, and heroes. They shall be discussed in the body of this work under these divisions. Only six of the personae are major gods: Apollo, Jove, Jupiter, Phoebus, Venus, and Vulcan. Since Apollo and Phoebus may be used synonymously, as well as Jove and Jupiter, Stevens technically uses only four major gods in his mythology.

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[15]Louis L. Martz, "Wallace Stevens: The Romance of the Precise," The Yale Poetry Review, XXXVI (Autumn, 1946), 14.

[16]Opus Posthumous, p. 165.

[17]This portion of the essay is presented in the Appendix.

The fifteen minor gods employed in his poetry may be subdivided into the categories of Greek and Roman. The Greek minor deities are Ananke, the Cyclops, Melpomene, Proserpine, and Triton. The Roman ones include Cupido, Fides, Flora, Fortitudo, Justitia, Patientia, Persephone, Phosphor, Saturn, and Vertumnus. Of these only Proserpine and Persephone are counterparts.

Of the thirteen heroes used by Stevens, six of them were metamorphosed into other than human forms: Arachne, Atlas, Hercules, Hyacinth, Medusa, and Narcissus. His remaining heroes, with the exception of Remus, are remembered in connection with the Trojan War: Aeneas, Agamemnon, Andromache, Hecuba, Penelope, and Ulysses.

Hesper and Romulus are alluded to in Stevens' poetry, but not mentioned by name. Since they are involved quite actively in the poems concerning Phosphor, Medusa, and Remus, they shall be treated as well as Stevens' named gods and heroes.

> The prologues are over. It is a question now,
> Of final belief. So, say that final belief
> Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.
>
> That obsolete fiction of the wide river in
> An empty land; the gods that Boucher killed;
> And the metal heroes that time granulates--
> The philosophers' man alone still walks in dew,
> Concerning an immaculate imagery.[18]

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[18]Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 250. This work is hereafter referred to in the footnotes as Collected Poems.

In these lines from "Asides on the Oboe," Stevens bemoans the fact that it is the theoretical man of the philosophers that still has a fate. "'The gods that Boucher killed,'" surmises Hi Simons in his "Genre of Wallace Stevens," "may be considered to refer to all anthropomorphic mythologies so familiarized and rationalized since the eighteenth century as to lose their force as objects of veneration."[19] The following pages attempt to show how Wallace Stevens reclothes these gods with cloaks of meaning and importance.

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[19] Hi Simons, "The Genre of Wallace Stevens," The Sewanee Review, LIII (Autumn, 1945), 570.

CHAPTER II

Robert Graves assures us in his introduction to The Greek Myths that ancient Europe had no gods. "The Great Goddess was regarded as immortal, changeless, and omnipotent; and the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious thought."[1] Eventually, however, the idea of "Male Kinship" was realized:

> The familiar Olympian system was then agreed upon as a compromise between Hellenic and pre-Hellenic views: a divine family of six gods and six goddesses, headed by the co-sovereigns Zeus and Hera and forming a Council of Gods in Babylonian style.[2]

Of these gods, Stevens makes use of the Phoebus-Apollo, the Jupiter-Jove, Venus, and Vulcan.

Apollo is used in an allegorical sense of representing knowledge in "The Sail of Ulysses."[3] This poem was written for the Phi Beta Kappa exercises at Columbia University in 1954. Samuel French Morse states that

> The real difficulty with it, for Stevens, seems to have been his uncertainty about being able to write a poem that would accommodate the theme of the Columbia University Bicentennial without lapsing into banality or mere artificiality. . . . Although he would not allow it to be printed, he salvaged from it the poem "Presence of an External Master of Knowledge" and the title of the charming lyric "A Child Asleep in Its Own Life."[4]

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[1]Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1955), I, 11.

[2]Ibid., p. 20.

[3]Opus Posthumous, p. 99.

[4]Ibid., p. xxiii.

Many of Steven's poems consist of a stated theme with elaborations of that theme. "The Sail of Ulysses" revolves about a quotation found in Section I:

> Then knowledge is the only life
> The only sun of the only day,
> The only access to true ease,
> The deep comfort of the world and fate.[5]

Richard Ellmann says that the sun in the poetry of Wallace Stevens "can be called God or the Imagination . . . though these terms are only metaphors for what is ultimately a mystery to be worshipped rather than fathomed."[6] In his catalogue of epithets of knowledge, Stevens includes this mysterious, mystical element in section IV:

> The unnamed creator of an unknown sphere,
> Unknown as yet, unknowable,
> Uncertain certainty, Apollo
> Imagined among the indigenes. . . .[7]

When man obtains a "freedom at last from the mystical," Stevens maintains, man shall discover perfection, namely: "himself." In cutting this poem from eleven stanzas to four for publication as "Presence of an External Master of Knowledge," however, the allusion to Apollo was omitted.

Apollo's first appearance in Stevens' poetry was not in quite so philosophical a mood as in "The Sail of Ulysses."

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[5] _Ibid._, p. 99.

[6] Richard Ellman, "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," _The Kenyon Review_, XIX (Winter, 1957), 101.

[7] _Opus Posthumous_, p. 101.

Stevens, who seemed to have been in a playful mood when he wrote "New England Verses" in 1923, used the older form of the god's name, Phoebus. The "Verses" consist of sixteen couplets, each bearing their individual titles. Among these we find such writings as "III, _Soupe Aux Perles_: Health-o, when ginger and fromage bewitch/ The vile antithesis of poor and rich" and "IV, _Soupe Sans Perles_: I crossed in '38 in the _Western Head_./ It depends which way you crossed, the tea-belle said."[8] It may be assumed that sections VII and VIII were written in much the same mood. Since the poems are short, they shall be quoted entirely, then discussed.

VII

Artist in Tropic

> Of Phoebus Apothicaire the first beatitude:
> Blessed, who is his nation's multitude.[9]

The following account is found in Graves' _The Greek Myths_:

> 2. One component in Apollo's godhead seems to have been an oracular mouse--Apollo Smintheus ('Mouse-Apollo') is among his earliest titles--consulted in a shrine of the Great Goddess, which perhaps explains why he was born where the sun never shone, namely underground. Mice were associated with disease and its cure, and the Hellenes therefore worshipped Apollo as a god of medicine and prophecy. . . . Python's pursuit of Apollo recalls the use of snakes in Greek and Roman houses to keep down mice.[10]

Apollo's gift of prophecy would perhaps qualify him to be delivering beatitudes, and certainly a Mouse-Apollo would

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[8] _Collected Poems_, p. 104.

[9] _Ibid._, p. 105.

[10] Graves, _op. cit._, pp. 56-7.

believe that the first-blessed would be he who is "his nation's multitude." Stevens may also be drawing a humorous parallel between the first Biblical beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"[11] and the popular proverb, "Poor as church mice."

VIII

Artist in Arctic

> And of Phoebus the Tailor the second saying goes:
> Blessed, whose beard is cloak against the snows.

The deed of Apollo that was closest to tailoring, suggests Dr. Rebecca Patterson, is the flaying of Marsyas, the satyr who challenged the god to a music contest.[12] Upon winning the contest, "Apollo took a most cruel revenge on Marsyas: flaying him alive and nailing his skin to a pine (or, some say, to a plane-tree). . . ."[13] Since culture (music, the arts) will not thrive in the Northern lands of Stevens' mythology, anyone having a device to counteract the sterility of the snows would be blessed. Little reference is found to the Biblical beatitude, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted," unless it be a warning that Marsyas should have mourned at finding the cursed

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[11]St. Matthew 5:3.

[12]Opinion expressed by Dr. Rebecca Patterson in a personal interview.

[13]Graves, op. cit., p. 77.

flute, rather than foolishly rejoicing in it and its fatal music.[14]

Phoebus appears last in the poetry of Stevens in poem I of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."[15] Here Stevens gives advice to the ephebe, the youth entering manhood. The boy can become truly alive only through idealizing imagination.[16] "Begin, ephebe," he admonishes,

> . . . by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun.

He uses the Wordsworthian idea that man becomes less imaginative as he grows older. He begs the initiate to see the sun once more as the primitive, the "ignorant man," saw it--as a god.

> Never suppose an inventing mind as source
> Of this idea nor for that mind compose
> A voluminous master folded in his fire.

Stevens now uses a theme which he usually associates with Jupiter, but here uses Phoebus instead: "The death of one god is the death of all." "Phoebus is dead, ephebe."

> But Phoebus was
> A name for something that never could be named.
> There was a project for the sun and is.

---

[14]Athena, realizing how ludicrous she looked while playing the flute, threw it down and laid a curse on anyone who picked it up. Marsyas found it and discovered that it played itself, "inspired by the memory of Athene's music." The peasants of Phrygia cried out that "Apollo himself could not have made better music, even on his lyre, and Marsyas was foolish enough not to contradict them." _Ibid_.

[15]_Collected Poems_, p. 380

[16]O'Connor, _op_. _cit_., p. 112.

Frankenburg states that Stevens is now forced in the remaining passages of this poem to expand by contradiction.

