Wallace Stevens: Versions of Apocalypse

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
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Apocalyptic writings assert that the whole of history has a single meaning, and that this meaning will be revealed only at the end of present world and the creation of a new and perfect world; they transform the plot of history into the plot of meaning.

Wallace Stevens attempts to stand outside such thinking in his poetry. But Jacques Derrida's writings on teleology and apocalypse suggest the difficulty or even impossibility of putting an end to this idea of the end, as do some of the works of Paul Ricoeur and Frank Kermode. This dissertation, then, explores the paradoxes that emerge from Stevens' attempts to write of the end of the discourse of the end. His engagement with apocalypse generates a number of contradictions, gaps, and disjunctions in his texts: disruptive dashes that nevertheless speak of a desire for continuity; autumnal tropes that gesture toward finality and oblivion while turning toward the world of returning seasonal cycles; ellipses that speak silently of the disappearance of old fictions; and, in "The Auroras of Autumn," an irresolvable tension between elegiac and apocalyptic tendencies.

These moments of tension reveal a poetry that remains haunted by certain structures of apocalyptic thinking even as it turns against them.
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Introduction

There will never be an end
To this droning of the surf.
Wallace Stevens, "Fabliau of Florida"

To have satisfied the mind and turn to see,
(That being as much belief as we may have.)
And turn to look and say there is no more
Than this, in this alone I may believe,
Whatever it may be; then one's belief
Resists each past apocalypse, rejects
Ceylon, wants nothing from the sea, la belle
Aux crinolines, smears out mad mountains.
Wallace Stevens, "Extracts from Addresses
to the Academy of Fine Ideas"

The strong music of hard times,
In a world forever without a plan
For itself as a world,
Must be played on the concertina.
Wallace Stevens, "Outside of Wedlock"
(from "Five Grotesque Pieces")

This dissertation will be concerned with Stevens' efforts to "resist each past apocalypse" in his poetry from the mid-1930s onwards. The precise meaning Stevens gives to the word "apocalypse" in the second citation above (from canto vii of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" [1940]) remains open to debate. If one understands "apocalypse" in its more commonplace or popular association with the future and a catastrophic end of the world, the phrase "past apocalypse" in my first epigraph

1 The dates for all Stevens poems mentioned in this dissertation are taken from J. M. Edelstein's Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography, unless otherwise noted.

2 According to Collins' Dictionary, apocalypse denotes "an event of great importance, violence, etc., like the events described in the Apocalypse"; Webster's gives "apocalyptic" as "Foreboding imminent disaster or final doom." Longman and Random House also refer
becomes an oxymoron, as James Longenbach suggests in *The Plain Sense of Things.* What can it mean to say that "the End" is part of the past? Yet that passage's concern with belief and perception provides strong reasons for interpreting "apocalypse" in terms of its root sense of "revelation" or "unveiling"--apocalypse as disclosure rather than closure.

At other times, Stevens appears to associate "apocalypse" with catastrophic world-historic events, with the end of a historical era or of history itself, as when, in "Description without Place" (1945), Lenin's

mind raised up, down-drowned, the chariots.

And reaches, beaches, tomorrow's regions became
One thinking of apocalyptic legions. *(CP 343)*

Some of Stevens' comments elsewhere on communism--for instance, the statement that it

to "imminent disaster" in their definitions of "apocalyptic." Many of the studies of literary apocalypses included in the "Works Cited" deal to a large extent with entirely secularized imaginative visions of earthly catastrophe, visions in which the notion of divine revelation plays little or no part. See, for example, Martha Banta's "American Apocalypses: Excrement and Ennui," Zbigniew Lewicki's *The Bang and the Whimper: Apocalypse and Entropy in American Literature,* John R. May's *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel,* Douglas Robinson's *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature,* and W. Warren Wagar's *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things.*

3 "Esthétique du Mal" shows how the weight of all previous literature, each 'past apocalypse' (an oxymoron from 'Extracts'), prevents us not only from writing about pain but from knowing the pain of disaster when we experience it" (Longenbach 240). Longenbach's own sentence is somewhat contradictory, though, since he seems to be thinking here of apocalypse as text rather than event. Those apocalypses which have defined the genre were, after all, written in the past.

4 In Gerhard Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* Albrecht Oepke tells us that "apocalypse" involves one of the most basic and general concepts of religious thinking: "all religion depends on revelation" (3:565).
promises "a practicable earthly paradise" (NA 143), or "the Bulgar's" failed socialist apocalypse in canto III of "A Duck for Dinner" (Owl's Clover [1936])—suggest that he understood communism to offer a secularized version of the millennium mentioned in Rev 20:4. My first epigraph, from the early "Fabliau of Florida" (1919) refers to the end of time, or rather to the absence of any end to the cyclic repetitions of nature; and the third epigraph relates this absence to a lack of pattern and purpose in history—end as goal or telos. The three epigraphs together thus speak of a complex of ideas associated with "the End": apocalypse as a revelation and particularly as a revelation of the end; and the relation between knowledge of or belief in that end and the idea of pattern and meaning in history. I will be concerned with Stevens' resistance to apocalypse as a resistance to this complex of ideas, and with the paradoxes that emerge from an attempt to put an end to the discourse of the end, to reveal the absence of revelation, to say that the world's only goal is to have no goal.

Stevens sometimes deals with these issues in more general terms; but he also encounters them through particular engagements with biblical texts. Sometimes his echoes of and allusions to the Bible seem to break with the discourse of the end, yet also place him within a prophetic tradition. Eleanor Cook has observed that Stevens' biblical

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5 "Outside of Wedlock" (1942) later speaks of time "Without beginning or the concept of an end" (OP 112).

6 Oepke's article on καιλος and related terms in Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament insists on an intrinsic relationship between the revelatory and eschatological in apocalypse: "the meaning of the words [i.e. φοκαλος and related terms] in the NT has its true locus in eschatology" (3:580).
allusions show him "decreating" his sources, and then moving "beyond, in order to retrieve what, after much testing, will hold. And what is retrieved and holds is different in kind, not just in degree, from what has preceded it" ("King James" 240). I wish to turn this question in a different direction, and ask if there are basic patterns of thinking native to apocalypse which will return to haunt Stevens' discourse, in spite--or even because--of his efforts to turn against the discourse of the end. I shall explore more particular questions, too, about the form or forms his resistance takes. Frank Kermode describes Stevens as a poet who seeks "to postpone the End--when the fiction might be said to coincide with reality--for ever; to make of it a fiction, an imaginary moment when 'at last' the world of fact and the mundo of fiction shall be one" (Sense 36-37). Kermode's formulation of the issue touches upon the paradoxes raised above, since it presents Stevens as an anti-apocalyptic writer, yet places his work within a discourse of a postponed end, rather than after a wholesale rejection of the very idea of the end. A writer might employ various strategies to defer the end of his/her fiction, but a denial of any

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7 John Hollander, in "The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound" is similarly concerned with Stevens' remaking of poetic tradition. Barbara M. Fisher's article on parody in Stevens ("Ambiguous Birds and Quizzical Messengers: Parody as Stevens' Double Agent") neatly sums up one aspect of his relation to the past: "Stevens uses parody both to establish a link with traditional sources and to maintain a distance, separate himself, from those same sources (4). Harold Bloom, of course, provides a very different account of Stevens' relation to the poetic past in Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate, which deals throughout with the poet's "anxiety of influence."

8 Kermode, perhaps, has in mind the peroration from canto vii of "It Must Give Pleasure" in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction--"It must be that in time / The real will from its crude compoundings come, / Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged" (CP 404)--which Stevens goes on to characterize as "the fiction of an absolute" (CP 404).
reality to the idea of "the End" seems to figure something other than its mere postponement. And, of course, if "the End" were to occur as prophecy tells us it will, it would come in its own good time, and in spite of anything Stevens, or anyone else, might have written.

But Stevens does resist apocalypse, and my second chapter will consider the rethinking of the relations between past, present, and future which is essential to his anti-apocalyptic stance. During the unsettled years of the 1930's and the Second World War, Stevens sought to put an end to the discourse of the End. My third chapter deals with a group of short post-war poems on autumnal themes, poems in which the world seems to be coming to an end simply as a result of the natural process of change. Even this version of the end resists the apocalyptic tradition. I shall expand upon this "autumnal terminal" (OP 125) in my fourth chapter, which concerns "The Auroras of Autumn." This section will deal with an elegiac strain which emerges in Stevens' most memorable engagement with apocalypse. But before turning to these detailed readings of Stevens' poetry, I shall consider, in my first chapter, the place of apocalypse in history and of history in apocalypse, and the general theoretical implications these have for Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance. The chapter will end with a brief history of apocalypse in Stevens criticism.
My "Introduction" touched upon two aspects of Stevens' engagement with apocalypse: his allusion to specific biblical passages, and the more general question of the shape given to history by the idea that history has an end—both a terminus and a goal. I shall defer a more detailed discussion of teleology until later in this chapter, but wish to note briefly some of the ways in which it impinges upon the discussion of apocalypse. Malcolm Bull's introduction to *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* considers the relations between the different senses of the word "end" in apocalypse (Bull 2-6). It has been a commonplace to associate the idea that history has an end with the belief that it has a meaning, and to claim that this relationship first emerges in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. In *Meaning and History*, Karl Löwith emphasizes the importance of history in prophecy, and the importance of prophecy to history and historical thinking. He "aims to show that philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfilment . . ." (2): "Within the biblical tradition, the Jewish prophets alone were radical 'philosophers of history' because they had, instead of a philosophy, an unshakable faith in God's providential purpose for his chosen people . . ." (194). According to Löwith, then, meaning and teleology are inseparable, at least in relation to history, and he notes that "a statement about the meaning of historical events is possible
only when their telos becomes apparent" (5). Of course, such concepts are Derrida's target in "White Mythology," "Force and Signification," "From Restricted to General Economy," and "Violence and Metaphysics"; I shall return to his writings later in this chapter. I wish to begin by discussing those aspects of biblical eschatology and apocalypse which will prove relevant to my discussion of apocalypse in Stevens' poetry. I shall then proceed to a more general and theoretical discussion of the end and the shape and meaning of history, and the paradoxes that emerge from Stevens' engagement with this discourse.

It may be useful to establish some of the limits of this discussion before proceeding. There are many different apocalypses, both Jewish and Christian, canonical

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1 A page later, Löwith offers a corollary to this statement, a corollary which gives a different configuration to the relationship between end and meaning: "The claim that history has an ultimate meaning implies a final purpose or goal transcending the actual events" (6). This is a common enough point, of course; it informs all of Kermode's The Sense of an Ending, and finds the following succinct formulation in A. E. Harvey's Jesus and the Constraints of History: "Unless we postulate an end towards which our efforts are tending, or which will relieve us from our suffering, our life becomes meaningless and even unendurable" (72). This theme appears in some apocalyptic texts. 2 Baruch 21:17, for example, tells us that "if a consummation had not been prepared for all, in vain would have been their beginning." (This citation and all succeeding citations from inter-testamental apocalypses are take from R. H. Charles' The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament). A later passage in the same work elaborates on this theme at some length:

He who travels by a road but does not complete it, or who departs by sea but does not arrive at the port, can he be comforted? Or he who promises to give a present to another, but does not fulfil it, is it not robbery? Or he who sows the earth, but does not reap its fruit in its season, does he not lose everything? Or he who plants a plant unless it grows till the time suitable to it, does he who planted it expect to receive fruit from it? (22:3-7)
and inter-testamental. Because all of Stevens' apocalyptic imagery and language can readily be traced to biblical sources (or later allusions to such sources in Romantic poetry), I do not consider the inter-testamental apocalypses, both Jewish and Christian, to be a significant or direct influence on his understanding of apocalypse. I will refer to these works from time to time in the course of this chapter, but only in order to indicate the role of such texts in the development of apocalypse, or to shed further light on the texts which Stevens appears to have known. In the Bible, the two texts considered to belong to the genre "apocalypse" are Daniel in the Old Testament, and Revelation in the New. But of course, eschatological writings appear throughout the prophetic books of the Old Testament, and in the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles of the New Testament. The eschatology of the Old Testament differs significantly from that of the inter-testamental Jewish apocalypses, and particularly from the eschatology of the New Testament, though it is not clear that Stevens follows these distinctions when he alludes to such works in his poetry. As I shall show in my reading of "Puella Parvula," he sometimes combines allusions to the eschatology of both Old and New Testaments in a single passage, or reads the former in the light of the latter, as though they did not differ in essence. These

2 R. H. Charles' "Eschatology of the Apocryphal and Apocalyptic Literature" in James Hastings' *A Dictionary of the Bible* (1:741-49) provides a useful summary of the apocryphal texts, with particular emphasis on the differences between these various eschatologies. A more detailed discussion appears in his *Eschatology: The Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, Judaism, and Christianity*.

3 Stevens was hardly the first to do so. Jean Daniélou, in *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, discusses such writers as Papias (60-c. 130), Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200), and Methodius (d. 311), who believed that eschatology referred to actual historical events which were to occur in the future. According to Daniélou, these readings already deviated
different eschatologies do share some common features, and many scholars have argued that apocalypse develops from and rewrites prophecy.\textsuperscript{4} It may be useful, then, to remember here the scenes of cosmic disorder and destruction, or of the dissolution of nature, associated with the Day of the Lord in many prophecies (Amos 5:16-20, 8:8-10. Joel 2:1-11, 30-32, Zeph 1, Is 24:18-23 for example); similar scenes usher in the end of the present order of things and the beginning of the millennium in Revelation, and both these sources figure in Stevens' versions of apocalypse. Some prophecies also feature elaborate descriptions of the perfect future life in a restored holy land (Is 11, Joel 3:17-21, Amos 9:13-15); this new age may or may not be conceived as a Messianic reign.\textsuperscript{5} One crucial distinction between prophecy and apocalypse, though, which I wish to note from the outset, lies in the latter's division of the future age into two stages: the Messianic

\textsuperscript{4} Charles, Norman Cohn (\textit{Cosmos}), Stanley Frost, Paul Hanson, Mitchell Reddish, Christopher Rowland (\textit{Open}), and others make this point.

\textsuperscript{5} S. D. F. Salmond provides a useful discussion of the different varieties of Old Testament Eschatology in James Hastings' \textit{A Dictionary of the Bible}. He notes that while "every Messianic passage is eschatological, there are many eschatological passages not Messianic" (1:735).
reign and the world to come. In Revelation, the former is conceived as the millennial reign of Christ on earth (Rev 20:4-5), and the latter as the new heaven and earth, along with the New Jerusalem which descends from the heaven (Rev 21). In this scheme, the paradisal imagery of such passages as Is 11 is reserved for the description of the New Jerusalem 21:10-22:5. No such language is applied to the millennial reign, which is ushered in by a most elaborate sequence of earthly and cosmic disasters. Of course, Stevens turns against all ideas of a divine plan for the world, and of divine intervention in history, and when elements of the patterns described above persist in his poetry, they do so in a thoroughly secularized form. In fact, Stevens turns against even secularized versions of teleology. And while both the rhetoric of cosmic destruction and of the Messianic age (the millennium in Revelation) and the world to come (the New Jerusalem) will figure in Stevens' engagement with apocalyptic language, I will show that Stevens' poetry re-configures the traditional relations between these elements as they appear in Revelation.

Some of these last points, of course, touch on the many different interpretive traditions which apocalypse has generated. Augustine's spiritual and figurative interpretation, for example, has for centuries exerted great influence on the understanding

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Charles notes that the later prophets conceived the future "as an unending kingdom of blessedness under the immediate sway of God or the Messiah" ("Eschatology" 1:742), but that in 1 Enoch 91-104 "the Messianic kingdom is apparently for the first time in literature conceived of as temporary" (1:743), and followed by eternal life in a new heaven. Not all apocalypses make this distinction, though; 1 Enoch 1-36 offers an example of an eternal Messianic reign.

Daniélou discusses this pattern, and others (377-79).
of apocalypse. But Norman Cohn has argued, in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, that although Augustine's interpretation became official church doctrine, a literal understanding of apocalypse persisted throughout the early middle ages, and gained considerable fresh impetus from the writings of the twelfth century Calabrian abbot, Joachim of Fiore (30-35; 108-10). Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending*, goes further, suggesting that the dominance of the Augustinian view did not always reduce the intensity of eschatological expectations; in fact, as the year 1000 approached, the belief "that the millennium was the first thousand years of the Christian era . . . supported the feeling that the world was reaching its term . . ." (9). When Stevens turns against apocalypse, he turns against the tradition that reads it in literal, historical terms, as a body of prophecies concerning the future and the end of the present order of things. It should

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8 Cohn observes that according to Augustine, the millennium did not lie in the future but had already begun with the incarnation and was continuing through the work of the church on earth (29). *The City of God* xx 6-11 is particularly relevant here: Chapter 6 discusses the "first resurrection" as a spiritual event in the present life of the Christian, and Chapter 7 gives Augustine's interpretation of the millennium. A brief summary of the history of the interpretation of apocalypse—up to 1903—appears in Frank C. Porter's entry ("Revelation, Book of") on Revelation in James Hastings *A Dictionary of the Bible* (4:241-44). Sturm's "Defining the Word 'Apocalyptic'" provides a more recent view. See also Beasley-Murrays' *Jesus and the Last Days* for an exhaustive account of the history of the interpretation of the "little apocalypse" of Mark 13. Abrams' studies of Romanticism listed in my Works Cited deal with the interiorization of apocalypse in nineteenth century literature and philosophy. Thomas Altizer, in "Imagination and Apocalypse," interprets this phenomenon as a consequence of the rift between both the divine and the worldly, and between subject and object, which emerges in post-medieval Western culture.

9 Cohn gives emphasis to the Sibylline Oracles, which were, "save for the Bible and the works of the Fathers . . . probably the most influential writings known to medieval Europe" (33). He also discusses the writings of Pseudo-Methodius (Seventh century) in this connection (32).
be immediately apparent, though, that Stevens' break with apocalypse cannot be separated from his characteristic concern with the life of the imagination and its interactions with reality. The rejection of these fictions of history may lead to a new inner life or renewed imaginative power, and hence a new perception of reality; the essentially inner, imaginative decision to turn against this discourse of the end may even be figured as the inauguration of a new historical era, or at least a new era in the history of the imagination. Does Stevens' wish to turn against one version of apocalypse also turn him towards another? I will consider these questions in more detail elsewhere in this chapter, and also in the succeeding chapters.

The idea of a "break" between two ages--past and present, or present and future--has become a commonplace in some current discussions of apocalypse, or in the use of apocalypse as a metaphor in historical discourse. This concept, I hope to show, has a crucial and paradoxical place in Stevens' engagement with apocalypse, since he tends to conceive of apocalypse in terms of a break with or end to the existing order of things, and also attempts to make his own break with that break. Fredric Jameson, for example, speaks of postmodernist discourse as an "inverted millenarianism" which posits a break between present and past, rather than between present and future.¹⁰ James Longenbach's discussion of Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance likewise reads the "apocalyptic fantasies" of the Second World War as those "that posited a catastrophic break between past and

¹⁰ "The case for its [postmodernism's] existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or coupure, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s" (Jameson 1).
present" (204). This rhetoric of terminations, of a break with the past, also appears in the work of writers like Foucault, and becomes the object of Derrida's scrutiny in "The Ends of Man" and "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy"; I shall discuss the latter essay later in this chapter. Frank Kermode deals with this rhetoric and its relation (in his perception) to apocalypse in *The Sense of an Ending*. There, he traces the gradual erosion, through history, of belief in the end; this process "throws the weight of 'End-feeling' on to the moment, the crisis, but also onto the sacraments" until "No longer imminent, the End is immanent" (*Sense* 25). In his chapter on "Modern Apocalypse" (93-124), Kermode claims that the modern sense of the present moment as crisis stems from the shift from imminence to immanence in apocalyptic thinking, and he associates current understandings of apocalypse with the idea of "a break with the past" (114). The apocalyptic crisis of "the new modernism" (114)—presumably what we now call postmodernism—resides in the very absence of apocalyptic beliefs, in its own break with the past and the discourse of the end, as Kermode claims in the following comment on Beckett: "It is a world crying out for forms and stations, and for apocalypse; all it gets is vain temporality, mad, multiform antithetical influx" (115). For Kermode, the very absence of apocalypse, the break with the fiction of the end, leads to or is this new apocalypse. I shall return to the implications of Kermode's discussion toward the end of this chapter; here, I wish merely to note that all the writers discussed above use apocalypse and the millennium as metaphors in a purely secularized understanding of

11 Unlike Jameson, Longenbach does not problematize the shift in the temporal location of this break.
historical change. Does their concept of a "break" itself break with apocalyptic literature? To what extent do these ideas belong to apocalypses? The answer to this question will prove significant for Stevens' desire to break with the past and with apocalypse.

In fact, scholars of Jewish and Christian apocalypse have distinguished between the historical concerns of prophecy and apocalypse in terms of the relationship--or disjunction--between the present order and the future. R. H. Charles notes, for instance, that "In OT the hopes of Israel were in the main confined to this world and to the well-being of the nation" ("Eschatology" 1:742), and that

The scene of this [messianic] kingdom was to be the earth purged from all violence and sin. But in the later period the gulf between the present and future begins to widen, and this process goes on till the last resemblances vanish, and the present appears a moral chaos under the rule of Satan and his angels, and the future is conceived as an unending kingdom of blessedness under the immediate sway of God or the Messiah. ("Eschatology" 1:742)

A prophetic text such as Isaiah, though, which predicts the creation of "new heavens and a new earth" (65:17), exemplifies the difficulty of maintaining clear distinctions between prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology. And the preceding citation from Charles does

\[\text{12}\] Charles uses different language in his article on "Apocalyptic Literature": there, he describes apocalypse's "transference of interest from the present to the future, from the mundane to the supra-mundane . . . " (1:110). He also emphasizes the apocalyptist's despair of the present order in this shift in values, as do many more recent writers on apocalypse. Adela Yarbro Collins, for example, writes of "the unbearable tension perceived by the [apocalyptic] author between what was and what ought to be," a "cognitive dissonance" (73) between desire and reality. Throughout the first chapter of "The Dawn of Apocalyptic" (1-31) Hanson emphasizes the role of a growing disillusionment with the historical realm in the development of apocalypse.

\[\text{13}\] Charles, for example, discusses Is 65 and 66 in more detail in Eschatology 127-29; there he refers to 66:6-16 and 18b-22 as "a fragmentary apocalypse" (128).
not posit an absolute difference between prophecy and apocalypse—he acknowledges a
gulf between present and future in prophecy—but rather a difference in the degree and
kind of separation between present and future in the two genres. And of course a
rhetoric of finality is central to prophetic eschatology and New Testament eschatology,
which frequently refer to "the time of the end" (Dan 8:17, 12:4, 12:9), "the end of years"
(Dan 11:6). "the last days" (Isa 2:2, Mic 4:1, Acts 2:17), and so on. But the metaphor of a
"break" tends to suggest a sudden change from one era to the other, when in fact in
Revelation, the scenes of violent destruction (earthquakes, fire, plagues, etc.), the
overthrow of earthly powers (the beasts of Rev 13, Babylon in 17-18, and Satan at 20:1-3),
and the final creation of a new heaven and earth unfold as a narrative sequence in
time. The metaphor of the break tends to elide the way in which apocalypse shows the
working out of God's plan in history. The present age will end, of course, and the
Messianic reign will begin, and after it, the world to come: but the terminal events need to
be considered as a process, not as a single, sudden change. Thus R. H. Charles writes of
"the gulf between the present and future" in order to emphasize the qualitative difference

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14 S. D. F. Salmond, in his article on "Eschatology" in Hastings' A Dictionary of the
Bible, describes Ezek 38, 39, Joel 3, Zech 14, Ob v. 18, and Dan as prophecies "that are
apocalyptic in their character" (1:738).

15 Kermode, for instance, refers to the myth of "Transition," "a period which does not
properly belong either to the End or to the saeculum preceding it"; it is associated with
"the three-and-a-half-year reign of the Beast," but "seems not to have been defined until
the end of the twelfth century..." (Sense 12). For Scholem, the beginning of the end
may be conceived as either sudden or gradual: "the 'light of the Messiah' which is to shine
wondrously into the world, is not always seen as breaking in with complete suddenness; it
may become visible by gradations and stages, but these gradations and stages have
nothing to do with the history that has gone before" (10).
between one order of things and another, between the present moral (or immoral) order and that of a perfect world filled with the divine presence. One might wonder if the writers discussed in the preceding paragraph show a certain impatience with this aspect of apocalypse. Does the metaphor of a "break" cut apocalypse short?

Many commentators on apocalypse have also used metaphors of irruption and "breaking in" to describe the inauguration of the new era in apocalypse. For example, in The Relevance of Apocalyptic, Rowley notes that "the apocalyptists foretold the future that should break into the present" (38), and for Hans Blumenberg, in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, "eschatology speaks of an event breaking into history, an event that transcends and is heterogeneous to it . . . " (30). Again, these metaphors need to be treated with care, since, as is clear from the many different narratives of the end, the present age does not end suddenly and all at once. The metaphor of irruption speaks more of the suddenness and violence with which the divine first irrupts into the ordinary world at the beginning of the last days, the sudden coming of the beginning of the end; all the events of those days may be understood as signifying the irruption of the divine in the world. These events do not immediately end the present order, though their irruption may well

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16 One of the most familiar versions of this theme in the New Testament involves a rhetoric of reversal: "But many that are first shall be last; and the last first" (Mark 10:31: also Matt 19:30 and 20:16). Less concise versions appear in some of the inter-testamental apocalypses; thus 2 Baruch places great emphasis on the concept of the two worlds and at 51:8-9, insists upon the difference between the two:

For they shall behold the world which is now invisible to them, And they shall behold the time which is now hidden from them: And time shall no longer age them.
shatter our commonplace assumptions about the world. The sudden irruption of destructive powers figures significantly in many of Stevens' engagements with apocalypse, though these forces are of course natural or human, and remain within our world of ordinary perception; they do not have the same shattering effect of the eschatological events.

My main point here, though, is that the metaphor of the break, as Jameson and Longenbach use it, tends to elide the fact that the new age, in both prophecy and apocalypse, also fulfils the past, and reveals the true meaning of all that has gone before; it is "the consummation of all things" (Charles, "Apocalyptic" 1:110). Gershom Scholem touches upon this question in his discussion of the Judaic concept of "the birth pangs of the Messiah" (10). He carefully balances his sense of the gulf between the two ages against the way in which the Messianic age reveals the meaning of all preceding history: "It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source"(10).17 The last judgement, after all, fixes the final meaning of all earthly deeds, both of individuals and of nations. I shall discuss the importance of the idea of fulfilment in more detail when I turn to Christian eschatology; here, I would only note that Stevens' understanding of the importance of fulfilment in apocalypse—even though he turns against the idea—marks his difference from such writers as Jameson and Longenbach. The latter two elide the idea of fulfilment as though it were in no way

17 Rowland uses a similar metaphor in relation to the eschatological beliefs of the earliest Christians: "history is illuminated by apocalypse . . . " (43).
essential to apocalypse; Stevens elides or breaks with this idea precisely because he knows it to be so crucial.

I noted above that Stevens re-configures the different elements or stages of the apocalyptic plot found in Revelation--cosmic and social upheaval. Messianic reign, the new heaven and earth--and now wish to consider this question in more detail. In many of those passages in which he rejects the idea of a future life, Stevens makes a direct contrast between earthly life as it is lived now, and a heavenly world, the final condition of perfected life in a New Jerusalem (in Revelation); but in rejecting the very idea of the latter, he also appears to elide the millennium which stands between the present world and the world to come. "Sunday Morning" (1915) provides one of the most celebrated examples of this movement in Stevens' poetry:

And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue. (CP 68)

Anyone who wanted badly enough to do so could read this passage as a debate over whether the Messianic reign will be an eternal earthly realm, or a temporary one followed by heavenly fulfilment;¹⁸ but such a reading would make little sense in relation to the poem as a whole and its arguments against the Christian myth. What I wish to note, though, is that in turning against the myth of the world to come, Stevens nonetheless

¹⁸ Such versions of apocalypse appear in 1 Enoch 1-36 and 83-90. It seems unlikely that Stevens was familiar with these texts.
turns to a prophetic rhetoric, a rhetoric of a new age attendant upon the rejection of the Christian myth (which he figures later in the poem as a "cloudy palm / Remote on heaven's hill" [CP 68], or as the absurd paradise of canto vi). Stevens' new world will still include labor and pain, and its friendlier and non-divisive sky does not result from the coming of the divine presence to earth, but from the abandonment of the idea that there is anything "beyond" that sky. In *Forms of Farewell*, Charles Berger describes "Credences of Summer" (1946) and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949) as "poems which begin to see the world as saved"(xi), and, in theological terms, a wholly saved earth would be a post-Messianic earth; it might be truer, though, to say that in these works the world has *not* been saved, since for Stevens it has never "fallen" and therefore does not *need* to be saved (not in any theological sense, at least). The world has always been what it is now, a place where "We found, / If we found the central evil, the central good" (CP 251). In my second chapter, I will show that for Stevens this rhetoric of the

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19 This, of course, is a standard reading of the poem. Miller describes "Sunday Morning" as one of "the creative hymns of a new culture, the culture of those who are 'wholly human' and know themselves (CP, 317)" (*Reality* 222). Riddel offers a similar reading in "Stevens on Imagination--the Point of Departure" (57-58). Vendler, though, sees this movement as an essentially elegiac one; she writes that "Stevens has no Nietzschean brio, and his prophecies of a new divinity are wistfully and even disbelievingly made" (*Extended Wings* 55). More recently, Eleanor Cook has given attention to Stevens' use of echo in an attempt "to displace heaven, through a change of old troping" (*Poetry* 109; the full discussion appears on pp. 99-111), and B. J. Leggett reads the poem against a range of Nietzschean intertexts (*Nietzschean* 88-122). He concludes that Stevens "can displace one interpretation only with another, one fiction with another" (122).

20 The very structure of this sentence, enclosing the central evil within the central good, suggests the impossibility of disentangling the two. Visions of the last judgement, of course, present the final separation of good and evil.
"new age" is opposed to the idea of "the End"--the end both as the termination of the present world and the goal or purpose of all history. Of course, many apocalypses speak both of an end to the present age and of an endless age to follow (either the endless Messianic reign or the world to come which follows it in some apocalypses). In apocalypse, these unending states are themselves "ends," goals, final states in which history is fulfilled. When Stevens refers to time "Without beginning or the concept of an end" (OP 112), he also refers to "a world forever without a plan / For itself as a world (OP 112)." Stevens' endless time speaks of the abandonment of the idea of a goal in history; the only end, for Stevens, is the end of all such myths of these "ends."

In "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu" (1935), Stevens' rejection of the idea of the

21 The question of whether the beginning of the world to come is also the end of time has been a subject of much controversy. Cullmann insists that the "eternity" of the world to come is not timelessness but rather "endless time" (69). Of course, Cullmann makes these arguments precisely because eternity has been interpreted as timelessness; but he insists that such conceptions are essentially Greek and philosophical, and not native to the Old or New Testaments (63-68). Early and influential Christian writers who understand eternity as a timeless state of being include Augustine (Confessions Book XI, Chapters xi and xiii esp.), and Boethius (Consolation Book IV Prose 6, and Book V Prose 6). In St. Thomas' Summa Theologiae the last day is interpreted as the end of time, the beginning of an atemporal eternity, not the beginning of a new temporal age: "Now after the resurrection the glorified body will not be moved in time, since time will not be then according to Apoc. x. 6" (Summa Theologiae 3 [Supp.] 84.3, Obj. 5). According to Charles and Cullmann, this would be a misinterpretation of the phrase χρόνος οὐκέτι ἐστι ("There should be time no longer" in the Authorized Version), which Charles construes as "there will be no delay" (Commentary 1:263) -- specifically, no delay of the Antichrist's coming. Charles dismisses readings like St. Thomas' (Commentary 1:263 n. 1). Cf. also Cullmann 49. When Stevens turns against the idea of eternity in his poetry, he turns against this Hellenized version of the concept, as is suggested by the absurd, unchanging paradise of "Sunday Morning" vi. The nearest Stevens comes to a positive version of eternity is in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (1947), where he writes of a "time / That of itself stood still, perennial, / Less time than place, less place than thought of place" (CP 432-33).
world to come touches upon the other side of his tendency to separate the two stages of the last days:

In a world without heaven to follow, the stops
Would be endings, more poignant than partings, profounder,
And that would be saying farewell, repeating farewell.
Just to be there and just to behold. (CP 127)

Here, Stevens would appear to understand the Christian myth as one in which the heavenly world follows immediately upon the present one, since there is no place in prophetic and apocalyptic tradition for a temporary Messianic reign "without heaven to follow" and for which "the stops / Would be endings." In turning against the idea of a heavenly fulfilment, as he does in this poem. Stevens again appears to elide the Messianic reign or millennium altogether. His secularized doomsdays, such as "The Auroras of Autumn," imagine a sudden end to the world, without any transitional time between this world and the next (or, rather, between the world and the absence of the world, of time, of everything). Stevens sees the present world as one poised at the "the last day of a certain year / Beyond which there is nothing left of time" (CP 372); in such passages. he foresees "time in its final block, not time / To come" (CP 183). Stevens dissociates the end of this world from any notion of a world to come or new age; and in doing so. he also empties the word "end" of any associations with teleology. My third and fourth chapters will take this secularized version of the end as their starting points, and consider the paradoxes inherent in Stevens' anti-teleological stance.

Of course, it is not possible to discuss apocalypse without considering Jesus' eschatological teachings, not merely because of the effect which these have had on the
concept of the end (and on history); they also bring another aspect of apocalypse—the importance given to the present in relation to the end—into the foreground. What matters for my argument concerning Stevens is the extraordinary significance given to the present moment in the world-view of the early Christians, a world-view in which "The sense of the present being determined by an imminent future, holding a promise of either reward or judgement, continued to be felt" (Harvey 92). At the same time as it gains this significance as a harbinger of the future, though, the present enters into a unique relation to the past; the imminence of the end can be known only because the vision of the future has already irrupted into the historical realm through the writings of the prophets and apocalyptists. Thus, Rowland writes that for Paul, "the present has become the moment to which all the Scriptures have been pointing, though their meaning can only be fully

22 Here, of course, one enters into the endlessly complex scholarly discussion as to whether the eschatological teachings attributed to Jesus are authentic, and, if so, whether they should be interpreted as involving a literal, historical expectation of a fulfilment, or a belief in an immanent and spiritual kingdom: imminence or immanence. The studies by John Ashton, George Beasley-Murray, Rowland, and Richard Sturm listed in my Works Cited give some sense of the range of this discussion.

23 This latter point, I think, emerges with particular force from a juxtaposition of the very different interpretations of early Christian apocalypticism given by Ashton and Rowland, who emphasize the spiritual and the historical dimensions of these teachings respectively. Ashton, writing on the fourth Gospel, notes that "For the most part John effectively de-eschatologizes judgement by making it the immediate consequence of an option for or against Christ in the lifetime of each individual" (223), whereas for Rowland, who argues for the political significance of Christian apocalyptic, "history is illuminated by apocalypse; vision opens ultimate possibilities, and responsibilities which others could only dream of. Thereby [believers] are equipped with insight hidden to others and privileged to enjoy a role in history denied even to the greatest figures of the past" ("Upon Whom" 43). In both Ashton and Rowland, the moment of decision in the present takes on supreme importance by virtue of its relation to the imminent end of the present age.
understood with that divinely inspired intuition which flows from acceptance of the Messiah. The present has become a time of fulfilment: 'Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6.2)" (48); "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand . . ." (Mark 1:15). The present bears the weight of a double significance, then, serving as the fulfilment of past prophecy and as the moment in which the divine signs of the future irrupt into the present age.

This emphasis on the present touches upon the single most significant difference between Jewish and Christian apocalypse, the difference made by the incarnation. Scholem, Ashton, and Löwith, for example, all point out that an event which was, for the early Christians, a part of their present world, an event which served as a sign of the imminence of the end and which shifted the weight in apocalyptic thinking from a distant future to the present--this event became part of the historical past. Oscar Cullmann provides one of the most succinct versions of this theme in Christ and Time:

What the Jews expected of the future is still expected of the future; but the future event is no longer the center of the redemptive history; rather, that center lies now in a historical event. The center has been reached but the end is still to come. (84)

Thus, according to Ashton, Christians living after the crucifixion have lived with the knowledge that "The decisive event, the divine intervention that occupies the gap between 'before' and 'after' has already taken place. The point of rupture along the line of human history has been displaced, shifted back to the time occupied by the Gospel narratives" (225). The futural dimension of apocalyptic thinking does not disappear in Christian apocalyptic, but now takes its meaning from the dominant central event; it
becomes part of a peculiar tension between fulfilment and desire, completion and incompletion. Thus Harvey writes that "New Testament scholars, who seem agreed at last that Jesus' Kingdom-sayings contain statements that are both irreducibly future and irreducibly present, tend to speak at this point of a tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' . . . " (Harvey 91). Beasley-Murray and Löwith offer further examples of this rhetoric:

The whole period between the Christ event and the parousia is kingdom-of-God time, for it is characterized by continuing signs of the in-breaking kingdom which comes in its fullness at the parousia. (Beasley-Murray 375)

On account of this profound ambiguity of the historical fulfilment where everything is 'already' what it is 'not yet,' the Christian believer lives in a radical tension between present and future. (Löwith 188)

Here I wish to return to Stevens' rhetoric of the new age, which I discussed on pp. 18-20 above. In the Old Testament, the Messianic age has yet to come, whereas the New Testament speaks of the present as the new age of the Messianic coming. Stevens sometimes applies his rhetoric of the new age to a present which he figures as a break with the past; at other times, as in the passage from "Sunday Morning" cited above, he associates this rhetoric with the future. And, as I will show in my second chapter, he also figures both a present which breaks with the past, and a future which will break with the present. The shifting of this temporal divider does not indicate a faith that wavered between Judaism and Christianity on Stevens' part, but rather a certain lack of interest in the radical differences between their models of history.

It may be useful to sum up a few of the preceding points. I have suggested that
Stevens' engagement with apocalypse turns against that discourse's configuration of the relations between beginnings and ends, and against the relations between different senses of "end." My discussion of apocalypse in Stevens will present him as a poet of both beginnings and ends: a poet of a new kind of newness, the witness to the emergence of a new time which puts an end to all ideas of an "end" in history; and a poet of the most absolute end, the end of even the end itself.

* * *

The preceding discussion has centred on Stevens' relationship to specific aspects of apocalyptic texts, with particular emphasis on Revelation. I have also touched upon some more general questions related to the idea that history has an end, both a termination and a purpose; in the following pages, I shall further defer the "end" of this dissertation--an analysis of Stevens' engagement with apocalypse--by returning to the more general issue of the "end" of history. It is my intention to explore not just the question of what apocalypses reveal--the eschatological content of an apocalyptic vision--but the way they reveal, and what that very manner of revelation reveals. In apocalypses, the elements of divine guidance or intervention and divine revelation give both the end of the present world and the whole of history a meaning nowhere evident in secularized doomsdays; the latter, in fact, do not necessarily reveal anything at all about the meaning of history, unless that absence of revelation is itself a revelation. There may be many revelations in any revelation of a divinely-ordained end to history: the revelation of the
end; the revelation by the end, the revelation of the meaning of all history by the terminal events themselves; and the revelation by the mere occurrence of the apocalyptic vision. I aim to generate, by considering some more recent writings on apocalypse, some theoretical questions posed in general by apocalyptic discourse for any effort to adopt an anti-apocalyptic stance or rhetoric. The body of this dissertation will consider Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance in relation to these problems.

The Revelation of St. John the Divine, the most widely-known of Christian apocalypses, is both the book of the end and the end of the Book. Revelation does not just tell the story of the end; it also has something to say about all that precedes it, whether we think of this "something" in terms of an inter- or intratextual relation to the rest of the bible (as in typological reading), or as a way of conceiving of historical process. It seems impossible to think of an apocalyptic ending without conceiving of the beginning, of the middle, of the whole of the book or history in terms determined by that end. Thus, Charles insists that "Apocalyptic and not prophecy was the first to grasp the great idea that all history, alike human, cosmological, and spiritual, is a unity—a unity following naturally as a corollary of the unity of God preached by the prophets" (Eschatology 183). Erich Auerbach has demonstrated the importance of this concept of history to medieval thinking in his celebrated essay, "Figura," which traces the history of a particular way of interpreting both the Bible and history (which overlapped for the medieval mind):

24 John R. May echoes this thought: apocalyptic writings, he suggests, "strove to show how past, present, and future were woven together into a single unity" (13).
Figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both, looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event. (58)

That actual, real and definitive event was, of course, the coming of God's kingdom in the last days. Many apocalypses do not just look forward to the end of history and to a last judgement which reveals and fixes the final meaning of all earthly events, but also engage in sweeping overviews of the whole of history. R. H. Charles notes, for example, that apocalypse differs from prophecy in "its indefinitely wider view of the world's history" (Eschatology 205); apocalypses "sketched in outline the history of the world and of mankind, the origin of evil, its course, and inevitable overthrow, the ultimate triumph of righteousness, and the final consummation of all things" (Eschatology 183). Scholem writes, in reference to Daniel, the 1 Enoch apocalypses, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch, that "Here God no longer shows the seer individual instances of historical occurrence or only a vision of history's end; rather he sees all of history from beginning to end with particular emphasis on the arrival of that new aeon which manifests itself and prevails in the

25 Mason Lowance argues throughout The Language of Canaan for the importance of figural reading to the American Puritans' understanding of the Bible and of their own place in history:

In the spiraling and progressive dispensations revealed to man about the future of God's saints, the New England Puritans figured prominently as a recapitulation of those primitive, prophetic, typological Israelites. And as they fulfilled the promises of Scripture in Cotton's exegesis, so they were also prophetic themselves of the dawning of a new day, one in which the saints would be gathered by Christ in a glorious moment when all peoples would speak the language of Canaan. (127)
Messianic events" (5). Charles refers to the allegorical presentation of Church history in Rev 12 and 13 as "the classical example of this treatment of the past" (Eschatology 182). And apocalyptists often resort to direct statements of such guidance: in a lengthy passage from 4 Ezra 6:1-6, God tells the seer how "In the beginning of the terrestrial world before ever the heavenward portals were standing, or ever the wind-blasts blew . . . . Even then had I these things in mind: and through me alone and none other were they created; as also the End (shall come) though me alone and none other." Stevens, I have said, is more likely to have been familiar with the biblical formulations of this theme:

I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done . . . . (Is

26 Bauckham tempers this view somewhat—he notes that "Although the apocalypses have conventionally been thought to be about history and eschatology, this is not necessarily true of all of them" (6); but it is worth noting some of the many apocalypses that do support these readings. 1 Enoch 93:1-10 and 91:12-17 (known as the "Apocalypse of Weeks") divide world history into a series of 10 "weeks," the seventh of which represents the writer's own "apostate generation" (1 Enoch 93:9); the last three weeks describe eschatological events. 2 Baruch 53-77 offer another allegory (followed by a lengthy exegesis) in which world history is divided into 24 eras represented by 12 deluges each of black and bright waters (Baruch's own time is situated part way through the ninth deluge of black waters). Other examples include 1 Enoch 85-90 (the "Animal Apocalypse"), and 2 Baruch 36-40, which presents past and future through the allegory of the forest, stream, and vine.

27 See also Bauckham's comments, cited in fn. 3 on p. 8 above. Abrams relates this aspect of Revelation's verbal texture to the tendency of apocalypses to sum up the meaning of history:

Like preceding books in the Bible, but more thoroughly than any of them. Revelation is recursive in its procedure; that is, it represents the present and future by replicating or alluding to passages in earlier biblical texts . . . . The Book of Revelation thus incorporates and confirms an implicit design of the course and prime cause of earthly affairs which was soon made explicit by Christian exegetes . . . . ("Apocalyptic" 9)
46:9-10)

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. (Rev 21:6)

Such phrases prove particularly resonant for Stevens, and he often turns against them by writing, as I have already noted, of a time "Without beginning or the concept of an end" (OP 112), or by rethinking the relations between Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, as he does in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" vi and "The Hermitage at the Center" (1952).

Of course, the sort of pattern envisioned in an apocalypse needs to be, and has been, described with greater precision. Frank Kermode, in The Sense of an Ending, mentions the commonplace view that "apocalyptic thought belongs to rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world" (5); Oscar Cullmann's Christ and Time provides one of the more succinct theological discussions of this issue (Cullmann 51-60). This is not the only "shape" associated with apocalypse: for M. H. Abrams, "the shape of history implied by Revelation is a circular one" ("Apocalypse" 12), and he illustrates this comment with a portion of the following quotation from Karl Löwith's Meaning in History:

The theological principle which determines this formal scheme of the historical process as a history of salvation is man's sin against God's will and God's willingness to redeem his fallen creation. In this theological perspective the pattern of history is a movement progressing, and at the same time returning, from alienation to reconciliation, one great detour to reach in the end the beginning through ever repeated acts of rebellion and

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28 Mircea Eliade's The Myth of the Eternal Return also deals with these different concepts of time, with particular attention to the idea of mythic consciousness.
self-surrender. (183)\(^29\)

Löwith's comments remind us that the spatial models mentioned above serve as representations of a certain kind of plot structure, and of course it is possible to consider the notion of plot without reference to such models.\(^30\) In fact, Kermode gives considerable attention, in *The Sense of an Ending*, to the relations between conceptions of time and history, the end of history, and narrative structures.\(^31\) Apocalyptic endings have, in particular, been associated with the sort of comic plot one finds in such works as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Hayden White, who, in *Metahistory*, proposes "explanation by emplotment" as one of the three basic means by which historians chart the relations between historical events (cf. White 7-11), associates comic plots with any vision of

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\(^{29}\) Theodore Dwight Bozeman's *To Live Ancient Lives* describes the pattern of history in American Puritan millenarianism as "the cycle of return to origins" (253), a circular return to the primitive conditions of the Christian Church: "In the new eschatology the future meant eclipse of the ordinary past, of the past that was human invention and loss of primal integrity, but it also meant fulfillment of the retrospective hope that had inspired the Great Migration" (237).

\(^{30}\) There has been much controversy over the use of spatial models to represent temporal patterns. This controversy is generally held to have its source in Lessing's distinction between poetry and painting as temporal and spatial arts in *Laocoon*. Joseph Frank's "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" is an important work in the debate from our century, and the works by W. J. T. Mitchell cited in my bibliography represent some of the most interesting and comprehensive recent work in this area. Mitchell makes the quite radical suggestion that literary forms are primarily and essentially spatial, and are temporal only metaphorically. The works by Kermode (*Sense* 52-54 esp.), James Heffernan, J. Hillis Miller (*Linguistic*), Monroe K. Spears, and Wendy Steiner offer other approaches to this subject.

\(^{31}\) Douglas Robinson, in *American Apocalypses*, touches upon the relation between one aspect of narrative structure--closure--and apocalypse: "to trace the operation of an author's image of the end of the world invariably leads one to consider the author's image of the end of the text" (7).
history which moves toward some goal or resolution; he writes of "the Christian (Comic) vision of the ultimate liberation of man from his world and his ultimate reconciliation with God" (127). And in his study of American Puritanism, To Live Ancient Lives.

Theodore Bozeman notes that in Thomas Brightman's influential Apocalyps (Amsterdam, 1611), "the story to be told about the earth's last days [was] transformed from tragedy to full-scale 'Comedy'" (209).

This fairly common identification of apocalypse with a sort of comic teleology appears in the work of critics interested in apocalypse and literature, such as M.H. Abrams, Northrop Frye, and Martha Banta, among others. But Banta explores other types of apocalyptic plots. She wonders whether American apocalypses might constitute a "perfect plot authored by a gothic god, rather than that divine comedy of happy renewal directed by the Christian God and the Transcendentalist All-Soul, or that human tragedy brought about by the powers of the Manichean abyss" ("American" 1). These ruminations prove instructive, not merely for suggesting that those who meet their end in Revelation 20's "lake of fire" (Revelation 20:10, 14-15) might not describe their situation as "comic." Banta reminds us that the apocalypses are very peculiar comedies, since their plots tend to be completed by the violent destruction of the world in which the plots unfolded. Frye, in his discussion of the six phases of comedy, suggests that apocalypse ultimately undoes

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32 Abrams writes of "a coming end (the abrupt Second Advent of Christ as King, followed by the replacement of the old world by 'a new heaven and a new earth') which will convert the tragedy of human history into a cosmic comedy" ("Apocalypse" 9). Frye suggests that we "think of the Christian myth as the comic (which in this context means apocalyptic or ideal) version of the Oedipal one" (Code 156).
the world of the comic plot, since "the undisplaced commedia, the vision of Dante's Paradiso, moves out of our circle of mythoi into the apocalyptic or abstract mythical world above it" (Anatomy 185). Thus, while "the crudest of Plautine comedy-formulas has much the same structure as the central Christian myth itself" (185), the apocalyptic conclusion does far more than transform or renew the social world in which the plot unfolded; it casts out that world, or the conditions of that world, in favour of a new one. Apocalypse is not just the end of the plot or the plot of the end; it is the plot that would end all plots.

There may appear to be certain contradiction between such visions of the whole of history and that break with the past so characteristic of apocalypses, but the two are in fact inextricably entwined. Such visions of past, present and future imply a point of view from which all history may be perceived; the end provides or sums up the meaning of the whole of history, and envisions not just the end of time, but passes judgement on the whole of time. John Lynen makes this point in his discussion of T.S. Eliot in The Design of the Present:

An end is required, and the reader's problem arises from mistakenly thinking that the last day is just another day of the same sort--a caboose to the temporal train. Calling it the Day of Judgment is a way of describing the end as a point of view, a point from which the whole of history can be seen. (411-12)\(^3\)

\(^3\) Frank Kermode makes a similar point: "The end, Apocalypse, is traditionally held to resume the whole structure, which it can only do by figures predictive of that part of it which has not been historically revealed" (Sense 6-7). However, Lynen also sees this way of thinking as characteristic of American Puritanism in general, as is made evident when he writes that the Puritan outlook "accustomed the imagination to conceive experience in terms of the purely present in relation to a total history or conspectus of all times" (35-
Of course, the point of view described here belongs not to human but to divine consciousness, and when Lynen describes it as "a state of consciousness, a perfect state. God's consciousness . . . a view in which all things exist temporally in series and yet are simultaneously present to consciousness" (412) he echoes--inevitably, perhaps--that part of Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions* which attempts to describe such a consciousness: "in the Eternal nothing passeth away, but that the whole is present" (189); "no time is wholly present" (189). but God exists "in the excellency of an ever-present eternity" (190). Deconstructive criticism, of course, questions the possibility of such a point of view, and some of J. Hillis Miller's comments on spatial emblems of time in The *Linguistic Moment* seem particularly relevant both to this aspect of apocalypse and to Stevens' poetry:

Various as these images are, they are all versions of a never completed movement toward total possession of time, a movement that comes forward toward the future in order to go back to the past and appropriate it, or a movement back into the past in order to go forward to a fully appropriated present and future. (xvi)

Augustine's conception of time, or of the relation between time and eternity, figures the basis on which an apocalypse's sweeping vision of all history would come to be written. It is only through what Derrida calls a series of "envois" from divine to human--"so many

36). Lynen bases this conclusion on his analysis of a number of early American Puritan texts and historical documents which, while not specifically apocalyptic in their general concerns, nonetheless show a strong tendency to relate events to both the whole of history and the end projected by Revelation.

34 Another classic formulation of this theme appears in Book IV Prose 6 and Book V Prose 6 of Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. See also fn. 21 on p. 20 above.
sendings, *envois*, so many voices, and this puts so many people on the telephone line*" 
("Apocalyptic" 86)--that the vision of apocalypse can enter into human consciousness and history; the vision comes as "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him. to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass: and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John . . ." (Rev 1:1). The fact, then, that the book of Revelation figures itself as presenting the viewpoint of eternity--apocalyptists viewed "all history *sub specie aeternitatis*" as Frost says (8)--and comes from beyond the temporal world, yet is both written and read in time, raises questions about the capacity of any temporal moment to contain the eternal. the part the whole (or at least some understanding of the whole), questions which touch upon central Christian mysteries. The apocalyptic vision (or any sort of divine vision) occurs *as* an interruption ("And immediately I was in the spirit"--Rev. 4:2), but the things envisioned, and the viewpoint from which they are seen, the viewpoint which makes such seeing possible, would also shatter our normal understanding of time. It is perhaps at least in part for this reason that Frye places apocalypse outside the world of the comic plot (*Anatomy* 185).

Besides the break foreseen by or in apocalypse, then, besides its plotting the end of plots, there may be a certain disruptive force *of* or in the occurrence of the vision as it irrupts into history through the imagination and writings of the apocalyptic seer. What are the consequences of such prophetic knowledge of the end? Douglas Robinson encounters these issues when he treats Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as an "apocalyptic farce" (68); this work, he suggests, demonstrates that "the past cannot contain the future; nestled uneasily in the womb of the past, the future must burst out.
even (or especially) at the expense of the womb itself, and even at the expense of the future's own existence" (68). It should be noted that Hank's knowledge, in this novel, is of a future which is not necessarily "the end" of the existing conditions of the world. But one might transfer Robinson's considerations from this fictional context to the actual world into which apocalyptists have brought their visions of the end. Regardless of whether or not one accepts the divine origin and absolute truth of Revelation and other apocalypses, the apocalyptic vision has become part of history, and with often explosive, destructive, and disturbing consequences. Here, Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* offers much insight into the sometimes violent methods by which those obsessed with the apocalyptic vision have sought to prepare the way for its fulfilment, or even to hasten its arrival; it tells, too, of the violence which has often greeted such beliefs. In fact, apocalyptic movements are frequently accompanied by equally forceful attempts to suppress apocalypticism. Scholem writes of the "explosive" nature of apocalyptic knowledge, knowledge which "could be reported only in a whisper" (7), and explores the tension between "the world of bonds and laws" (19) or *Halakhah* and Messianism: Medieval Judaism, for example, "was deeply suspicious of that anarchic element which I discussed earlier--perhaps on account of a fear of the eruption of antinomian trains of thought, which apocalypticism, in fact, could easily produce" (26).\(^35\) Philip F. Gura, in *A

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\(^35\) Amos N. Wilder's "The Rhetoric of Ancient and Modern Apocalypse" speaks of a disruptive force in apocalyptic utterance: "we are dealing with acts of the imagination and of language which break with the cultural patterns of their particular period . . . " (439). For Wilder, apocalypse returns to a "precultural" (441) origin of language, though he also notes that the apocalyptic writer may turn to existing mythic and religious discourse in order to express this experience (441).
*Glimpse of Sion’s Glory*, also describes the wary reaction of Puritan authorities in New England to millenarian stirrings:

Because such a heightened excitement about the last days could readily degenerate into violence against those unwilling to accept an immediate rule by the saints, Massachusetts's magistrates and ministers were careful to control such beliefs, particularly so that the colony would not become another Münster, where a century earlier government by another group of "saints" had resulted in ecclesiastical and moral anarchy. (128)\(^6\)

Such histories provide the most concrete example possible of the disruptive force of apocalyptic writings—not to mention their capacity to survive the continuous disconfirmation attendant upon their emergence. Cohn's study reminds us of the revolutionary impetus of apocalypticism, its roots in an unquenchable desire to do away with "things as they are" and replace this world with a new, perfect one. Geoffrey Hartman beautifully sums up this aspect of apocalypse in his discussion of Wordsworth's anti-apocalypticism:

The term ["apocalyptic imagination"] may also describe a mind which actively desires the inauguration of a totally new epoch, whether preceding or following the end of days. And since what stands between us and the end of the (old) world is the world, I sometimes use "apocalyptic" to characterize any strong desire to cast out nature and to achieve an unmediated contact with the principle of things. (x)

A poet who wrote that "the world is the only thing fit to think about" (*OP* 192) would be unlikely to have felt any such desire.

This relationship between a desire for the end and the desire to take in the whole plot of history in a single glance has important implications for the question of literary

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\(^6\) Gura discusses the violence incited by and visited upon the Fifth Monarchists in England (136-44).
plots. Clearly, if we suspend apocalypse's own figurations of its divine origins, and assume that an apocalypse is not the irruption of divine, eternal truth, but rather the product of a human desire to break through the sufferings and losses of history and find consolation in the certain promise of permanent rest and recompense, we might speak of apocalypse as the genre that risks spoiling the plot by giving away the end too soon. Apocalypse springs from a desire to know the end of the plot before its time, to arrive before the arrival, to fill the uncertain time of our wandering through history with the certainty of a definitive and immutable conclusion. Here, a difference between the apocalyptic and aesthetic or fictive may come into play; John Lyden notes, for instance, the static quality of early American Puritan narratives, which consider events only in relation to their final, eternal meaning. In such narratives, "progression and development are relatively less important than the analogy between isolated occasions and eternal principles" (54).

But such an overriding concern with a truth to be revealed after the end of the present world threatens to short-circuit the play necessary to the vitality of literary plots. One might wonder whether these writers were driven not only by a desire to discover a

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37 Bozeman offers another concise summation of this kind of thinking in his account of American Puritan millenarianism:

The given objective was, not study of an institution in time, subject to causality and change, but demonstration of linkage to the time of times. Strictly speaking, the subject matter of this history was not temporal at all . . . . Analogy and correspondence were the appropriate analytical categories, not causality and intrinsic development, for the church was true only so far as it incorporated the timeless doctrine and forms of Scripture. (246)
narrative in history, but also by an impatience with the history to be played out before that end, an impatience with the play of narrative. They desire to arrive at least at knowledge of the end before the end itself arrives. These, at any rate, are among the implications of the recurrent opposition between the play of romance and the closure of apocalypse in Patricia Parker's *Inescapable Romance*:

"Romance" is characterized primarily as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object, a description which Fredric Jameson approaches from a somewhat different direction when he notes that romance, from the twelfth century, necessitates the projection of an Other, a projet which comes to an end when that Other reveals his identity or "name" . . . . When the "end" is defined typologically, as a Promised Land or Apocalypse, "romance" is that mode or tendency which remains on the threshold before the promised end, still in the wilderness of wandering, "error," or "trial." (4)

Parker suggests that the end of the narrative--not the moment at which we close the book, but the moment within the book in which we read the narration's last events--also moves us beyond the text, or beyond textuality itself. It in some sense disrupts or destroys the narrative and narrated world which has preceded it: "A poem may lead to 'revelation.' as evening leads to morning, or shadowy type to truth, but the moment of revelation is by definition discontinuous, beyond signs" (132). The work thus serves "as mere scaffolding, part of a discursive mode of knowing to be superseded, and obliterated, by the immediacy of revelation" (153). But this apocalyptic moment does not only occur at the end of the text; Parker also writes of an apocalyptic desire which seeks an immediate rather than a deferred fulfilment.38 Thus, she contrasts, in reference to *Paradise Lost*, "the lesson of

38 Douglas Robinson also notes that "The predictive apocalyptic imagination attempts to rush across the gap of differance . . . " (49). Bloom refers to the "highly anti-
patience, of submission to the discipline of time or temperance . . . to the apocalyptic impulse in its Satanic form" (11-12). She also notes, in her discussion of Spenser, that "The traditional function of Apocalypse is to portray the enemy as already defeated, in a vision of the end which places us outside the monsters we are still inside—as Job at the end of his trial is shown the externalized forms of behemoth and leviathan—and, by this act of identifying or naming, proleptically overcomes them" (Parker 77). Apocalypse, then, "can be a premature or preemptive end" (99) founded in "the apocalyptic desire to precipitate 'arrival,' the impulse of the 'self-consuming artefact' (226), "the desire to penetrate the veil of meaning or to hasten the narrative's gradual striptease" (221). The genre of apocalypse practiced by the Jewish and Christian writers discussed in the earlier part of this chapter would seem to heighten this impatience: these texts often begin by placing themselves at or near the end of the present order of things, and at the end of a long line of prophetic texts. Apocalypse might be defined as the genre which cuts short its own plot by foreseeing the end before its own time, the genre that leaps to conclusions.

These paradoxes have important implications for an anti-apocalyptic discourse, as I hope to show through a brief consideration of Derrida's "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy." First, though, it is necessary to deal with the more general apocalyptic space within which, according to Derrida, both "the genre of writings called 'apocalyptic' in the strict sense" (87) and anti-apocalyptic writings may be apocalyptic virtue of patience" in relation to the conclusion of Stevens' Notes toward a Supreme Fiction III vi ("Notes" 93).
located. Derrida also insists on a certain disruptiveness in apocalyptic writing itself, though he situates this force at both a more profound and inescapable level than does Parker. He gives particular attention to the way in which Revelation figures its own origins. It opens with an "interlacing of voices and envois" (87), "so many sendings, envois, so many voices" (86), with lines that announce "the apocalypse as sending, as envoi, and . . . the envoi as apocalypse, the apocalypse that sends itself" (86):

By its very tone, the mixing of voices, genres, and codes, and the breakdown [le détraquement] of destinations, apocalyptic discourse can also dismantle the dominant contract or concordat. It is a challenge to the established admissibility of messages and to the enforcement or the maintenance of order [la police] of the destination, in short to the postal regulations [la police postale] or to the monopoly of the posts. (89)

The challenge posed by an apocalyptic discourse "to the established admissibility of messages" stems from its place outside the order of knowing. Derrida makes this point when he discusses the repeated citations of the word "come" in the final chapters of Revelation: "That 'Come,' I do not know what it is, not because I yield to obscurantism, but because the question 'what is' belongs to a space (ontology, and from it the learnings of grammar, linguistics, semantics, and so on) opened by a 'come' come from the other" (93-94). What Derrida finds in this revelatory opening--and closing--of Revelation, then, is a sort of "generalized" apocalypse which opens the space in which the more specific philosophical and theological understanding of apocalypse as revelation comes into

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39 Obviously, Parker and Robinson both rely on Derrida's writings, but do not comment on this essay, or the more recent "No Apocalypse, Not Now," in the body of their texts, since these essays appeared either after or during the completion of their books. Robinson discusses "Of an Apocalyptic Tone" in a long note (251 n. 1).
being, a generalized apocalypse which therefore can never become an object of either revelatory intuition or philosophical discourse. It is here that Derrida turns to the question of writing:

Isn't this completely angelic structure, that of the Johannine Apocalypse, isn't it also the structure of every scene of writing in general? . . . wouldn't the apocalyptic be a transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience itself, of every mark or every trace? And the genre of writings called 'apocalyptic' in the strict sense, then, would be only an example, an exemplary revelation of this transcendental structure. (87)

This apocalyptic sending thus locates a generalized apocalypse outside of the restricted economy of meaning, of philosophy, of history, of work. And not just apocalyptic writing, but all writing would belong within the space opened by this fundamental scene.

One might say, then, that Parker's understanding of apocalypse as terminal revelation takes its place within a pli of this generalized apocalypse.40 Her version of apocalypse would appear to belong among those described by Derrida when he momentarily suspends his generalization of apocalypse, asking us to adopt a fiction in which "the apocalyptic tone is not the effect of a generalized derailment, of a Verstimmung multiplying the voices and making the tones shift [sauter]. opening each word to the haunting memory [hantise] of the other in an uncontrollable polytonality . . ."

" (83). In this pli, apocalypse is the discourse which reveals that

Truth itself is the end, the destination, and that truth unveils itself is the advent of the end. Truth is the end and the instance of the Last Judgement. The structure of truth here would be apocalyptic. And that is why there would not be any truth of the apocalypse that is not the truth of truth. (84)

40 Derrida discusses these plis or folds on pp. 87-88 of "Of an Apocalyptic Tone."
As Derrida points out, this "fundamental scene" is still "a philosophical, onto-eschatoteleological interpretation" (83). It remains within that pli of apocalyptic discourse in which both apocalyptic mystagogue and rationalist Aufklärer are united around some "exclusion," "some inadmissible" (79) which is precisely that generalized Verstimmung of apocalypse discussed above, and which would emasculate or castrate the discourse of truth. It is because they both would speak the truth, and be the only true guardians of the truth, that mystagogue and Aufklärer remain within the same apocalyptic pli—in spite of the disruptiveness of the former's discourse, a disruptiveness which Derrida, in his reading of Kant's attack on the mystagogues, emphasizes through a rhetoric of leaping, derailment, and so on.41 Both their discourses are enclosed within that apocalyptic opening which opens all discourse, and which they exclude—or must exclude.

Derrida's essay, then, is concerned finally with the possibility or impossibility of moving beyond the discourse of the end, which is also the discourse of truth. According to Christopher Norris, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy" continues a discourse of ends begun in "The Ends of Man" and "Cogito and the History of Madness." essays that "show that what is in question is not some ultimate, decisive leap beyond humanism. 'Western metaphysics' or the principle of reason. In fact they insist that no such leap is possible, that even the most seemingly radical statements of

41 The mystagogues Kant attacks attempt to bypass the "labour of thought" (Norris 236) necessary to philosophy and deconstruction; "the overlord reaches with a leap and through feeling what is immediately given him" (Derrida, "Apocalyptic" 70), the mystagogues cause "the voice of reason" "to derail or become delirious" (71). They make "a leap from concepts to the unthinkable or the irrepresentable, an obscure anticipation of the mysterious secret come from the beyond" (72).
intent--like Foucault's desire to speak the very language of madness--must always at some point rejoin the tradition whose embrace they so fiercely reject" (239). Derrida ends his essay by placing himself both inside and outside this discourse of the end at one and the same time. He wishes to put an end to the discourse of the end, yet must at the same time question whether this gesture can truly escape the eschatological program of apocalypse, "a powerful program that was also an untransgressible contract among discourses of the end" ("Apocalyptic" 80). Even his own announcement of "an internal and external catastrophe of the apocalypse, an overturning of sense [sens] that does not merge with the catastrophe announced or described in the apocalyptic writings without however being foreign to them" (95)--even this generalized apocalypse as absolute outside of the genre "apocalypse" and its philosophical Aufklärung becomes one more party to that untransgressible contract:

But then what is someone doing who tells you: I tell you this. I have come to tell you this, there is not, there never has been, there never will be an apocalypse, the apocalypse deceives, disappoints? There is the apocalypse without apocalypse. (94-95)

I have gone into Derrida's argument in more detail than might be strictly necessary for the immediate purposes of my argument about Stevens; I have done so in order to delineate this essay's place in relation to Derrida's other writings, and in particular to register the very different histories, contexts, and trajectories of these two writers' engagements with the discourse of the end. When Stevens comes to the

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42 This issue is also crucial to Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics," which demonstrates the impossibility of Emmanuel Levinas' attempt to transcend or break with metaphysics in his Totality and Infinity.
apocalypse, it is to the apocalypse as that onto-eschato-teleological *pli* within the
generalized apocalypse described above—though of course Stevens himself employs no
such terminology. But Stevens' desire to turn away from that version of the end, to come
to the end of the end, to imagine an end which comes without revelation, without
teleology, without fulfilment, without final meaning, clearly raises similar questions
about the possibility of escaping the discourse of the end. Here, I would return to the
description of apocalypse as a discourse which is always impatient for the end, which
would arrive at knowledge of the end before its time, a discourse which would imagine or
make the most radical possible break with the present order of things. An anti-apocalyptic
poem might have to cut off apocalypse before apocalypse could cut off itself; it would
need to be more impatient of the end than apocalypse itself. It would have to put an end
to the history of the end, make a break with the history of the break. Here, Kermode's
argument with "the new modernism" seems relevant to some of these issues. He speaks of
the avant-garde art of his time in terms of a "shift towards schism" (*Sense* 115); works of
this type treat the past as "that which ought to be ignored" (*Sense* 115), or "destroy[ ] the
indispensable and relevant past" (123). Kermode finally questions the possibility of such
a radical break with the past, and notes that "Schism is meaningless without reference to
some prior condition; the absolutely New is simply unintelligible, even as novelty" (116).
His recent "Waiting for the End" offers another version of this paradox: "If in addition we
deny all end-directed history we have apocalyptically eliminated apocalyptic thinking . . .
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In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur gives a largely sympathetic reading of *The
Sense of an Ending, but disagrees with Kermode's belief that the continued validity and vitality of our fictions depends on our confidence and belief in those fictions--belief, above all, in their correspondence to reality. For Ricoeur, the impossibility of making a total break with the past and with its forms of discourse lies instead in the very nature of discourse itself:

I hold that the search for concordance is part of the unavoidable assumptions of discourse and of communication. Either discourse or violence. Eric Weil has said in his Logique de la Philosophie. The universal pragmatics of discourse says what amounts to the same thing. Intelligibility always precedes itself and justifies itself. (2: 28)

Ricoeur and Kermode's questions are somewhat more absolute than my own concerns with Stevens; I am not concerned so much with the break with discourse itself, but with the break with one particular discourse. But as the preceding discussion indicates, this discourse has had a crucial place in the history of meaning and the meaning of history. Stevens' break with apocalypse leaves us asking what meaning history gains from the absence of an end, or from an end which is only a termination, and not a goal. What might be revealed by a revelation of the impossibility of such terminal revelation? These questions may still belong within apocalypse.