> If we determine to worship the sun, the true sun, the sun beyond and behind all names for the sun, we are impelled in the next breath to name it: "bull fire," "gold flourisher." Naming it, we come much closer to an apprehension of its nameless qualities. . . .[17]

This is the boy's first task then: to perceive the "inconceivable idea of the sun."

> 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.

Thus, Stevens builds his symbol of the sun from the playful 1923 conception of a patron god of arts and medicine to a complex personification of reality by 1947.

By 1949 Stevens had an imposing array of symbols: the most common were the sun and green representing reality; the moon and blue standing for the imagination. His personae included far more than the student and the ephebe searching for truth: the Oklahoman, the shepherd, the Ecclesiast, the professor were all now being used. Summer stood for the "rich, truthfully informing activity of the senses."[18] The statue referred to man's decadent civilization.[19] These symbols found a culmination in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

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[17]Frankenburg, op. cit., p. 258.

[18]Harold H. Watts, "Wallace Stevens and the Rock of Summer," Kenyon Review, XIV (Winter, 1952), 123.

[19]O'Connor, op. cit., p. 60.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" was first published in Transactions of The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Science, December, 1949. It had been written for the Academy and read by Stevens at the evening session of its thousandth meeting the previous November.[20] There is but one classical mythological reference in the poem:

> It was
> In the genius of summer that they blew up
> The statue of Jove among the boomy clouds.[21]

This section of the poems refers again to the destruction of the most imaginative of religions. "It took all day to quieten the sky/ And then to refill its emptiness again. . ."

> There was . . .
> A knowing that something certain had been proposed,
> Which, without the statue, would be new,
> An escape from repetition, a happening
>
> In space and the self, that touched them both at once
> And alike, a point of the sky or of the earth
> Or of a town poised at the horizon's dip.

Jove, then , is used as representative of the supreme result of man's imagination: the omnipotent god of an imaginative religion. The loss, Stevens feels, is irreplaceable. He uses Jove, as Jupiter, as a similar symbol in "Academic Discourse at Havana."

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[20]Samuel French Morse, Wallace Stevens: A Preliminary Checklist of His Published Writings: 1898-1954 (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1954), p. 54.

[21]Collected Poems, p. 482.

In this poem, Stevens sets forth the doctrine that "Life is an old casino in a park."[22] The poet develops in the first two sections of this poem the thesis showing that at present, even the swans, symbols of decadence, are now dead, the rain has "swept through its boarded windows," and the leaves have "filled its encrusted fountains." But this has not always been the situation, the poet muses. When all things in the park were in perfect repair, man enjoyed them and created the myth that everything would always be perfect. But "Politic man ordained/ Imagination as the fateful sin."[23]

Stevens finds Cuba a place similar to the formerly delightful park:

> Canaries in morning, orchestras
> In the afternoon, balloons at night. That is
> A difference, at least, from nightingales,
> Jehovah and the great sea-worm. The air
> Is not so elemental nor the earth
> So near.
> But the sustenance of the wilderness
> Does not sustain us in the metropoles.[24]

"The world is not/ The bauble of the sleepless," he warns us, "nor a word/ That should import a universal pith/ to Cuba."

> Jot these milky matters down.
> They nourish Jupiters. Their casual pap
> Will drop like sweetness in the empty nights
> When too great rhapsody is left annulled
> And liquorish prayer provokes new sweats: so, so:
> Life is an old casino in a wood.[25]

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[22]*Ibid.*, p. 142.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 143.

[24]*Ibid.*, p. 142.

[25]*Ibid.*, p. 143.

It is the imagination, then, that creates Jupiters and security. The imagination gains sustenance through ideas provoked by "the wilderness." These ideas suckle the imagination as the goat Amalthea suckled the infant Jupiter in the isolated cave on Mount Ida, where Rhea had intrusted the child-god to the care of the Melian nymphs.[26]

The earliest publication form of this work was entitled "Discourse in a Cantina at Havana" in the November, 1923, Broom.[27] An interpretation of section IV of this poem is much easier with the earlier title in mind. The poet has been discussing poetry with friends at the cantina, asking such questions as, "Is the function of the poet here mere sound. .. to stuff the ear?"[28] No, he decides. Let the poet speak and the people of the world will respond.

> But let the poet on his balcony
> Speak and the sleepers in their sleep shall move,
> Waken, and watch the moonlight on their floors.

As the pople become aware of imagination and its effects, perhaps the world itself may be changed:

> And the old casino likewise may define
> An infinite incantation of our selves
> In the grand decadence of the perished swans.

Although classical mythology associates the swan with Venus, Wallace Stevens does not. Instead, he refers to her more common companion creature, the dove. A portrait of Venus

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[26]H. A. Guerber, Myths of Greece and Rome (New York: American Book Company, 1893), p. 21.

[27]Morse, op. cit., p. 46.

[28]Collected Poems, p. 144.

is found in "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard," which appeared in the December 15, 1932, issue of Contempo.[29] "You do not understand her evil mood," the poem opens. An analogy is drawn between the moon and the goddess--how one may expect the obscurity of love to diminish as does the obscurity of the moon, but is inevitably disappointed.

> If she is like the moon, she never clears
> But spreads an evil lustre whose increase
> Is evil, crisply bright, disclosing you
> Stopped in a night of vast inquietude.
> Observe her shining in the deadly trees.[30]

Love, then, according to Stevens, does not have the power to alter the world into a more favorable place as does the imagination. On the contrary, its effect is one of evil.

The Spanish theme mentioned in the title is brought into the second section of the poem. "How, then, if nothing more than vanity/ Is at the bottom of her as pique-pain/ And picador?" The more one rages at love, the poet suggests, " . . . the bliss/ She needs will come consolingly."

The multiplicity of love is accentuated in section three. Here the goddess is mentioned by name for the first time:

> The choice twixt dove and goose is over-close.
> The fowl of Venus may consist of both
> And more. . . .

Love may be as foolish as it is divine, the poet suggests.

---

[29] Opus Posthumous, p. 299.

[30] Ibid., p. 34.

He then presents a catalogue of attributes of the bird of love: feathery color-frets, paragon of lustre, voice of the "mother of all nightingales," wisdom of the harem parrot, the disdain and valiance of the eagle.

> Let this be as it may. It must have tears
> And memory and claws; . . . So composed
> This hallowed visitant, chimerical,
> Sinks into likeness blessedly beknown.

Stevens' final mention of Venus is a simple allusion found in his 1936 Owl's Clover: "A Duck for Dinner."[31] Here Stevens uses the goddess of love as a symbol of supreme luxury and leisureliness in contrast to the members of the working class toward the end of the depression following World War I. "The workers do not rise, as Venus rose,/ Out of a violet sea."[32] They rise, "but an inch at a time, and inch/ By inch, Sunday by Sunday, many men." Eventually, prophecizes the poet, "their grizzled voice will speak and be heard."

Vulcan, the lame blacksmith of the gods, appears briefly as an illusion in the poet's masterful work, "The Commedian As the Letter C."[33] William Van O'Connor contends that Stevens used the barber-valet Crispin of French drama, "the poet as a great tragic figure wandering the wastes of this

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[31]This poem is discussed fully in the section on Phosphor, p. 33.

[32]Opus Posthumous, p. 60.

[33]Collected Poems, p. 27.

world," from Jean-Francois Regnard's Le Legataire universel (1708), as the hero in this poem.[34] Early in his travels, Crispin arrives in Yucatan, where he encounters a severe storm. The terrified commedian "knelt in the cathedral with the rest,/ This connisseur of elemental fate,/ Aware of exquisite thought."[35] The danger, the ferocity of the storm, re-affirms the man's lost faith in God. In the thunder and lightning, the valet-poet finds poetry--much greater poetry than he can ever create:

> This was the span
> Of force, the quintessential fact, the note
> Of Vulcan, that a valet seeks to own,
> The thing that makes him envious in phrase.[36]

Although traditionally it is Jupiter who hurls the thunderbolts, it is Vulcan, the powerful creator-god, who forges Jupiter's weapons.[37] It is the result of Vulcan's workmanship that

> the thunder, lapping in its clap,
> Let down gigantic quavers of its voice,
> For Crispin to vociferate again.

It may be seen that although Stevens uses four of the twelve major gods of classical mythology to enrich the imagry of his poetry, they play a relatively small part as actors in his works. In only one of the seven poems employing the

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[34] O'Connor, op. cit., p. 139

[35] Collected Poems, p. 32.

[36] Ibid., p. 33.

[37] Guerber, op. cit., p. 147.

names of the major gods does that god figure as a central figure: Venus in "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard." The remaining poems contain only simple allusions and allegorical symbols of Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, and Vulcan.

CHAPTER III

Although Stevens states in his Adagia that he prefers Greek mythology to Roman, he uses but one goddess that is purely Greek: Ananke. This fatal goddess is used with the Cyclops, Melpomene, Proserpine, and Triton in a pessimistic vein, while the Roman gods are treated as more optimistic symbols.