* * *

One last detour, one last deferral of Stevens' encounter with apocalypse seems necessary here. Other critics have dealt with both apocalyptic and anti-apocalyptic elements in Stevens' poetry, some only briefly and some in more extended studies. I will
refer to these throughout my dissertation, but it seems advisable to provide a brief outline of earlier work in the field, and in particular to situate this study in relation to such work. Some major critics have made occasional, passing references to apocalypse in Stevens. Vendler, for instance, writes of "the Portent" in "Sombre Figuration" (Owl's Clover) as Stevens' "anti-Parousia" (Extended Wings 87), and compares some of "Description without Place" to "the old dazzles of Owl's Clover, with the same recognizable manipulation of tenses to yield apocalypse . . . " (220). She later describes "the etched anticipation of a secularized doomsday" (267) in canto viii of "The Auroras of Autumn." Vendler does not deal with the theme in any thoroughgoing manner, and particularly does not engage with the implications of that secularization of "doomsday." In spite of these comments, though, her reading of Stevens is largely, though only implicitly, anti-apocalyptic, as the following excerpt suggests:

Stevens' best verse trembles always at halfway points, at the point of metamorphosis, when day is becoming darkness, when winter is becoming spring, when the rock is becoming the ivy . . . . It is a poetry of the transitional moment, of the not-quite-here and the not-yet-gone . . . . (Extended Wings 46-47)

Vendler is more explicit when she describes Stevens as a poet who chooses "repetition over revelation" (171) in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction; here, a reference to the preceding discussion of the uniqueness of the apocalyptic event should be sufficient to indicate the potentially anti-apocalyptic direction of this reading.

Bloom also makes occasional comments on apocalypse in Stevens throughout The Poems of Our Climate, the most intriguing, perhaps, being the observation, in relation to "Saint John and the Back-Ache." that "St. John is . . . the apocalyptic impulse that
[Stevens] has dismissed for so long . . . but that will begin to break in upon his reveries in *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven* and *The Rock* and then dominate the poems composed from 1952 through 1955" (*Climate* 298). In "St. John and the Back-Ache," Bloom writes, St. John's "apocalyptic reply . . . gives us a triumph of the American Sublime" (*Climate* 298). But again, Bloom's occasional observations on apocalyptic elements in Stevens' poetry do not add up to any sort of consistent engagement with this theme. And, as is clear by now, I hope to show that Stevens is more characteristically an anti-apocalyptic, rather than an apocalyptic poet. Stevens does not merely dismiss an "apocalyptic impulse," but rather adopts a deliberately anti-apocalyptic stance in his poetry, even when he himself comes to speak of the end of the world.

Charles Berger's *Forms of Farewell* does deal, in its first three chapters, with both apocalyptic and anti-apocalyptic tendencies in Stevens' work, as the following quotation suggests:

One can argue that Stevens' late poetry begins in an atmosphere of premature closure, as Stevens fears that the war will bring on a sudden end to civilized life. When these fears subside, we get poems that I have called counterapocalyptic, such as "Credences of Summer" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," poems which begin to see the world as saved. (xi)

I have already commented on Berger's notion of an "already saved" earth in another context. Here, I would like to note that it is also possible to interpret "Esthétique du Mal." which Berger reads as an apocalyptic poem in his first chapter, as a "counterapocalyptic" poem: the work as a whole suggests that "mal," in its various senses, is a part of life both as essential and as inevitable as pleasure or the good. An apocalyptic poem would seek a
complete escape from evil in a new realm after the end of the present order, a final
division of good and evil. Berger's study contains fine readings of many of Stevens' late
poems, but he enters into a reading of Stevens' apocalypticism and
"counterapocalypticism" without first offering a coherent account of the complex
phenomenon of apocalypse itself. His analyses of "Esthétique du Mal" and "The Auroras
of Autumn" assume, rather than set forth, a definition of apocalypse as a world-wide
catastrophe of human cause--World War II and the nuclear war, respectively--and thus do
not engage fully with the historical implications of apocalyptic thinking, and with the
history which lies behind or remains concealed within this secularized version of the end.
I hope to show, in my chapter on "The Auroras of Autumn," that Stevens' engagement
with "all the rhetorical resources of the apocalyptic tradition" (Berger 36) involves a more
complex and paradoxical relationship to that tradition than Berger suggests, and I will
comment on Berger's reading in more detail in that section.

Eleanor Cook, in Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens, gives a
very detailed reading of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" as "a purgatorial poem in
the antiapocalyptic mode" (Poetry 273), and is sensitive to the complexities of any
attempt to adopt such a stance:

The word "antiapocalyptic" is wrong if we visualize Stevens reaching the
top point of a hill of purgatory, then turning away from the heaven beyond
or the earthly paradise there at the peak, and coming back down . . . .
[Stevens] makes a lateral exploration, neither up nor down. This is a poem
written against the upness of all heavens and the downness of earth. A
simple reversal of apocalyptic conventions would come down to earth . . . .
Instead, Stevens practices a decreation of apocalyptic literature. (273)

Cook's reading works largely in terms of metaphors of perception, of veiling and
unveiling, the eucalyptic and apocalyptic, rather than the kind of historical thinking with which I have been concerned in this chapter. Similarly, Joseph Adamson, in his article "Apocalyptic Hysteria in Stevens"—an essay strongly influenced by Derrida's writings on "differance" and the "supplement"—emphasizes apocalypse as unveiling, revelation, disclosure, truth. For Adamson, though, Stevens' "ultimate revelation is that revelation is itself a figure. . ." (7)." He concludes that "Stevens' apocalypse, then, even at its most urgent, is still eucalypt; it uncovers, reveals, only in re-covering" (10). His suggestion that Stevens does not write an apocalypse but an "apocalypse" (6) suggests again, though in a different context, and through different metaphors, the problems of arriving at the end of the discourse of the end. Will an anti-apocalypse still in some sense be an apocalypse? Similar paradoxes are noted by Patricia Parker, in the last chapter of Inescapable Romance. There, she writes that "Stevens' wariness of apocalypse or center is partly a peculiarly American preoccupation" (240). and that while the role of Stevens' "necessary angel" is "to clear away the veil of successive mediations and to provide an 'Evening without Angels'" (237), "the 'angel' itself remains the irreducible figure" (238).

James Longenbach describes "The Auroras of Autumn" as "a late and beautiful instance of Stevens' lifelong meditation on apocalypse" (288) in Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things; his study of Stevens, concerned largely with the political and social context of the poetry, includes three chapters which consider Stevens' engagement

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43 Parker's association of "center" with apocalypse stems from Stevens' desire to strip away fictions and achieve a fresh perception of reality (Parker 237), a desire "to arrive / At the neutral centre" (CP 241-42).
with the apocalyptic rhetoric prevalent in some cultural and political spheres of his day. Longenbach's readings of Stevens' anti-apocalypticism give a very convincing account of its place in a specific historical context, and I will refer in more detail to his study in the next chapter, which deals with Stevens' poetry of the late 1930s and of the Second World War. My own readings are not intended to supersede those of Longenbach, or indeed of any of these critics; instead, they explore Stevens' anti-apocalyptic rhetoric from a particular theoretical viewpoint, a viewpoint derived from the reading of apocalypse which has formed the bulk of this chapter.
Chapter Two. Sudden Time

In the preceding chapter, I noted that in an apocalypse, knowledge of the end of time enters into the present, thereby giving meaning and pattern to the whole of history before that history has run its course. Both the occurrence of an apocalyptic vision itself and the events foreseen in that vision have a certain disruptive force, yet their ultimate aim is to assert wholeness, to insist that in the end all the losses and sufferings of history will be made good. I have also written that the very idea of meaning and pattern in history, and the notion that history can be viewed as a totality, are central to the significance of a revelation of the end of time: the mere fact that the end can be foreseen in this manner proves at least as meaningful as any specific content of that revelation. An apocalypse, considered in the most general terms as a plot of the end and the end of the plot of history, does not just give history a particular meaning: it transforms the plot of history into the plot of meaning. In this chapter, I will be concerned primarily with a selection of Stevens poems—*Owl's Clover* (1936), "Girl in a Nightgown" (1938), "Martial Cadenza" (1940) and "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" (1942)—which oppose the notion that history has a preestablished end, an end that determines its meaning. Each of these poems takes a stance against discourses or events that, for Stevens, touched upon questions—and fears—about the end of history: Marxism and the rise of Fascism in *Owl's Clover*, and, in the three shorter works, the Second World War. I shall consider the precise form taken by Stevens' resistance to the idea of the end in these poems, and shall
also engage with some more general concerns about the limits of any anti-apocalyptic stance. Does Stevens' anti-teleological, anti-eschatological stance itself end by revealing a meaning in history, a meaning that lies in the very absence of purpose or meaning? Stevens may turn against the idea of an "end" of history--both a telos and a termination--only to make anti-teleologism a telos; the need to turn away from any goal "In a world forever without a plan / For itself as a world" (OP 112) may itself become a paradoxical goal.

Such possibilities, I believe, lie behind the contradictions in and between John Lynen's and Richard Jackson's readings of temporal and historical pattern in Stevens' poetry. In The Design of the Present, John Lynen attempts to place Stevens within that American Puritan tradition which tends "to conceive experience in terms of the purely present in relation to a total history or conspectus of all times" (35-36). In reading the "generalizing" conclusion of "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Lynen writes that "One can object with reason that generalizing does not necessarily presuppose adopting the eternal point of view, but in Stevens this proves to be the case" (9-10). This view of Stevens would appear to go against the grain of most Stevens criticism--not to mention the poetry itself; in fact, readings of Stevens as a poet of change, flux, and transition, a poet concerned with the impermanence of the moment rather than with eternity or the whole of time have long been commonplaces of Stevens criticism.1 Lynen's sense of the difficulty

1 Sister M. Bernetta Quinn's chapter on Stevens in The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry is an early and important work in this vein. A number of more recent studies focus on the way in which the desire for change is embodied in Stevens' poetic and verbal strategies, as in the articles by Helen Reguiero ("Rejection") and Marie
of maintaining his assertion emerges a few pages later: "Yet the very qualified sense in which Stevens finds [the Eternal Incarnate] revealed and the transitory nature of the revelation indicate that [Stevens'] primary assumptions make incarnation both emotionally necessary and logically absurd" (15). Lynen, unfortunately, does not return to Stevens in the body of his study, and leaves these paradoxes and contradictions—a qualified revelation of eternity, an emotionally necessary logical absurdity—unexplored. Richard Jackson, in contrast, reads Stevens as a poet of "radical time," one concerned with "a temporality that always evades us" (10), and places him in a poetic tradition which attempts to "subvert the spatiability of time, and yet achieve a sort of transcendental, spatialized vision" (9). Jackson doesn't explain just what this "sort of (my emphasis) transcendental, spatialized vision" is, or how it "subvert[s] the spatiability of time" even while demonstrating that "the spatial metaphor can never be fully abandoned"

Boroff ("Incipient") in my "Works Cited." In his analysis of "The Rock" in The Linguistic Moment, J. Hillis Miller plots the restlessness of Stevens' language in terms of the chains of deferral and abysses of difference one might expect of a deconstructive critic. Joseph Kronick and Michael Beehler each take a deconstructive approach to this aspect of Stevens' poetry, as does Joseph Riddel in his articles "Metaphoric Staging" and "The Climate of Our Poems." Thomas Hines, David Jarraway, Steven Shaviro, and Helen Vendler all encounter the subject in different ways. Frank Lentricchia offers a Marxist critique of Stevens' desire for change and newness: "that sort of desire for freshness of natural encounter, already doubtful in Emerson (that is why he urges it), is thoroughly translated by later Stevens into hope for the freshness of commodity consumption" (226).

2 Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time" and Elizabeth Ernarth's Sequel to History also offer some detailed discussions of the differences between teleological and non-teleological conceptions of time, from, respectively, feminist and postmodernist perspectives. This theme appears frequently in studies of postmodern literature; John Keeling's reading of Ashbery's "Litany" deals with that poet's tendency "to deny any linearity of perspective, any fixed, and thus limited, whole view" (142), and Jackson's chapter on "Nomadic Time" in Ashbery offers a more general treatment of this theme.
(11). But both these critics arrive at a crucial point of tension in Stevens' engagement with the idea of pattern in history. though they reach that destination by very different routes: Lynen's insistence on an eternal point of view in Stevens seems to founder on the poet's refusal to move beyond the flux of time; Jackson's poet of "radical time" nevertheless ends by adopting a transcendental point of view. A detailed consideration of Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance will not so much contradict these readings as reveal the elements in Stevens' poetry which make both of them possible.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, James Longenbach has provided one reading of Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance. He deals in particular with Stevens' opposition to those versions of apocalyptic rhetoric which were a major force in the culture of the nineteen-twenties, thirties, and forties. Longenbach notes that "The Comedian as the Letter C" is Stevens' response to the "wasteland state of mind" (180) which had become prevalent in the cultural milieu after the First World War, though there may be reasons to question the assumed correlation between a "wasteland" mentality and an apocalyptic one—my first chapter, I hope, has suggested that an apocalyptic stance involves more than an attitude of despair in the face of perceived cultural and social decay. In Chapter One, I cited Longenbach's association of apocalypse with "any historical teleology that posited a catastrophic break between past and present" (204), and he seems to have such a break in mind when writing about the poetry of the 1920s and 30s. He notes that in "The Comedian as the Letter C," "[Stevens'] vision is comic and social, set deeply at odds to

the apocalyptic climate into which the poem was born" (88), and that Stevens counters this apocalyptic rhetoric by "affirm[ing] historical continuity" (93). Longenbach finds the same theme of continuity—both continuity in time and in the relations between individual and society—at the conclusion of "Sombre Figuration" (in Owl's Clover), which offers "a future continuous with the past," "a return to what Stevens had called 'social nature' in 'The Comedian as the Letter C' . . . " (189). Longenbach's reading thus offers an alternative to both the "radical temporality" noted by Jackson, and to Lynen's concern with the relation between the present and the eternal in Stevens.

I hope to show, however, that Stevens' opposition to apocalyptic rhetoric involves not just an assertion of continuity between past, present, and future, but rather an insistence that such continuity can be founded only on an experience of time as a pure present (if such a thing is possible). Stevens articulates this theme in a work that constitutes his single most thoroughgoing engagement with questions of the pattern and meaning of history, with prophecy and the future, and a work widely regarded as his weakest long poem—Owl's Clover. This poem also stands as Stevens' most sustained engagement with social and political themes, and particularly with the leftist movements of the 1930s. Alan Filreis, in his recent Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens,

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4 Book XI of Augustine's Confessions is a locus classicus of this discussion.

5 Bloom calls it "his largest failure" (Climate 113) and devotes most of his attention to an analysis of the "badness" of Stevens' "trash can at the end of the world" (OP 81: Bloom's discussion appears on p. 119 of Climate). Joseph Carroll seems comparatively generous in calling it "one of Stevens' least successful efforts in extended composition" (88), and Eleanor Cook refers to its mode of social satire as a "dead end" (Poetry 120).
the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism, has demonstrated the ways in which Stevens' "long poem-response" (221) to Stanley Burnshaw's October 1935 New Masses critique of Ideas of Order "propose[s] continual inter-ideological struggle as a model for negotiating opposing positions that were themselves shifting" (221). Rather than examining the poem's political and social dimensions, though, I shall deal briefly with the ways in which its vision of history involves a shift away from concerns with the goal of history and toward the ever-shifting present. This is a central concern of Joseph Riddel's reading of the poem in The Clairvoyant Eye; in canto ii of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," he finds Stevens "Rejecting the illusion of a fixed and final order, either Christ's or Marx's . . ." (Clairvoyant 126). Stevens, writes Riddel, "embraces change and thus chaos, and hesitates to prophesy" (Clairvoyant 128). Yet Riddel's reading of Stevens' attitude toward the "subman" of "Sombre Figuration," and particularly of the poem's conclusion, seems puzzling; he writes that Stevens "returns to his subman not as creator of portents and

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6 Robert Emmett Monroe's "Figuration and Society in 'Owl's Clover'" and Harvey Teres' "Notes Toward a Supreme Soviet: Stevens and Doctrinaire Marxism" also deal with the poem's politics, and in particular are concerned with the political implications of its formal aspects. Both writers offer an essentially enthusiastic reading of Stevens' politics of form; they show him assigning a positive social role to a flexible and open aesthetic, and doing so in opposition to the political rigidity of Marxism, Fascism, and capitalism. Thus, Monroe finds Stevens "incorporating politics into supple and freely maneuverable forms" (148). According to Teres, Stevens takes on orthodoxy for its historic failure to deal productively with modern subjectivity, especially its inability to incorporate imagination, sensuality, the unconscious, the appeal of authoritarianism, and, of course, poetry, in either its social diagnoses or prescriptions. (155)

Both these critics are more generous than most others in their evaluation of the work's poetic merits; Teres considers it an "undervalued" work (151).
statues, but as the vital being itself and chokes off his poem with a plea for the absolutely irrational, a commitment to the sheer 'gaudium of being'" (134). If, as Riddel claims, the poem has been largely concerned with the rejection of teleology, prophecy, the future, why should this closing gesture, which asks us to restrain the prophetic imagination, to "stifle" its "land-breath," to "clip" the "cloak" and "re-design" the night (OP 101)--why should this gesture merely "choke off" the poem? Other critics have given even more positive readings of the subman, and expressed similar puzzlement or uncertainty over the poem's conclusion. For Patke, this figure links past and present "in a beneficial way" (66), and the poem comes to "a curious close, lacking the courage of its own invention" (68). Teres also gives a largely positive reading of the subman's place in the poem, though in assessing the poem's final lines he suggests more of Stevens' ambivalence: "perhaps [the statue] gives rise to the passion roundly felt, to flee imagination and its seemingly illimitable, destabilizing uncertainties..." (163). I hope to show that Stevens' attitude toward the subman is altogether more wary than any of these critics suggest, and that this wariness is entirely in keeping with the poem's general uncertainty about prophecy, the future, and the plan of history. In particular, the concluding lines do not represent a falling away from this extravagant figure, a failure of imaginative nerve, but

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7 La Guardia and Carroll are still more enthusiastic in their assessments of this figure. La Guardia reads the final lines as "a plea for the release of this subman" (64), and Carroll writes that in "Sombre Figuration," "the imagination emerges triumphantly as lord of past and future" (89): "What the man below beholds, though it is a sombre figuration, reconciles the conflicting claims of past and future to provide the mythic locus of visionary fulfillment" (98). In his reading, the poem's conclusion does not appear to undermine this revelation.
rather a deliberate rejection of the subman, and of our tendency to seek or imagine "portents" of the future. This rejection is entirely in keeping with the poem's general anti-teleological stance. Since the latter has been quite thoroughly discussed by Riddel, I wish to limit my comments to those portions of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," "A Duck for Dinner," and "Sombre Figuration" which have the most bearing on Stevens' concern with history and the future, and which provide the necessary context for my reading of the poem's conclusion.

In "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," Stevens directs his attentions toward communism as a secularized millenarianism, not toward apocalypticism itself, and although I do not wish to pretend that the concept of history as a teleological progression toward a final, stable state was the only basis of Stevens' difference with the movement, it is precisely his argument with communism's sense of the design of history which I shall consider here.  

Karl Löwith's Meaning in History offers a concise version of the common

8 Stevens' conservatism emerges quite clearly in a letter to Hi Simons of January 12, 1940: "Of course, I believe in any number of things that so-called social revolutionists believe in, but I don't believe in calling myself a revolutionist simply because I believe in doing everything practically possible to improve the condition of the workers, and because I believe in education as the source of freedom and power, and because I regret that we have not experimented a little more extensively in public ownership of public utilities. What really divides men into political classes in respect to these things is not the degree to which they believe in them but the ways and means of putting their beliefs into effect. There are a lot of things that the workers are doing that I do not believe in, even though, at the same time, I want certainly as ardently as they do to see them able to live decently and in security and to educate their children and to have pleasant homes, etc. I believe that they could procure these things within the present frame-work" (LWS 351). This belief in the essential adequacy of the present state of things forms a silent background to the theory of "incessant change" which Stevens develops in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue."
reading of Marx's indebtedness to Old Testament prophecy and eschatology.⁹ and Stevens, in the following passage from section vi of "A Duck for Dinner." likewise appears to assume a certain continuity or homology between Marxist teleology and apocalypticism:

the diverting of the dream  
Of heaven from heaven to the future, as a god,  
Takes time and tinkering, melodious  
And practical. (OP 95-96)

In a letter to Hi Simons concerning the shorter version of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" published as "The Statue at the World's End" in The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems, Stevens turns against the teleological pattern of Marxist history. He writes that

One assumes further that the evolution of what ought to be is not now in its final stage (as all the world supposes), and that the future of the mass is not an end of the future, but that change is incessant. It is a process of passing from hopeless waste to hopeful waste . . . . We live constantly in the commingling of two reflections, that of the past and that of the future, whirling apart and wide away. (LWS 367)

Stevens' rhetoric here may contrast a catastrophic rupture with history with a desire for historical continuity, as Longenbach suggests; but it also pits a desire for final fulfilment against a desire for constant and unending revolution, final stasis versus perpetual change.¹⁰ Stevens opposes the final "future of the mass" to a vision of history as a process

⁹ "Though perverted into secular prognostication, the Communist Manifesto still retains the basic features of a messianic faith: 'the assurance of things to be hoped for'" (44).

¹⁰ Teres and Monroe both contrast Stevens' flexibility and desire for change with the (perceived) rigidity of Marxist ideology, though their readings deal largely with the effect of such ideologies on Stevens' present, rather than with its conception of the future.
of continuous revolution and disruption, a succession of discrete moments: "What I think is that these little times are never more than little times, and that one such time never fails after an interval to succeed another" (LWS 368). These "little times" leave no time for a coming great time. a time of times, or for the notion that all time is moving toward that single goal. If Stevens adopts the rhetoric of the "new day"—"suddenly with lights, / Astral and Shelleyan, diffuse new day"—(OP 79), he also turns against the vision of a perfected or improved earth characteristic of some versions of prophetic eschatology: "the apple in the orchard, round / And red, will not be redder, rounder then / Than now" (OP 79). Stevens does not look toward the new day, but toward a new day, one which will not serve as a terminus but will only lead to another new day. Instead of desiring a world that moves toward a definitive, fixed and final state, Stevens asks his muses to realize that "It is only enough / To live incessantly in change" (OP 82). in a world of "chaos and of archaic change" (OP 82), a world whose founding principle and origin are not the stable and unchanging ground of an eternal divinity but the principle of flux itself. Stevens' emblem of this world, in the poem's most extravagant metaphor, is the "trash can at the end of the world" (OP 81), an allusion, according to Vendler, to the valley of dry bones of Ezekiel 37 (Extended Wings 88). Vendler calls it Stevens' "anti-paradise" (87),

11 See, for example, Isaiah 11 or 65: 20-25. Riddel sees that Stevens "rejecting the future" here (Clairvoyant 126); it seems nearer the truth to say that Stevens only rejects a certain vision of the future.

12 One might note, for example, the difference between Stevens' principle of "archaic change" and Augustine's contrast, in the Confessions, between "that ever-standing eternity" and "the times which never stand" (189).
although the meaning of this "anti" needs to be defined more precisely. The trash can, a sublime precursor to the dump of "The Man on the Dump" (1938), fills with Parts of the immense detritus of a world 
That is completely waste, that moves from waste 
To waste, out of the hopeless waste of the past 
Into a hopeful waste to come. (OP 81)

As the terminus of all earthly things, the trash can speaks not of a final fulfilment, nor even of final loss, but of an endless process of loss; the earth itself is completely and always waste. Stevens' word-play on "rose" and "rise" in the "shades and shapes / Of rose, or what will once more rise to rose" (OP 81) tells of a process in which the future always rises out of the waste of the past, but only "For a little time" (OP 81), only long enough for "rise" just as quickly to become "rose"--the color often associated with eros in Stevens, but also the past tense of "rise." The verb rises to fresh life and sinks back into its own past in the same gesture. Stevens' "gigantic, solitary urn" (OP 80) is not so much an end as a place between, the present world located between the "two immense / Reflections" of the past and future, "whirling apart and wide away" (OP 81). Stevens' trash can touches upon the ideas of final fulfilment and recompense in history, emptying these into a concept of history in which there is no escape from "waste"; Stevens rewrites the movement from loss to final recompense as an unending movement from hopeless to hopeful waste.

If the only law is the law of change, if no end has been lying in wait since the beginning, what certainty can there be of the future?--this seems to be one of the questions behind the third poem of Owl's Clover. "A Duck for Dinner." The verse of
diversion cited above ("the diverting of the dream / Of heaven")—itself one of those melodious tinkerings of which it speaks—makes and describes an anti-apocalyptic gesture, turning against the idea of a heavenly fulfilment beyond history in favor of the world of "time and tinkering," the world of history, of work and poetry. In turning against apocalypticism, this passage turns to the difficult task, in the present, of turning away from the past's vision of the future, the task of making a break with that past. This very difficulty itself constitutes "so great, / So epical a twist, catastrophe / For Isaac Watts" (OP 95) that the future itself becomes radically uncertain. Thus for the workers of canto ii

only an agony of dreams can help,
Not the agony of a single dreamer, but
The wide night mused by tell-tale muttering,
Time's fortune near, the sleepless sleepers moved
By the torture of things that will be realized.
Will, will, but how and all of them asking how
And sighing. (OP 92)

Stevens' prophetic stance in this poem, such as is, consists largely of anxious suppositions and questions: "Suppose the future fails" (OP 93). "Suppose, instead of failing, it never comes. / This future" (OP 94). "How shall we face the edge of time?" (OP 96), and "When shall lush chorals spiral through our fire / And daunt the old assassin, heart's desire?" (OP 96). Even the Bulgar's vision of a communal fulfilment which finds "all men thinking together as one, thinking / Each other's thoughts, thinking a single thought, / Disclosed in everything, transcended" (OP 93) dissolves in the realization that "that / Apocalypse was not contrived for parks . . . " (OP 93). The very nature of the present seems to work against, rather than toward, the fulfilment desired in that present. Stevens' poetry hovers at the "edge of time," but only because the present
moment is always at the edge of the next moment, not the last moment. The poem looks to the future in a mood of uncertain expectation, not in any confident belief in the eventual fulfilment of history. Stevens suggests, then, that the Bulgar's desire for a future fulfilment must collapse upon the difficulty or even impossibility of transcending the present, on the fact we can know nothing beyond our own "little time." Stevens' anti-apocalypticism seems to depend more on this limitation to the present than on any assurance of continuity between past, present, and future.

*Owl's Clover* comes closest to apocalyptic vision and violence in "Sombre Figuration." particularly in the passages concerning the "sprawling portent" which the "subman" sees moving "High up in heaven" (*OP* 98):

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It is the form
Of a generation that does not know itself.
Still questioning if to crush the soaring stacks.
The churches, like dalmatics stooped in prayer.
And the people suddenly evil, waked, accused.
Destroyed by a vengeful movement of the arms.
A mass overtaken by the blackest sky.
Each one part of the total wrath, obscure
In slaughter . . . (OP 98)
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Stevens, of course, had a specific historical context in mind when he wrote this, and his own comments on the poem, in a letter to Hi Simons dated August 30, 1940, relate it to the rise of Fascism: "When we were facing the great evil that is being enacted today merely as something foreboded, we were penetrated by its menace as by a sub-conscious portent. We felt it without being able to identify it. We could not identify what did not yet exist . . ." (*LWS* 373). Longenbach finds Stevens turning against the portent by asserting the continuity of past, present and future, particularly in the final verse-paragraph of canto
The future must bear within it every past.
Not least the pasts destroyed

The portent may itself be memory;
And memory may itself be time to come
And must be, when the portent changed, takes on
A mask up-gathered brilliantly from the dirt,
And memory's lord is the lord of prophecy
And steps forth, priestly in severity,
Yet lord, a mask of flame, the sprawling form
A wandering orb upon a path grown clear. (OP 99)

Longenbach takes this passage as Stevens' last word on the issue of historical continuity in this poem, though I hope to show that his reading, which I have already quoted in part above, does not give sufficient attention to the preceding citation's place in the poem as a whole:

"The future must bear within it every past," continues Stevens in "Sombre Figuration," "not least the pasts destroyed." The vision of a future continuous with the past is not the illusion of "tomorrow's past" (as the tenth poem of the "Blue Guitar" has it), or "the swarm of dreams / Of inaccessible Utopia" (which Stevens exposes in the twenty-sixth poem of that sequence). Instead of a world washed in imagination, the final movement of "Sombre Figuration" offers a return to what Stevens had called "social nature" in "The Comedian as the Letter C"; instead of an end, it offers continuity; instead of the force of a statue, Ananke, a hero, or the subman, it offers Jocundus, the "medium man," the "hum-drum." Crispin grown a little older in suburban shade. (188-89)

Longenbach's reading elides his own leap from canto iii to the conclusion of canto iv, and imposes the passage from canto iii on the poem's conclusion. Stevens' leap from "subman" to "medium man" also involves a leap away from continuity. At the end of *Owl's Clover*, Stevens turns away from the idea of the end, but does so not in the name of continuity but rather in the name of a present apparently isolated from both past and
To flourish the great cloak we wear
At night, to turn away from the abominable
Farewells and, in the darkness, to feel again
The reconciliation, the rapture of a time
Without imagination, without past
And without future, a present time, is that
The passion, indifferent to the poet's hum,
That we conceal? A passion to fling the cloak,
Adorned for a multitude, in a gesture spent
In the gesture's whim, a passion merely to be
For the gaudium of being, Jocundus instead
Of the black-blooded scholar, the man of the cloud, to be
The medium man among other medium men,
The cloak to be clipped, the night to be re-designed.
Its land-breath to be stifled, its color changed.
Night and the imagination being one. (OP 100-01)

The first part of this passage in particular raises questions about the value assigned to the continuity of past, present, and future outlined in canto iii. Stevens' own gloss on that passage. again from a letter to Hi Simons (August 30 1940) could be read as contradicting Longenbach's assessment of the positive value granted to that vision of historical continuity:

The future must bear within it every past, not least the pasts that have become submerged in the sub-conscious, things in the experience of races.
We fear because we remember. (LWS 373)

Longenbach reads Stevens' "must" in the poem as a prescriptive "ought to" or "should." whereas Stevens' final sentence suggests that we might interpret "must" as a statement of probability, and an apparently undesirable one at that; this submerged past leads us to experience the future as fear, a fear which distracts us from the present. Longenbach's reading elides the disjunction between these two versions of the relations between past
and future, a disjunction made explicit in Stevens' letter to Simons: the return to the statue in canto iv marks a return to "a normal object that of itself brings everything back into true focus. Farewell, then, to the chimera of the sub-conscious, evading day . . . " (LWS 374). The "medium man" is not another version of the subman, as Riddel suggests, but an entirely new figure placed in opposition to the subman, a figure who will clip the cloak and re-design night. To turn to the present, to make "a gesture spent / In the gesture's whim" is to break with all those destroyed pasts which remain in the sub-conscious and to experience the present as a free and isolated moment. It is to make a break with that prophetic tradition, in which "the portent, changed, takes on / A mask up-gathered brilliantly from the dirt. / And memory's lord is the lord of prophecy." This seems to be the true object of Stevens' desire, and the goal of this anti-teleological poem: the continued experience of this moment of freedom in a present that breaks with the past. If the poem does end with a final "choking off," that gesture proves strangely concordant with the rest of the poem, and with the following comment from his 1936 essay, "The Irrational Element in Poetry": "The incessant desire for freedom in literature or in any of the arts is a desire for freedom in life." Stevens adds, "This desire is irrational" (N 231) -- but not, perhaps, of the same order of irrationality as the subman, since it seeks contact with reality.

* * *

When Stevens provided Simons, in August of 1940, with his own interpretation of
"Sombre Figuration"'s "portent," he may well have felt as though his own apocalyptic forebodings had been fulfilled by history; the vision of destruction which had lain submerged in the "pasts destroyed" of the subconscious had become part of his present reality. What happens to the desire to live fully and only in the present when the present itself does not promise the "normalcy" and stability of a statue in a park, when the present itself can be characterized only as disruption and destruction on an almost apocalyptic scale (in the popular, secularized sense of the word)? What sort of refuge from or resistance to apocalyptic fears can the present offer in such a time? The world of the Second World War was certainly one in which one might despair of the present state of things, and hope for a new and better world. Longenbach observes that Stevens found himself in an uneasy position during the war, seeking historical and social continuity in the face of disaster, and yet remaining aware of the need to fully confront the disruption and suffering wrought by the war. Thus, Longenbach, developing the metaphor of "a catastrophic break between past and present" (204), reads Stevens as a poet who felt that "if people were to conceive of the war as an event that they could manage and ultimately prevent, then it needed to be understood as an event in the ongoing arc of history and not as the bitter end" (204). In adopting this stance, Stevens courts the danger "that the real catastrophic rupture of the war might be obscured. But Stevens avoids the opposite danger—namely, naming the catastrophe as the apocalypse that renders all actions irrelevant and terminates the still necessary work of history" (209).13 Jahan Ramazani, in "Stevens and

13 In "The Apocalyptic Temper," Robert Alter expresses a similar belief that apocalypse discourages involvement in social change and politics. But Schollem's
the War Elegy," has also written of Stevens' desire "to console and not to warn" in his war poems, through "figures whose power and totality protect against the extreme pressure of war" (24). Stevens' fictive hero, for example, consoles "As a totality in a time of fragmentation" and at the same time "internalizes [war], refiguring violence as an inward reality, part of a human totality" (32). For Ramazani, this "attempt to make war a part necessary to an aesthetic or psychic whole" "approximates the more frightening accommodations of war not only in Nietzsche but also in the later Yeats" (33). 14 Although the terms of their arguments differ--part and totality versus historical continuity--Ramazani and Longenbach seem to be responding in different ways to the same aspect of comments on "Messianic activism" (15-17) contradict this statement. as does all of Cohn's The Pursuit of the Millennium. It is difficult to be enthusiastic. of course. about the form taken by much of this activism. and its often violent consequences. See also the comments from Rowland in fn. 23 on p. 22 above.

14 There has been much critical discussion of late concerning the political dimensions of Stevens' poetry--or the lack thereof--and considerable attention has been given in particular to the poetry of the Second World War. Marjorie Perloff's "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric" suggests that the social and political context which produced Notes toward a Supreme Fiction was for Stevens only "a history [he] longed to erase" (62); the poem's "elaborate and daunting rhetoric is designed to convince both poet and reader that, despite the daily headlines and radio bulletins, the real action takes place in the country of metaphor" (42). A more positive assessment of Stevens' politics may be found in Keith M. Booker's "A War Between the Mind and Sky': Bakhtin and Poetry, Stevens and Politics." which argues against Perloff's reading of the political implications of Stevens' formal strategies. Brogan's "Stevens in History and Not in History: The Poet and the Second World War" seeks out topical references in Stevens' poetry of the war years in order to demonstrate his increasing consciousness of world-historical events. Melita Schaum provides a useful summary of this critical debate in pp. 129-82 of Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools. Longenbach and Filreis (in Wallace Stevens and the Actual World) give the most detailed and thorough accounts presently available of the politics of Stevens' war poetry; I shall refer to their work throughout this chapter.
Stevens' war poetry. What Longenbach reads as a resistance to apocalyptic despair. Ramazani interprets as a sort of acquiescence to violence through a desire to contain and console.

Longenbach's reading of Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance, however, is complicated by his interpretation of the celebrated description, in "Two or Three Ideas" (1951), of the disappearance of the gods:

Inasmuch as Stevens is interested in change, he also anticipates the unveiling of a new age; there is an apocalyptic urge in his work that is epitomized by a sentence in his late essay "Two or Three Ideas": "To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences." (88)

The passage from "Two or Three Ideas" could be read as a version of that rhetoric of the new age I discussed in Chapter One. One of those instances in which Stevens secularizes the proclamation of the present as the new age, shifting the eschatological orientation from future to present. The disappearance of the gods, of course, would appear instead to reverse the pattern of biblical and inter-testamental apocalypses: this celestial vanishing act reveals the absence of any divine plan in the world. More interesting, though, is the fact that this passage does not quite answer to that interpretation of apocalypse as a "catastrophic break" against which Longenbach defines Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance. It speaks of an event within history—one which changes our perception of the world and of history, but nevertheless one that does not serve as the "bitter end" or "catastrophic break" Longenbach speaks of elsewhere. Longenbach's comments on "Two or Three Ideas" suggest that he might read the following passage from "Man and Bottle" (1940) as another example of this apocalyptic desire—but he does not. Here, "The mind," Stevens
tells us.

has to content the reason concerning war,
It has to persuade that war is part of itself.
A manner of thinking, a mode
Of destroying, as the mind destroys.

An aversion, as the world is averted
From an old delusion, an old affair with the sun,
An impossible aberration with the moon,
A grossness of peace. (CP 239)

This passage might be read as a kind of inverted kingdom-saying, reading the present as a new age of violence which breaks with the peaceful past.

I wonder if the gap between Longenbach's two understandings of apocalypse, or the fact that he can call the selection from "Two or Three Ideas" apocalyptic, but not "Man and Bottle," stems from his desire to read Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance during the war year as an assertion of continuity in the face of upheaval and disruption, and his desire to find a narrative of gradual political enlightenment in Stevens' poetry of the Second World War. Both Longenbach and Ramazani make much of Stevens' internalization of violence in such poems as "Man and Bottle" (1940); according to Longenbach, "the actual violence of the Second World War made [Stevens] uncomfortable with 'Man and Bottle'" (216). He notes that "Extracts" opposes "Man and Bottle"'s and "Of Modern Poetry"'s "willful internalization of war" (217). But by reading "Extracts" in opposition to "Man and Bottle," he finally neutralizes the violence of "Man and Bottle," and elides the fact that this rhetoric returns in the later "Repetitions of a Young Captain" (1944). There may be a sense in which the war becomes a kind of apocalyptic or revelatory force in Stevens' poetry: in the language of "The Noble Rider
and the Sound of Words." the war enforces an engagement with reality, with "what is
direct and immediate and real" (NA 22). A kind of revelation is implicit throughout
"Repetitions of a Young Captain"; there, the destructiveness of the war--"A tempest
cracked on the theatre" and "Quickly, / The wind beat in the roof and half the walls" (CP
306)--brings about contact with "a reality beyond / The finikin spectres in the memory"
(CP 307): "The rip / Of the wind and the glittering were real now, / In the spectacle of a
new reality" (CP 306).15 Of course, Stevens subtly undermines his revelatory rhetoric
when he also names his new reality a "spectacle"--is it just another show, another bit of
stage machinery, "The pulling into the sky and the setting there / Of the expanses that are
mountainous rock and sea" (CP 308)? And it may be difficult to remain comfortable with
the value Stevens appears to assign to violence in these passages. But I hope to show that
Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance proves more complex than Longenbach suggests.
Longenbach separates two elements in Stevens engagement with apocalypse: his desire to
turn away from apocalyptic endings and catastrophes: and his desire to turn away from
the past, his desire for a new age of the anti-mythological myth. I would argue that
Stevens' rhetoric of violence and of the need to turn away from--or make a break with--
the past does not disappear from his poetry as the war proceeds, but in fact becomes
central to his anti-apocalyptic stance, to his desire to turn against those apocalyptic
desires for a final fulfilment.

15 Longenbach's reading of the poem concentrates on its attempts to define masculine
and feminine roles in relation to war and creativity (232-36). He does not relate its
rhetoric of violence and of the emergence of a new reality to apocalypse.
The following pages will focus on three poems which show Stevens exploring moments of crisis, visions of catastrophe. In the 1940s in particular, it was not enough for Stevens to say that this particular disruption--the Second World War--was not the End, since this gesture might merely seem to acknowledge the continued deferral of the terminal event, thereby becoming just another moment in the apparently interminable history of this deferred terminus. Stevens seeks instead to put an end to the very idea of the end. Stevens counters apocalyptic disruption with the idea that time keeps disrupting itself, that time reveals, in each new moment, only its own disruptive potential.

Here, I am influenced by Steven Shaviro's reading of the theme of repetition in Stevens' later poetry, which he describes as "a new kind of repetition, one founded not on identity but on the reiterated renewal of the experience of change" (226), "an inexhaustibly repeatable movement of pure divergence without origination" (226). Mary Doyle Springer's "Repetition and 'Going Round' with Wallace Stevens" reads this kind of repetition in light of Kierkegaard's distinction between "recollection" and "repetition." and also relates it to the theme of repetition in Kristeva's *Desire in Language*; in Springer's account, Stevens deals with "repetitions that are slightly different each time they occur" ("Repetition" 194), "a circling backward and forward from the past" (196), a "fruitful repetition which is non-repetitive in that it is 'always beginning'" (197). One

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16 According to Doyle, "recollection is unsatisfying because it merely re-collects what has happened or what has been said before and burdens us with it..." ("Repetition" 195). Repetition, on the other hand, is for Kierkegaard always a "willed repetition' in which we choose, not the spanking new, but the fresh rediscovery as a basis for renewal" (195).
might contrast their two readings by saying that Shaviro is concerned with the repetition of difference itself, whereas Springer looks for repetitions which include a difference and the possibility of a fresh re-consideration of the repeated thing or event.¹⁷ My reading, I think, is closer to Shaviro's, and I wish to use this theme of repetition as a way of understanding Stevens' view of the relations between historical events and particularly of the disruptiveness of the Second World War; I shall also show that the appearance of this theme in Stevens' late poetry does not represent, as Shaviro suggests, a new development, but actually repeats the configuration of temporal relations which Stevens had established in his poetry by the 1930s.¹⁸ This theme is played out on many levels: it is involved, for instance, in the peculiar restlessness of Stevens' language, his constant questioning of old figures and his search for new ones to replace them--and which themselves must be replaced.¹⁹ And Stevens' stance is not without its own contradictions, since it leads to a vision of continuous discontinuity in history. Must the theme of disruption break with

¹⁷ Shaviro and Springer are united, though, in differentiating the repetition of "That which is always beginning" from the monotonous repetition of sameness which one also finds in Stevens, the repetition of bees in Notes II i. the "granite monotony" (CP 394) of Notes II vi. the "Red-in-red repetitions never going / Away" (CP 400) of Notes III iii. or the "repetition / In a repetitiousness of men and flies" (CP 502) which forms part of "The Plain Sense of Things." This selection of citations suggests, as does Springer's reading of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" ("Repetition" 197-200), that the two versions of repetition do not belong to different periods of Stevens' career, but recur throughout his oeuvre.

¹⁸ The earliest poem which Shaviro considers in any detail is Notes toward a Supreme Fiction (1942).

¹⁹ The works by Bloom (Climate), Boroff ("Incipient"), Cook (Poetry), Reguiero ("Rejection") and Hollander in my list of works cited each deal with this aspect of Stevens' work in different ways.
itself? While the preceding sounds like a series of rather abstract metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) statements about the nature of time and the plot of history, it is also possible in the end to relate this theme to questions of desire: the desire for the freedom of a present that breaks with the past, and the apparently contradictory desire for continuity, for more time, for an end to fears that "The future might stop emerging out of the past" (CP 151). I wish to continue, then, by examining these questions through readings of "Girl in a Nightgown," "Martial Cadenza," and "Dutch Graves in Bucks County."

* * *

In "Girl in a Nightgown," a war-haunted poem of 1938, Stevens' meditations on war modulate toward apocalyptic foreboding. Alan Filreis, though, insists that "Girl in a Nightgown," since it was written in 1938, is not concerned with war; its "booming wintry and dull" (CP 214), he writes, presages only the arrival of a spring whose colours will soon "burst into flames" (CP 214). Filreis' claims (Actual World 63) seem questionable, since although the poem obviously cannot reflect upon a world war that has not yet begun, it nevertheless can deal with premonitions of war, and 1938 seems to have been as good a year as any in which to worry and write about such fears. Nor does Filreis' reading clarify why this booming, if it is the booming of spring, has apparently replaced or drowned out, with its "Massive drums and leaden trumpets," the "fluters' fortune" (CP 214) of spring. His reading results, perhaps, from his desire to tell a narrative of Stevens'
progress from an initial isolationist stance to full support for America's involvement in
the war in Europe—a Stevens unconcerned with omens of war in 1938 (or with the
Spanish Civil War) proves more consistent with the disengaged Stevens of the early years
of World War II. I hope to show that a reading that turns to the context of impending war
in Europe (or the Spanish Civil War) not only illuminates some aspects of "Girl in a
Nightgown," but also sheds light on "Martial Cadenza," which returns to the scene of the
earlier work in order to take a different stance toward the war.

The threat of violence also figures in a poem which I think haunts "Girl in a
Nightgown": Yeats' celebrated 1919 lyric, "A Prayer for My Daughter." Yeats' poem, of
course, followed upon the horrors of the First World War, whereas Stevens' is poised at
the brink of the Second. And Holly Stevens would have turned fourteen in 1938, while
Yeats' daughter Anne was less than a year old when she became her father's poetic
subject. Stevens is altogether more oblique and elliptical in sketching the setting,
characters, and situation of his poem—the opening stanza of "Girl in a Nightgown" would
have to be an almost comically terse American reply to Yeats' first two. Nevertheless,
certain elements unite the two scenes: a peaceful domestic setting, with a female child
apparently just retired to bed; a concern with the weather; a shift from threatening
weather to the threat of human violence; and, permeating or indeed motivating all this, an
awareness of the fragility of innocence in a potentially violent world. Stevens delicately
counterpoints his poem's two recurring elements in its first stanza, juxtaposing the
domestic scene with the still only vaguely threatening exterior:

    Lights out. Shades up.
A look at the weather.
There has been a booming all the spring,
A refrain from the end of the boulevards. (CP 214)

Stevens seems to shift almost imperceptibly from what may be a spoken command--"Lights out"--to an interior monologue, and the clipped, staccato phrasing suggests, perhaps, a certain wary, guarded stance. This protective drawing-in of forces is literally visible in the contrasting shapes of the two half- stanzas. The first two lines, then, enact a double interiorizing: the parent, facing the outside world from a vantage of domestic security, turns from speech to interior monologue, all the time reining in his words, withholding his verbal energies as though in defense against the more energetic force which breaks out in the "booming" of the more expansive final lines. The tone is delicately nuanced here; but while the full force of the threat posed by the "booming" has not yet emerged, the vague uneasiness of the opening bespeaks an inside which has already been penetrated by some unsettling and unbidden force. It is perhaps for this reason that the object of the speaker's protective instincts--the "Girl in a Nightgown"--is named only in the title, relegated to a safer, literally separate space above the poem's more troubling elements.

In fact, the whole poem plays at another set of boundaries, boundaries between the sensory and the visionary, the ordinary and the extraordinary, between rumours of war and apocalyptic fears. For all its guardedness, the first line bespeaks an opening to an exterior world, and might even be read as a curiously domesticated metaphor for a sort of visionary experience, for moments, in Wordsworth's phrasing, "when the light of sense / Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us / The invisible world . . . " (Prelude vi 534-36).
Stevens also goes on to speak of war in terms suggestive of apocalyptic endings:

This is the silence of night.
This is what could not be shaken.
Full of stars and the images of stars--
And that booming wintry and dull.

Like a tottering, a falling and an end,
Again and again, always there,
Massive drums and leaden trumpets,
Perceived by feeling instead of sense.

A revolution of things colliding

.....................................

It is shaken now. It will burst into flames,
Either now or tomorrow or the day after that. (CP 214)

The "day of the lord" of the Old Testament and the parousia in the New are also times when the peoples of the earth will be shaken by much shaking, as in the following passages from Haggai and Hebrews:

For thus saith the Lord of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land: And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come . . . . (Hag 2:6-7)

Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. (Heb 12:26-27)

The somewhat didactic tone of the second passage--it appears to be a gloss on Haggai 2:6-7--makes it less poetically appealing or rhetorically seductive than the first, but "Girl in a Nightgown" seems to follow its variations on "shake" quite closely. Stevens apparently finds nothing in his world that "cannot be shaken," though he posits no divine mover and shaker. These biblical echoes only emphasize Stevens' difference from those
texts; his vision belongs to that secularized, modern version of apocalypse which foresees a disaster brought about by human means. By the end of the poem, Stevens moves toward a more prophetic stance, using the future tense to speak of a world that "will burst into flames, / Either now or tomorrow or the day after that" (CP 214); but while the boomimg, "Like a tottering, a falling and an end," foretells a violent conclusion. Stevens does not envision a new heaven and a new earth, as John of Patmos and Isaiah do. Stevens cuts short the story of the end, leaving us on the brink of nothingness rather than fulfilment.

The profound sense of loss and disruption which Stevens feels upon encountering these forces, and which is heightened by the absence of any sort of compensation or consolation, emerges most clearly in the poem's gaps and disjunctions, its hesitations and silences. Stevens cannot rest long in the security of "what could not be shaken." since the interruption of the dash marks the apparently unbidden return of the "booming" mentioned in the first stanza. This dash seems syntactically unnecessary--its removal would in no way disturb the passage's intelligibility--but its silent interruption of "the silence of night" tells us much about Stevens' stance toward the violence it introduces. An emotionally charged suspension, it speaks silently of a desire not to speak, of a hesitation before the pronouncement of a violent conclusion. Yet it also bespeaks something of the disruptive force of the vision (or audition) which it introduces; it interrupts and breaks off from "what could not be shaken." Stevens' dash is both strangely weightless and overladen with significance: it marks a boundary between interior and exterior, private and public, domestic and political, order and disorder, peace and war: and even as it
crosses these boundaries, it marks a certain reluctance to do so.²⁰

But it also seems as though the poem has already crossed that boundary even before the dash appears. Reading backwards from the dash, we learn that "This is the silence of night. / This is what could not be shaken" (my emphasis); here, the shift of tense from present to past suggests that such stability has already vanished. One might note, too, the contrast offered by Hebrews 12:27, which speaks with full certainty of "those things which cannot be shaken" (again, my emphasis). Has the disruptive force of this dash rippled backwards to the poem's beginning? The dash, at any rate, introduces a "refrain" which lives up to its etymology: the refrain "breaks" in upon the present peace "Again and again, always there." And it breaks that peace. The force of the disruption is registered nowhere so clearly as in the difference between the two appearances of tropes of peace:

This is the silence of night.
This is what could not be shaken.
Full of stars and the images of stars
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.²⁰ Mary Doyle Springer, in "Closure in a Half Light," comments briefly on the "abrupt deviational effect" (171) of Stevens' dashes in the last of his "Six Significant Landscapes" and in "World without Peculiarity." I hope to show that this is just one aspect of their force.
instructive: Stevens gradually closes off any hope for the desired world of "should"—"The night should be warm and fluters' fortune / Should play in the trees when morning comes" (CP 214)—as he relegates "the repose of night" to the "was" of the past, portrays the "is" of a shaken present, and ends on the "will" of future destruction. Thus, the poem's many "Phrases . . . of fear and of fate" (CP 214) revise or displace its descriptions of "what could not be shaken" in an unsettling reversal or emptying, transforming the present into a thing of the past. That "will" leaves the poem in a curious state of suspension, divided between a "shaken" present, and a destructive event which has yet to be. Stevens finds no way of closing off or controlling the violence which irrupts in this poem's present.

In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941), Stevens described the Second World War as "a set of events, not only beyond our power to tranquillize them in the mind, beyond our power to reduce them and metamorphose them, but events that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real . . ." (NA 22). It is certainly this sense of the mind's inability to "tranquillize" either these events or itself that haunts "Girl in a Nightgown." "Contrary Theses (I)" (1942), though not a poem that engages with apocalyptic forebodings, betrays a similarly shaken consciousness. This poem contrasts a scene of present plenitude and fulness with the equally present violence of war, and does not come to any resolution of the tension between the two:

Now grapes are plush upon the vines.
A soldier walks before my door.

The hives are heavy with the combs.
Before, before, before my door.
And seraphs cluster on the domes,  
And saints are brilliant in fresh cloaks.

Before, before, before my door.  
The shadows lessen on the walls.

The bareness of the house returns.  
An acid sunlight fills the halls.

Before, before. Blood smears the oaks.  
A soldier stalks before my door. (CP 266-67)

Stevens' obsessive repetitions disrupt the peaceful world portrayed in the other lines, and finally leave their mark on the inner world when "The bareness of the house returns. / An acid sunlight fills the halls." Stevens' tropes of natural plenitude turn into tropes of an inner emptiness and natural corrosion. His diminution of the refrain to "Before, before" also expands the meaning of those words: they become temporal markers, suggesting the irrevocable loss of the conditions that existed "before" the war. Again, Stevens' "refrain" breaks the tropes of peace, and the only thing that returns is loss.

* * *

It is precisely in its unsettled and unsettling conclusion, in its inability to find any assuagement for the premonitions of "a tottering, a falling, and an end" that interrupt and disturb the present--or indeed that are the present--that "Girl in a Nightgown" serves as a counter-example to the other poems to be considered in this chapter. In "Martial Cadenza" and "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," Stevens explores the way in which the
sense of interruption or disruption created by the war paradoxically also becomes a
guarantee of continuity, a new beginning rather than an apocalyptic termination. This new
beginning also turns away from any sense of a final fulfilment of the past.

"Martial Cadenza" (1940) begins and ends by suggesting a relation between past
and present through its allusive echoes of Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard
Bloom'd." Whitman begins "Lilacs" with a memory of mourning, of a time when "the
great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night" (l. 2), and later addresses the star
as follows:

O western orb sailing the heaven,
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd,
As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,
As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side . . . . (I.I. 55-59)

Stevens, at a time of immense social upheaval, when the sheer scale of warfare brings
forebodings of a disruptive conclusion to history, turns to the poetic past in order to
achieve a sense of historical continuity:

Only this evening I saw again low in the sky
The evening star, at the beginning of winter, the star
That in spring will crown every western horizon,
Again

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Only this evening I saw it again,
At the beginning of winter, and I walked and talked
Again, and lived and was again, and breathed again
And moved again and flashed again, time flashed again. (CP 237-38)

But, significantly, he finds this continuity through a relationship to one of the great war
elegies of the nineteenth century, a poem which commemorates Lincoln, and "all the slain
soldiers of the war" (l. 179). Stevens finds his sense of continuity, then, through his relation to another time of upheaval, disruption, and loss. He picks up where Whitman left off, responding to the earlier poet's initial forward-looking stance—Whitman "shall mourn with ever-returning spring" (l. 3)—as well as to his final valedictory comments: "I cease from my song for thee, / From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee. / O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night" (l. 195-97). Thus, Stevens' "again," a crucial word in "Martial Cadenza," marks a certain continuity not just with that last time the poem's speaker saw the star, but also with the star's most celebrated appearance in an American war lyric; Stevens sees the star again, and he hears Whitman's words about the star again, and gives them new poetic life. But Stevens achieves this regeneration not by merely repeating, but by turning from or against Whitman's words even as he turns back to them (or as they return to him). For Whitman, the star is a sign of mourning, a sign of loss; the planet of desire and love returns only to mark the absence of the beloved, for whom there can be no "again." Stevens' "again" turns this star in a new direction; it does not gesture toward a lost past, but rather is "The present close, the present realized, / Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands" (CP 238). Stevens returns to Whitman's marker of memory and loss only to make a doubled gesture, to turn it, paradoxically, into a trope that turns away from the past and toward new beginnings.

"Martial Cadenza" also has a revisionary relationship to "Girl in a Nightgown," and takes us back to that poem's struggles with the apocalyptic fears aroused by war. Some elements of "Martial Cadenza" echo the scene of the earlier work--the starry night
sky, the peacefulness now figured as "a world without time" (CP 237). the trumpets and
drums (now present through their absence), and references (more specific this time) to
war. But the later poem reverses the values assigned to the peaceful time portrayed at the
beginning of "Girl in a Nightgown." a time when "the repose of night. / Was a place,
strong place, in which to sleep" (CP 214). While James Longenbach's and Alan Filreis'
association of the poem with American isolationism at the outset of World War II
convincingly accounts for its historical context. Longenbach's equation of "the evening
star"'s return with the poet's sense of timelessness, and his claim that the poem "expresses
a desire for a 'world without time'" (210) make sense neither of the poem's syntax and
logical structure, nor of its revisionary relationship to "Girl in a Nightgown." As Brogan
notes ("History" 173), the evening star's return comes "like sudden time in a world
without time," a world--"this place, the street in which I was" (CP 237)--which, until that
moment, seemed unreal and "without time" because of its peacefulness, its apparent
isolation from the terrible events unfolding in Europe. "as that which is not has no time. /
Is not, or is of what there was, is full / Of the silence before the armies" (CP 237). The
stasis of a peaceful, isolated world now proves undesirable, and the desired rejuvenation

21 Filreis' reading of the poem proves more subtle and convincing, but he expresses
dissatisfaction--and ambivalence--over the poem's central question, which he describes as
a "bold, pertinent" and yet "doubtful question," one which reveals some political
blindness on Stevens' part (Actual World 24). Filreis misses a mythological motif which
makes Stevens' question both more reasonable and more disturbing. What does the
evening star, not a star at all but Venus, the planet of love, of desire, have to do with this
"Martial" world? Why does such a return of desire and youth bring to mind the
contemporaneous but distant reality of war? Greek myth provides some answers, but ones
that do not resolve the poem's deep ambivalence concerning the cost of such involvement
in the present.
and return to life come from the turn toward the present and the dangerous pun in its "constant fire" (CP 238), another reminder of the war-time context. This turn toward the present is also marked in Stevens' references to the war, which have a historical specificity somewhat unusual even among his more topical poetry. One senses the burden placed upon his consciousness by the "blank skies over England, over France / And above the German camps" (CP 238), thoughts of which are brought to him by the star. and his keen awareness of the war leads him to suggest that the "evening star" punningly "looked apart" (CP 238) from/of that war. Yet Stevens' "world without time" somehow sounds more deathly than the violent reality of war. Are the inhabitants of such a world already dead? A "world without time" may call to mind the post-apocalyptic world of eternity

22 Filreis proves critical of this passages, though his criticism is based on some odd assumptions about the measure of a writer's political sympathies:

Even the question "Which side are you on?"--itself central to the cultural politics of U.S. intervention, as it derived from leftist antifascism earlier--goes unanswered in this war song. The trope of the commonly viewed star leaves indistinct the essential differences between the English, the French, and the Germans on the one side, and the neutral-seeming star-gazing American on the other. The speaker tries to consider the "sides" to be equated by nature and not distinguished by other great differences (such as German fascism and French republicanism; England, France, and Germany on the same "side" of an ocean from the point of view of isolationist America). (Actual World 24)

Stevens may simply have trusted his readers to know the difference between German fascism and French republicanism; and there is always the difficult problem of speaking of atrocities which Christopher Ricks explores in "Geoffrey Hill 1: The Tongue's Atrocities." Filreis' lack of interest in poetic form also leads him to neglect the ways in which Stevens does mark the difference between Germany and France: the line break after France leaves that nation hanging on the brink, separates it from Germany, and forces the reader to hesitate before proceeding to the next line--whereupon that hesitation takes on an unexpected significance.
"there should be time no longer"—Rev. 10:6), as though the end of time had come before its time. Of course there could be no question of returning to the life of "sudden time" from this timeless state, and Stevens carefully distances himself from an assertion of actual timelessness by using the "like" of simile. One might also fleetingly read a "world without time" as a world that has run out of time, a world teetering on the brink of annihilation, but granted a reprieve by the influx of "sudden time." It should be noted, too, that Stevens contrasts the present order with a timeless one, not with the different temporal order of the millennium. Stevens makes these allusions to last things only in order to turn away from ideas about an end of time, and to turn instead to the present and its "sudden time." It is time itself, as the present, that enters and disturbs the stasis of this world. The last two stanzas might be read against Eliot's insistence, in 1935's "Burnt Norton," that "Time past and time future / Allow but a little consciousness. To be conscious is not to be in time . . . " (II ll. 37-39). Stevens, on the other hand, seeks not to transcend time, but to live in the moment: to be conscious, for Stevens, is to be in time, in the present. "Martial Cadenza" expresses a desire for time, for more time, rather than a desire for a "world without time."

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23 For a discussion of different understandings of eternity and different readings of Rev 10:6, see fn. 21 on p. 20 above. The idea of a world without time also calls to mind the static heaven of "Sunday Morning" vi.

24 A. Walton Litz, in "Space and Time in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,'" makes a similar comparison between Notes and Eliot's Four Quartets: "Both Eliot and Stevens are responding to an almost unbearable fracture in history, and both are attempting to 'redeem the time.' Eliot by viewing the temporal from a timeless perspective, Stevens by immersing himself in the unpredictable flow of secular time" (163).
Stevens deals with his earlier fears of "a tottering, a falling, and an end" by making a commitment to the present, seeking a sense of continuity, paradoxically enough, through a present which itself is always interrupting the past and which includes war. Stevens' idea of time in this passage, in fact, with its echoes of the conclusion of "Sombre Figuration," seems opposed to the straightforward continuity which Longenbach reads as Stevens' response to the war. The "evening star"

shall maintain--Itself
Is time. apart from any past, apart
From any future, the ever-living and being,
The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire.

IV

The present close, the present realized,
Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands.
The vivid thing in the air that never changes,
Though the air change. (CP 238)

Stevens' refusal to give this present any spatial dimension beyond that point occupied by a star in the night sky suggests a wish to experience time as a pure, present moment. Such an experience takes place "apart from any past, apart / From any future" as though each moment were experienced as a break which breaks off from the past, and with which the future will also break (a break reinforced by Stevens' line break), a repeated interruption which interrupts itself. Stevens plays out this narrative of interruption through the poem's syntax and structure. The syntax at the beginning of this passage ("Yet it is this that shall maintain--Itself / Is time") almost literally embodies the irruption of time into the poem; the words that attempt to realize "the present realized" interrupt that which precedes them. The dash that marks or performs the interruption, as a purely syntactic marker, thus
creates a moment of "blank time" (CP 342) in the poem, a moment of interruption. Oddly enough, Stevens interrupts himself at the moment of his strongest assertion of continuity: "And yet it is this which shall maintain." "Maintain" is left stranded, cut off from any object, as though the verb were becoming intransitive, asserting the mere act of endurance in the face of a force which apparently cuts the sentence short--until we read "Itself."

Stevens' enjambment makes us momentarily read "maintain--Itself," so that, albeit briefly, the verb maintains its transitivity, and the star maintains only itself. It is only after this interruption and these momentary suspensions of sense that the restless movement of the tropes of the present break across the stanza boundary with a new confidence, a confidence that apparently comes in response to the threat to continuity posed by the war.

One wonders, too, about the range of meanings intended in the "cadenza" of the title. Some poetry may fall on the ear with a martial cadence, though Stevens is usually more varied and subtle a prosodist. In music, a cadence most often provides closure; but "Martial Cadenza" seems to be a poem against closure. The cadenza of the classical concerto, however, unfolds in a space left free for improvisation between two tutti chords, an interval suspended between two iterations of a dominant pedal. It puts off closure through or in the name of improvisation. Stevens' poem interrupts itself in order to create space--and time--for a poetic version of such extemporization in a time of war.

There is, of course, another paradox in the suggestion that this vision of time might be true at all times, and in fact the poem seems founded on an apparently self-

\[25\] Here I am referring to the longer cadenza usually included between the end of the recapitulation and the beginning of the coda in the first movement of a classical concerto.
contradictory desire for the continuation of time's disruptive force. Time is both "the ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire"--the latter having inescapable associations with that Heraclitean idea of flux--and "the vivid thing that never changes." And for all its emphasis on the novelty and "living changingness" (CP 380) of a "sudden time" experienced "apart from any past, apart / From any future." the poem seems dominated by a rhetoric of return and repetition:

Only this evening I saw again low in the sky
The evening star, at the beginning of winter, the star
That in spring will crown every western horizon,
Again . . . as if it came back, as if life came back,
Not in a later son, a different daughter, another place,
But as if evening found us young, still young,
Still walking in a present of our own. (CP 237)

"Again, the diva-dame" (CP 353) makes so many appearances throughout the poem, particularly in its last lines, that the word itself flashes repeatedly like the time symbolized by "The evening star." And the echo of the poem's opening in its final

26 Stevens gives one of his most beautiful versions of this paradox in canto x of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." in a notable anti-apocalyptic passage which makes change a guarantee of continuity. Here, he writes that our spirit resides

In a permanence composed of impermanence,
In a faithfulness as against the lunar light,

So that morning and evening are like promises kept,
So that the approaching sun and its arrival,
Its evening feast and the following festival,

This faithfulness of reality, this mode,
This tendance and venerable holding-in
Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces. (CP 472)
"Only this evening I saw it again. / At the beginning of winter" (CP 238) marks the poem's structure as one of departure and return, so that by turning away from a street full "of what there was . . . full / Of the silence before the armies" (CP 237) the poem enacts a return to and of the present. The poem's echoes of "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd" and "Sombre Figuration" likewise establish a paradoxical relationship with the poetic past. But, as I have already suggested, this present itself turns away from or breaks with the past, so that what returns is only the moment of turning away, of breaking with the past. Stevens looks for continuity, and finds it in an interruption. Such moments occur throughout Stevens' work, and the fact that he often articulates this return of the turn in terms of desire returns us to the "evening star"'s identity as Venus, the emblem of desire. This identification underlines the strong physical element in Stevens' sense of rejuvenation in the poem's final lines: "and I walked again and talked again, / And lived again and was again, and breathed again / And moved again and flashed again, time flashed again" (CP 238). This is a return to a world of life, movement, and change. Stevens' obsessive repetitions of "again" here become part of a rhetoric of desire which constantly reiterates the moment of repetition, as though each such return only generated more desire, rather than bringing fulfilment; there appears to be no lasting gain in each "again." The return to and of time is also a return to and of the disruptive force of desire, and both seem marked as paradoxical double turns by a

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27 One of the best-known versions appears in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" I ii: "It is desire at the end of winter" that "knows that what it has is what is not / And throws it away like a thing of another time. / As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep" (CP 382).
structure that turns back in order to turn away again.

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I have already noted that an apocalypse which foresees the end of history also gives history a certain meaning and pattern. "Dutch Graves in Bucks County." a 1942 poem rooted both in Stevens' reaction to the Second World War and in his increasing interest in family history, plots relations between past, present and future that turn away from any teleology in history. The question of the relation between past and present in this poem has provoked a variety of critical responses; Harold Bloom, for instance, writes that this work takes a "pugnacious and polemical . . . stand against the past . . . " (*Climate* 219). But Bloom also claims that the poem asserts continuity with the past in the apparent overcoming of "divergence" (*CP* 293) in the final couplet (*Climate* 221). Alan Filreis provides a far more detailed reading, focusing in particular on the poem's war-time context and its relationship to Alan Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (*Actual World* 115-24). Filreis reads, in this poem, a narrative of Stevens' progression from an initial sense of discontinuity with the past to a "an unmistakable conclusion" in which "a new sense of likeness between past and present supports 'these violent marchers of the

28 For Bloom there is a tension in the poem between this stance and "Dutch Graves"' status as "as strongly an Emersonian text as any Stevens wrote" (*Climate* 219).

29 For Bloom, these lines are "one of [Stevens'] most ambivalent tropes, perhaps beyond interpretation . . . " (*Climate* 220).
present" (120-21). This conclusion has an "emotional validity . . . derived from Stevens's personal identification with his *semblables*, versions of himself as Dutch soldier (121).30 James Longenbach reads a similar narrative in the poem, but finds the conclusion less certain, noting only that by the poem's conclusion, "the gap between the past and the present is narrowed . . . " (214). Unfortunately, Longenbach's brief comments do not resolve some crucial questions—how is this gap narrowed? If, in his view, the gap is narrowed but not closed, what forces in the poem prevent the full "identification" between Stevens and his "semblables" proposed by Filreis? I hope to show that the poem makes a paradoxical figuration of the relation between past and present, a figuration determined by a desire to turn against end-directed conceptions of history.

In "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," Stevens returns to an ancestral plot in order to work out his own version of the plot of history as a plot of free improvisation, of open possibilities rather than pre-established ends, thereby turning against or plotting against the plot of his "doubly killed" (*CP* 290) forebears. Both that ancestral plot and Stevens' counterplot emerge in a particularly complex passage:

> And you, my semblables, whose ecstasy  
> Was the glory of heaven in the wilderness—

> Freedom is like a man who kills himself  
> Each night, an incessant butcher, whose knife

30 Filreis is particularly concerned with the element of *personal* identification in Stevens' relationship to his "semblables"; he contrasts this with Alan Tate's desire for historical objectivity and his rejection of Romantic and subjective interpretations of the past. In contrast, Ronald Sukenick sees little if any continuity between past and present in this poem; his reading deals with the poem largely in terms of a "static past of the dead from which time continually breaks" (117).
Grows sharp in blood. The armies kill themselves.
And in their blood an ancient evil dies--
The action of incorrigible tragedy.