Ananke, "necessity" or "fate," takes a major role in the mythological array of Stevens. The Greeks portrayed this posthomeric goddess as "an independent power to which gods as well as men must yield."[1] Her worship was definitely known to immerge into cult at Corinth, but only one or two other faint and dubious traces of her cult exist elsewhere.[2]

She appears first in section XII of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,"[3] then in section VIII of "The Greenest Continent" from Owl's Clover,[4] and finally in "Stanzas for 'Examination of the Hero in a Time of War.'"[5] In each of these Ananke is represented as a pitiless, unapproachable

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[1]William Sherwood Fox, Greek and Roman Mythology (Vol. I of The Mythology of All Races, ed. Herbert Gray. 13 vols.; Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1916), p. 284.

[2]"Ananke," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1954), I, 872.

[3]Collected Poems, p. 152.

[4]Opus Posthumous, p. 52.

[5]Ibid., p. 83.

god. Both Stevens and his critics refer to the goddess as male:

> He sees but not by sight.
> He does not hear by sound. His spirit knows
> Each look and each necessitous cry, as a god
> Knows, knowing that he does not care, and knows,
> Knowing and meaning that he cannot care.[6]

Stevens is consistant in referring to the goddess as a masculine deity throughout his poems. The arrogant god does not deign to take notice of the individual. William Van O'Connor states in his criticism:

> It is appropriate, Stevens says in "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit," from Transport to Summer, that if "There must be a god in the house" he be alien to us. The god of "Credences of Summer" is an "inhuman author" who cannot hear his characters speak. It is right that be so, Stevens says in Esthetique du Mal, so we may give our attention to the earth:
> It seems as if the honey of common summer
> Might be enough.[7]

The terrible goddess "with averted stride, frost that glistens on your face and hair, the sense of the serpent in you," in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," is found mirrored and enlarged upon in "The Greenest Continent." Here, "Fatal, Fateful Ananke" is the only possible god for Africa--the symbol of darkness, ignorance, and incivility. Ananke is presented as the "final god," as

> that obdurate ruler who ordains
> For races, not for men, powerful beyond
> A grace to nature, a changeless element.[8]

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[6]Ibid., p. 59. [7]O'Connor, op. cit., p. 60.

[8]Opus Posthumous, p. 59.

In her final appearance in the poetry of Stevens, Ananke represents the necessity of men going to war ("the antiquest wishing to bear virile grace before their fellows); nor do men desiring war ever find gratification. Oftentimes they must wage battle before they have become used to peace ("They had hardly grown to know the sunshine"). The goddess is merciless and unyielding.

Not so the Cyclops. Those one-eyed, giant, semi-human-formed children of Mother Earth, are quite appropriately used by Stevens as the symbols of the suns of the Underworld in his "mythology of modern death," "The Owl in the Sarcophagus."[9] In this poem the poet moves among the dead and sees the three Cyclops that accompany the departed: sleep, peace, and memory. "These forms," Stevens states, "are not abortive figures, rock,/ Impenetrable symbols, motionless."

> They move
> About the night. They live without our light,
> In an element not the heaviness of time,
> In which reality is prodigy.[10]

In section III, Stevens uses the following lines to describe that "giant body," <u>sleep</u>:

> Sleep realized
> Was the whiteness that is the ultimate intellect,
> A diamond jubilance beyond the fire,
> That gives its power to the wild-ringed eye.[11]

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[9] <u>Collected Poems</u>, p. 431.

[10] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 432.

[11] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 433.

Robert Graves mentions in a note in his The Greek Myths that "Cyclops means 'ring-eyed', and they are likely to have been tattooed with concentric rings on the forehead, in honor of the sun, the source of their furnace fires. . . ."[12] Guerber also associates the Cyclops with the sun, saying that they represent the thunder and the lightning

> whose single blazing eye has been considered an emblem of the sun. They forge the terrible thunderbolts, the weapons of the sky (Jupiter), by means of which he is enabled to triumph over all his enemies, and rule supreme.[13]

In section IV the Tartarus-imprisoned Cyclops are mentioned by name. It is peace, Stevens comments, that is "stationed at our end,"

> Always, in brilliance, fatal, final, formed
> Out of our lives to keep us in our death,
>
> To watch us in the summer of Cyclops
> Underground, a king as candle by our beds
> In a robe that is our glory as he guards.[14]

Stevens has the third Cyclop, memory, represented as a female: "she that says/ Good-by in the darkness, speaking quietly there/ To those that cannot say good-by themselves."[15]

"The names Brontes, Steropes, and Arges ('thunder,' 'lightning,' and 'brightness') are late inventions," states

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[12]Graves, op. cit., I, 32.

[13]Guerber, op. cit., p. 398.

[14]Collected Poems, pp. 434-35.

[15]Ibid., p. 431.

Robert Graves.[16] The attributes, if not the names, of these Cyclops might well be applied to the trio of Stevens, however.

> This is the mythology of modern death
> And these, in their mufflings, monsters of elegy,
> Of their own marvel made, of pit made,
>
> Compounded and compounded, life by life,
> These are death's own supremest images,
> The pure perfections of parental space,
>
> The children of a desire that is the will,
> Even of death, the beings of the mind
> In the light-bound space of the mind, the floreate
> flare. . .
>
> It is a child that sings itself to sleep,
> The mind, among the creatures that it makes,
> The people, these by which it lives and dies.[17]

The more somber side of Greek mythology is pursued still more deeply by Stevens when he chooses a Muse for "In a Bad Time," which appeared in the spring, 1948, Hudson Review.[18] He concludes this poem with an apostrophe to Melpomene, the muse of tragedy. This poem explores the economic situation of the poor, represented by the beggar. "What has he? What he has he has. But what?"[19] Stevens answers himself:

> He has his poverty and nothing more.
> His poverty becomes his heart's strong core--
> A forgetfulness of summer at the pole.

One of the attributes of the Muses, according to Anthon, is to "bring before the mind of the mortal poet the events which

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[16]Graves, op. cit., p. 33.

[17]Collected Poems, pp. 435-36.

[18]Morse, op. cit., p. 53.

[19]Collected Poems, p. 426.

he has to relate."[20] Stevens' muse is "sordid," "dressed high in heliotrope's inconstant hue."[21] The suggestion of the sun in the word <u>heliotrope</u> is strengthened by the adjective <u>high</u>. The reddish blue-red gown of the muse is later called "purple," symbol of nobility. The poet commands his muse to stress the nobility rather than the bloody sordidness of her creations:

> Speak loftier lines.
> Cry out, "I am the purple muse." Make sure
> The audience beholds you, not your gown.

An analogy is drawn between the world as a stage with the "muse of misery" as the featured actress. Once more pleading for the unfortunates who live on "bread hard found/ and water tasting of misery," he asks "Sordid Melpomene, why strut bare boards,/ Without scenery or lights in the theatre's bricks. . . ?" The muse must appear to man, the intelligence of this planet, showing stark tragedy, not the romantic apparel which can so quickly surround it to those who have not participated in it. The thinking man must be made aware of tragedy as it exists and shown that he can do something to alleviate it.

> How made would he have to be to say, "He beheld
> An order and thereafter he belonged
> To it?" He beheld the order of the northern sky.

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[20] Charles Anthon, <u>A New Classical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography, Partly Based upon the Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology by William Smith, LL. D.</u> (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1874), p. 529.

[21] <u>Collected Poems</u>, p. 427.

The Stygian aspects of the death-spring goddess Proserpine are stressed in an early poem by Stevens, rather than the fruitful, productive side of her nature. About 1920[22] Stevens wrote a short dramatic poem called "Infernale."[23] In this poem, a man, "a boor of night in middle earth," witnesses the return of Proserpine from Hades to her Mother Ceres. The poem, following a rhyme scheme of abba in iambic pentameter, includes stage directions showing pauses, vocal interpretation, costume, and lighting.

The wanderer comes upon steps "that break/ This crust of air." He wonders if life can be restored after death, for he saw a "waxen woman in a smock/ Fly from the black toward the purple air." He shouts a warning to her, "Hola! Of that strange light, beware!"

> (A woman's voice is heard, replying.) Mock
>
> The bondage of the Stygian concubine,
> Hallooing haggler; for the wax is blown,
> And downward, from this purple region, thrown;
> And I fly forth, the naked Proserpine.
>
> (Her pale smock sparkles in a light begun
> To be diffused, and, as she disappears,
> The silent watcher, far below her, hears:)
> Soaring Olympus glitters in the sun.[24]

Stevens' Triton follows the pattern of being a negative creation by destroying the faith of the poet-valet, Crispin.

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[22]Opus Posthumous, p. 298.

[23]Ibid., p. 24.

[24]Ibid., p. 25.

In "The Commedian as the Letter C"[25] Crispin, in his youth, goes off to sea. Stevens states quite plainly that Triton is a symbol of the sea, which in turn is a symbol of reality:

> Could Crispin stem verboseness in the sea,
> The old age of a watery realist,
> Triton, dissolved in shifting diaphanes
> Of blue and green? . . .
> Triton incomplicate with that
> Which made him Triton, nothing left of him,
> Except in faint, memorial gesturing,
> That were like arms and shoulders in the waves,
> Here, something in the rise and fall of wind
> That seemed hallucinating horn, and here,
> A sunken voice, both of them remembering
> And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain.
>
> * * *
>
> Crispin . . .
> . . . excepting negligible Triton, free
> from the unavoidable shadow of himself
> That lay elsewhere around him.[26]

The disillusionment of Crispin as he journies into the world is summarized by Frankenburg:

> In the face of this reality, Triton, the conventional poetic symbol, is inadequate. Crispin has lost the romantic illusion that man is the measure of his universe, "the intelligence of his soil," as the poem had begun.[27]

A more complex symbolism is built around the Roman minor deities in Stevens' poetry, and significantly they are more numerous and appear more often in his poetry.

The thirty-nine-year-old Wallace Stevens invites his mate to "celebrate/ The faith of forty, ward of Cupido. . . ."

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[25]Collected Poems, pp. 27-46.

[26]Ibid., pp. 28-9.

[27]Frankenburg, op. cit., p. 211.

in one of his best-known poems, the love song of middle-age, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle."[28]

Stevens uses the Latin form of Cupid or Eros, the god of Love. This corresponds with such Roman phrases as "'Mother of heaven, Regina of the clouds,'"[29] and "Memorabilia of the mystic spouts."[30] It is in sharp contrast, however, with the Greek "Hyacinth" of section VI,[31] the Chinese names Yangtse and Utamaro of section III,[32] and the Jewish "dark rabbi" and "rose rabbi" of section XII.[33] This wide variety of racial symbols may have been used by the poet to suggest the universality of love.

The poem itself is an endeavor to find an "oblation fit" to Cupido, love. Stevens finally identifies love with the symbol of Cupid and Venus, the dove. Using this symbol, he pictures youthful love and mature love in the last stanza:

> A blue pigeon it is, that circles the blue sky,
> On sidelong wing, around and round and round.
> A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground,
> Grown tired of flight.[34]

Only four of the deities used by Stevens are personifications of abstract qualities. These three goddesses and a

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[28]Collected Poems, p. 16.

[29]Ibid., p. 13.

[30]Ibid., p. 16.

[31]Ibid., p. 15.

[32]Ibid., p. 14.

[33]Ibid., p. 17.

[34]Ibid.

god are found in "Lions in Sweden."

> Fides, the sculptor's prize,
> All eyes and size, and galled Justitia,
> Trained to poise the tables of the law,
> Patientia, forever soothing wounds,
> And mighty Fortitudo, frantic bass.[35]

Stevens forms an analogy between these desirables--fidelity, justice, patience, and fortune--and a musically unbalanced quartet of three female voices and a "frantic bass." A touch of humor is achieved by having the bass strain to equalize the three other voices.

Hi Simons states that these "ethical absolutes" are being satirized in this poem.[36] William Van O'Connor echoes this sentiment and summarizes the poem quite briefly:

> In "Lions in Sweden" he says we hanker after "soverign images," after symbols that are informed of our beliefs. If those we have inherited--Fides, Justitia, Patentia, and Fortitudo--no longer serve us we can and will create others.[37]

Stevens assures his audience that "The vegetation still abounds with forms."[38]

Stevens often uses his mythological names in a setting far different from their place in classical mythology. An example may be found in his metamorphic portrait of Lady

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[35] Ibid., p. 124.

[36] Hi Simons, op. cit., p. 571.

[37] O'Connor, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

[38] Collected Poems, p. 125.

Flora MacMort Lowzen drawn in "Oak Leaves Are Hands."[39] Stevens places the lady near a river in India:

> In Hydaspia, by Howzen,
> Lived a lady, Lady Lowzen,
> For whom what is was other things.

Allusion to the Roman goddess of flowers, Flora, is brought into the next stanza. His adjectives suit the goddess: florid, while echoing the goddess' name, means "flowery;" feen suggests "fen" and "green;" the masquerie, evasive, and metamorphorid suggest the changing of the season and of the goddess.

> Flora she was once. She was florid
> A bachelor of feen masquerie,
> Evasive and metamorphorid.

The more macabre side of the lady appears as she ages: MacMort, "Twelve-legged in her ancestral hells," "Brooding on centuries like shells."

> So she in Hydaspia created
> Out of the movement of few words,
> Flora Lowzen invigorated
>
> Archaic and future happenings,
> In glittering seven-colored changes,
> By Howzen, the chromatic Lowzen.

Thus, the lady grows ancient, spider-like, with only her memories to occupy her mind: so unlike the gay Flora of her youth.[40]

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[39] Ibid., p. 272. See also the section concerning Hecuba in this work, p. 53.

[40] Flora is discussed further in connection with Hecuba, see p. 53.

Stevens' use of Baudelaire's doctrine of "correspondences" is illustrated by O'Connor in his chapter entitled "Resemblances and Precision."[41] He summarizes this in the following paragraph:

> Stevens' symbolist esthetic includes the translating of one sense impression into another. Poetry is identified with "sound," "music," or painting, an idea merges with a color, a thought with an odor or perfume. Presumably he believes that synesthesia is a fact of the mind which should be recognized and given its place in the language of poetry. Taken together, all the arts suggest a common concern, a reaching toward the ideal that each individually expresses in a fragmentary way.[42]

This synesthesia is smoothly achieved by Stevens in his "Things of August," which appeared in the December, 1949, issue of Poetry.[43] After punning on locusts and locus (the "disused ambit of the soul"), the poet speaks of "sun-slides," "the spirit's sex," "naked voice," "somnolent grass," etc.[44]

Into this poem, which explores the things around us as the spirit "sees" or senses them, the poet brings in "the sad smell of the lilacs."[45] "One remembered it," he recalls:

> Not as the fragrance of Persephone,
> Nor of a widow Dooley,
> But as an exhumation returned to earth . . .[46]

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[41] O'Connor, op. cit., p. 123.

[42] Ibid., p. 125.

[43] Morse, op. cit., p. 53.

[44] Collected Poems, p. 409.

[45] Ibid., p. 491.

[46] Ibid.

With these lines, Stevens adds the element of negation to the poem. Persephone, daughter of Ceres, when abducted by Hades, ate seven pomegranate seeds in the land of the dead. This, technically, should have caused her to remain forever as Hades' wife and Queen of the Underworld, but Ceres had placed a curse of unproductiveness upon the land until her daughter be restored to her. Ceres stoutly maintained:

> 'I will neither return to Olympus, nor remove my curse from the land.' Zeus then persuaded Rhea, the mother of Hades, Demeter, and himself, to plead with her; and a compromise was at last reached. Core should spend three months of the year in Hades's company, as Queen of Tartarus with the title of Persephone, and the remaining nine in Demeter's.[47]

Robert Graves points out that this myth accounts for the "winter burial of a female corn-puppet, which was uncovered in the early spring and found to be sprouting." Thus, although Persephone's return is the "fragrance" of spring and in actual practice an exhumation, Stevens states that the lilacs have nothing of death about them--neither the return of the dead to earth, nor the interment of the dead to the earth (i.e., the husband of widow Dooley).

Nevertheless, an idea of death does cling to the spring flower, Stevens concludes.

> One wished that there had been a season,
> Longer and later, in which the lilacs opened
> And spread about them a warmer, rosier odor.

Unlike Flora, Phosphor, the Morning Star, retains his classical setting in Stevens' poems. Phosphor was son of Eos,

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[47]Graves, op. cit., I, 91.

the Dawn, and Astraeus, who came of Titan stock.[48] Stevens first employs this character in "A Duck for Dinner." This book, which dealt with the politics and economic ills of the thirties and reflects the tension of that decade, was omitted by Stevens in his Collected Poems.[49] In this particular poem, Stevens wonders if cities are to become mountainous, with streets trundling "children like the sea."[50] He watches the workers in the park on summer Sundays and analyzes them. If, in theory, these people were like bees, "A shade of horror turns/ The bees to scorpions blackly-barbed." These, in turn, are metamorphosized by fear to empty "skins/ Concealed in glittering grass, dank reptile skins."[51] Thus, Stevens shows a peaceful, industrious people changed to murderers by the horror of war, and finally cast off as the outgrown skin of the wartime reptile-nation. But all is not hopeless: the working-man is exalted--"for a moment, once each century or two."

> The future for them is always the deepest dome,
> The darkest blue of the dome and the wings around
> The giant Phosphor of their earliest prayers.
> Once each century or two.

O'Connor summarizes the remainder of the poem as:

> The "abstract man" is a meaningless phrase, there are only men, formed by the world that has made them. .

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[48]Graves, op. cit., I, 149-50.

[49]O'Connor, op. cit., p. 18.

[50]Opus Posthumous, p. 61.

[51]Ibid., p. 65.