And you, my semblables, behold in blindness
That a new glory of new men assembles. (CP 292)

Stevens' brief phrase--"the glory of heaven in the wilderness"--proves difficult to interpret with any absolute certainty in this context. Does it refer to the inner glory of Christ's spiritual kingdom in the life of the individual believer, or does Stevens attribute to his ancestors a desire for an actual physical, temporal millennium on American soil? Stevens finds his own ecstasy, at any rate, by taking a position outside either of these concepts.

the position of the self-mutilating "freedom" found in the present and its disruption of the past, "The hullaballoo of health and have, / The much too many disinherit ed / In a storm of torn-up testaments" (CP 292). The fact that the passage quoted above is the only one in which the refrain referring to Stevens' "semblables" is left incomplete, suspended by the dash--that mark of interruption--suggests this passage's crucial place in the poem's argument; "freedom . . . an incessant butcher" breaks in upon the ancestors' desire for heavenly glory with a disruptive force. Stevens' "semblables" are forced to exchange their vision of "the glory of heaven in the wilderness" for another, parado xical vision, in which they "behold in blindness / That a new glory of new men assembles" (CP 292). In fact, the poem seems disruptive in many ways. While Alan Filreis, as I mentioned, reads in it an argument with Alan Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," one might also consider the

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31 Stevens displayed a much more negative response to his sense of "disinheritance" in the earlier "Cuisine Bourgeoise" (1939).
ways in which its opening lines—"Angry men and furious machines / Swarm from the little blue of the horizon / To the great blue of the middle height" (CP 290)—violently disrupt the expectations created by the title's gesture toward affiliation with the "graveyard" genre. Stevens visits this poetic topos not just to insist that the proper "place" of the past (and perhaps of that genre) is six feet under the topsoil of Bucks County, but also to make his ancestors turn in their graves. He turns their plots into a trope of the absolute pastness of the past:

And you, my semblables, are crusts that lie
In the shrivellings of your time and place. (CP 291)

And you, my semblables, in the total
Of remembrance share nothing of ourselves. (CP 291)

And you, my semblables, know that this time
Is not an early time that has grown late. (CP 292)

Stevens' plot of history is one of a constant "divergence" (CP 293) in which each moment follows a new inclination, turning away from the past without having any absolute end (in both senses of that word) in sight.

I have produced this reading, however, only to turn against it, and to suggest that in "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" Stevens sketches a more complex and paradoxical relationship between past and present. Past and present are, I hope to show, related by their unrelatedness, by their mutual rejection of the past. The poem's form embodies this

32 One wonders, too, if Stevens may also be turning against Hardy's "Channel Firing." Though there are no specific verbal echoes, Stevens seems even more determined than Hardy's God to keep his skeletons in their place, in spite of the war's apocalyptic rumblings.
apparent self-contradiction, since it both keeps apart and holds together the stanzas of the present and the refrain of the past in their mutual difference. This structure turns away from any straightforward sense of narrative continuity in history, while nonetheless making it possible to assemble a sort of narrative of the poem, a narrative which tells of the gradual progression toward the perception of this paradoxical relationship between the two sections, which initially seem to be somewhat confusingly unrelated. Stevens' ancestors, of course, enacted their own "divergence," having departed, as emigrants, from the country whose "old flag" now "flutters in tiny darkness" (CP 290), or, as Protestants, having broken with the Catholic Church. But Stevens' tropes of the present also insist on its own divergence from the past ("these are not those rusted armies" [CP 292], "The much too many disinherited" [CP 292], and so on), so that the two sections gradually turn toward each other in their divergences. This process culminates in the poem's final refrain: "Time was not wasted in your subtle temples. / No: nor divergence made too steep to follow down" (CP 293). "Divergence," the act of turning away from the past, or even from the present, paradoxically unites the different epochs in their differences. Stevens does not "follow down" the same "divergence" as his ancestors; rather, his different divergence informs his self-contradictory sense of continuity. Stevens turns his

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33 Stevens' etymological word-play on "divergence" is characteristically complex. "Steep" and "down" clearly ask us to think of vergere as "to incline," ("diverge," OED), and all this down-turning certainly seems in keeping with the reference to those who were "defeated at last and lost / In an ignorance of sleep with nothing won" (CP 291). There may also be a grim joke concerning the present location of Stevens' ancestors, and the fact that Stevens himself will follow them down to a similar place sooner or later. Other aspects of the poem's rhetoric, as I hope to show, ask us to think of vergere as "bend, turn."
ancestors and their plots into a strange sort of trope; as "semblables," they become a similitude for a paradoxical similarity in dissimilarity, and help Stevens to speak of history as continuous discontinuity, uninterrupted interruption. The whole poem remains suspended in an irresolvable tension between these poles, a tension which irrupts everywhere in the poem, inscribing itself in the blank spaces which both hold together and separate the poem's two formal units and different historical sites. Here, it seems that the dashes described in the preceding paragraph also demand a double reading. Do they hold the two units farther apart or bring them closer together? Does Stevens hesitate before his vision of freedom, or does this vision rush in upon the refrain of the semblables? Yet if the dash establishes a new connection—both semantic and syntactic—between the two stanzas, it does so only to insist on the divergence of past and present. It joins in order to mark a separation. Instead of a plot in which history has a single end, Stevens envisions one in which juxtaposed tropes of past and present return again and again in order to turn towards each other—by turning away.

This turning back/turning away seems, in fact, to open up a sort of *mise-en-abîme* of ends. As a poem of "total war," "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" cannot wholly turn away from apocalyptic fears or hopes. The sixth of the longer stanzas, for example, coming roughly at the poem's midpoint, presents a vision of history as a teleological progression towards a final state of rest:

An end must come in a merciless triumph,  
An end of evil in a profounder logic,  
In a peace that is more than a refuge,  
In the will of what is common to all men,  
Spelled from spent living and spent dying. (*CP* 291)
This earthly era of final and total peace sounds like a version of the millennium, though a thoroughly secularized one. Stevens' language also gives more emphasis to the struggle that leads to "a peace that is more than a refuge" than to the peace itself, and his uncomfortable paradoxes--"an end of evil" can come only through "merciless triumph"--certainly undercut any possible complacency one might feel about such a final peace. Stevens writes here of a concept of history in which all present expenditure will eventually be recouped in the form of peace, so that "spent" will mean more than merely "exhausted, worn out, used up" ("spent" II.6. OED). And yet the next stanza threatens to undo all this with a vision of an expenditure without compensation: "There were other soldiers, other people / . . . Year, year and year, defeated at last and lost / In an ignorance of sleep with nothing won" (CP 291). This realization, apparently forced upon Stevens by recollections of the futility of earlier wars, leads to the

    pit of torment that placid end
    Should be illusion, that the mobs of birth
    Avoid our stale perfections, seeking out
    Their own, waiting until we go
    To picnic in the ruins that we leave. (CP 292-93)

Stevens' adoption of the prophetic stance leads him to see--or foresee--an end to ends, an end to the idea of a "placid end" determined by a "profounder logic;" and yet this end to ends is, paradoxically, itself conditioned by his break with--or his desire to break with--the discourse of the end. But by the poem's end, when the opening stanza's "wheels [that] are too large for any noise" (CP 290) have been broken into arches by men who march "Under the arches, over the arches, in arcs / Of chaos composed in more than order" (CP 293), one may wonder whether the fate of Stevens' end of ends is to foresee even its
own end. Stevens plays his rhetoric of "divergence"--a word whose etymology speaks of both inclinations and bends and turns (see fn. 34 on p. 95)--against a future generation that will "avoid our stale perfections." One may "avoid" the past by turning away from it. but Stevens does not allow us to turn away from that word's etymology, which speaks not of turning away, but of a more radical and absolute emptying. Does this gesture return Stevens to the apocalyptic fold by announcing its end to the end of the end?

But the poem's final long stanza proposes one more alternative to the discourse of the end, an alternative that reappears throughout Stevens' poetry from the Second World War and later:

These violent marchers of the present,  
Rumbling along the autumnal horizon,  
Under the arches, over the arches, in arcs  
Of a chaos composed in more than order,  
March toward a generation's centre. (CP 293)

Stevens returns us again to the present; and the direction taken by his "violent marchers"--"along the autumnal horizon" (my emphasis) rather than toward it--keeps them within his present range of view. The "arches" and "arcs" belong to a rhetoric of incompletion: these words may allude to the "broken arcs" of Browning's "Abt Vogler," though Stevens makes no mention of "a perfect round" "in the heaven" ("Abt Vogler" l. 72). But most significantly, Stevens' violent marchers "March toward a generation's centre"--not toward an end, or even toward a future, another generation, but toward the centre of their own time. Other critics have commented extensively on the importance of the "centre" in Stevens poetry, and here, I merely wish to suggest the possible place of this word in
Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance. The protagonist of "Yellow Afternoon" (CP 236), who lives through "the fatal unity of war" (CP 236), finds that "Everything comes to him / From the middle of his field" (CP 237). And in "Asides on the Oboe," the violence of the war inspires another shift away from the notion of finality. That poem begins with the realization that

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. (CP 250)

Stevens moves away from this sense of living in a terminal situation when he realizes that "We found, / If we found the central evil, the central good" (CP 251). The experience of

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34 See, for example, Harold Bloom's "The Central Man," Riddel's "Stevens on Imagination," or La Guardia 22-28. Carroll discusses Stevens' concern with the centre throughout Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction, and gives a particularly useful account of two senses of "centre" in Stevens on pp. 199-200 of that book. But his reading of the centre is marred by a determination to find a transcendental and metaphysical aspect in Stevens' poetry. He attempts to place all of Stevens' references to the centre within a dialectical progression toward an almost mystical end: "Stevens' purpose is to render himself the medium through which 'the central mind' comes to knowledge of itself (CP 524)" (4), "to become the medium through which God achieves knowledge of himself" (27). David R. Jarraway, in contrast, sees Stevens deconstructing the notion of centre in "From the Packet of Anacharsis": "The poem thus displaces the representation of meaning away from the center and locates it in the production or repetition of meaning as meaning recedes in a quickening of rings . . . " (189). Jarraway also reads the desire to breathe "at the azure centre of time" in "This Solitude of Cataracts" as an ironically self-destructive desire (260-61).

35 There are times, of course, when Stevens questions the possibility of ever arriving at this centre, though his desire to be at the centre stands in marked contrast to the apocalyptic desire to move beyond the present world. "Esthétique du Mal" xi informs us that "We are not / At the centre of a diamond" (CP 323). and in "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" (1947) Stevens feels "Helplessly at the edge," rather than "at the middle" (CP 430). Stevens' rhetoric here is largely spatial rather than temporal, but even this language can take on an anti-apocalyptic aspect, as becomes clearer in canto vii of "Extracts."

There, Stevens "Resists each past apocalypse" (CP 257), and, abandoning the idea of a
such overwhelming physical violence, a violence at the centre of our existence. Stevens seems to suggest, simultaneously heightens our awareness of earthly good, simply because it directs our awareness to the centre of things in our present. "Of Ideal Time and Choice," the last of the "Three Academic Pieces" Stevens read at Harvard in February 1947, makes an explicit contrast between last things and central things, and does so in order to favour the latter. Stevens wonders:

of how
Much choosing is the final choice made up.
And who shall speak it, what child or wanderer
Or woman weeping in a room or man.
The last man given for epitome.

Upon whose lips the dissertation sounds,
And in what place, what exultant terminal,
And at what time both of the year and day . . . . (NA 88-89)

Stevens describes this final speech in language similar to that of the rejected apocalypse of "A Duck for Dinner" iii; is it, he wonders, an oration in which a "world agrees, thought's compromise, resolved / At last, the center of resemblance, found / Under the bones of time's philosophers?" (NA 89). But this last man, maker of the final choice at an "exultant terminal" (NA 89) will turn away from his terminal situtation and look back to the past--Stevens' own present--as the moment of "ideal time" (NA 89). Stevens thus continues to throw the weight of historical thinking from the future back to the present, to

journey "to the moon, / Or anywhere beyond, to a different element" (CP 258), speculates that "the deepest inhalation / Would come from that return to the subtle centre" (CP 258). The subtlety of that subtle centre, in fact, seems to reside in its status as a place of change, a place where one watches "the thinnest light / And the most distant, single color, about to change" (CP 258).
turn away from the emphasis given to the end in teleological thinking. This centre may itself become a paradoxical *telos*, a centre whose "end" is to lead us away from thoughts of the end.

Yet one might also wonder if Stevens' turn to the centre also turns toward the Christian model of history, in which, as I noted in Chapter One, the most significant point is not the end but the centre, the moment, in the incarnation, in which redemption enters into time in the person of Christ. Of course, in the poems I have studied in this chapter, there is no incarnation, no revelation of God's plan for the world in the person of Christ. These moments reveal only the constant self-interruption of time itself, the absence of a plan. Just as the present does not fulfill the past, the future will not fulfill the present, as it does in the figural reading of history. For Stevens, the centre is not related to the end, but rather stands in opposition to the end, or indeed seems to find its place in a plot which attempts to do away with the idea of the End itself. Kermode's statement that "we claim to live now in a period of perpetual transition . . ." (*Sense* 28), an age in which "the stage of transition, like the whole of time in an earlier revolution, has become *endless*" (101), might thus seem to have some bearing upon Stevens' vision of history in these poems. But it would be necessary to contrast Stevens with Kermode's largely negative reading (cited in part toward the end of my first chapter) of this condition in the works of Beckett:

Time is an endless transition from one condition of misery to another, 'a

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36 John Ashton offers the following formulation of this idea: "The divine plan itself--the Logos--is incarnate: fully embodied in the person of Jesus; and it is his life that reveals God's grand design of saving the world, a design now being realized, lived out, by the community" (404-05). Cf. Oepke 3:580 also.
passion without form or stations,' to be ended by no *parousia*. It is a world crying out for forms and stations, and for apocalypse; all it gets is vain temporality, mad, multiform antithetical influx. (115)

For Stevens, temporality is not vain, but the only locus of meaning and pleasure; that mad, multiform antithetical influx is for Stevens "The freshness of transformation" and thus "The freshness of a world" (*CP* 397-98).

Stevens' engagement with the discourse of the end thus returns us, finally, to the idea of beginning. Of course, tropes of new beginnings return constantly throughout Stevens' poetic career, and his desire for what Helen Vendler calls "freshness of utterance" (*Desire* 58) is so pervasive and treated so thoroughly by a large number of critics that any detailed commentary here would prove superfluous. These tropes return so often that he never seems to have lost his capacity or his desire to renew them, as is attested by a poem as late as 1952's "Saint Armorer's Church from the Outside" with its vision of "this present, / This *vif*, this dazzle-dazzle of being new / And of becoming" (*CP* 530), the return/departure of "That which is always beginning" (*CP* 530). Likewise, in canto xvi of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." "The oldest-newest day is the newest alone. / The oldest-newest night does not creak by, / With lanterns, like a celestial ancientness" (*CP* 476). This desire for the "dazzle-dazzle of being new" (*CP* 530) has a

37 Berger, Boroff ("Incipient"), Cook (Poetry), Hines, Hollander, Lentricchia, Reguierio ("Rejection"), Riddel ("Metaphoric Staging" and "Imagination"), and Shaviro--to name a few examples--all deal, to varying degrees and in different ways - with this aspect of Stevens' work. See also fn. 1 on p. 52 above. A more pessimistic account of this theme appears in Paul Morrison's "'Sepulchres of the Fathers': Notes toward a Supreme Fiction' and the Ideology of Origins." Morrison sees the desire for originality as self-frustrating, since "the desire for origins or originality [is inscribed] within the history of that desire . . . " (16-17).
complex relationship to apocalypticism, since the destruction envisioned in many apocalypses takes place in the name of a new, though final, beginning; one of the last divine acts of Revelation is not destructive but creative—the creation of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1—an allusion to Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22), upon whose appearance "he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5) and, later, "It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6). "Things as they are" are destroyed only in the name of this new creation to replace the old. But this new beginning that ends the New Testament, this final break with the past, is also the past's fulfilment, and initiates the new day of an eternity whose monotony Stevens rejected in canto vi of "Sunday Morning." Stevens' new beginnings do not offer any fulfilment in a final, perfect world, neither a temporal millennium nor an otherworldly eternity, since each new beginning must eventually give way to another new beginning. Each break with the past occurs in the name of this new kind of newness, as a fulfilment of the need and the wish to continue the extemporization of life as a "beginning, not resuming, this / Booming and booming of the new-come bee" (CP 391). Each new beginning is a return to and of the present, a return to and of the moment of change and disruption, and to the possibility of further change—a turn away from stasis, permanence, perfection.

The constant repetition of their disruptive force places these new beginnings outside the one final beginning which concludes Revelation. This repetition often results in a vision of history, and especially of imaginative history, as a series of apparently isolated, unrelated moments. In "Description without Place" (1945), for instance,
Nietzsche's vision of "the much-mottled motion of blank time" (CP 342) reveals that the "eccentric souvenirs of human shapes" are "all first / All final" (CP 342)—though Stevens playfully places "first" and the end of one line, and "final" at the beginning of the next. Stevens tends to view the past through a dominant metaphor of depth and discrete layering rather than one of linear continuity, as in that "deep pool / Of these discolorations" (CP 342) studied by Nietzsche, the "figures verdant with time's buried verdure" (CP 352) of "A Completely New Set of Objects," or the "tiny darkness" of Stevens' "doubly killed" (CP 290) ancestors six feet or so beneath the topsoil of Bucks County. Such figures return the discussion to that paradoxical vision of history which has been played out in the preceding analysis: namely, that Stevens sees time as the constant repetition of the moment when the present turns away from the past, away from repetition. Stevens envisions a process of change which remains non-teleological—unless change itself can be said to operate as a sort of telos in this scheme of things. I have already noted the difference between cyclic and linear concepts of time: Stevens, though, brings the two together in Notes III ix:

These things at least comprise
An occupation, an exercise, a work,

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood. (CP 405)

Stevens' somewhat paradoxical union of cyclic repetition and finality in this playfully
repetitive passage challenges teleological and linear concepts of time: the rhetoric of "final" and "good" bespeak a certain teleology, but the "end" sought here is not the unique terminus of the eschatological event, but rather the repeated moment of repetition and return itself. It is in such thinking that Stevens comes closest to that transcendental view of the whole of time described by Jackson and Lynen. This paradox, I believe, generates their readings of time in Stevens. Stevens envisions the whole of time as just such a goalless and endless process: the endless repetition of the moment of change, the moment in which the present breaks with the past.

* * *

I wish to return, before ending, to two points. the first of which involves the question of desire which was left suspended after the discussion of "Martial Cadenza." I have suggested that Stevens desires to turn away from apocalypse, and that he does so by figuring the present as a moment which itself turns away from the past, and by imagining a future which turns away from the present. Stevens' moment of disruption reveals nothing beyond its own disruptiveness, part of a process in which the present incessantly turns away from the past. This process is the foundation of Stevens' paradoxical sense of continuity. It also creates a certain continuity between the different poems considered in this chapter: the return of the turn that turns away returns again and again, not just within each poem, but in different poems as well. My reading, then, is not so much a rebuttal
Longenbach's emphasis on continuity, as a complication of the idea of continuity as it appears in these poems, or a counterpoint to the narrative Longenbach reads in Stevens' poetry during the war years. I would like to suggest, finally, that these poems constitute sites of conflicting desires: a desire to break with the past and a desire for continuity. A comparison between "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" and another poem from the same year (1942), "Outside of Wedlock" (which provided one of my epigraphs) reveals the extent of this conflict. Certainly, Stevens' mounting interest in genealogy during the 1940s bespeaks a desire for continuity in the face of the war, as this bitter little poem suggests:

The strong music of hard times,
In a world forever without a plan
For itself as a world,
Must be played on the concertina.

The poor piano forte
Whimpers when the moon above East Hartford
Wakes us to the emotion, grand fortissimo,
Of our sense of evil,

Of our sense that time has been
Like water running in a gutter
Through an alley to nowhere,
Without beginning or the concept of an end. (OP 112)

Here, Stevens deliberately rejects any teleological or eschatological significance in the disruptiveness of the present--"The old woman that knocks at the door / Is not our grandiose destiny" (OP 112)--yet this disruption still leaves him stranded in a present cut off from the past. The hymns sung for this old woman by the "White February wind" will sound like "the voice of all our ancestors. / The père Benjamin, the mère Blandenah, /
Saying we have forgot them, they never lived" (OP 112). Again, a curious doubleness haunts the return of the past here: it comes back only to mark its own absence, its own oblivion. The voice of these ancestors admonishes the present for its abandonment of the past. "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" may be read as Stevens' attempt to establish that lost connection with his ancestors without abandoning his desire for the freedom of the present.

I hesitate now--though only briefly--before returning to my second point, which is neither a point, nor a theme, a word, a plot, a structure, but rather the dash which has returned in each of these poems, and which will return in the following chapter. My hesitation stems from a wish to give serious consideration to some of Derrida's comments on the syntactic and semantic in "White Mythology." There, Derrida speaks of a sort of plot of meaning as a movement from loss to reappropriation:

Henceforth the entire teleology of meaning, which constructs the philosophical concept of metaphor, coordinates metaphor with the manifestation of truth, with the production of truth as presence without veil, with the reappropriation of a full language without syntax, with the vocation of a pure nomination: without differential syntax, or in any case without a properly unnameable articulation that is irreducible to the semantic relève or to dialectical interiorization. (270)

This pattern repeats "the opposition of the semantic and the syntactic, and especially the philosophical hierarchy that submits the latter to the former" (270). I wonder, then, if there is a danger of making too much meaning of these syntactic markers, and thereby making too little of them. By assigning them a definite, single meaning or purpose, by filling them with an unmistakable intention and transcribing or transliterating their syntactic force into a semantic content, they could be robbed of their disruptive force.
Much of that force resides in the very difficulty of giving any final, definitive reading to the dashes in the poems discussed above. Do they mark continuity or discontinuity, or both? As marks of interruption which also join syntactic units, they seem to remain divided and differing within themselves even as they mark that paradoxical relation within the elements of the poem. And yet their very dividedness seems appropriate to Stevens' conflicting desires, and to his sense of the disruptiveness of the present which returns again and again in these works.
My second chapter demonstrated that Stevens, at a time when society was
inflicting an almost apocalyptic level of destruction on itself, sought a paradoxical sense
of continuity by breaking with the past, and by breaking in particular with the idea of any
fulfilment or consummation of history. I wish to suggest now that in his post-WWII
poems, Stevens often turns toward visions of the end. This turn may at first seem odd:
concerns about the end of history appear somewhat out of place in a period of
comparative peace and prosperity. But the mounting tension of the cold war and the
possibility of nuclear annihilation brought a new element of fear into world
consciousness.¹ And it could also be argued that the desire for newness which figured so
prominently in the preceding chapter carries its own undoing within itself: if it returns
often enough, this desire may itself have to be thrown "away like a thing of another time"
(CP 382). Could its disruptive force eventually disrupt itself and produce, by its own
logic, the desire for an end to the new, a desire for an end to the end of the end, for the
rest that comes at the end?² Stevens now writes of an end which is not a new beginning.

¹ Stevens felt this situation acutely, as the following comment from a letter of June
25, 1954 suggests: "I cannot say that there is any way to adapt myself to the idea that I
am living in the Atomic Age and I think it a lot of nonsense to try to adapt oneself to such
a thing" (LWS 839).

² Here, I touch upon the issues discussed by Charles Berger in Forms of Farewell,
particularly in the final chapter ("Last Poems"--141-88). According to Berger, "The dual
vision of the late poems arises from the mingling of this need to continue and the desire
but an absolute end, an end figured either as the death of the individual or as the end of the present world. Yet while Eleanor Cook notes that "It is worth considering Stevens as a poet of endings, both thematic endings (mortal and eschatological matters) and formal endings (matters of closure)" (Poetry 10), she later explores the ways in which "Stevens is a writer 'against closure' in the sense of opposing traditional eschatologies" (99). The preceding chapter traced Stevens' opposition to any sort of eschatology; the present one then, will examine his development of a non-traditional eschatology. In many poems from Stevens' later years, autumn and all its changes signal "a change immenser than / A poet's metaphors" (CP 341), immenser than the change of season itself. The cyclical death of nature seems, at such times, to gesture toward

\[
\text{a total death,} \\
\text{A devastation, a death of great height} \\
\text{And depth, covering all surfaces,} \\
\text{Filling the mind. (CP 362)}
\]

Something of the autumnal bleakness found in many of these late poems appears in a letter to José Rodríguez Feo (October 25, 1948) in which Stevens wrote:

How this oozing away hurts notwithstanding the pumpkins and the glaciale of frost and the onslaught of books and pictures and music and people. It is finished, Zarathustra says: and one goes to the Canoe Club and has a couple of Martinis and a pork chop and looks down the spaces of the river and participates in the disintegration. the decomposition. the rapt finale. (LWS 621)

for rest and reward-- the poet's reward, that species of immortality called fame" (145). Berger reads the Stevens of these works as a poet constantly revisiting and revising the scenes of his earlier work, balancing the desire to renew the poetic process and the desire to give, in retrospect, a final, definitive shape to his oeuvre and poetic career. Berger relies upon Lawrence Lipking's The Life of the Poet for the terms of his argument.
Stevens' verbal zest in the face of this scenario of "Murder . . . and adieu; assassination . . . and farewell" (*LWS* 621) does not quite conceal the fact that autumn "has always been the toughest time of the year for [him]" (*LWS* 473). I wish to explore, in the following pages, the ways in which this "rapt finale" came to speak to Stevens of the end not just of a season, but of the world itself.

Yet there is no obvious or traditional relationship between autumnal decline and the end of the world. The apocalypse might occur at whatever time of year it chose to, but in these late poems of Stevens, it is not a question of a divine fiat or a catastrophe of human cause occurring in autumn; rather, autumn itself becomes an emblem of the end of the world. An association between autumn and the onset of mortality or the mutability of all earthly things is a commonplace in both poetry and everyday discourse, though, and one that appears in Stevens' work.³ Traditionally, Fall also serves as a reminder of the Fall, not only because, as Hopkins' "Spring and Fall" points out, nature's death is a sign of "the blight man was born for," (l. 14) but because the Fall turned the "Eternal Spring" of Eden (*Paradise Lost* iv 268) into the changing seasons of the fallen world (x 651-56). But this figuration links autumn not with the end of the fallen world but rather with its beginning, and with the effects of time and change that we experience in the natural cycles of death and regeneration. It should be noted, too, that autumn serves as a time of earthly fulfilment; it is, after all, the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. / Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun" (l. 1-2) of Keats' "To Autumn." Autumn may become

³ For instance, in "The Death of a Soldier," "Life contracts and death is expected. / As in a season of autumn" (*CP* 97).
a moment of earthly plenitude and maturity poised at the edge of decline in such versions of the *topos*, a sort of dual season, speaking of both fulfilment and loss at one and the same time, a moment in a cycle of change. As I suggested in Chapter One, the understanding of history revealed in apocalypse both breaks this cycle and transcends it. It sees history not as the endless repetition of natural cycles, but as a process with a single, final, goal, and the emergence of apocalyptic thinking marked a break with the mythic concept of time. Harold Bloom reads just such a difference between autumnal and apocalyptic ends in the final section of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," although he finds Stevens' response to the end of "The fiction of the leaves" (*CP* 526) unsatisfactory or unconvincing in this instance: "All men, together, or any man in solitude can avenge a fallen leaf only through apocalyptic thought . . ." (*Climate* 107). Presumably the success of such vengeance lies in an apocalyptic thought's move—or claim to move—to a transcendent realm beyond the cycle of seasonal change figured by "a fallen leaf" (*CP* 158).

Clearly, such a disjunction between the autumnal *topos* and the apocalypse has implications for Stevens' visions of an "autumnal terminal" (*OP* 125), and suggests that they must inhabit or be informed by this disjunction between the plots of seasonal cycles and of apocalyptic endings. Here, Eleanor Cook's account of canto xii of "An Ordinary

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4 This is the last of the sequence of fifty poems:

Union of the weakest develops strength
Not wisdom. Can all men, together, avenge
One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?
But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow. (*CP* 158)
Evening in New Haven" as Stevens' "own kind of apocalypse" (*Poetry* 281) proves suggestive; she notes that "Stevens locates his apocalyptic moment fully in time . . . " (283). Cook's point has to do with the nature of the apocalyptic vision itself, rather than with the events it foresees or any ideas of the end of time. In Revelation, after all, the final events take place in time, and the end of the present order leads to the temporal Messianic kingdom or millennium. Cook is concerned with distinguishing Stevens' temporal apocalypses from Eliot's sense of the intersection of the eternal and temporal in *Burnt Norton*, and my discussion will consider how Stevens' vision of the last things occurs, how the end of the world is revealed. As I have suggested in my first chapter, an apocalypse offers a vision of time that comes from beyond time,\(^5\) and the terminal events themselves will not result from the ordinary unfolding of time and history, but from the direct intervention of God in history--the irruption of the eternal into the temporal. Such concepts have no place in Stevens' version of an autumnal end. Stevens at one and the same time foresees the end and also challenges these aspects of apocalyptic visions and endings. And the autumnal locus of his terminal visions is crucial to his temporal displacement of apocalypse. The moment of autumnal change figures the effects of time and change in general, and serves as a reminder of the mortality of all earthly things. An autumnal apocalypse would not just expand autumn to "a world of universal poverty," nor prolong it into "an autumn that will be perpetual" (*CP* 152), but would rather foresee an absolute absence of the world, an absence of autumn, seasons; and it must foresee this

\(^5\) At least according to the Hellenized understanding of eternity; see my discussion in fn. 21 on p. 20 above.
end of things only on the basis of time itself. There is thus a certain resistance to
apocalypse inherent in the very locus of these "apocalyptic" poems. and at times this
resistance also comes to the fore. An anti-apocalyptic strain, a desire for more time, often emerges even as Stevens makes his annunciations of the end, as he turns his tropes of
time into tropes of the end. Of course, one may still wonder by what "divinations. / Mechanisms of angelic thought, / The means of prophecy" (CP 503) this vision of the
future enters into the present. Can Stevens make his autumnal *topos* signal the end of the plot of seasonal cycles, without somehow repeating some crucial apocalyptic gestures?

The apocalyptic vision itself has, as I have suggested, its own destructive potential. Such a vision of the end can occur only because it originates in an eternity in
which all temporal events exist simultaneously; sent thence by means of angelic "relays."
its irruption thus threatens to shatter our normal sense of temporal continuity. I have spoken above of this potential largely in terms of a certain disruption of the plot of
history, a paradoxical disruption which is necessary in order for the goal of history to
make itself known, and also in terms of the violent historical consequences of that
irruption. But is it possible to envision the end before its time without violence,
disruption, or interruption of some sort? Autumnal tropes can also, and quite "naturally."
be turned to tropes of renewal, reminders, as moments of change in the cycle of change,
that the cycle has yet to be completed, or indeed that it is never completed, since no one season can be nominated as the "final" one in the cycle. In this sense, Joseph Riddel's comments on Stevens' tropes of summer in "Credences of Summer" could just as easily be applied to tropes of autumn:
The seasonal cycle is thus only a totalized tropic sequence, without beginning or end . . . 'Summer,' like 'primary noon,' is not an unmediated or transcendental moment, not the moment in which every substitution is effaced or effaces itself in 'face of the object.' It is instead a doubled moment in a tropic sequence . . . . Summer is at once the culmination of spring and the beginning of fall, between in- and ex-halation. ('Climate' 160)

The conclusion of Shelley's notably autumnal and apocalyptic Ode to the West Wind also reminds us that one trope of seasonal change calls to mind the rest of the sequence, as though one good turn always did deserve another:

Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (ll. 68-70)

Bloom gives particular attention to the influence that this apocalyptically destructive and regenerative "breath of Autumn's being" had on Stevens, especially in regard to Stevens' many "fiction[s] of the leaves" (CP 526): "Nothing could be more unlike Stevens, in tone, burden, and spirit, and yet no poem haunts his poetry more" (Climate 58). My own analysis will consider the ways in which Stevens, in some of these autumnal poems, turns with Shelley in his prophetic opposition to biblical revelation, while at the same time

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7 Eleanor Cook touches upon this question in her discussion of canto xii of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

turning against Shelley's anticipations of new life. As Cook notes in her discussion of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" xii, "Stevens remains autumnal" (Poetry 283). If there is a kind of apocalyptic violence in Stevens' autumnal visions of the end, it comes in this cutting short of the seasonal cycle, this vision of an autumn that leads only to dissolution and nothingness, not to tropes of winter and thence to spring, the trope that turns to new life. Stevens undertakes a certain break with the history of this topos. One might wonder, too, about that duality of fulfilment and decline found in such works as Keats' "To Autumn." If Stevens is a thoroughly anti-teleological poet, would his autumnal terminations also need to turn away from even this sense of natural completion and fulfilment?

One aspect of apocalyptic thinking that Stevens may not be able to turn away from, though, by temporally displacing the irruption of the apocalyptic vision with and into a moment of autumnal change, is the capacity of the end to sum up the meaning of the whole plot, the whole of time and history. Here it may be helpful to recall John Lynen's statement that "Calling it [the last day] the Day of Judgement is a way of describing the end as a point of view, a point from which the whole of history can be seen" (411-12). The poems discussed in the preceding chapter seemed to suggest that there is no such point of view in Stevens' poetry. And yet a paradox emerges from the stance adopted in those works, since to envision history as a process of constant

Our readings have been too exclusively, and so weakly, Shelleyan. Stevens hears what it is that Shelley challenged with his apocalyptic voice in Ode to the West Wind: it is the ancient prophetic Word of God. Just such a challenge is Stevens' also. (Poetry 283)
"divergence" is, in fact, to make some sort of summation of the whole, to position oneself, explicitly or implicitly, at "a point from which the whole of history can be seen."

A similar paradox emerges from Stevens' purely temporal autumnal apocalypses. Malcolm Bull's introduction ("Making Ends Meet") to *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, which I mentioned in my first chapter, discusses versions of apocalypse in which the different senses of "end"--termination or *telos*--may or may not coincide (Bull 1-6). In the preceding chapter, I suggested that in Stevens' idea of a history "Without beginning or the concept of an end." the very absence of a termination may in itself become a paradoxical kind of *telos*: the desire to avoid any final goal becomes a goal. In these late autumnal poems, Stevens arrives at a similar point by a quite different route. He imagines an apparently arbitrary end which results from the effects of time and change, an end which has not been present as a *telos* since before the beginning of time and which is not part of a divine plan for the world, an end which merely occurs the way seasonal changes occur. Is such an end the only possible one in a universe not governed by a divine being?