> . . Turning from the dream of heaven to the dream of the future will take "time and tinkering." Changes will come, but they should come in a way that is
>
> <u>More of ourselves in a world that is more our own</u>. . . .
>
> The "envoi to the past" was certainly one of the most preposterous planks in the political platform that foretold the brave new world. . . . The future must be in terms of what we are, "more our own." Knowing ourselves and knowing the past we cannot promise a duck on Sunday to each of a million. We can offer hope--but we should do well to remember that the future is likely to be another winding of the clock.[52]

In this poem Phosphor, the Morning Star, symbolizes the people's wish for the future--a wish made in their "morning" years. A suggestion of the promise of a duck every Sunday is aided by the clause, "The future for them is always. . ./ the wings around/ The giant Phosphor of their earliest prayers." Of course, the morning-star-duck is just as inaccessible as the promised political-reward-duck. But despite this monstrous inaccessibility, the people still dream, child-like, of the promised "wings." "When," the poet concludes, "shall lush chorals spiral through our fire/ And daunt that old assassin, heart's desire?"[53]

A more complex Phosphor appears six years later in "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" in <u>Parts of a World</u>.[54] O'Connor classifies this character in Stevens' dramatis personae as a form of the scholar. The scholar, O'Connor

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[52] O'Connor, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 63.

[53] <u>Opus Posthumous</u>, p. 66.

[54] <u>Collected Poems</u>, p. 267.

states, "has a head bulging with speculation and with wonderment. Sometimes in his pursuit of learning he loses his animality. . . . Even his final knowledge, his 'metaphysics,' however, is lost in the 'drifting waste,'"[55] In this poem, the poet observes the Morning Star trying to read by his own light and advises him of the futility of the task.

Green is mentioned much in the poem in conjunction with the star and its light. Green usually stands for reality in the poetry of Stevens.[56] This idea is substantiated when Stevens addresses the student-star as "realist." He strongly disapproves of his method of gaining knowledge, however: "The page is dark./ Yet he knows what it is that he expects."

Stevens then refers to Phosphor through a rather obscure pun, green night. First, it might be well to review the fact that the opposite of reality's green in Stevens' poetry is imagination's blue. In Sir Thomas Mallory's History of Prince Arthur, I, 131 (1470), the Morning Star is represented as the "Green Knight," while the Evening Star is the "Blue Knight."[57] The term, green night (or knight) in this poem about the Morning Star could hardly be coincidental.

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[55]O'Connor, op. cit., p. 102.

[56]Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, O. S. F., "Metamorphosis in Wallace Stevens," Sewanee Review, LX (April, 1952), 243.

[57]E. Cobham Brewer, The Reader's Handbook (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, n. d.), p. 840.

Great use of contradiction occurs also in this poem: "the page is blank," "a frame without a glass," "a glass that is empty when he looks." Finally, this poem of literary gymnastics is concluded with a portmanteau word, fusky, consisting of "fussy" and "dusky." Perhaps it is to the person who insists on reading a poem literally that the poet addresses and admonishes as Phosphor:

> Look, realist, not knowing what you expect.
> The green falls on you as you look,
>
> Falls on and makes and gives, even a speech.
> And you think that that is what you expect,
>
> That elemental parent, the green night,
> Teaching a fusky alphabet.

"A poem need not have a meaning," Stevens wrote in his Adagia, "and like most things in nature often does not have."[58]

Phosphor, the Morning Star, reappears in "One of the Inhabitants of the West," unnamed, but in the guise of Hesper, the Evening Star. The star is still a scholar reading by his own light:

> A reader of the text,
> A reader without a body,
> Who reads quietly. . . .[59]

However, Phosphor, who once read only what he wanted to read, now grown old, reads quietly a "pastoral text." He is no longer the Green Knight of Reality, but the Blue Knight of

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[58] Opus Posthumous, p. 177.

[59] Collected Poems, p. 503.

Imagination. He reads of the "Horrid figures of Medusa.[60]." Medusa, the snake-headed goddess whose stare turned men to stone, is a title of the Moon-goddess, according to Graves.[61] As such, she will die at the rising of the sun. But now she (the moon of imagination) turns cities to stone as

> These accents explicate
> The sparkling fall of night,
> On Europe, to the last Alp,
> And the sheeted Atlantic.

The sleeping cities being stilled may be called "Horrid" in that they appear to be bereft of life. But the moon has a greater influence than this mere metamorphosis of the city to stone. The star continues to read:

> These are not banlieus
> Lacking men of stone,
> In a well-rosed two-light
> Of their own.

Banlieus, of course, are "suburbs." These stone cities do not lack "men of stone," men touched by the imagination-moonlight, who, like the "rose rabbi" who has discovered the imagination,[62] walk in a rose-colored world in spite of the constant struggle of reality-versus-imagination going on about them. But then Phosphor-Hesper confesses, "I am the archangel of evening and praise/ This one star's blaze." He then muses, "Suppose it was a drop of blood. . ." shining upon the world, rather than an angelic star. Even with his

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[60]Ibid., p. 504.

[61]Graves, op. cit., I, 129.

[62]O'Connor, op. cit., p. 101.

benevolent "pastoral text"

> So much guilt lies buried
> Beneath the innocence
> Of autumn days.

The Star does not care to think of what situation the human world would be in without a single ray of imagination. The poem ends.

"Note on Moonlight" is a poetical essay on the effect of imagination on objects of reality. The property of imagination, Stevens states, is "what it evokes."[63] Imagination can so expand and elevate a mountain that it becomes more a sensation, a sense, rather than an object. Imagination, on the other hand, may also transform a distant "figure waiting on the road" into a definite object, a gunman or a lover. He continues:

> A gesture in the dark, a fear one feels
> In the great vistas of night air, that takes
> this form,
> In the arbors that are as if of Saturn-star.

Here, the planet Saturn, named after the Italian god of agriculture, might well represent to Stevens another form of reality. In his discussion of Saturn, Anthon says:

> Saturnus, then, deriving his name from sowing, is justly called the introducer of civilization and social order, both of which are inseparably connected with agriculture.[64]

Although one knows that he is secure with the "arbors" of civilization and social order, the imagination easily trans-

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[63]Collected Poems, p. 531.

[64]Anthon, op. cit., p. 780.

forms "a gesture in the dark" into the emotion fear, "into a sense, an object the less."

Stevens concludes the poem with the observation that imagination makes this world of "quietude" "active with a power, an inherent life,/ In spite of the mere objectiveness of things."[65] This purpose may be empty and absurd, he admits, "but at least a purpose,/ Certain and ever more fresh. Ah! Certain, for sure. . . ."[66]

Stevens' experimentation with the imagination is continued in "Extraordinary References."[67] Reference is made to Vertumnus, a god indigenous to ancient Rome, where he was regarded as the guardian of fruit trees, gardens, and vegetables. The poet has transplanted "a second-hand Vertumnus" to the Tulpehocken, in Pennsylvania.[68] It was here that the Zeller family, religious refugees and ancestors of Stevens, settled in 1724. "Their reality," Stevens states, "while propounding the thesis that life, not the artist, creates or reveals reality," "consisted of both the visible and the invisible."[69]

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[65]Collected Poems, p. 531.

[66]Ibid., p. 532.

[67]Ibid., p. 369.

[68]Wallace Stevens, "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems," The Necessary Angel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), p. 99. This work is hereafter referred to in footnotes as The Necessary Angel.

[69]Ibid., p. 100.

Thus, in this poem the mother finds peace as she ties three hair-ribbons in her daughter's newly braided hair (visible reality) and recalls the child's three immediate forebears (invisible reality):

> My Jacomyntje!
> Your great-grandfather was an Indian fighter.
>
> * * *
>
> My Jacomyntje! This first spring after the war
> In which your father died, still breathes for him
> And breathes again for us a fragile breath.

The sense that the father, grandfather, and great-grandfather (the invisible realities) are present in the child is heightened by the mentioning of Vertumnus, "the god who changes or metamorphoses himself."[70]

> In the inherited garden, a second-hand
> Vertumnus creates an equilibrium.

The imminent visible reality restates itself in the last line: "The child's three ribbons are in her plaited hair."

This concludes the analyses of the poems in which the minor gods appear. As seen, Stevens primarily uses the minor Greek gods either as anti-imagination symbols or as representations of reality. The minor Roman gods, on the other hand, usually represent the creative force of the imagination. They all tend to mirror Stevens' observation: "The imagination

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[70]Anthon, _op_. _cit_., p. 931.

is the liberty of the mind and hence the liberty of reality."[71]

[71] *Opus Posthumous*, p. 179.

CHAPTER IV

Stevens finds his most valuable classical mythological figures in the mortals and heroes which embroider the ancient religions. In "Three Academic Pieces," he states that if one is to formulate an accurate theory of poetry, "we must examine one of the significant components of the structure of reality--that is to say, the resemblance between things."[1] "First, then," he continues, "as to the resemblance between things in nature,"

> . . . in some sense, all things resemble each other . . . . In metaphor (and this word is used as a symbol for the single aspect of poetry with which we are now concerned--that is to say, the creation of resemblance by the imagination, even though metamorphosis might be a better word)--in metaphor, the resemblance may be, first, between two or more parts of reality; second, between something real and something imagined or, what is the same thing between something imagined and something real as, for example, between music and whatever may be evoked by it; and, third, between two imagined things as when we say that God is good, since the statement involves a resemblance between two concepts, a concept of God and a concept of goodness.[2]

"Variations on a Summer Day" starts off showing the resemblances of things in nature: "Say of the gulls that they are flying/ In light blue air over dark blue sea."[3] The comparisons shift from "The rocks of the cliffs are the

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[1] <u>The Necessary Angel</u>, p. 71.

[2] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 72.

[3] <u>Collected Poems</u>, p. 232.

heads of dogs" and "The leaves of the sea are shaken and shaken" to "The moon follows the sun like a French/ Translation of a Russian poet." This poem is, as the poet states, "an exercise in viewing the world."[4]

A rather intricate set of relationships is attempted in section XIV. It begins with the simple statement, "Words add to the senses."[5] Then follow three comparisons; among these is "The Arachne[6] integument of dead trees." Here the poet not only gives the reader a comparison between spider webs and dead limbs, but brings in ideas of antiqueness, punishment, metamorphosis, etc. He combines and compares this with the other comparisons quite skillfully:

> Words add to the senses. The words for the dazzle
> Of mica, the dithering of grass,
> The Arachne integument of dead trees,
> Are the eye grown larger, more intense.

The poem in its entirety (twenty sections) becomes a comparison of the various thoughts of a man standing on the deck of a boat reviewing a summer day. It is not until the last stanza that the reader realizes that the man has been

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[4]*Ibid*., p. 233.

[5]*Ibid*., p. 234.

[6]Arachne was a proud young lady who boasted that she would have no fear to match her weaving skill with Minerva's. The contest was held and Arachne defeated. "Bitterly did Arachne now repent of her folly; and in her despair she bound a rope about her neck, and hung herself. Minerva saw her discomfited rival was about to escape: so she quickly changed her dangling body into a spider, and condemned her to weave and spin without ceasing,--a warning to all conceited mortals." Guerber, *op*. *cit*., pp. 59-60.

contemplating suicide. This stanza contrasts quite dramatically with the first stanza of gulls in "light blue air over dark blue sea." As a ship approaches,

> You could almost see the brass on her gleaming,
> Not quite. The mist was to light what red
> Is to fire. And her mainmast tapered to nothing,
> Without teetering a millimeter's measure.
> The beads on her rails seemed to grasp at transparence.
> It was not yet the hour to be dauntlessly leaping.[7]

A similar exercise in comparison is found in "The Public Square." This appeared in the April, 1923, Measure, and is naturally not so complex as Stevens' later works. In describing a public square, Stevens shows how, as the evening falls, the building, pylon and pier, disappears and "A mountain-blue cloud arose/ Like a thing in which they fell. . . ."[8] After metamorphosizing the buildings into a mountain range, Stevens moves quite smoothly into an allusion to Atlas.

> It turned cold and silent. Then
> The square began to clear.
> The bijou of Atlas, the moon,
> Was last with its porcelain leer.

This poem's first title was "How the Constable Carried the Pot across the Public Square."[9] The improbability of the Constable having a vivid enough imagination to change the buildings into a mountain created from a Greek myth may have caused Stevens to change the title simply to "The Public Square." In this poem, as in others, the moon is a persistent

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[7]Collected Poems, p. 236.

[8]Ibid., p. 108.

[9]Morse, op. cit., p. 45.

symbol of the sensibilities and imagination,[10] the ornament of the myth of Atlas.

Another poem, which appeared in 1923, was the "New England Verses." Hercules, god of all athletic games,[11] is the sole mythological character in the first pair of couplets.[12]

I

The Whole World Including the Speaker

> Why nag at the ideas of Hercules, Don Don?
> Widen your sense. All things in the sun are sun.

Don Don may be taken as another of Stevens' names for the student, the searcher for reality. He is ennobled with the Spanish title, Don. The ideas, or deeds, of Hercules were, of course, all physical.[13] These are not to be scoffed at by the intelligent man, warns Stevens. "Widen your sense." We are in a physical world of the sun. "The sun in all of Stevens' poetry," reiterates O'Connor, "is the life force, physical existence, the unthinking source." These qualities embodied in Hercules are not to be scorned. The world is a world of reality and brute, unthinking strength.

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[10] O'Connor, op. cit., p. 103.

[11] Guerber, op. cit., p. 417.

[12] Collected Poems, p. 104.

[13] Hercules' tasks were the destruction of the Nemean lion, the killing of the Hydra of Lerna, the capture of the Stag of Cerynea, the capture of the Erymanthian boar, the cleansing of the Augean stables, the capture of the Cretan bull, the taming of Dionedes' steeds, the theft of Hippolyte's girdle, the slaying of the Stymphalian birds, the capture of the divine cattle of Geryones, the plucking of the Hesperian apples, and the fetching of Cereberus from the lower world. Guerber, op. cit., pp. 219-29.

In "II: The Whole World Excluding the Speaker," the moon, symbol of the imagination, holds sway. "I found between moon-rising and moon-setting/ The world was round. But not from my begetting." Ironically enough, the truth discovered by moon-light, the imagination, is universally accepted, but Don Don cannot accept his discoveries made in the sunlight. The poet's chief regret in these two couplets is that it was not his imagination that first begat the idea.

A second classical mythological figure found in "Le Monocle de Monocle" is Hyacinth.[14] Hyacinth, a youth of extraordinary beauty, was beloved of Apollo and Zephyrus, the West Wind.

> He returned the love of Apollo; and as he was once playing at quoit with the god, Zephyrus, out of jealousy, drove the quoit of Apollo with such violence against the head of the youth that he fell down dead. From the blood of Hyacinthus there sprang the flower of the same name (hyacinth), on the leaves of which appeared the exclamation of woe Ai, Ai.[15]

In speaking of "men at forty," Stevens states that "When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink/ Into the compass and curriculum/ Of introspective exiles, lecturing." This is not the time to be bewailing "Ai, Ai," the loss of love. "It is a theme for Hyacinth alone."[16]

Since Medusa is discussed on page 38 of this study under the section on Phosphor, Narcissus shall now be considered.

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[14] Collected Poems, p. 15.

[15] Anthon, op. cit., p. 382.

[16] Collected Poems, p. 15.

He is found mentioned in "Jumbo,"[17] a study of the relationship between the ego and reality. Stevens' theory of this relationship is set forth in "Three Academic Pieces."[18] He explains narcissism in the following manner:

> . . . Narcissus did not expect, when he looked in the stream, to find in his hair a serpent coiled to strike, nor, when he looked in his own eyes there, to be met by a look of hate, nor, in general, to discover himself at the center of an inexplicable ugliness from which he would be bound to avert himself. On the contrary, he sought out his image everywhere because it was the principal of his nature to do so and, to go a step beyond that, because it was the principle of his nature, as it is of ours, to expect to find pleasure in what he found. Narcissism, then involves something beyond the prime sense of the word. It involves, also, this principle, that as we seek out our resemblance we expect to find pleasure in doing so; that is to say, in what we find. So strong is that expectation that we find nothing else. . . . Narcissism itself is merely an evidence of the operation of the principle that we expect to find pleasure in resemblances.[19]

Stevens introduces "jumbo, the loud general-large," who "singsonged and singsonged, wildly free," in the first stanza of this poem. Sister M. Bernetta Quinn in her "Metamorphosis of Wallace Stevens" suggests that "the perceiving agent is symbolized often by the wind, called Jumbo in the poem of that name, a'companion in nothingness' who although a transformer is himself transformed."[20] This elephantine creature "fatly soft/ And wildly free, whose clawing thumb/ Clawed on

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[17]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 269.

[18]<u>The Necessary Angel</u>, p. 71.

[19]<u>Ibid</u>., pp. 79-80.

[20]Quinn, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 235.

the ear these consonants," bears a definite relationship to "us." "Who was the musician? . . . Who the transformer, himself transformed? . . ." the poet queries. What is reality and what is merely narcissistic reflection of ourselves?

The rock in Stevens' poetry, says Babette Deutsch, is truth. The poet shows it eventually as the symbol for "that reality which it was the poet's labor, as it was his joy, to seek and to declare."[21] Image derives from the Latin root word, imitari--"to imitate." It is significant, therefore, that Stevens should end this poem on the relationship between the ego and reality with this statement: "There are no rocks/ And stones, only this imager."

> Proposita: 1. God and the imagination are one. 2. The thing imagined is the imaginer.
> The second equals the thing imagined and the imaginer are one. Hence, I suppose, the imaginer is God.[22]

Although Stevens consistently used classical mythological images throughout his writing career, his earlier poems do not use them to express the complexities of the poet's philosophy. In 1919, "Ploughing on Sunday" presented a modern Romulus proceeding to mark out, not the pomoerium of Rome, but that of North America. The sun-rise brings to the view of the young giant, not the twelve ominous vultures, but

> The white cock's tail
> Tosses in the wind.
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Glitters in the sun.[23]

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[21]Babette Deutsch, "Contemporary Portrait No. 2: Wallace Stevens," Poetry London-New York, I (Winter, 1956), 46.

[22]Opus Posthumous, p. 178. [23]Collected Poems, p. 20.

He then shouts out to his brother,

> Remus, blow your horn!
> I'm ploughing on Sunday,
> Ploughing North America.
> Blow your horn!

The horn blows, the "turkey-cock's tail/ Spreads to the sun," but "the white cock's tail/ Streams to the moon."

> Water in the fields.
> The wind pours down.