The questions raised in the preceding discussion have grown out of my readings of the five poems from Stevens' later years which I have chosen to explore in this chapter. Each of these works--"Burghers of Petty Death" (1946), "Puella Parvula" (1949), "Lebensweisheitspielerei" (1952), "The Hermitage at the Center" (1952), and "The Region November" (1956)--engages with that sense of finality provoked by autumn and the autumnal *topos*. 
Though James Longenbach's reading of "Burghers of Petty Death" suggests that it more properly belongs among the war poems considered in Chapter Two, I believe that its autumnal confrontation with "total death" (CP 362) has more to do with that disjunction between seasonal cycles and visions of last things which I have outlined above. The poem first appeared in 1946 in the Quarterly Review of Literature, where it was the third poem of twelve grouped together as "More Poems for Laidoff." Longenbach reads the sequence as Stevens' "struggle to put the disaster of the Second World War behind him" (271). In particular, he relates "Burghers of Petty Death" to "A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home" (1946), apparently identifying the "wasted figure" (CP 362) of the former with the latter's man who "dies that does not fall," who "walks and dies" (CP 360): 

"['Burghers'] explains that these ghostly living dead remain victims of the 'total' death of total war, not the natural death of peace, which seems petty in comparison . . . " (271). But Longenbach's attempt to conjure up the living dead in this poem seems unconvincing. The interpretive framework thus provided does not explain why, for instance, the man who "walks and dies" now propounds a "blank final music" (CP 362), nor why, if this figure belongs to the violent death of "total war," he now dwells in "an imperium of quiet" (CP 362). And Stevens figures the difference between "petty death" and "total death" both in terms of part/totality and small/great, rather than natural/unnatural, peaceful/violent, as Longenbach suggests. Thus, while "total death" may echo the "total war" (CP 258) of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine
Ideas" (and, of course, of common parlance) it seems important to emphasize the difference between the two phrases, particularly since Stevens tended to be far more specific in his references to the war in his poetry of the late 1930s to mid-1940s. "Total war" may, as I have written in my second chapter, inspire apocalyptic fears of a "total death," but "Burghers of Petty Death" seems much more concerned with the idea of "total death" than with the reality of the "total war" that may have called up such fears.

Certainly, the poem is much more reflective, calmer, and elegiac than any of the war poems discussed in Chapter Two, and in fact I would argue that this tone and the poem's setting place it in the graveyard genre, though it perhaps borders on that version of elegy which David Shaw sees as turning toward apocalypse. Here, it is worth remembering that Stevens was much more direct in confronting the reality of war while contemplating "Dutch Graves in Bucks County." another version of the graveyard genre. Thomas F. Lombardi argues that "Burghers of Petty Death" had its genesis in Stevens' visit, in January, 1945, to the graveyard of St. Paul's Church in Amityville, Pennsylvania, where his maternal great-grandparents, John and Catherine Zeller, were buried; Lombardi's descriptions of the site certainly make sense of the poem's topography and topoi (Lombardi 49-51). There may well be some buried word-play here, too, since "Burghers

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8 "At its outer limits an elegy may turn into an apocalypse, which is a lament, not just for a dead person, but for the passing of a world. When the universe goes to war, and stars send down their spears, what happens to the individual mourner? Will he survive the wreck of nature, as Tennyson predicts in section 123 of In Memoriam, or will his light, too, be blotted out?" (Elegy 155). Shaw writes about Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn" as just this sort of elegy, and his reading of this poem will figure significantly in my next chapter.
of Petty Death" and "small townsmen of death" would be the inhabitants of a necropolis, a city of the dead, making its vision of "total death" a less "unburgherly apocalypse" (CP 24) than that experienced by "A Doctor of Geneva." I want to suggest that "Burghers of Petty Death" is a graveyard elegy whose musings on death are disturbed by a vision of "total death," and that the poem seems concerned with an inadequation or disjunction between our traditional "places" of death and "total death."

Rather than reading the autumnal scene as a harbinger of the end, then. "Burghers of Petty Death" repeats, though in a displaced form, that difference between autumnal musings and visions of "total death" which I discussed near the beginning of this chapter. a thematic disjunction which is marked in the poem by rhetorical and structural disjunctiveness. Stevens offers two ways of relating "total death" to the graveyard and autumnal topoi. When he tropes his buried ancestors as "a slight part of death" (CP 362) and goes on to speak of a "total death" two lines later, he suggests a synecdochic relationship between the two. Yet the statement that the "grass is still green." and the simile which compares the "small townsmen of death, / A man and a woman" (CP 362) to "two leaves / That keep clinging to a tree. / Before winter freezes and grows black" (CP 362) seem to figure a relation of temporal succession between "petty death" and "total death." as though the autumnal trope need only turn far enough toward finality for the "blank final music" of the end to be heard. There may be some tension between these two tropes, then, since the one signals a sort of simultaneous participation of the part in the whole, while the other points toward a narrative unfolding in time. But the poem's structure and syntax interrupt the logic of both synecdoche and temporal succession. The
"but" that begins the second stanza already questions the logic of synecdoche suggested by the movement from "a slight part of death" to "total death," suggesting a relation of contrast between part and whole. A more radical disjunction, though, occurs as Stevens crosses from the third to the final stanza of the poem. Stevens' simile--"like two leaves / That keep clinging to a tree. / Before winter freezes and grows black" (CP 362)--tropes his two figures "by the stone wall." "A man and a woman" (CP 362), who were already troped as "a slight part of death," as a kind of fallaciously pathetic resistance to total death; and there may be some temptation to read the approach of that black and frozen winter as a trope for the "total death" of the second stanza. But Stevens cuts short this trope of seasonal turnings while the leaves are still clinging to the tree, interrupting it with the disjunctive dash and returning to, as well as adding to, the second stanza's rhetoric of "a total death" "Of great height / And depth" (CP 362). The dash marks a disjunction between "a slight part of death" and "total death," between the figure of the leaves and the "wasted figure," thereby interrupting the logic of both synecdoche and of the plot of seasonal change; "total death" will cut short all such tropes, topoi, and tales.

Stevens introduces this "total death" into the poem not just as a disruption or interruption of conventional graveyard and autumnal topoi, but, paradoxically enough, as a force which takes away the imagination's power to generate tropes:

But there is a total death,  
A devastation, a death of great height  
And depth, covering all surfaces,  
Filling the mind

Of great height and depth
Without any feeling, an imperium of quiet.
In which a wasted figure, with an instrument.
Propounds blank final music. (CP 362)

Stevens engages in a sublime rhetoric in his metaphors of "great height / And depth." and in the figure of "total death" as a force capable of "a devastation . . . / covering all surfaces, / Filling the mind," a power figured in the poem's final stanza as "an imperium of quiet" (CP 362). This power may be another "part of the sublime / From which we shrink" (CP 314), and it is worth noting a similarity between Stevens' language of devastation here and in the first canto of "Esthétique du Mal." with its "paragraphs / On the sublime" (CP 313); in the earlier work, Stevens notes that "Except for us. Vesuvius might consume / In solid fire the utmost earth and know / No pain . . ." (CP 314). But if one considers Kant's definition of the sublime as the product of a dynamic that reaches a limit of the imagination only to reveal a still greater power in the mind, or Longinus' emphasis on the Sublime as a revelation of an orator's power, one may wonder whether this passage might more properly be characterized as a sort of anti-sublime or a

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9 Brogan describes these lines as "a clear reference to the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb . . . " ("History" 181). She reads the passage in terms of the effect of the bomb on human consciousness, though her interpretation of the penultimate line's "instrument" as the "catastrophic instrument" of the bomb does not seem consistent with the poem's logic and language.

10 Cook (Poetry 192-96) and Longenbach (239) discuss this topos.

11 In the Critique of Judgement, Kant writes at first that the sublime "is produced by the feeling of a momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them . . ." (83). He goes on to describe this process more explicitly: "the sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense" (89).
partial sublime, since Stevens figures only a limitation, reduction, or even emptying of the human creative faculty in the face of this power. This is an "imperium of quiet" that commands a silencing of the poetic voice, a devastation that reduces figuration to "a wasted figure" (*CP* 362) and empties the poetic cadence into "a blank final music" (*CP* 362). The overall effect of these passages, in spite of Stevens' repetitions of "great height and depth" is not one of expansion and elevation, but of reduction and emptying, or perhaps of a paradoxical expansion to nothingness, a completion through loss, a filling to emptiness.

Stevens' rhetoric here opens a number of paradoxes concerning language's capacity to gesture beyond itself towards such silence and emptiness. We have already heard some of this silence in the brief suspension marked by the dash at end of the third stanza; but the poem keeps itself going only by remaining outside that "imperium of quiet" which it describes, or describes that injunction only by breaking it, unless we think of the poem only in terms of the silence of writing. Stevens' "wasted figure." too, proves suggestive. A wasted figure might be a weather-worn carving on a tombstone or tomb, a piece of funeral statuary, or a representation of death as a corpse-like figure. But such a figure might also be a wasted trope, one which has ceased to have any meaning, or whose

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12 Kant writes, in the third Critique, that "The transcendent ... is for the imagination like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself; but for the rational idea of the supersensible it is not transcendent, but in conformity with law to bring about such an effort of the imagination, and consequently here there is the same amount of attraction as there was of repulsion for the mere sensibility" (97). According to this description, Stevens might be conceived, in "Burghers of Petty Death," as leaving the imagination to contemplate that potentially annihilating abyss without revealing that higher power of the mind.
very nature is to have no meaning—a figure used wastefully or one which cannot be used profitably, which will never quite arrive at the meaning it gestures toward. like the failed synecdoche of "petty" and "total death." And yet the very vagueness of Stevens' language here contributes to this figure's strength; the refusal to identify the figure or its instrument gestures toward the unspoken or the unspeakable. Such figures succeed by failing; they reveal by revealing that they do not fully reveal. Stevens' use of the word "quiet." perhaps, keeps us just on this side of the silence of "total death."

A similar paradox emerges through Stevens' rhetoric of "covering." By "covering all surfaces," "total death" functions also as a sort of anti-imagination: Stevens echoes his well-known rhetoric of "fictive covering" (CP 396) to portray its very opposite, a reversal in which reality breaks back in on that "black water" (CP 255) of self and imagination, and obscures those surfaces in which Stevens' poetry so often delights. And as a "covering," this vision of the end interrupts the poem's trope of seasonal turning as the very opposite of a final revelation or uncovering; Stevens' non-apocalyptic vision reveals the end as a final covering, a re-veiling which disrupts the logic of revelation. Yet this absence itself becomes a revelation, a revelation of the absence of revelation, as though these words of covering could not cover themselves. Here, I would like to raise a

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13 This phrase comes, of course, from the celebrated reply of Ozymandias to Nanzia Nunzio in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction II viii, which, in spite of its higher page number in the Collected Poems, was written some four years before "Burghers of Petty Death." Another notable association of fictions with coverings occurs in "The Rock" (CP 525), written in 1950: there, although "It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves" (CP 526), Stevens meditates on "the fiction of the leaves" (CP 526), leaves that "are more than leaves that cover the barren rock" (CP 527).
question about the relation of such a vision of the end to the apocalyptic vision's role as
the revelation of the meaning of the whole of history, its revelation of history as a story
ending with a final fulfilment, a recompense for all earthly losses. The "total" of "total
death" suggests something like a consummation, fulfilment, or completion. and yet, as I
have suggested, the poem shows this "filling" as an emptying and reduction. It projects a
total loss rather than a total fulfilment. Stevens' end paradoxically sums up only the
absence of any final summation in its "imperium of quiet," its "blank final music."
"Burghers" cuts short both the autumnal plot of seasonal cycles and the plot of history
which ends in eschatological fulfilment.

Stevens' critics seem to have had little interest in "Burghers of Petty Death."
presumably because it does not present Stevens at his strongest; it is certainly the weakest
of the poems under consideration in this chapter. But this weakness may prove
instructive, and suggests, in fact, that the poem's disjunctiveness is something of an
aesthetic liability, or at least that in this case, unlike "The Hermitage at the Center."
Stevens has failed to turn an aesthetic profit on this technique. The poem is disjunctive
not just structurally but stylistically as well, since the second and fourth stanzas are
considerably more abstract in diction and imagery than the first and third, and use that
calm, hovering syntax which builds sentences from short, appositive phrases, each
turning back to qualify a preceding phrase, and containing few, if any, independent
clauses or main verbs--all characteristics of Stevens' late meditative lyrics. The irruption
of this manner into the more straightforward and declarative style of the first and third
stanzas seems both anti-climactic and, somehow, too abrupt, as though the poem's form
could not accommodate the unfolding of this more relaxed manner. This effect, though, may prove emblematic of that very disjunction between autumnal and terminal tropes at which this poem is situated.

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"Puella Parvula" (1949), which Harold Bloom considers "the strongest short lyric in the *Auroras of Autumn* volume" (*Climate* 300), figures no such disjunction between the plot of seasonal change and the plot of "the end" as it moves from its opening vision of terminal destruction toward a *summarium in excelsis* (*CP* 456). According to Bloom, this poem, like "Saint John and the Back-Ache" (1948) contains a strain in which "both the apocalyptic seer and the wary pain-of-the-past speak for Stevens . . ." (*Climate* 300). I hope to show some other "strains" in this poem, in particular one caused by apocalyptic and transcendent voices that others have heard in the autumn wind, and one that arises from a psychic division within the speaker as he searches for his own appropriate stance toward this destructive wind and the fears it arouses. This psychic division results, perhaps, from the very success with which "Puella Parvula" overcomes the autumnal/apocalyptic disjunction and realizes the possibility of a purely temporal displacement of apocalypse.

Stevens' hyperbolic visions of the autumn wind's destructive force seem to place the poem at the brink of some universal catastrophe. This vision emerges from the moment when summer changes to autumn, making it a vision both *in* time and *of* time
and its effects:

Every thread of summer is at last unwoven.  
By one caterpillar is great Africa devoured  
And Gibraltar is dissolved like spit in the wind.

But over the wind, over the legends of its roaring.  
The elephant on the roof and its elephantine blaring.  
The bloody lion in the yard at night or ready to spring

From the clouds in the midst of trembling trees  
Making a great gnashing, over the water wallows  
Of a vacant sea declaiming with wide throat.

Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs  
Like a trumpet . . . . (CP 456)

As Borroff (Introduction 21-22) and Bloom (Climate 300-301) observe, the animals in this passage echo the lion and elephant of Notes I v; they are vocal figures of an animal violence which must be tamed by "the heroic children whom time breeds / Against the first idea" (CP 385). These figures also register the difference between animal vocalism and human tales.14 They thus prove unusual among Stevens' many windy tropes, which tend to turn against any sort of consciousness in the wind;15 as Bloom notes, those of

14 In Notes, Stevens contrasts the "red-colored noise" (CP 384) of the lion in the "red emptiness" (CP 384) of the desert with the "voluble dumb violence" (CP 384) of an "ephebe" who dwells in a structure of human fictions and art, in a "mansard with a rented piano" (CP 384).

15 These figures are so numerous and well-known that only a few should suffice to indicate their general tendency. For instance, on the mountain-top of "How to Live. What to Do." "There was neither voice nor crested image, / No chorister, nor priest . . . . // There was the cold wind and the sound / It made . . . (CP 126). "The Idea of Order at Key West" speaks of the "heaving speech of air, a summer sound / Repeated in a summer without end / And sound alone" (CP 129), and in "Montrachet-le-Jardin" "The wind is never rounding O / And, imageless, it is itself the most, // Mouthing its constant smatter throughout space (CP 263). In a later work, the wind becomes one of the voices in a
"Puell Parvula" amount to "a giant, composite pathetic fallacy or series of impositions of an animal consciousness upon the reality of nature" (Climate 301). Bloom also identifies the leaves and trumpet of this poem with those of Shelley's Ode to the West Wind, though not, apparently, the wind itself, which seems odd, since Shelley implores the wind to make his trumpet sound. But Stevens, "in this season of memory" (CP 456) does not just hear the destructive autumn wind; he also remembers Shelley's wind and superimposes his own tropes on that wind, in a sort of tropic palimpsest. At any rate, Shelley's Ode tropes the wind as a sublime and transcendent power, a source of inspiration, a "Spirit fierce" (l. 61) to whom the "chained and bowed" poet (l. 55) implores, "Make me thy lyre" (l. 57), "Be thou me" (l. 62). Stevens' tropes of animal voice turn against what is most transcendentally apocalyptic in Shelley's trope of the wind, reducing it to a wholly natural though no less destructive or frightening force.

Yet Stevens hears other voices in this wind, voices that echo the rhetoric of Old Testament prophecy, as though he heard not just Shelley's prophetic voice but the tradition to which Shelley belonged. Stevens' "one caterpillar," for example, reminds us of Joel's prophecies of the Day of the Lord as "A day of darkness and of gloominess" (Joel 2:2), a time when "that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten" (Joel 1:4). Unlike Joel, though, Stevens does not speak of a later time when the Lord will

"Continual Conversation with a Silent Man: "It is not speech, the sound we hear // In this conversation, but the sound / Of things and their motion: the other man. / A turquoise monster moving round (CP 359-60)."
"restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar . . . " (Joel 2:25). Stevens' "dissolved" also echoes prophecies of the last days; in Isaiah 24:19, for example, "The earth is utterly broken down, the earth is clean dissolved . . . ." And in Isaiah 34:4, we learn that "all the host of heaven shall be dissolved . . . ." Other biblical echoes haunt the poem. In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Stevens describes "the lion of Juda" (CP 472) as "a cat of a sleek transparency / That shines with a nocturnal shine alone" (CP 473). One might wonder whether the lion that springs from the clouds constitutes another such transcendent beast; Stevens seems to remember those Old Testament prophecies that warn of the day when the Lord "shall roar like a lion: when he shall roar, then the children shall tremble from the west" (Hos 11:10). The preceding quotation also brings to mind the trembling of peoples, earth, and heavens at the last days (Joel 2:1. 2:10. Is 64:2); Stevens' trees seem similarly shaken by the violent wind. The noise of the trees likewise echoes that eschatological gnashing (usually accompanied by wailing or weeping) elicited from the wicked at the end of days (Matt 13:42. 24:51, 25:30. Luke 13:28). And. as Bloom (Climate 300) notes. one of Stevens' most powerful apocalyptic tropes from "The Auroras of Autumn" (1947) reappears in the "Flame. sound. fury" of the penultimate line. though here these have been "composed" by

16 This figure appears in many Old Testament prophecies of the Day of the Lord: in Isaiah 31:4. "Like as the lion and the young lion roaring on his prey . . . so shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for mount Zion . . . ." Cf. also Hosea 5:14 and 13:7-8. Amos 3:8 relates the trope to prophetic voice: "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?"
the "dauntless master." The last lines echo *Macbeth* in their conjunction of sound, fury, and tale, even if the latter is "human" rather than idiotic, and one wonders if Stevens senses, amidst all this destruction, the approach of "the last syllable of recorded time" (V v 21). Clearly, the biblical echoes—particular those of the lion that springs from the clouds—appear to contradict my reading of the echoes of *Notes* as an attempt to turn against transcendent voices in the wind. Stevens' extraordinary complexes of echoes make it difficult to decide just what we are hearing in this wind. Lion and elephant unmistakably echo *Notes*; but lion, caterpillar, gnashing, trembling, and dissolution are undeniably biblical, particularly when thus combined. The first pairing seems to issue a challenge to the latter group, yet it is not certain at once that either of these complexes of echoes has triumphed over the other. Stevens leaves both roaring against each other. This duality marks these tropes as the locus of a particularly intense struggle for Stevens: the more he attempts to turn against these tropes of transcendence, the more they haunt his imagination. His aim is to assert the triumph of the imagination over all these tropes, and yet it seems that his own imagination has imposed these very tropes on the wind. Is this another instance in which the mind must "defend / Against itself" (*CP* 436)?

Stevens' trumpet proclaims the imagination's triumph over all these tropes in the fourth stanza, and it is through this appropriation of an ancient symbol of divine and

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17 There, "The man who is walking . . . / observes how the north is always enlarging the change, / With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps / And gusts of great enkindlings" (*CP* 413). Later in that poem, "The scholar of one candle" "opens the door of his house // On flames . . . [and] sees / An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything he is" (*CP* 417). I shall discuss these passages in detail in the following chapter.
prophetic voice that Stevens most clearly marks his difference from the tradition which Shelley's *Ode* itself both belongs to and questions. Shelley desires that "breath of Autumn's being" (l. 1) to blow through his own lips, so that he might become one with the "Spirit Fierce" and transcend his own sense of poetic impotence: "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" (ll. 61-62). Rather than turning to this wind for inspiration, Stevens blows his own horn against it, and the trumpet of his imagination thus announces a most complex triumph over all these windy voices. If Shelley's trumpet speaks against the biblical and specifically apocalyptic tropes of the voice of God ("I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet" [Rev 1:10]), or against the angelic trumpets that sound through Revelation 8-10, Stevens turns against both these voices, announcing, in the face of the end, the end of biblical and Romantic fictions of transcendence, and the beginning, at last, of the "human tale." One wonders, though, about the cost of this displacement for Stevens, since, at the very moment of the imagination's triumph, he remembers that Autumn is "This season of memory, / When the leaves fall like things mournful of the past" (*CP* 456), and addresses the "wild bitch" in the heart. Does the mind go wild not just because of the violence of the autumnal wind, but also because that wind has been stripped, or perhaps has stripped itself through its own sheer violent force, of those transcendent fictions? Stevens' wildness, though, might also be the wildness of fresh inspiration felt upon the escape from old fictions. A similar doubleness may haunt the leaves that "fall like things mournful of the past." Are these the leaves of the tradition Stevens has moved beyond, or those of his own oeuvre which must leave that past
behind? Do they become part of the past even as they make their break with the past? It is difficult not to think here of Shelley in the *Ode*, who asks the West Wind to "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is: / What if my leaves are falling like its own?" (ll. 57-58). Stevens makes his break with the prophetic tradition only by becoming part of that tradition.

But the true locus of the poem's drama is not the boundary between mind and destructive reality, a boundary figured by the window pane across which the "Puella" is told to "write pax," but rather a division within the poet's psyche:

Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs
Like a trumpet and says, in this season of memory.
When the leaves fall like things mournful of the past.

Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch. O mind
Gone wild, be what he tells you to be: *Puella*.
Write *pax* across the window pane. And then

Be still. The *sumarium in excelsis* begins . . .
Flame, sound, fury composed . . . Hear what he says.
The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale. (*CP* 456)

The destructive wind, stripped of fictions of transcendence only to be refigured in animal guise, drives the heart and mind wild; but heart and mind also seem to have driven themselves wild by thus projecting their fears onto the wind, fears over which the mighty imagination must triumph with its new fiction of "the human tale." Stevens thus establishes a sort of tutelary relationship between his imagination and his wild heart and mind, a relationship which apportions power along the lines of gender, speech, and writing. Stevens speaks momentarily (or writes about speaking) in the "imagination's Latin" (*CP* 397), instructing the mind to be the more easily tutored "*Puella*" of the title.
limiting it, in the process, to a sort of silent and ephemeral note-taking (I assume "Write pax across the window pane" to describe a child's finger tracing letters in the condensed vapour on the glass). This division between a "dauntless master" who calmly faces these signs of the end and "composes" their "flame, sound, fury." and a "wild bitch." a "mind / Gone wild" who apparently cannot turn towards the end with such composure also suggests that the poem describes or is situated at a crisis in Stevens' engagement with the discourse of the end. The ambiguity of Stevens' wildness and of the mournful leaves may also speak of this division. The poem betrays here a conflict between, on the one hand, that desire to turn away and turn away from the end and from the biblical discourse of the end, and, on the other hand, the necessity of turning toward the inevitable end. "Required, as a necessity requires" (CP 503), toward a vision of "total death" located fully in time. The whole poem seems thus to involve a struggle between these aspects of Stevens' psyche, and, perhaps, a struggle between these two loci of struggle, one internal, the other a boundary between interior and exterior. The fact that this concealed locus of the poem's drama is revealed just as the imagination proclaims its victory indicates that this triumph remains incomplete. But if the poem triumphs through the imagination's triumph over the wild bitch in the heart, over the mind gone wild, these latter serve, in their very wildness, as the source of the poem's strengths and in particular of its complex emotional force.

Without them, the struggle that the poem records would not have existed; it depends on that which it would silence or reduce to ancillary status. The difference both in tone and degree of artistic success between this poem and "Burghers of Petty Death" may have its source in the wildness of the "wild bitch" and the "mind / Gone wild."
I began my discussion of this poem by touching upon the temporal locus of Stevens' vision of destruction, and wish to end by considering where this poem can be situated in relation to that curtailment of the plot of seasonal return I discussed earlier. Some answer to this question may emerge from the word-play on rising and falling which Stevens has woven throughout the poem, and which outlines a peculiar sort of anti-apocalyptic plot in which fictions of transcendence are overcome in a movement toward a climactic "summarium in excelsis" in "the human tale." This movement begins with "The elephant on the roof," proceeds upward to the lion "ready to spring // From the clouds." ascends to the "mighty imagination" which is heard "over the wind." triumphing "Over all these" (my emphasis in both cases) and finally reaches "the summarium in excelsis." the highest of heights, at least etymologically. Yet all these ever-heightened gestures towards transcendence occur while "the leaves fall like things mournful of the past." as though, as I suggested above, this process also involved a profound loss. Stevens strips the violent autumn wind of transcendent fictions in a paradoxical transcendence through reduction, so that in arriving at "the summarium in excelsis," a final summing-up of what has gone before, he arrives also at "the human tale" in which the human imagination finally displaces all transcendent fictions of the end. Critics seem divided about the sort of closure provided here. Bloom emphasizes a lingering "poetic anxiety" (302), and

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18 Marie Borroff notes that "summarium in excelsis" echoes such phrases as "hosanna in excelsis" and "gloria in excelsis," which are normally reserved for the praise of God: "The allusion in 'summarium in excelsis' to such biblical phrases as 'hosanna in excelsis' and 'gloria in excelsis' implies that the revealed truth of imaginative vitality can fully compensate for the lost truth of religious revelation" ("Introduction" 21). The compensation, though, may be less fully satisfying than Borroff suggests here.
Jarraway sees the imagination's triumph as "so much whistling in the dark" (298); Halliday, on the other hand, finds in the conclusion "a willed recuperation from the bitter mood of the poem's opening stanzas" (136), and others give still more weight to the imagination's triumph (Leggett, Poetic Theory 194; Longenbach 289). The trumpet tone of the mighty imagination seems at least to sound to a dominant harmony as we await the completion to be provided by "the human tale," though the fact that the poem ends with the speaker still issuing instructions to a recalcitrant "mind / Gone wild" suggests something more dissonant. At any rate, for Stevens, the tale that comes at the end is not one that sums up the Heilsgeschichte but precisely one in which the tropes of transcendence are displaced by "the human tale." In the face of the destructive autumn wind, a wind which speaks of last things, Stevens struggles to break free of old fictions of the end. Are those fictions the only things that have ended in this poem, deflating themselves in one last gust? Stevens' final arrival at a beginning does not mark the completion of a plot of departure and return, but a break with such plots. It is a final change revealed at a moment of seasonal change, revealed, perhaps, as part of that change.

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"Lebensweisheitspielerei" (1952), a poem Stevens included in the section of the Collected Poems entitled "The Rock," returns to the autumnal topos for another tale of the end. Unlike "Burghers of Petty Death," this poem turns the autumnal topos as far as it
can go, or indeed turns it beyond itself, so that the dwindling that comes with the seasonal change extends all the way to annihilation, even to the annihilation of the autumnal changes that signal annihilation. Such a vision of the end, as I have already suggested, differs significantly from those apocalyptic ones in which knowledge of the end of history irrupts into the present, offering a view of history from a point beyond history; instead, "Lebensweisheitspielerei" envisions an end which results from time itself, as exemplified by the changes attendant upon the autumnal equinox. Stevens reveals an entropic conclusion, a whimper rather than a bang, as though the universe were "a machine left running, and running down" (CP 306). an end and a vision of the end without violence and disruption. "Lebensweisheitspielerei" is thus situated at a boundary between the ordinary seeing of an autumn afternoon and a more visionary mode which somehow sees in such seeing the intimations of "annihilation," yet does so without shattering the world of ordinary perception. But in turning these tropes as far as they can go, Stevens also cuts short the cycles of the seasons and turns against those Keatsian tropes of autumnal ripeness and fruition. I wish to explore the ways in which "Lebensweisheitspielerei." as a poem of closings and closure, a poem of human leave-taking, opens a gap between ending and completion or fulfilment even as it closes that disjunction between the cycles of seasonal return and the single, final fulfilment imagined in apocalypses.

Apocalypses tend to encompass the whole of both time and space in their vision, but Stevens' gestures towards such totalization in "Lebensweisheitspielerei" prove paradoxical. Stevens balances the poem between tales of human and cosmic decline, only
gradually allowing a sense of the unity of micro- and macrocosm to emerge:

Weaker and weaker, the sunlight falls
In the afternoon. The proud and the strong
Have departed.

Those that are left are the unaccomplished.
The finally human,
Natives of a dwindled sphere.

Their indigence is an indigence
That is an indigence of the light,
A stellar pallor that hangs on the threads. (CP 504-05)

Here, Stevens reads the weakening light of an autumn afternoon as an emblem of a coming annihilation, so that this scene of autumnal indigence becomes, like "a bough in the electric light / And exhalations in the eaves, so little / To indicate the total leaflessness" (CP 477). The departure of "the proud and the strong" from the first stanza seems to announce the last stage of a plot of successive deterioration, as in the classical myth of the four ages. In fact, both the human and natural world undergo a synchronous decline throughout the poem, a decline which emerges through an insistent rhetoric of diminution: "Weaker and weaker." "unaccomplished." "dwindled." "indigence." "Little by little." "poverty." "stale." "annihilation." What Stevens sees in his vision of the whole is a loss of wholeness and freshness, a shrinking and dwindling. This language also enters into a paradoxical engagement with the logic of synecdoche. "Lebensweisheitspielerei" presents a vision in which, as "Little by little, the poverty / Of autumnal space becomes / A look, a few words spoken" (CP 505), a part becomes expressive or characteristic of the whole. Stevens chooses to describe the situation in which a synecdoche emerges rather than presenting those "few words" which might express the whole of autumnal space. as
though his own language must fall short of synecdoche. Might these missing words themselves constitute the bit of "Lebensweisheit" mentioned in the title--a bit of practical wisdom, a maxim to live (or die) by? But the real peculiarity of this passage lies in the fact that the part expresses not so much the whole but the lack of wholeness of the whole, its dwindling into poverty and indigence. This emerging sense of connection between part and totality thus produces an effect of contraction rather than expansion, as everything dwindles to "annihilation" in a totality strangely filled with need.

In reading, then, this ordinary evening as a token of things to come. Stevens finds only signs of "annihilation" rather than fulfilment; the weakness, falling, departures, dwindling, finality, and indigence all suggest a plot that opens a gap between ending and completion even as it moves toward its own conclusion. "Those that are left" might be read as an ironic version or inversion of the idea of an apocalyptic "remainder." the Christian faithful who will survive the series of catastrophes and be saved in the end, and find in heavenly (or earthly) glory the true meaning and fulfilment of their lives. But the subtle etymological word-play in Stevens' designation of "those that are left" as "the unaccomplished, / The finally human" raises questions about any fulfilment they might achieve or experience. "Those that are left" are "the finally human" (my emphasis): they are both an end and at an end, the terminus of "the human tale." But etymologically, "the unaccomplished" are those that have not finished or are not finished, since

19 Harrap's Standard German and English Dictionary gives "wisdom," "profound reflection on life" and "apotheigm, adage" for "lebensweisheit." Collins offers "maxim." and Muret-Sanders translates the word as "practical wisdom or philosophy."
"unaccomplished" has its roots in the Latin *complere*, "to fill up, complete" ("accomplish," *OED*) or "to fill up, finish, fulfil" ("complete," *OED*). Stevens plays these words and their histories against each other to suggest an end without completion or fulfilment, to empty the word "end" of any association with goal or purpose. Thus when "Each person completely touches us / With what he is and as he is. / In the stale grandeur of annihilation" (*CP* 505), it may be this very lack of accomplishment which accomplishes such touching completeness. Here, "Lebensweisheitspielerei" shows a concern with a final speech which sums up the meaning of its "dwindled sphere" (*CP* 504), a summation of the "poverty of autumnal space" (*CP* 505), though it arrives at "the finally human" in a tone radically different from the triumphal trumpeting which prepares us for "the human tale" of "Puella Parvula's" "dauntless master." The "look." the "few words spoken" which grow out of "the poverty / Of autumnal space" may describe precisely the sort of summation the poem also questions; it is certainly the emergence of this expression of universal poverty that creates the feeling of closeness and unity in which "each person completely touches us." Stevens presents an end which, by its very incompletion and revelation of incompleteness, by dwindling to nothing rather than achieving fulfilment, arrives at a paradoxical completeness. Such an end provides the only appropriate fulfilment to a history or "plot" without any goal, any pre-ordained order or fulfilment. The "finally human" figures who await annihilation may thus also represent a paradoxical sort of fulfilment of human possibility. In their indigence, stripped of pride and strength, they have "finally" become "the finally human," revealing in their unaccomplishment the limit of human possibility--a minimum which is their maximum.
Does Stevens, in spite of himself, end by making ends meet? Does this absence of fulfilment bring fulfilment to a world in which all things can only dwindle into annihilation?

The difficulty that Stevens thus confronts through the poem's thematic concerns—namely, that the vision of this sort of non-fulfilling end both affirms and contradicts its own premises—has complex implications for the questions of poetic form and particularly poetic closure. When Stevens describes the indigent autumn light as "a stellar pallor that hangs on the threads" (CP 505), one might wonder if the poem is including itself in the weakening, dwindling and indigent world it describes, since "threads" calls to mind all those textile metaphors for texts and the imagination of which Stevens was so fond. Does "Lebensweisheitspielerei"'s own stellar pallor hang on its "threads" as they unravel and as the text moves toward its own end while describing an end? Certainly, in the riskily indigent lines that precede the stellar pallor—"Their indigence is an indigence / That is an indigence of the light"—it seems as if the poem itself, or its maker's imagination is in a state of entropic decline. And yet this stylistic embodiment of the poem's thematic concerns makes "Lebensweisheitspielerei"'s texture, its weaving together of substance

20 Barbara Herrnstein Smith's Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End provides the relevant background for this discussion, particularly in the section on "Closure and Anti-Closure in Modern Poetry" (234-60). I shall return to this work in more detail in my fourth chapter. Springer's "Closure in a Half Light" relates Stevens' anti-closural tendencies—both in his "variety of poem endings" (162-63) and in "the never-ending analysis of his ideas" (163)—to "an ongoing vein of principled nonclosure" (161) in American poetry, and also to the concept of "poetic language" found in the work of Kristeva. Timothy Bahti's "End and Ending: On the Lyric Technique of Some Wallace Stevens Poems" examines the role of paradox, indeterminacy, and doubleness in Stevens' resistance to closure.
and manner, that much more closely knit. In fact, it is at precisely this point that the poem begins to gather strength as it moves toward its conclusion, describing the moment in which this "poverty" achieves its summation in "A look, a few words spoken." and, presumably, in these few words written. The simultaneous movement toward annihilation and summation suggests that the two cannot be separated, that nothingness must itself be a kind of fulfilment, if not "a metier" (CP 526)--a contradiction affirmed by the sort of formal closure the poem achieves. And to end a poem about ends with the word "annihilation" reaching out to the succeeding blank seems a powerful closing gesture. Stevens figures the grandeur provided by such annihilation as "stale," presumably because, in being appropriate to a non-heroic world, it does not provide the sort of heightening, the sense of transcendence that might fulfil the most intense human desires.  