Thus, the tale of Rome is re-created, but this time there are no portents of a fall of an empire: the sun will run its course, and the virility of the nation will be coupled with creative imagination. To the Stevens of 1919, the future was bright.

Throughout his career, Stevens borrowed greatly from the Trojan War with its multitudes of heroes. Aeneas is the personification, the form, of tradition in "Recitation after Dinner,"[24] a soliloquy on the nature of tradition. Stevens states that tradition is not a set of laws, wisdom, memory, nor experience, but

> It has a clear, a single, a solid form,
> That of the son who bears upon his back
> The father that he loves, and bears him from
> The ruins of the past, out of nothing left,
> Made noble by the honor he receives,
> As if in a golden cloud. The son restores
> The father. He hides his ancient blue beneath
>
> His own bright red. But he bears him out of love,
> His life made double by his father's life,
> Ascending the humane. This is the form
> Tradition wears, the clear, the single form
> The solid shape, AEneas seen, perhaps,

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[24]Opus Posthumous, p. 86.

> By Nicholas Poussin, yet nevertheless
> A tall figure upright in a giant's air.

Stevens, himself, explains these passages in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet."[25] When "we" are remembering an age, looking at the impression it leaves,

> . . . what we are remembering is the rather haggard background of the incredible, the imagination without intelligence, from which the younger figure is emerging, stepping forward in the company of a muse of its own, still half-beast and somehow more than human, a kind of sister of the Minotaur. This younger figure is the intelligence that endures. It is the imagination of the son still bearing the burden of the obscurities of the intelligence of the old. It is the spirit out of its own self, not out of some surrounding myth, delineating with accurate speech the complications of which it is composed. For this Aeneas, it is the past that is Anchises.

Among the first poems published by Stevens, "Phases,"[26] are found allusions to Agamemnon, commander-in-chief of the Greek forces during the Trojan War. Stevens, at this time, was preoccupied with the Great War and states in section II "that it was not/ Like Agamemnon's story." The poem concludes,"Only, an eyeball in the mud,/ And Hopkins,/ Flat and pale and gory!"

Agamemnon appears again in section IV of the poem:

> Death's nobility again
> Beautified the simplest men.
> Fallen Winkle felt the pride
> Of Agamemnon
> When he died.[27]

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[25] <u>The Necessary Angel</u>, pp. 52-53.

[26] "Poems from 'Phases'," <u>Opus Posthumous</u>, p. 3.

[27] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 4.

This is quite as ironic in tone as the first selection, since Agamemnon was not killed in battle. Instead, he was murdered by his wife and her lover upon his return from the war.

Thus, the first allusion contrasts the First World War with the Trojan, while the second contrasts the Greek prince with the "simplest" war casualties--

> A dead hand tapped the drum,
> An old voice cried out, "Come!"
> We were obedient and dumb.

Stevens realizes the ridiculousness of comparing a modern soldier with an antique hero. It is the same poet, who in 1951, when receiving the National Book Award, said, "It means nothing to compare a modern poet with the poet of a century or more ago. It is not a question of comparative goodness. It is like comparing a modern soldier, say, with an ancient one, like comparing Eisenhower with Agamemnon."[28]

Andromache, the wife of Hector, is described as "one of the noblest and most amiable female characters in the Iliad."[29]

> . . . Her father and her seven brothers were slain by Achilles at the taking of Thebe, and her mother, who had purchased her freedom by a large ransom, was killed by Diana. . . . On the taking of Troy her son was hurled from the wall of the city and she herself fell to the share of Neoptolemus (Pyrrhus), the son of Achilles, who took her to Epirus, and to whom she bore three sons, Molossos, Pielus, and Pergamus. She afterwards married Helenus, a brother of Hector, who ruled

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[28] Opus Posthumous, p. 244.

[29] Anthon, op. cit., p. 61.

> over Chaonia, a part of Epirus, and to whom she bore Cestrinus. After the death of Helenus, she followed her son Pergamus to Asia, where a heroum was erected to her.

Stevens, in one of his Harvard day poems, "Peter Parasol,"[30] merely uses Andromache as the ultimate of "women fair."

> Why are not women fair,
> All, as Andromache,
> Having, each one, most praisable
> Ears, eyes, souls, skins, hair?
>
> * * *
>
> I wish they were all fair
> And walked in fine clothes,
> With parasols, in the afternoon air.

Physical beauty is rarely the theme for Stevens' pen. Even when working with the goddess Venus, he avoided mentioning the fact that she is a goddess of beauty, In 1918, in the December Little Review, Stevens published "Architecture for the Adoration of Beauty."[31] In his Opus Posthumous, however, the title was shortened to "Architecture." In this poem we find the "fairest of the lesser Roman gods," Flora. Guerber states, "She was principally worshiped by young girls, and the only offerings ever seen on her altars were fruits and garlands of beautiful flowers. Her festivals, generally celebrated in the month of May were called the Floralia."[32] Graves says that it was this goddess that pointed out the may-blossom to Hera, who upon touching it gave birth to Ares

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[30]Morse, op. cit., p. 20. Morse states that Peter Parasol was the pseudonym Stevens used when sending poetry to Harriet Monroe "in competition for a prize offered in September, 1914, for a 'war poem'." p. xviii.

[31]Morse, op. cit., p. 44.

[32]Guerber, op. cit., p. 301.

and his twin-sister Eris. "The may, or whitethorn," he continues, "is connected with miraculous conception in popular European myth. . . ."[33] Thus, we find Flora as a figure in a group of statuary in the new "house of peace": "the group of Flora Coddling Hecuba,"[34] The fecundity of Hecuba provides suitable reason for Flora's presence: she bore nineteen of Priam's fifty sons.[35] Stevens' irony of placing this statue in a "house of peace" is clearly visible upon examination of the names of her children: Hector, Paris, Creusa, Laodice, Polyxena, Deiphobus, Helenus, Cassandra, Pammon, Polites, Antiphus, Hipponous, Polydorus, and Troilus--all of them associated with the great Trojan War.[36] Hecuba, herself, might have prevented the war had she heeded the seers of her land:

> Now, just before the birth of Paris, Hecabe had dreamed that she brought forth a faggot from which wriggled countless fiery serpents. She awoke screaming that the city of Troy and the forest of Mount Ida were ablaze. Priam at once consulted his son Aesacus, the seer, who announced: 'The child about to be born will be the ruin of our country, I beg you to do away with him.'
>
> . . . But Hecabe was delivered of a son before nightfall, and Priam spared both their lives, although Herophile, priestess of Apollo, and other seers urged Hecabe at least to kill the child. She could not

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[33] Graves, _op. cit._, I, 52.

[34] _Opus Posthumous_, p. 17.

[35] Graves, _op. cit._, II, 263.

[36] _Ibid._

> bring herself to do so; and in the end Priam was prevailed upon to send for his chief herdsman, one Agelaus, and entrust him with the task. . . . some say that Hecabe bribed Agelaus to spare Paris and keep the secret from Priam.[37]

A final reason for excluding Hecuba from a "house of peace" would be the legend stating that when she discovered that her son-in-law, Polymnestor, killed her son, Polydorus, for gold, she called him forth with his two sons, stabbed the boys to death, and tore out Polymnestor's eyes. "The Thracian nobles would have taken vengeance on Hecabe with darts and stones, but she transformed herself into a bitch named Maera, and ran around howling dismally, so they retired in confusion."[38]

Thus, "Architecture," rather than being an ode to beauty, turns into a biting satire on those who said that World War I was to be the "war to end all wars."

> What manner of building shall we build?
> Let us design a chastel de chastete.
> De pensee. . . .
>
> * * *
>
> Let us build the building of light.
>
> * * *
>
> How shall we hew the sun,
> Split it and make blocks,
> To build a ruddy palace?
> How to carve the violet moon
> To set in nicks?[39]

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[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 342.

[39] *Opus Posthumous*, pp. 16-17.

It is an impossible job, Stevens concludes. "Only the lusty and the plenteous/ Shall walk/ The bronze-filled plazas/ And the nut-shell esplanades."[40]

Stevens' favorites of the heroes, however, seem to be Penelope and Ulysses. He uses this man and wife in some of the finest of his poems lauding the imagination.

> As we read Bunyan we are distracted by the double sense of the analogy and we are rather less engaged by the symbols than we are by what is symbolized. The other meaning divides our attention and this diminishes our enjoyment of the story. But of such an indisputable masterpiece it must be true that one reader, oblivious of the other meaning, reads it for the story and another reader, oblivious of the story, reads it for the other meaning; and that each finds in perfection what he wants. But there is a third reader, one for whom the story and the other meaning combine to produce a third, or, if they do not combine, inter-act, so that one influences the other and produces an effect similar in kind to the prismatic formations that occur about us in nature in the case of reflections and refractions. Bunyan nowhere produces these prismatic crystallizations.[41]

Stevens does attempt to produce these prismatic crystallizations in "The World as Meditation."[42] On the surface, the poem is merely a strong portrayal of the emotions of a wife whose husband is away at war. This poem depicts the anxiety of Penelope, her constant meditation on Ulysses and his return from the Trojan War. The thought of his return is the dream which sustains her, keeps her preparing for his inevitable coming--"_rien ne l'a jamais suspendu en moi_. . . . _Je vis un_

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[40]_Ibid._, p. 18.