Annihilation's grandeur feels stale because of this disappointing appositeness. yet such disappointment itself plays a part in the sense of dissatisfying satisfaction. Something of this duality may be at play in the poem's title. Stevens may have enjoyed the apparent portentousness of such a weighty German compound (one that exists in no dictionary I have consulted), especially since it begins with the seriousness of practical wisdom, but ends, not in annihilation, but at least as a trifle, a game. "Spielerei" may also mean "play" in a more general sense, though, and play may also be serious, just as some of

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21 Joseph Carroll dwells on these aspects of the poem (305-6).

22 Pons includes "play(ing)," "silly trick" and "trifle" amongst its translations of "spielerei"; Muret-Sanders also gives "toying, trifling."
Stevens' word-play in this poem was. If Stevens' playful compound--itself a bit of a jest, a spielerei--deflates itself or dwindles as it proceeds, as though losing its faith in pride and strength and accepting the game of life as it is, that process itself is serious. This very loss becomes a gain in the poem's completely touching closing gestures. Stevens leaves this poem of ends oscillating uncertainly between the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of an end appropriate to an unravelling and diminished world.

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A disjunction between paradisal and autumnal topoi marks each stanza of "The Hermitage at the Center" (1952), which immediately follows "Lebensweisheitspielerei" in the Collected Poems. The initial line of each of this poem's first four stanzas returns to the fallen leaves and wind of "Puella Parvula." but the quieter, calmer tone bespeaks perhaps a further imaginative triumph, a triumph over the fierce struggles of the earlier work; these passages have more in common with the entropic ending imagined in "Lebensweisheitspielerei." And here, rather than battle the wind and the heart and mind it once drove wild, Stevens turns toward more consolatory imaginings. Read from start to finish, the poem tells of a poet in old age who, on an autumn day full of terminal intimations, finds his mind turning to paradisal beginnings, including, perhaps, those found in his own earlier work. If for Eliot spring is the season that mixes "Memory and

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23 Harrap, Collins, Muret-Sanders all include this sense.
desire" (*The Waste Land* l. 3), autumn instead brings such stirrings to Stevens, at least in "The Hermitage at the Center." And yet the poem's form poses formidable challenges to this reading, which gives the indented lines the status of a series of parentheses, a sort of inner monologue enclosed by the "external" description of the "actual" autumnal scene.\(^{24}\)

The length of each parenthesis, the way in which each of the paradisal tropes--except for the final one--is in turn interrupted by the autumnal scene, and the fact that each of the poem's two *topoi* asks the reader to assemble it as a complete sentence in its own right, make such a reading strategy almost impossible to sustain in practice. Like a verbal equivalent of a duck-rabbit picture, the poem of vernal meditations in autumnal surroundings changes, without actually changing, to one in which two separate poems, or at least two sentences, have been spliced together by means of the dashes. The poem's form seems thus to heighten or perhaps multiply the disjunction which already separates its two *topoi*.

For such reasons, perhaps. Helen Vendler finds "The Hermitage at the Center" "almost unreadable" (*Desire* 58). But it seems more accurate to say that this form does

\(^{24}\) Although I will argue that Stevens' paradisal lines do not really function as parenthetical comments, Christopher Ricks' sense of the inherent doubleness of parentheses in his "Geoffrey Hill I: 'The Tongue's Atrocities'" does seem relevant. Ricks writes of "the privileged paradoxicality of brackets" (304-05), of "that special beyond/within which is parenthesis" (304) and which gives the words enclosed therein "that unique feeling of being at once a crux and an aside" (300). Stevens, of course, is not concerned with the particular problem of speaking of atrocity described by Ricks; but he seems to double the doubleness of parenthesis in "The Hermitage at the Center," as each of his two intertwining *topoi* takes a turn at being both crux and aside. The end effect of his dashed double sentence is to put parenthesis in parenthesis, to suspend the accustomed effect of parenthesis by thus doubling it.
not so much render the poem unreadable as lead the reader to employ at least two
different reading strategies: one, a double reading in itself which considers each of the
two intertwining sentences separately; and another, in which the whole poem is read
continuously. Perhaps, too, the poem demands a third strategy, one which attempts to
bridge the gap between the first two, if such a thing is possible. The poem's two scenes
might be read as brief plots in their own right—a plot of beginning and a plot of ending, or
perhaps the beginning of a plot and the end of a plot. What sort of plots emerge from
these different reading strategies? How might the different plots affect each other and be
related to each other? Does Stevens have in mind that version of apocalypse in which the
end of human time is also a return to or of a paradisal state of being, in which end and
beginning meet to make a pattern of circular completion?25 This pattern is implied by the
poem's final triplet:

And yet this end and this beginning are one.
And one last look at the ducks is a look
At lucent children round her in a ring. (CP 506)

The first line above may eccentrically echo the well-known line from Revelation 21:6—"I
am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end."26 And yet it would be unwise to ignore
the force of Stevens' "And yet"—a phrase that elsewhere leads to that part of the "never-
ending meditation" (CP 465) which takes place during "An Ordinary Evening in New

25 See my discussion of paradisal imagery in prophecy and apocalypse, and in some early readings of apocalypse, on p. 9 above, and in fn. 3 on p. 8.

26 One wonders, too, if there is some relation to Eliot's East Coker and Little Gidding, which ground their meditations on ends and beginnings in a specific landscape: I will suggest that Stevens echoes the latter work in his first line.
Haven." My own meditation on this poem will end, but not before I have examined the forces in "The Hermitage at the Center" that necessitate this "And yet." These words bespeak a desire to overcome the disjunction between autumnal end and paradisal beginning, a disjunction not only marked but perhaps heightened by the poem's disjunctive form; in the final triplet, Stevens wishes, apparently, to displace or indeed to break with the disjunctiveness which dominates the poem. Can a second disjunction overcome the disjunction between the poem's autumnal endings and paradisal beginnings? I wish to begin by considering each of the poem's two topoi on its own, in order to determine the precise weight and value of the disjunction marked by the dashes.

"The Hermitage at the Center" begins with the end of the plot or the plot of the end, with the first of a series of continually interrupted tropes in which the plot of seasonal change undergoes its own terminal unravelling. Stevens hears the sound of the fallen leaves on the macadam, and his wordplay on "macadam" reminds us of their place in the fallen world of the sons of Adam, the world of change and death. But the suggestion that the leaves make a noise "like tales" also involves an odd sort of tropic doubling; the trope turns away from itself and comes to resemble a tale. Eleanor Cook deals with the way in which Stevens turns tropes into narratives, or tells tales about tropes, in some of his metaphor poems;27 and in "The Hermitage at the Center" Stevens tells, in his four autumnal lines, another tale of tropes, this time of the end of tropes of the

27 "He literalizes metaphor, provides it with various stories, considers its different kinds, delights in it, rejects it" (Poetry 172). A discussion of Stevens' metaphor poems takes place in pp. 172-88 of Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens.
end. Through "the favourite pun" (Jarraway 282) on "leaves." these leaves also trope the "leaves" of books, and, by metonymy, any particular "fiction[s] of the leaves" (CP 526) that may be written on them—including, perhaps, Stevens' own. Stevens hears other sounds in these leaves, such as those of the purgatorial and apocalyptic second movement of Eliot's *Little Gidding*, where "the dead leaves still rattled on like tin / Over the asphalt where no other sound was . . ." (ll. 83-84). But they now make a noise "like tales that were told the day before yesterday." since the trope of the fallen leaves has also echoed through poetry from Homer and Virgil through Milton, Shelley, Hopkins, and so on, down to Eliot and Stevens.28 Sounding like those worn-out "tales that were told the day before yesterday," tales perhaps "Of an earth in which the first leaf" (as well as the last leaf) "is the tale / Of leaves" (CP 394), they seem to sum up the history of a trope and subtly turn it against itself, as though the trope of seasonal change that so often figures the end in Stevens were itself coming to an end, even as he hears "The leaves on the macadam" one more time. And the wind that "sways like a great thing tottering-- // . . . Which suddenly is all dissolved and gone" (CP 505) seems also to reduce all those likenesses of winds that have blown through poetry to a similar state of terminal exhaustion. Stevens again leaves his autumnal tropes suspended at the brink of nothingness as this wind now dissolves only itself, not Gibraltar. Stevens thus seems to wager on an odd sort of terminal doubling, announcing, through these terminal tropes, an end to tropes of seasonal change, and an end to his own figures of ends.

28 See fn. 43 on p. 115 above for references to Bloom's and Cook's discussions of the "fiction of the leaves."
Stevens' plot of the end is repeatedly disrupted or displaced by a paradisal vision. Stevens returns here to his own poetic beginnings, since the figure of "The desired" in "The Hermitage at the Center" calls to mind some earlier naked dames in his poetry, most notably Susanna of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (CP 89-92), whose grassy surroundings and musical tropes bear the closest resemblance to the ambience of "The Hermitage at the Center." Stevens' paradise seems, then, to be a place of poetic renewal, and such desired and desirable figures, being unobscured by any "fictive covering[s]" (CP 396), inspire the creation of figurative weavings. Thus, while the soft grass, celestial temperature, and intelligible twitterings are conventionally paradisal, the poem's implicit concern with figuration also displaces paradise. Stevens figures his paradise as a place of figuration, a tropic of tropes in whose heavenly temperature a sleekly naked woman both awaits and overhears, through the pun on "attends," the emergence of a new trope, a trope pronounced by "Birds of more wit, that substitute-- // . . . Their intelligible twittering / For unintelligible thought" (CP 505). These birds serve as a trope of poetic voice--an old trope about which Stevens was often deeply ambivalent (Cook, Poetry 238); and, by substituting "their intelligible twittering," they become a trope for troping. Stevens'

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29 Similar figures, both nameless and named, include that "Paltry Nude" of vernal voyages (CP 5-6), the apostrophized Vincentine (CP 52-53), the later "naked, nameless dame" (CP 271) of "The Hand as a Being," and, of course, Nanzia Nunzio of Notes II viii (though the latter is not naked to the eyes of "an inflexible Order" [CP 396]).

30 Even the desired woman's nakedness lends itself to figurative interpretation, paradoxically enough, as an absence of figuration, as though nakedness itself, like Nanzia Nunzio, were never naked--at least not in a poem. It thus seems to be an "irreducible figure" of the sort noted by Patricia Parker (238), and which I discussed on p. 49 above. The articles by Riddel ("Climate") and Kronick listed in my "Works Cited"
paradise does not lie outside our fallen and changing world, but rather *is* change itself. another reminder, perhaps, that "The imperfect is our paradise" (*CP* 194); like that paradise of the third section of "The Pure Good of Theory," it is already "a metaphor . . . /
A metamorphosis of paradise" (*CP* 331). It is worth noting, too, that in "Things of August," Stevens portrays another central hermitage as a place of simultaneous writing/interpretation. That poem's penultimate canto speaks of a desire for a
text of intelligent men
At the centre of the unintelligible.
As in a hermitage, for us to think.
Writing and reading the rigid inscription. (*CP* 495)
Stevens' centre seems to be a fiction, or perhaps, a place where fictions are created, a humanized world in the midst of the nonhuman, the "unintelligible." Paradise, the most desired place, is changed to a place of changes, offering satisfaction only to those who desire "the exhilarations of changes" (*CP* 288).

If these two tropes thus displace both paradisal beginnings and apocalyptic endings, what sort of plot is implied by their disjunctive alternation throughout the poem?
Since "The Hermitage at the Center"'s paradise serves only as a *topos* of beginning, not of also touch upon this issue.

31 The paradisal third section of "The Pure Good of Theory" likewise turns its "paradise malformed" into a place of change, and employs the same wordplay on the different senses of "attends" to suggest the elusiveness of this moment:

Now, closely the ear attends the varying
Of this precarious music, the change of key
Not quite detected at the moment of change
And, now, it attends the difficult difference. (*CP* 332)
ending--the latter function belongs to the autumnal *topos*--the poem seems to inhabit the world of such seasonal tales as are found in "Farewell without a Guitar"; there, "Spring's bright paradise" arrives at an "autumnal terminal" when "the thousand-leaved green falls to the ground" (*OP* 125). Of course, as I suggested above, Stevens seems to be bringing such tales of seasonal cycles to an end in "The Hermitage at the Centre." And yet the poem's form, at least in its broad outline, reverses this temporal pattern, beginning with the *topos* of autumnal endings, and ending with that of beginning, as though the poem concealed a further disjunction, a disjunction between the order of time and the order of art. The poem's disjunctive form, of course, does not just reverse the "normal" order of beginnings and ends, but disrupts even a reversal of that pattern. Here, I would return to my initial plot of autumnal strollings and paradisal musings: Stevens finds himself in the fallen world of autumn, just as it seems full of intimations of its own impending end: but the paradisal vision that irrupts into this scene does not speak of any future transcendence of earthly life, but comes rather as a memory of a paradisal past, a paradise within and not beyond this world, and a paradise lost upon each return of the autumnal *topos*. Stevens' formal strategy in this poem has a peculiarly intense and ambivalent emotional effect: paradise seems to lurk around each turn, and yet proves always evanescent.

It is perhaps this sense of doubleness which makes the dashes so crucial to the poem's complex turnings. This doubleness poses a particular critical problem which emerges, for example, in Frank Doggett's reading of the indented lines as a "poem within a poem" (*Thought* 54) concerning the "permanence of reality in the midst of change" (54), permanence "beyond the tumult of the flux" (53) represented by the autumnal scene.
This reading attempts to still or suppress the indented lines' participation in the play of tropic substitutions and displacements on either side of the dashes, and does not account for Stevens' refashioning of paradise as a topos of change. Here, I wish to return to my discussion of these marks at the end of my second chapter (see pp. 107-108 above), and note that Doggett's interpretation grants a single meaning to the dashes, making a univocal semantic translation of a syntactic mark. It may, in this regard, be informed by what Derrida calls "the philosophical hierarchy that submits [the syntactic] to [the semantic]" in its desire for a language "without differential syntax" ("Mythology" 270). If anything, these dashes are charged with a surplus of syntactic value, since they both join and separate the two sentences, marking a paradoxical relationship which consists of a certain non-relatedness, of mutual disjunctiveness and interruption. The dashes, placed at the turning point of each line of verse, embody the poem's thematic concern with the relationship between beginnings and ends, since each functions as an end and a beginning in mediating between the two tales. They embody that moment of change which does not so much interrupt the plot, but which rather forms the plot of changes and interruptions, the moment around which and away from which Stevens' restless tropes turn. Stevens returns again and again to this moment of turning away, a moment that marks the return

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32 Similar problems appear in David Jarraway's reading. He argues that in this poem "textuality is kept open in the way a secret hermitage might suggest" (282), but his "open" reading paradoxically relies on an attempt to close off the significance of the dashes. For Jarraway, the dashes lead in one direction only, from end to beginning, suggesting always that "an apparent end to interpretation might just be the beginning . . . that autumn elsewhere in the poem, for example, might be an access to more desirable grass in the recline of temperate heaven . . . " (282).
to and loss of a desired place, a moment that seems both to leap across the time between beginning and end, and yet to open another, perhaps deeper gap between the two.

Can Stevens turn away from this tale of interruptions, of continual turning away, and turn it into the tale of circular completion, suggested by the final triplet? In her discussion of the last three lines, Helen Vendler writes that "It is only by a great effort of will that Stevens can resume the two columns into one at the end, by reciting one of the oldest of religious gnomic utterances... This fiction of the circular, of a primitive like an orb, informs Stevens' use of Alpha and Omega" (Desire 58). She goes on to note, however, that "this last poem cannot patch the world quite round..." (59). Stevens does appear to close the circle at the end of the poem, through the assertion that "this end and this beginning are one" and in the circular completion suggested by the poem's final trope of beginning: "And one last look at the ducks is a look / At lucent children round her in a ring." The change in the poem's syntax and structure also registers this gesture toward closure: in the last two lines Stevens replaces the dashes of the preceding four triplets with a linking verb (and displaces the site of the transition between end and beginning) in an attempt to put an end to the disruptive force of the dashes. But Stevens' end and beginning are "one" only in being both caught up in time and change, in being moments of change. Certainly, the final image of "lucent children round her in a ring" bespeaks, at one and the same time, both circular completion and an opening toward the future as the cycle of generation continues, gesturing toward a sort of completeness and harmony.

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33 Michel Benamou, in contrast, reads the poem's conclusion as "a final resolution, a reconciliation of opposites" (136).
I wish to end my discussion of this poem by returning to the place of the centre in Stevens' engagement with the discourse of the end, a subject already touched upon in my second chapter. There, I remarked that Stevens' concern with the centre during the war years could be read as a move away from the tendency to conceive of history and the meaning of history in terms of the relation between the present and the end or telos of history. In "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," Stevens' "violent marchers of the present" find the meaning of their situation by marching "toward a generation's centre," not toward the future. One might wonder if the "center" of "The Hermitage at the Center" bespeaks a displacement of the beginnings and ends imagined in the poem's two dominant topoi. But such questions also lead one to ask just what constitutes the centre in this poem, or indeed whether the poem has a centre at all. It begins with the idea of the centre in its title, and ends with the desired woman at the centre of a ring of children. And yet this central figure is already doubly displaced, an irreducible figure caught up in the poem's play of tropes. How is the title's central hermitage related to the poem's tropes of paradisal beginnings and autumnal endings, and to its complex structure? I have already noted that Frank Doggett's reading of the paradisal topos as the poem's centre does not quite explain the work's formal complexities. The poem's only centre, in fact, may reside in those dashes around which the poem's two tropes turn--the moment of change, of restless substitutions, a moment which itself displaces beginning, end, and centre, and prevents us from resting in any fixed centre.
The four poems considered thus far have each repeated a return to the autumnal scene in order to point toward a time (or non-time) when even this repetition of decline and change will no longer occur: they make repeated gestures against repetition. I wish to turn, in the end, to "The Region November," a poem not published until 1956, some eight months or so after Stevens' death, and eventually included in Opus Posthumous. The poem repeats an earlier scene--"It is hard to hear the north wind again" (OP 140)--and is dominated by both descriptions of repetitive movement and by verbal repetitions. But its explicit concern with "revelation," its biblically-derived image of "a critic" seated "On the waste throne of his own wilderness" (OP 140), and the title's translation of temporality into the stasis of space suggest that we may have arrived, finally, at some unique terminal revelation, a revelation beyond repetition. Here it is worth remembering the choice of "repetition over revelation" (Extended Wings 171) Vendler finds in Notes. Stevens does not repeat the distinction between the two in "The Region November," but questions it. Might there be a revelation of or by repetition itself? And if so, what might such a revelation reveal? "A revelation not yet intended" (OP 140) may still be a revelation: in fact, I hope to show that this absence of intention may be another of the poem's

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34 In his notes to Opus Posthumous, Bates observes that Stevens sent this poem Themistocles Hoetis, editor of Zero, on November 15, 1954 (cf. OP 324).

35 Stevens echoes biblical visions of the throne room of God; cf. for example 1 Kings 22:19, Dan 7:9-10, Rev 4:9, 5:1, and others. Bauckham discusses this figure in pp. 31-34 of The Theology of the Book of Revelation.
revelations. I wish to consider the way in which the "not yet" is also displaced into a boundary between speech and non-speech, meaning and its absence. Here I will touch on issues raised by Roy Harvey Pearce, who reads the poem as one in which Stevens "acknowledge[s] both the virtual life of the non-human and its virtual capacity to 'say'" (131). Helen Reguiero's reading of this poem in The Limits of the Imagination (211-12) deals largely with the difference between rational or conceptual knowledge and non-conceptual knowledge, and emphasizes the poem's "inability to say anything about reality": "the imagination suddenly finds itself in reality, unable to articulate it but drawing the reader into the inexplicable experience" (212). Stevens, I will suggest, is not so much concerned with the imagination's inability to say anything about the swaying of the trees, but rather with the capacity of the imagination to say the difference between "saying" and "swaying."

I have already mentioned, in relation to "Puella Parvula," Stevens' life-long engagement with vocal tropes of the wind, and in particular his argument against Romantic tropes of the transcendent voice of the wind; but another voice in that "Constant Disquisition of the Wind" sounds in "The Region November," a voice which speaks from or of a strange boundary between voice and non-voice, speech and non-speech. This voice-like non-voice is heard, for example, in the "barbarous chanting of what is strong" (CP 191) of "Parochial Theme," or in the wind that "repeats words without meaning" (CP 288) of "The Motive for Metaphor." And though one might argue that, in the last analysis, Stevens leaves us hearing only sound in the wind, he in fact makes us hear something more: the difference between sound and speech. Again and
again, this trope becomes a trope of the imagination's transcendence over mere natural sound. But some of Stevens' later poems bring these windy sounds to bear upon that concern with the possible existence of a "pensive nature, a mechanical / And slightly detestable operandum, free // From man's ghost . . . " (CP 517). This figure recurs throughout Stevens' later poetry, and Leggett sees in it the influence of Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art* (Poetic Theory 142-201. and 195-97 esp.). In "The Constant Disquisition of the Wind," the first of "Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It," Stevens' unnamed thinker "thought within the thought / Of the wind, not knowing that that thought / Was not his thought, nor anyone's . . . " (CP 513). Steven's "within" has the odd effect of decentering human thought, making it a set of marginalia to the works of that "pensive nature" posited in "Looking across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly." As Pearce observes, such figuration does not constitute a pathetic fallacy (131); Stevens reinscribes human thought within the generalized non-human thinking of a "pensive nature" engaged in "an inhuman meditation" (CP 521). This rather extravagant conceit is, in fact, delicately balanced between contradictory gestures toward transcendence and reduction: natural phenomena are elevated to a sort of universal thinking, but human thinking itself thus becomes a natural phenomenon, even if it allows

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36 This poem does not just trope the wind as a kind of thought, but also tropes human thought as a likeness to the wind. There, Stevens begins by somewhat derisively describing this notion as one of "the more irritating minor ideas / Of Mr. Homburg" (CP 517). According to that scholar, "What we think" becomes "a breathing like the wind. / A moving part of a motion, a discovery / Part of a discovery, a change part of a change (CP 518), since "We think as wind skitters on a pond in a field . . . " (CP 518). Dorothy Emerson's "Wallace Stevens' Sky That Thinks" deals with this figure in some of Steven's earlier poetry, though her reading involves some rather schematic allegorizing.
things to go "as far as they can" (*CP* 519). Stevens' north wind, whose "mighty buskin" (*CP* 426) he heard "In the Element of Antagonisms," and which (I assume) was also heard by "The Snow Man" (1921), thus engages in a finely nuanced debate with Shelley's transcendent "wild West Wind" (*Ode* l. 1), and the different orientation of Stevens' wind may reflect more than a desire for meteorological accuracy. Stevens has turned tropes of the wind in a new direction. "The Region November," with its "critic of God, the world / And human nature" (*CP* 140), seems to be situated at a conjunction between these two figurations of the wind, the one speaking of the wind's inability to speak, its difference from speech, the other figuring the wind as a kind of thought and reinscribing human thought within it.

The theme and practice of repetition also returns in "The Region November."

Stevens begins the poem by marking it as a return to an earlier, though unspecified scene:

> It is hard to hear the north wind again,
> And to watch the treetops, as they sway.
>
> They sway, deeply and loudly, in an effort,
> So much less than feeling, so much less than speech.
>
> Saying and saying, the way things say
> On the level of that which is not yet knowledge . . . . (*OP* 140)

This beginning repeats, albeit with a change of season, some aspects of the "pre-history of February" which Stevens chronicled in "Long and Sluggish Lines" in 1952:

> It makes so little difference, at so much more
> Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before
> 
> .................................
>
> The trees have a look as if they bore sad names
> And kept saying over and over one same, same thing,
In a kind of uproar, because an opposite, a contradiction, Has enraged them and made them want to talk it down. \((CP \text{ 522})\)\(^{37}\)

The later poem's sayings, though, do not figure any such "contradiction" in a "yellow patch, the side / Of a house," nor find any sign of new life (or the repetition of newness) in "these--escent--issant pre-personae: first fly, / A comic infanta among the tragic drappings . . . " \((CP \text{ 522})\). Patterns of verbal repetition dominate the poem's texture, as though the poem itself were unable to progress beyond mere obstinate repetition: "as they sway." "They sway," "swaying, swaying, swaying"; "deeply and loudly." "Deeplier, deeplier, loudlier, loudlier": "so much less than feeling, so much less than speech":\(^{38}\) "Saying and saying, the way things say" \((OP \text{ 140})\).

Clearly, this poem's repetitions do not bring back the theme of constant change and beginning which I discussed throughout the previous chapter, but constitute another return to and of that "granite monotony" which Stevens always found so distasteful, the repetition of mere sameness (see fn. 17 on p. 73 above). And yet the poem makes a paradoxical effort to create something new from this wearying repetition. "The Region November" sways back and forth between "saying" and "swaying," between speech and

\(^{37}\) Reguiero reads "Long and Sluggish Lines" as a return to the scene of "The Region of November" \((Limits \text{ 212})\), but the apparent chronology of composition does not support this view.

\(^{38}\) These words echo the phrase "Without any feeling" in "Burghers of Petty Death." A similar phrase appears in "Of Mere Being" \((1955? \text{ [Bates' date in } OP])\): "without human meaning, / Without human feeling" \((OP \text{ 141})\).
mere sound.\textsuperscript{39} Stevens marks this movement through the presence or absence of the letter "w," itself perhaps one of the meaningless sounds made by the wind: only when that sound is absent does the wind "say":

\begin{quote}
They sway, deeply and loudly, in an effort.
So much less than feeling, so much less than speech.

Saying and saying, the way things say
On the level of that which is not yet knowledge:

A revelation not yet intended. (OP 140)
\end{quote}

As Stevens crosses the space between couplets, he seems to allow the swaying to sway towards articulation, although he leaves the reader contemplating a paradoxical saying which is not speech, a saying "on the level of that which is not yet knowledge."

(Presumably, the juxtaposition of "way" and "say" continues the phonic play mentioned above). The poem's conclusion is similarly complex:

\begin{quote}
Deepli\textit{er}, deepli\textit{er}, loudli\textit{er}, loudli\textit{er}.
The trees are swaying, swaying, swaying. (OP 140)
\end{quote}

Stevens' odd but entirely characteristic adverbs---"Deepli\textit{er}, deepli\textit{er}, loudli\textit{er}, loudli\textit{er}"---suggest a sort of progression or gathering, a movement toward greater depth, and an increase of volume as this non-vocal voice is heard with ever more force. Yet the poem ends by emptying the earlier gesture toward speech, turning "saying and saying" back into the "swaying, swaying, swaying" of words whose meaning, in this context, has become the absence of meaning. And while the combination of rhythmic and verbal

\textsuperscript{39} Pearce also notes this movement (131); he is largely interested in Stevens' anti-anthropocentrism in this poem, but rather oddly identifies Stevens himself with the "critic of God."
repetition has a somewhat incantatory effect. Stevens' repetitions also bring the poem to
the verge of a mere rhythmic swaying like that of the trees it describes, or at least to a
verbal approximation of that action. In the end, though, the "swaying" comes to mean
much more than the word ordinarily might: it comes to say the difference between
"saying" and "swaying." Stevens' movement away from meaning paradoxically leads
toward a certain increase or doubling of meaning. This, perhaps, is Stevens' final
revelation of repetition, the revelation that comes from the very absence of finality or
from repetition itself: the absence of revelation, the revelation that the world can never
move beyond such meaningfully meaningless repetition.

The figure which presides over this scene of revelation and repetition, of a
meaningful absence of meaning, is itself an appropriately paradoxical and doubled figure:

It is like a critic of God, the world
And human nature, pensively seated

On the waste throne of his own wilderness. (OP 140)

Stevens' allusion to such biblical passages as Revelation 20:11-12 displaces God from his
throne and sets a critic there in his stead. Stevens' fondness for etymological word-play
figures here, too. "Critic," being etymologically related to the words used to describe God
and Christ as judge throughout the New Testament,40 makes Stevens' "critic of God" the
critic of The Critic, the judge of The Judge, in a sort of anti-theological usurpation.

Stevens' strategy here is characteristically indirect; he does not just offer an inverted last

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40 See Büchsel's discussion in Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
(3:921-54). God makes his judgement in Revelation 20:11-15, and is described as ρεποιημ
in 2 Tm 4:8, Hb 12:23, and Jm 4:12 and 5:9.
judgement, but obliquely and allusively tropes such an overturning. That "critic of God, the world / And human nature" to which Stevens likens his unnamed "it" might sound like another self-description by the "questioner about reality," the "disbeliever in reality" (OP 117) of "First Warmth" (1947) and "As You Leave the Room" (1947-1955?). But Stevens' echoes of "Crude Foyer" (1943) suggest that in fact a double usurpation has taken place. The earlier poem describes

A foyer of the spirit in a landscape
Of the mind, in which we sit
And wear humanity's bleak crown:

In which we read the critique of paradise
And say it is the work
Of a comedian, this critique . . . . (CP 305)

In "The Region November," however. Stevens displaces that human critical faculty, assigning this role instead to a non-human "it," which apparently encompasses the whole natural scene before his eyes. But it seems essential to "[attend] the difficult difference" (CP 332) marked by the "like" of Stevens' simile, a word which in this case indicates both the crossing and the questioning of a boundary between the human and non-human.

meaning and its absence. Stevens' "critic" is a critic because of the difference between "his" saying/swaying and human speech, and because his criticism thus reinscribes human thinking within a non-human context which exceeds it and questions our fictions of "God, the world / And human nature." This value or meaning becomes evident, though, only through its inscription in the "like" of simile which carries the non-human

\[\text{\textsuperscript{41} Bates provides these dates for the last two poems; cf. OP xiii, and his note on "First Warmth" (OP 323).}\]
over into human speech. It is only in speech that we may hear this difference between speech and non-speech. And yet Stevens' rhetoric also speaks of the inability of language to properly "name" this critic. It, in fact, remains an unspecified "it," which may be "like" a critic, but which cannot be properly named or identified as such. Brogan's comments on Stevens' use of simile seem particularly revealing here: she notes that "Whereas metaphor attempts to conceal that gap (with the unspoken unity of tenor and vehicle), simile attempts to reveal that gap" (Simile 125). Stevens' language thus gestures toward what it cannot say about this strange figure that presides over the boundary between meaning and emptiness, revelation and its absence. Stevens' revelation is thus delicately balanced at this boundary between discourses, or between discourse and non-discourse, so that we seem swayed as much by the mind that hears the trees' "saying" as by their saying/swaying itself. Similarly, one may ask whether the trees' "saying" is "not yet knowledge" because nature remains inarticulate, or because the listener cannot yet understand such "saying." Stevens' final revelation, perhaps, is of that "not yet." a "not yet" whose precise significance has not yet been determined. The poem leaves us suspended in an autumnal world which gestures beyond itself and yet refuses to transcend itself.

42 Although Stevens does not use the word "silence" here, it is worth weighing his saying/swaying against Derrida's reading of the paradoxes of silence in Bataille: 

If the word silence "among all words," "is the most perverse or the most poetic," it is because in pretending to silence meaning, it says nonmeaning, it slides and it erases itself, does not maintain itself, silences itself, not as silence, but as speech. This sliding simultaneously betrays discourse and nondiscourse. ("Restricted" 262)
It may seem ironic that this chapter, which has been concerned to some extent with the notion of terminal summations, should fail to achieve its own *summarium in excelsis*; but the variety of stances Stevens develops toward the end in the five poems discussed here certainly complicates any such summarization. To some extent, the preceding discussion completes a circuit, beginning as it does with the separation of terminal visions from the autumnal *topos* in "Burghers of Petty Death." and ending with the "not yet" of "The Region November." Each of these poems, too, seemed to leave us at a strange boundary from which language gestured toward a revelation it could not make--only to transform this failure into a kind of revelation. This is perhaps the only kind of circuit Stevens allows us to complete: one which begins and ends on a note of openness, incompleteness, and disjunction. This apparent contradiction, I hope, proves faithful to the sorts of endings Stevens envisions in his autumnal poems, which speak, in spite of their differences--or perhaps through and in those very differences--of a terminal vision that remains balanced between the visible and visionary, between completion and incompleteness, fulfilment and unfulfilment. Many of these concerns do find a kind of summation in the poem to be considered in my next chapter, "The Auroras of Autumn."
"The Auroras of Autumn" constitutes Stevens' single most sustained engagement with those intimations of an autumnal terminal which I discussed in the preceding chapter. I suggested that in those poems Stevens often achieves a delicate tension between ordinary and extraordinary terminations; Autumn seems a season balanced at least as much at "the edges of oblivion" (CP 435) as at the edge of winter. Stevens grounds his sense of an ending in his observations of ordinary seasonal decline, the effects of time and change. In "The Auroras of Autumn" both the external signs of impending annihilation and the level of psychic disturbance in response to that threat are greatly heightened.¹ But even though the auroras introduce an element more terrifying than any encountered in the poems of the preceding chapter, there is no need to turn, as Charles Berger does, to the threat of nuclear annihilation in order to explain the apocalyptic elements of "The Auroras of Autumn." The coldly flashing lights of the aurora borealis seem an altogether weak and rather remote trope for the bomb, with its one immense blinding flash, vast mushroom cloud, and inconceivable destruction. The disturbing and disruptive threat of the auroras does not mark a break with Stevens' other

¹ This heightening is almost literally embodied in the way the poem, as Charles Berger has noted, constantly directs the inner eye of the reader toward the heights of a sky filled with the aurora borealis: "The sense of verticality that we find in 'Auroras,' as Stevens both lifts and lowers his eyes, is especially striking in the sixth canto. Much can be learned about the poem simply by following Stevens' gaze along this axis" (58).
figurations of autumnal endings, but rather displays a paradoxical continuity with his consideration of last things in the autumnal poems written before and after "The Auroras of Autumn."²

Thus, even if one were to accept Berger's association of the auroras with the atomic bomb, it would still be necessary to account for the remarkable distance or difference between bomb and auroras, especially in light of Stevens' much more specific references to war in the poems written during World War II. Does the poem mark a return to the "naturalizing logic" (Filreis, Actual World 16) of Stevens' earlier poems of the Second World War, eliding the reality of the nuclear threat by figuring it as a natural phenomenon, and making the greatest possible human violence as "natural" an occurrence as the lights?³ But a reading which suggests even the most tenuous relation

² Berger's reading breaks down precisely at the poem's climactic moment, the declaration in canto viii that the auroras are "innocence":

It still might seem odd to readers that Stevens should invoke the auroras at a historical moment when they are bound to appear natural analogues for human destructiveness, to describe them in ways that only further the resemblance, and then declare the auroras to be a part of natural "holiness." His point in making the comparison and then trying to break it may be to insist that there is still a version of natural power uncontaminated by man. (67)

³ "War was not a failure of political will, unique and specific each time: it was 'the periodical failure of politics,' coming on like the seasons, like weather. War 'came back' then, in 1939, as the winter star always does and will--reasonably, inevitably, free from question" (Filreis, Actual World 25). Filreis shows Stevens "naturalizing the fact of war" (25) in pp. 16-28 of Wallace Stevens and the Actual World.
between the auroras and the threat of nuclear annihilation would need to account for this shift away from historical specificity. However, I believe the poem marks a still greater shift; in "The Auroras of Autumn" Stevens seems concerned not with war between human beings but with that "war between the mind / And sky" (CP 407) which he sought to explain to his imagined soldier in the coda to Notes toward a Supreme Fiction. The placement of "The Auroras of Autumn" after this final canto of Notes in the Collected Poems, while determined by the positions these works took in the already published Transport to Summer and Auroras of Autumn, nevertheless proves particularly suggestive; the soldier has departed in the later poem, but the "war between the mind / And sky" remains, heightened and intensified, perhaps, revealed more fully than before, now that the violence of the war in Europe has come to an end. When war enters the later poem, as it does in the realization that "A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round / And knock like a rifle-butt against the door" (CP 414), it intrudes only as a simile for the natural threat perceived in that other war. Thus the naturalizing metaphors noted by Filreis in the earlier World War II poems have in fact been reversed or displaced. This gesture itself may involve a certain violence, a violence against the violence of war, a disruption of that concern with the "actuality" of contemporary world-historical events which dominates much of Stevens' poetry of the thirties and early forties, and a violence against what was most threatening in the postwar situation. It is certainly this gesture which forms the basis of Filreis' and Longenbach's ideological critiques of Stevens' postwar poetry. It is possible, then, to relate Stevens' auroras to their historical moment without reading them as a figure for the nuclear threat; such a reading also reveals their
continuity with the terminal visions discussed in the preceding chapter.