[41]"Effect of Analogy," _The Necessary Angel_, p. 109.

[42]_Collected Poems_, pp. 520-21.

reve permanent, qui ne s'arrete ni nuit ni jour."[43]

Stevens, no doubt, was well aware of the theory that Ulysses is a solar hero.[44] He therefore creates, not a combination, but an inter-action between the hero and the sun:

> Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
> The interminable adventurer? . . .
> . . . Someone is moving
>
> On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
> A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
> Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in
> which she dwells.

Such lines suggested to Randell Jarrell concerning the protagonist that "it is not Penelope and Ulysses but Stevens and the sun, the reader and the world--'two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.'"[45] But Stevens is not working for such a simple analogy, for in the sixth stanza, he shatters Mr. Jarrell's interpretation:

> But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
> On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her
> heart.
> The two kept beating together. It was only day.

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[43]Quotation by Georges Enesco, ibid., p. 520, preface.

[44]". . . Ulysses, early in life, after wedding Penelope, is forced to leave her to fight for another; and on his return, although longing to rejoin his morning bride, he cannot turn aside from the course marked out for him. He is detained by Circe (the moon), who weaves airy tissues, and by Calypso (the nymph of darkness); but neither can keep him forever, and he returns home enveloped in an impenetrable disguise, after having visited the Phaeacian land (the land of clouds or mists). It is only after he has slain the suitors of Penelope (the weaver of bright evening clouds) that he casts aside his beggar's garb to linger for a short time beside her ere he vanishes in the west." Guerber, op. cit., p. 395.

[45]Randell Jarrell, "The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens," The Yale Review, XLIV (Spring, 1955), 343.

Stevens achieves his prismatic effect in the concluding two stanzas when he combines "the story and the other meaning":

> It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
> Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement
> The barbarous strength within her would never fail.
>
> She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
> Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
> Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.

Stevens achieves his purpose, as he states La Fontaine does in his fable of "The Crow and the Fox":

> . . . Here the effect of analogy almost ceases to exist and the reason for this is, of course, that we are not particularly conscious of it. We do not have to stand up to it and take it. It is like a play of thought, some trophy that we ourselves gather, some meaning that we ourselves supply. It is like a pleasant shadow, faint and volatile. . . .[46]

Ulysses is the man of thought in Stevens' poem written for the Phi Beta Kappa exercises at Columbia University, "The Sail of Ulysses."[47] The poem, excluding the prologue and epilogue, consists of eight sections, and is the soliloquy of Ulysses as he guides "his boat under the middle stars." He reasons that "knowledge is the only life."[48]

> In the generations of thought, man's sons
> And heirs are powers of the mind,
> His only testament and estate.
> He has nothing but the truth to leave.
> How then shall the mind be less than free
> Since only to know is to be free?[49]

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[46]*The Necessary Angel*, p. 46.

[47]*Opus Posthumous*, p. 99.

[48]*Ibid.*, p. 100.

[49]*Ibid.*, p. 103.

The importance of the fine arts to an education is stressed by Stevens:

> The mind renews the world in a verse,
> A passage of music, a paragraph
> By a right philosopher: renews
> And possesses by sincere insight
> In the John-begat-Jacob of what we know,
> The flights through space, changing habitudes.

The Bible as the "John-begat-Jacob" is fitted carefully among the mythological images. Perhaps the strongest of these is the deity who will inform us exactly what we should learn: the sibyl. Stevens queries:

> What is the shape of the sibyl? Not,
> For a change, the englistered woman, seated
> In coloring harmonious, dewed and dashed
> By them: gorgeous symbol seated
> On the seat of halidom, rainbowed,
> Piercing the spirit by appearance,
> A summing up of the loftiest lives
> And their directing sceptre, the crown
> And final effulgence and delving show.[50]

The real sibyl is Necessity. "Need makes/ The right to use. Need names on its breath/ Categories of bleak necessity." The ancient or traditional sibyl is "now seen in an isolation," no longer practical to mankind.

With this thought, Ulysses, "symbol of the seeker"--the man of thought, becomes aware of his great sail. It seemed

> _In the breathings of this soliloquy,_
> _Alive with an enigma's flittering. . ._
> _As if another sail went on_
> _Straight forwardly through another night_
> _And clumped stars dangled all the way._[51]

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[50] _Ibid._, p. 104.

[51] _Ibid._, p. 105.

CONCLUSION

Although Wallace Stevens does not use the creations of classical mythology in the precise way that tradition often demands that they be treated, he has vitalized them, not only as colorful, active members of his own personal mythology, but as messengers of his gospel of the imagination. "Stevens has the sense for the precise word or phrase as well as the sensibility and imagination necessary to creating the radiant atmosphere in which the commonplace and the real can be seen freshly and newly." This tribute by William Van O'Connor correctly estimates the genius of Stevens.[1]

Stevens jotted in his Adagia, "Poetry is great only as it exploits great ideas or what is the same thing great feelings."[2] He achieves this greatness in his poetry through the use of his dramatis personae. His ideas are abstract and intellectual, but he adds a great deal of emotionalism to them making them, not stilted and dull, but vibrant and living. Although he uses the major and minor gods in his works, he feels that the reader will associate himself, as the poet has done, more closely with the mortals in the classical writings and chooses their moments of extreme elevation or dejection to illustrate his themes.

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[1] O'Connor, op. cit., p. 140.

[2] Opus Posthumous, p. 176.

Stevens felt that he did not always achieve his purpose through his poems. "The eye sees less than the tongue says. The tongue says less than the mind thinks."[3] This is illustrated also by his seeming reluctance to publish his work, although friends and critics and publishers urged him to do so. "One does not write for any reader," he said, "but one."[4]

Stevens felt pleasure in the study of classical works. He felt that the religion had a definite place in the modern world and gave them that place in his poetry. Although he made obeisance to tradition, he was not chained to it. "The aesthetic order includes all other orders but is not limited to them."[5] "Poetry is not the same thing as the imagination taken alone. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions."[6]

These interrelations or interactions of reality and imagination form the basis of Stevens' poetry. "It is life we are trying to get in poetry."[7]

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[3]*Ibid.*, p. 170.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 165.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 166.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 163.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 158.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

"The Death of the Gods"

from

"Two or Three Ideas"

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. Since we have always shared all things with them and have always had a part of their strength and, certainly, all of their knowledge, we shared likewise this experience of annihilation. It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling 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 amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness. 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. There was always in every man the increasingly human self, which instead of remaining the observer, the non-participant, the delinquent, became constantly more and more all there was or so it seemed; and whether it was so or merely seemed so still left it for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms.

Thinking about the end of the gods creates singular attitudes in the mind of the thinker. One attitude is that the gods of classical mythology were merely aesthetic projections. They were not the objects of belief. They were expressions of delight. Perhaps delight is too active a word. It is true that they were engaged with the future world and the immortality of the soul. It is true, also, that they were the objects of veneration and therefore of religious dignity and sanctity. But in the blue air of the Mediterranean, these white and a little colossal figures had a special propriety, a special felicity. Could they have been created for that propriety, that felicity? Notwithstanding their divinity, they were close to the people among whom they moved. Is it one of the normal activities of

humanity, in the solitude of reality and in the unworthy treatment of solitude, to create companions, a little colossal as I have said, who, if not superficially explicative, are, at least, assumed to be full of the secret of things and who in any event bear in themselves even, if they do not always wear it, the peculiar majesty of mankind's sense of worth, neither too much nor too little? To a people of high intelligence, whose gods have benefited by having been accepted and addressed by the superior minds of a superior world, the symbolic paraphernalia of the very great become the very natural. However all that may be, the celestial atmosphere of these deities, their ultimate remote celestial residences are not matters of chance. Their fundamental glory is the fundamental glory of men and women, who being in need of it create it, elevate it, without too much searching of its identity.

The people, not the priests, made the gods. The personages of immortality were something more than the conceptions of the priests, although they may have picked up many of the conceits of priests. Who were the priests? Who have always been the high priests of any gods? Certainly not those officials or generations of officials who administered rites and observed rituals. The great and true priest of Apollo was he that composed the most moving of Apollo's hymns. The really illustrious archimandrite of Zeus was the one that made the being of Zeus people the whole of Olympus and the Olympian land, just as the only marvelous bishops of heaven have always been those that made it seem like heaven. I said a moment ago that we had not forgotten the gods. What is it that we remember of them? In the case of those masculine do we remember their ethics or is it their port and mien, their size, their color, not to speak of their adventures, that we remember? In the case of those feminine do we remember, as in the case of Diana, their fabulous chastity or their beauty? Do we remember those masculine in any way differently from the way in which we remember Ulysses and other men of supreme interest and excellence? In the case of those feminine do we remember Venus in any way differently from the way in which we remember Penelope and other women of much mark and feeling? In short, while the priests helped to realize the gods, it was the people that spoke of them and to them and heard their replies.[1]

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[1] *Opus Posthumous*, pp. 206-09.