I hope to show, too, that a more literal approach to the auroras themselves may reveal more of the poem's complexity than do the methods of critics such as Mary Arensberg, Michael T. Beehler, or David L. Jarraway, each of whom reads the poem as though it were an allegory for some notion or term borrowed from Derrida's writings.\(^4\) David Shaw, for example, seems content to accept the possibility that the auroras may, after all, be the auroras, and even goes so far as to state that "The annunciation of disaster at the elegiac climax of the poem has all the simplicity of literalness" (Elegy 161). His reading remains particularly sensitive both to the poem's apocalyptic tone and imagery and to its radical uncertainties and gaps. But while other critics, such as Vendler and Berger, have noted either the elegiac or apocalyptic aspects of the poem,\(^5\) Shaw seems

\(^4\) For Jarraway (238-51), the auroras figure "force," a term he finds in Stevens' 1951 essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" but whose definition Jarraway appears to derive from Derrida's "Force et Signification." However, Jarraway's insistence that force will always evade the poem's forms only raises the question of how, then, he is able to make so certain an identification between the auroras and this radically unrepresentable force. Jarraway also elides an important difference between Stevens' and Derrida's uses of the term "force." Stevens writes that "the operative force within us . . . derives its energy more from the imagination than from the sensibility" (NA 164, my emphasis). For Derrida, "force" cannot be said to "derive" from anything; "Force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is" ("Force" 27). Beehler's and Arensberg's readings encounter similar difficulties.

\(^5\) Vendler writes that Stevens "gives us the beautiful triad of poems each beginning 'Farewell to an idea,' where his elegy reaches a perfection of naturalness and subdued restraint hardly possible in earlier long poems. These three cantos are an elegy written before the fact, an anticipatory mourning in which 'a darkness gathers though it does not fall!'" (Extended Wings 252). She finds that "what is remembered of [canto ix] is not that assumed naïveté, but the etched anticipation of a secularized doomsday . . . " (Extended Wings 267). She does not, however, consider the poem's shifts between elegy and apocalypse. Elsewhere, she notes another sort of tension in the poem:
unique in his intriguing exploration of the poem's dual generic allegiances to both elegy and apocalypse. He writes that "the elegiac power of Wallace Stevens' 'The Auroras of Autumn' is most apparent when Stevens is transforming it into something else: into an apocalyptic poetry of star wars and cosmic inquisition" (Elegy 158). Later, too, Shaw describes the Stevens of "The Auroras" as "a poet who is trying to move from elegy toward apocalypse" (Elegy 158).

But Shaw's sense of the general direction in which the poem moves---"from elegy toward apocalypse"---and his observation that "At its outer limits an elegy may turn into an apocalypse, which is a lament, not just for a dead person, but for the passing of a world" (Elegy 155) lead one to ask whether apocalypses, or at least biblical and intertestamental apocalypses, do in fact lament the end of the world. The discussion of apocalyptic impatience in my first chapter would suggest otherwise. Does not Revelation eagerly look forward to the destruction of a sinful and corrupt world, its replacement by "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1), and the final just punishment of the bad and rewarding of the good? The bad do lament the passing of the world, but the faithful apocalyptic seer does not; if anything, from his perspective, the end of the world is as

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["Credences of Summer" and "The Auroras of Autumn"] represent the wrestling of Stevens' naturally elegiac style into a temporarily topographical poetry. Again, the result is happier in The Auroras of Autumn, where elegy and description are kept in a dissolving equilibrium, and present and past remain in a fluid focus. (232)

Berger emphasizes the poem's apocalyptic aspects throughout his very thorough reading (34-80).
good a thing as it is inevitable. An apocalypse which is also an elegy for the world must depart in significant ways from traditional religious apocalyptic visions. In her reading of "The Auroras of Autumn," Vendler refers to such an end as "a secularized doomsday" (Extended Wings 267); for Stevens, there is no "new heaven and a new earth" on the other side of apocalyptic destruction, no Jerusalem descending from the heavens, but only "Darkness, nothingness of human after-death" (CP 336). Here, I wish to return to Bloom's argument, noted above in Chapter Three, concerning the capacity of "apocalyptic thought" (Climate 107) to "avenge / One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn" (CP 158): in some elegies, the thought of the "unexpressive nuptial song" (Lycidas 1. 176) both interrupts and assuages the painful elegiac lament with the consoling power of a celestial recompense for all loss. Clearly, this consoling force must be among the casualties in an apocalyptic plot cut short at the moment of terminal destruction. a plot in

\[\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{6}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize In Rev 18:9-24, the laments of the inhabitants of Babylon (18:15-19) find a counterpoint in the angel's triumphant description of the city's desolation in 18:20-24. Gershom Scholem sums the matter up thus: "if there is anything which, in the view of these seers, history deserves, it can only be to perish" (10). These are surely among the aspects of Revelation that lead Bloom to regard the book as "Lurid and inhumane" (Introduction 4), and his own final judgement of the work deserves citation as much for its rhetoric as for its revelations of Revelation:}

\[\text{\footnotesize Resentment and not love is the teaching of the Revelation of St. John the Divine. It is a book without wisdom, goodness, kindness, or affection of any kind. Perhaps it is appropriate that a celebration of the end of the world should be not only barbaric but scarcely literate. Where the substance is so inhumane, who would wish the rhetoric to be more persuasive, or the vision to be more vividly realized? (4-5)}\]

Douglas Robinson deals with the desire for apocalypse in his reading of such naïvely apocalyptic works as Wigglesworth's The Day of Doom and Carol Balizet's distressingly popular The Seven Last Years (33-62).
which the end of this world no longer serves as preparation for the next, but merely as the endpoint; this terminus does not lead to any fulfilment or recouping of loss.

A poem that thus cut short apocalypse would logically (if that is the appropriate word) become "a lament, not just for a dead person, but for the passing of a world"; but the resulting lament would have to deal with a double bereavement, as the elegist/prophet confronts the death of the self, of humanity, of the world, as well as the death of any traditional consolation for those losses. Christian elegy moves from an individual death to the consolation offered by Christian teleology: Stevens' terminal visions foresee an end which takes the teleological consolation out of apocalypse, thereby opening an abyss of loss.\(^7\) In "The Auroras of Autumn," Stevens seeks consolation, then, for the loss of the world and the loss of that form of consolation, so that this apocalyptic poem also becomes a sort of elegy for elegy.\(^8\) In fact, the relationship between apocalypse and elegy in "The Auroras of Autumn" might be more complex than Shaw's comment--the poem "is trying to move from elegy toward apocalypse"--suggests. The poem, I think, originates not in either of these two genres, but rather in a disjunction between the two, a disjunction between Stevens' desire for consolation and the absolute loss foreseen in this "secularized doomsday." Here, I wish to return to a passage from Patricia Parker's

\(^7\) Here, it is useful to note Berger's reminder that "it still ought to surprise us when we realize how thoroughly [Stevens] has excised the eschatological dimension from the elegy" (112).

\(^8\) David Shaw makes a similar observation on Arnold's "Thyrsis": "By introducing such extraneous deaths as the death of God and the death of the pastoral elegist's traditional exercise of verbal power, Arnold has also composed an elegy for elegy" (Elegy 43).
Inescapable Romance which I cited in a different context in my first chapter. There, I was concerned with apocalyptic impatience; here, I wish to emphasize the relations and differences between the world of twilight and the world of revelation. Parker notes that "Dwelling on the twilight space of creation or trial is clearly in Milton part of the lesson of patience, of submission to the discipline of time or temperance in contrast to the apocalyptic impulse in its Satanic form" (11-12). Stevens' poem begins and ends in "The threshold or 'twilight' space before final revelation or ending" (13), the space of "'evening' as decline or distance, of exile both from Light and from final or definitive meaning, an exile which frequently recalls more the notes of elegy than those of prophecy in the epic's closing lines" (12). How can this twilight space, this place and time where "darkness gathers though it does not fall" (CP 412), where the only lights are flickering and uncertain--how can this become the space of apocalypse, of revelation, of final truth? One might also note that apocalyptic writings often have a strong narrative element: Daniel 7-12 and Revelation, for example, devote much of their time to descriptions of the series of events that will take place at the end of days.9 "The Auroras of Autumn" springs from a single event--a display of the aurora borealis--and unfolds as a characteristically Stevensian meditation on the implications of what he has seen, returning again and again to that one image. The poem takes on a characteristically elegiac movement as it searches for consolation, and yet Stevens' apocalyptic fears constantly interrupt and disrupt this movement. Can Stevens overcome this disjunction, and find some compensation for the

9 Cullmann makes much of the narrative aspect of Revelation (66-68).
losses registered at the poem's outset?

I would also like to revise further Vendler's and Shaw's sense of "The Auroras of Autumn"'s elegiac elements by suggesting that cantos ii-iv may be best understood as self-elegy, or a remaking of self-elegy. Berger, Carroll, La Guardia, and Leggett, for example, have described canto ii as a farewell to earlier fictions of whiteness, more southerly beaches, the Floridean muse and so on, without discussing it, or the poem's other elegiac cantos, in relation to the genre of self-elegy. In fact, Berger considers self-elegy to be the dominant mode of Stevens' last lyrics (141-88). With Lawrence

Berger sees a tension between farewells to the Floridean muse and to the power gained from whiteness in "The Snow Man" (43-48); this retrospective theme disappears in his readings of cantos iii and iv (48-54). La Guardia concentrates on the echoes of "Farewell to Florida," but reads the later poem in too positive a manner, eliding its marked differences from the earlier one in tone and setting; for him, "The difference in 'Auroras' is that, instead of announcing freedom as an accomplished fact, Stevens elaborates the processes by which freedom is attained" (131). This reading does not take into account the fact of old age and the sense of impending disaster that permeates the poem. The necessary farewell to the earlier fiction seems, in this context, to lead only to loss and foreboding, not freedom. Leggett also concentrates on the Florida connection, but focuses instead on "The Idea of Order at Key West." He emphasizes the relation between the auroras and the lights that appear at the end of the earlier work and which "Mastered the night and portioned out the sea" (CP 130); his account of the differences between the earlier and later Stevens (Poetic Theory 177) is more convincing than La Guardia's.

In his introduction, Berger observes that Stevens "wrote his own elegy over and over again, as he attempted to place himself in the afterlife of literary history" (xii). His reading of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" also deals with these issues (112-33). Jahan Ramazani refers briefly to "The Auroras of Autumn" in his article on self-elegy in Stevens, but only to suggest that it does not belong to that genre:

The house that he shapes and bequeaths reappears in the early cantos of "The Auroras of Autumn" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," but in "The Plain Sense of Things" it is more obviously emblematic of his work . . . ." ("Self-Elegy" 97)
Lipking's *The Life of the Poet* in mind, Berger describes these poems as "versions of the *tombeau*" (143), though the terms of his argument seem to derive more from Lipking's chapter on the poet's desire for a harmonious summation at the end of the career (Lipking 65-137). Stevens' "accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise" (*CP* 412) in canto ii might sound similar to the one described by Berger when he suggests that the last lyrics show Stevens "testing the resiliency of the completed artifact by seeing if it can withstand the onslaught of its maker's repudiation" (146), or perhaps like the process Lipking attributes to Whitman: "He tries to extract the essence of *Leaves of Grass*, not by purging it of impurities but by steeping it in the destructive elements, matter and time" (130).

Berger also writes that "the late lyrics as a group seem to be aimed against the very idea of satisfactory closure . . . " (145). He goes on to describe how "these late poems often have to clear new space for themselves at the cost of disparaging or revising the earlier work" (166); "The rejection of constructed work results only in another act of construction, another stone, soon to become cold, added to the total edifice" (170). But on another level "The Auroras of Autumn" does not so much turn against the idea of closure, as envision the inevitability of closure, a form of closure that transcends the designs of the individual poet and poem. The auroras apparently enjoin Stevens to engage in a sort of poetic thought experiment here; he imagines the dissolution of his fictions not so much

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12 Ramazani, in the notes to his article on self-elegy in Stevens, lists this chapter of Lipking's book as one of several "wide-ranging discussions of self-elegiac works" ("Self-Elegy" 104), though Lipking never speaks explicitly of self-elegy in this chapter. A summation, it seems, is no more necessarily a self-elegy than a self-elegy is necessarily a summation.
in order to ask whether they will survive the destruction foretold by the fiery skies of the auroras, but rather to confront and deal with the inevitability of that loss. Thus, the positive value Berger assigns to such farewells in the last poems seems less certain in "The Auroras of Autumn." If Stevens says "farewell to an idea" in order to clear a space for the sublime new fiction of the auroras, he does not derive much comfort from this displacement. Rather than creating a new fiction, he faces the end of fictions, a fiction of absolute loss.

* * *

Harold Bloom has written that in the first canto of "The Auroras of Autumn."
"Stevens adds no meanings to the auroras . . ." (Climate 261). It might be nearer the truth, though, to suggest that Stevens begins in a state of uncertainty as to just what meanings he might add to the flickering lights of the northern sky:

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.  
His head is air. Beneath his tip at night  
Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.

Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,  
Another image at the end of the cave,  
Another bodiless for the body's slough?

This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,  
These fields, these hills, these tinted distances.  
And the pines above and along and beside the sea.

This is form gulping after formlessness,  
Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances  
And the serpent body flashing without the skin. (CP 411)
It has been something of a critical commonplace to read this opening, with its constantly shifting lights and skin-shedding snake, as emblematic of a principle of flux and transformation that governs the auroras, if not the universe itself. The contrast between the second and fourth stanzas, of course, while suggesting some uncertainty as to the precise meaning of this process—either something new is emerging, or something old is disappearing, or both—speaks more of the flux of becoming, rather than of any absolute annihilation. Stevens' world here remains one of cyclic change, of generation and regeneration, the autumnal world of mutability. Yet while Stevens' use of participles in the third stanza emphasizes process and incompletion, the gesture recorded there—"form gulping after formlessness," "Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances"—nevertheless suggests a world poised on the brink of some more absolute, final change. The canto remains balanced between this process of cyclic change and intimations of some world-ending event. Is the world of cyclical change straining to become the world of apocalyptic annihilation, to become the world of absolute disappearances, of the disappearance of the world? And do Stevens' emblems of flux, expanded to a sublime scale, also strain to become emblems of impending apocalypse? Stevens' celestial serpent may also echo the dragon of Revelation 12, whose "tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth . . . " (Rev 12:4). Just as the snake of "Farewell to Florida" (1936) could not be contained in its skin, the auroras seem to gesture toward a force that cannot quite be contained within a figuration of flux. The only certain thing in

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this canto may be this uncertainty as to the final meaning and destination of this process of change.

The canto ends balanced between loss and recompense, as though Stevens were uncertain as to where the poem stood in that pattern of loss and compensation characteristic of both elegy and apocalypse, or, indeed, as if that pattern had no place in the poem at all. Stevens figures this uncertainty through a disjunction between two versions of the serpent:

This is the height emerging and its base
These lights may finally attain a pole
In the midmost midnight and find the serpent there.

In another nest, the master of the maze
Of body and air and forms and images,
Relentlessly in possession of happiness.

This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
Even that. His meditations in the ferns,
When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun,

Made us no less as sure. We saw in his head,
Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
The moving grass, the Indian in his glade. (CP 4:11-12)

The first lines of this passage suggest a certain telos both for the poem and the auroras themselves, a search that might reveal a purposive, designing mind behind (or above) "the maze / Of body and air and forms and images." In contrast to this proposed telos, the last five lines turn to a remembered but lost past. Here, the natural serpent's former capacity, through his slight movements, to "make sure of sun" and thereby make "us no less as sure" underlines the absence. in Stevens' nocturnal and boreal setting, of sun and certainty, and of everything that the sun has represented for Stevens from canto vii of
"Sunday Morning" to the opening of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* and beyond. Oddly enough, even this lost certainty seems only to have been available through the mediacy of the serpent, as though there were no possibility of returning to a point prior to that moment (in Christian myth) in which the serpent contributed to humanity's fall from a perfect state. Helen Vendler has made much of the antagonistic relationship between "The Auroras of Autumn" and "Credences of Summer" (*Extended Wings* 231-68), but has not commented on the fact that the "rock of summer," "this present ground, the vividest repose, / Things certain sustaining us in certainty" (*CP* 375) now sustains the serpent's head, which in turn once sustained our certainty. Stevens' natural serpent, emblem of a harmonious natural world, or of a harmonious way of living in that world, an America in which the Indian lives in a glade that is his own, reminds us not just of a lost natural paradise, but also of a lost myth of paradise, of a belief that there was a time before the serpent's poison. In Stevens' refashioning of Christian myth, the serpent

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14 Vendler writes of "The energy of repudiation directed toward *Credences of Summer*" (*Extended Wings* 248) in the later poem.

15 Vendler makes this point: "The wholly natural beast, at ease in the glade, is the presiding spirit of Stevens' willful wish, even here, to be entirely at home in the world, to be an Indian in America. an aborigine indigenous to the place" (*Extended Wings* 250).

16 Here, Stevens echoes, though somewhat obliquely, his concern with a lost paradise in the first canto of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas":

> Where is that summer warm enough to walk  
> Among the lascivious poisons, clean of them,  
> And in what covert may we, naked, be  
> Beyond the knowledge of nakedness, as part  
> Of reality, beyond the knowledge of what  
> Is real, part of a land beyond the mind? (*CP* 252)
always appears as or on the horizon of his world, both in past and future, basking on a rock or flashing as the auroras in the sky. We feel the effect of the serpent's poison in moving from the projected discovery of the serpent's happiness to this lost vision of natural harmony. Stevens leaves the canto balanced between a loss already suffered and a recompense yet to be found, or, rather, between two losses, the loss of a myth of past happiness and the loss of a new myth of future happiness.

In keeping with this theme of loss, cantos ii-iv make a series of farewells to old fictions, farewells which also develop along a fault line between elegy and apocalypse. Many critics read this sequence as one instance of the more general theme of change in Stevens, one more abandonment of an old fiction in order to make room for a new one. Bloom makes this point in his discussion of canto ii, when he notes that "Stevens had said 'farewell' before in his poetry; indeed, in some sense he always had been saying farewell to some aspect of self or experience, and he went on with such elegiac intensities until the end in Of Mere Being" (Climate 261). Of course, nothing returns so continually in Stevens' poetry as change. But Bloom does not account for the unique position of this farewell in Stevens' oeuvre, its occurrence at a particular stage in his life and poetic career--an autumn arrived at after a Transport to Summer--a position which accounts for the peculiar intensity of this valediction. Might there be different breaks with the past.

La Guardia, whose reading is remarkably similar to Bloom's both in its general outline and in some details (though he makes no use of Bloom's method of antithetical reading), echoes this thought: "In a changing world, the present imagination must always wave adieu to its earlier forms" (132). Here, La Guardia's language suggests a continuity between "Auroras" and the earlier "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu" (1935).
different "Forms of farewell" (CP 482)? This farewell, or series of farewells, does in fact mark another sort of break with Stevens' earlier poetry, a break with his earlier breaks, a more decisive, final, and absolute break, haunted, as it is, by a sense of impending disaster, of an absolute end, a final change which will end all changes. Stevens' usual sense of change changes here, and he says farewell to an earlier form of farewell.

In the first parts of canto ii, even the silences articulate Stevens' theme of leave-taking. Throughout *Elegy and Paradox*, David Shaw gives particular attention to the silences, disjunctions, withholdings and elisions whose apparent emptiness often (paradoxically) fills elegies, and he suggestively describes the earlier tercets of "The Auroras of Autumn"'s second canto as "withholding and austere. Meanings seem excluded by an 'extremist' in excising, whose 'exercise' (II.15) even yields by excision the excluded word 'excise'" (159). The ellipsis which follows "Farewell to an idea" may indicate one such excision. Stevens' concern with the final elision of fictions and tropes in this poem, with the disappearance of so many of the differences that his poetry has thrived on, makes this ellipsis one of the most telling silences in his poetry, and reminds us that an ellipsis is not just a moment in which nothing is said, but rather a way of saying, silently, that something has been withheld, silenced. In a poem that says farewell, in which the world is paradoxically reduced to the whiteness in which all colour is present and yet invisible, a poem in which white itself seems only a mark of absence, "a

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18 Cf. in particular his fourth chapter ("The Paradox of the Unspeakable: Speaking by Being Silent in Romantic Elegy [103-46]) and fifth chapter ("The Paradox of Veridiction: Breakdown and Breakthrough in Modern Elegy" [147-79]).
kind of mark // Reminding, trying to remind, of a white / That was different, something else. last year / Or before" (CP 412), Stevens' elliptical silence somehow states, by (not quite) saying nothing, the dominant idea of this canto of farewells. This speaking through silence, through absences and withholdings, is central to Stevens' theme and method in these elegiac cantos. Canto II in particular, I hope to show, becomes a veritable palimpsest of farewells: each trope seems to overwrite or erase some absent or remembered fiction, a memory which itself erases some more thoroughly elided idea. Stevens' silences speak volumes.

The first item, then, in Stevens' litany of farewells. is the cabin, which several critics have identified with Crispin's cabin in "The Comedian as the Letter C." though only Jarraway notes that Crispin appears at some point to have moved it from an inland lot to one with an ocean view.19 But Crispin's cabin itself functions as a double figure in "The Comedian," standing for the reduced artistic ambitions of a poet/protagonist "who once planned/ Loquacious columns by the ructive sea" (CP 41), and also for the displacement of the artistic by the practical life, of the creative by the procreative: the results of Crispin's "cabin ribaldries" (CP 42) "Leav[e] no room upon his cloudy knee. / Prophetic joint, for its diviner young" (CP 43). Jarraway writes of the house of canto iii as a "Jamesean house of fiction" (239) though, as I will show, the cabin of canto ii seems to be a specifically Stevensian version of this trope. Both Stevens' early and later versions of the fiction of the house of fiction, as a trope for his own oeuvre, tend to be ironically

and self-deprecatingly diminished structures. In "The Plain Sense of Things" (1952), for example, "The great structure has become a minor house" (CP 502): the "shuttered mansion-house" of the self-elegiac "A Postcard from the Volcano," for all its lasting effect on subsequent generations, is reduced to "A dirty house in a gutted world, / A tatter of shadows peaked to white" (CP 159). In "Auroras" ii, then, Stevens says farewell to one version of the fiction of a house (or cabin) of fiction which is itself already a diminished structure, a relic, a farewell. And, of course, the oeuvre to which Stevens bids farewell has itself often been an oeuvre of farewells, as Vendler and Bloom have observed.  

This gesture thus reveals deeper layers of absence and loss.

In attempting to determine which aspects of his house of fiction will prove most durable, Stevens gives particular emphasis to its colour--or lack of colour. In fact Stevens inscribes so much white writing over the trope of the cabin that this passage becomes more a farewell to whiteness than to the house of fiction--unless we read it as a farewell to the whiteness of that house:

A cabin stands.
Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
As by a custom or according to

An ancestral theme or as a consequence

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30 See the comments by Bloom on p. 177 above. In On Extended Wings, Vendler writes that "The elegy and the earthy celebration seem to him in some moments to be the only two possible modes for poetry" (83), and she later gives further definition to Stevens' sense of elegy:

Stevens' recurrent poem is finally neither the elegy for the death of the gods nor the earthy tum-ti-tum, but in fact the elegy for the death of tum-ti-tum, the atrophy in life of the earthy poem. (85)
Of an infinite course. The flowers against the wall
Are white, a little dried, a kind of mark

Reminding, trying to remind, of a white
That was different, something else, last year
Or before, not the white of an aging afternoon.

Whether fresher or duller, whether of winter cloud
Or of winter sky, from horizon to horizon.
The wind is blowing the sand across the floor.

Here, being visible is being white,
Is being of the solid of white, the accomplishment
Of an extremist in an exercise . . .

The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach.
The long lines of it grow longer, emptier.
A darkness gathers though it does not fall

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall. (CP 412)

Critics have offered more than one possible source from Stevens' earlier work for this
vision of whiteness.21 Bloom, however, bringing etymology into play, proves particularly
convincing with his suggestion that here Stevens has in mind "that ever-early candor"
(CP 382) of Notes I iii: "The poem, through candor, brings back a power again / That
gives a candid kind to everything" (CP 382). Now night drives away the colors of
Stevens' fictions (both tropes of colour, and colours as a trope for tropes) and reduces
visibility to "being white," and at the same time reveals the colors of the auroras. This
exercise in reduction thus sounds like the work of that "pensive nature, a mechanical/
And slightly detestable operandum" (CP 517) that "[thinks] away the grass, the trees, the

21 See fn. 10 on p. 171 above, and also my comments on p. 171.
clouds" (*CP* 517), rather than being, as Bloom suggests. Stevens' own accomplishment. Stevens' house--or cabin--of fiction remains visible in this encroaching darkness because it is white; but Bloom's reading of this whiteness as another example of "that ever-early candor" may provide too optimistic an answer to Stevens' questions about the survival of his house of fiction's whiteness. "The white of an aging afternoon" does not constitute an "ever-early candor" but rather says farewell to that earlier version of whiteness, marking its absence while inscribing a new trope of whiteness over it. In fact, the ever-early candor seems to have been so thoroughly expunged in this palimpsest that Stevens can no longer name or describe it, or state how it differed from that of the present scene; the very multiplicity of tropes elides the possibility of certain knowledge on this score. And Stevens' language of finality--"the accomplishment / Of an extremist" plays etymologically with notions of ending and completion--leads to a sense that even this different version of whiteness is disappearing as "A darkness gathers though it does not fall // And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall." As the end approaches, there are no signs of fulfilment and completion, but only loss and incompleteness. When "The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand" (*CP* 412), he presumably, in spite of the quibble on "blankly," turns away from all this whiteness, making a farewell within Stevens' farewell. Stevens leaves his diminished house of fiction, then, in this fragile condition: open to the elements, reduced to a whiteness no longer the mark of an original.

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22 "As poet he is the extremist, and the exercise is his characteristic reduction to a First Idea, performed here all too successfully and with fearful consequences . . ." (*Climate* 263).
"ever-early candor," a whiteness growing still "less vivid" in the "Boreal night" (CP 413). His farewell to this white house becomes another palimpsest of farewell, silently bidding adieu both to his tropes of colour and to an earlier version of whiteness.

Other absences haunt this seaside poem. Berger suggests that "The man who is walking" recalls "The Idea of Order at Key West"; but now Stevens hears no voice singing of the imagination's ordering power. In fact Stevens' favourite vocal tropes for oceanic sounds are oddly absent from this littoral lyric. These oceanic tropes also serve as tropes of continuity, both in the early "The Place of the Solitaires" (1919) and later works such as "Somnambululisma" (1943), "Two Versions of the Same Poem" (1946), or the second section ("The Westwardness of Everything") of "Our Stars Come from Ireland" (1948); in all these poems, Stevens suggests that "There will never be an end / To this droning of the surf" (CP 23). This trope of endless recurrence appears to have

23 "Once again Stevens is striding the beach--but now there is no singing girl to behold, nor is there any companion, even a pale Ramon, to share the vision" (Berger 45).

24 Bloom claims that "the Auroras is a crisis-poem" (Climate 254) and that "The American crisis-poem, from Emerson to A. R. Ammons, is a shore-lyric . . ." (96). Bloom discusses this issue in the first chapter of The Poems of Our Climate (12-16). The theme returns in some of his readings of individual poems (cf. 83, 165-66, 231, 234, and 301-02, for example). Bloom explains the near-absence of oceanic tropes in "Auroras" by noting that their "place is taken, throughout, by the auroras, and by the auroras' ally, the sea-wind, which continues to blow 'as sharp as salt' all through the poem, just as the lights go on flashing throughout the poem" (257). It is not clear, though, that all ten cantos share this sea-side setting; the auroras may be seen just as well inland, and it would not be at all unusual for Stevens to shift locations throughout the course of a poem as long as "Auroras." Cantos i and ii, of course, are shore lyrics.

25 A juxtaposition of passages from "The Place of the Solitaires" (1919) with "Somnambululisma" (1943) reveals both the continuity of this theme and something of Stevens' poetic growth from early to late (though admittedly the earlier poem is not major
come silently to an end in "The Auroras of Autumn," without even a "farewell." But the foremost figure in Stevens' memory here may be another trope of imaginative power and continuity, that of the sun as Walt Whitman in the opening poem of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery":

In the far South the sun of autumn is passing  
Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore.  
He is singing and chanting the things that are part of him,  
The worlds that were and will be, death and day.  
Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end.  
His beard is of fire and his staff is a leaping flame. (CP 150)

"The man who is walking" does not chant, but rather "turns blankly on the sand." troping futilely, as Bloom suggests, but also engaging (etymologically) in a kind of white writing against the white background of the sand. One suspects that if this man were to

\[\text{early Stevens, and the later work is a particularly wonderful one):} \]

Whether it be in mid-sea  
On the dark, green water-wheel,  
Or on the beaches,  
There must be no cessation  
Of motion, or of the noise of motion.  
The renewal of noise  
And manifold continuation;

And, most, of the motion of thought  
And its restless iteration . . . . (CP 60)

On an old shore, the vulgar ocean rolls  
Noiselessly, noiselessly, resembling a thin bird.  
That thinks of settling, yet never settles, on a nest. (CP 304)

\[\text{26 "To turn blankly is to trope vainly or write poetry without purpose, in a state of 'This is,' where the wind and the auroras dominate and the wind and auroras themselves are allied as 'gusts of great enkindlings' (Climate 264).} \]
chant rather than turn blankly, his words would not proclaim that "Nothing is final" or that "No man shall see the end," but rather that the end is near, and that he has seen it in the auroras.

This layering of valediction and loss marks the "The Auroras of Autumn"'s difference from Stevens' earlier rhetoric of farewell. Stevens' subtle and elusive way of marking the absence of discarded fictions provides an analogue to the poem's concern, announced in the opening canto, with the casting off of old fictions and forms. Stevens' farewell to his house of fiction, to its "ever-early candor." echoes silently with earlier forms of farewell, with memories of strangely disembodied fictions. In abandoning his "Floridean muse" in "Farewell to Florida" Stevens also greeted a new aesthetic with new tropes, a northern, more masculine aesthetic, one which was at times more directly concerned with particular social pressures of Stevens' day. The Stevens of "Auroras" completed this northern turn long ago, and that northern place had provided the climate of his poems for some ten years. This final northern turn to watch the auroras does not so much turn to a new fiction, as toward the end of fictions.

The blank turning of "The man who is walking" acts as the turning point of canto ii. a turn from self-elegy to apocalypse:

The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand.
He observes how the north is always enlarging the change.

With its frigid briliances, its blue-red sweeps
And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green.

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27 Berger, La Guardia, and Leggett (Poetic Theory) read canto II as a farewell to "Farewell to Florida"; see p. 171 above and fn. 10 on p. 171.
The color of ice and fire and solitude. (CP 413)

For Bloom, this passage records a moment of creative crisis, and he argues that here Stevens has come to "an end of the imagination" (CP 502); cantos ii-iv demonstrate "the failure of the power of the mind to assert itself over the auroras and the wind, synecdoches of the universe of death (and of language)" (Climate 265). But Bloom's claims that the aurora borealis "is its own First Idea, and what fades and shrivels is the fable of reimagining" (264), and that it seems "to resist becoming 'an imagined thing'" (261) need to be weighed against David Shaw's observation that in the final sentence of "Auroras" ii Stevens "transforms scenes that are unremittingly natural, sometimes even commonplace, into apocalyptic poetry of ravishing and fierce simplicity" (Elegy 159). A certain tension emerges between these readings: for Bloom, the naming of the auroras as "innocence" in canto viii marks the triumph of Stevens' imagination. Yet for critics like Shaw and Vendler, the apocalyptic fears aroused by the auroras produce one of Stevens' greatest displays of imaginative power. It is worth noting, too, that this poem is utterly different in tone from Stevens' other poems of imaginative failure, such as "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" (1921) or "The Plain Sense of Things" (1952). The imagery, diction, and style (the latter work in particular contains an unusual number of short, blunt, declarative sentences) produce a sense of constraint which little resembles the expansive...

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28 Carroll also reads this passage as a description of imaginative failure (242).

29 Vendler, writing on the vision of innocence in canto viii, reinforces this sense that the poem is most powerful when it is most apocalyptic; she observes that "what is remembered of this poem is not that assumed naïveté, but the etched anticipation of a secularized doomsday . . . " (Extended Wings 267).
grandeur of "Auroras" ii's conclusion. There is little sense of Stevens being "too dumbly in [his] being pent" (CP 96) here. If "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (CP 503), it has rarely been imagined to such powerful aesthetic effect. The sense of crisis in this passage may stem not from a disjunction between reality and imagination, but from a disjunction within the imaginative realm, between different poetic modes and genres. This passage is a crux in the poem not because it constitutes a failure of imagination, but because here Stevens' apocalyptic fears break through the self-elegiac mode that has dominated the canto. Stevens' "color of ice and fire and solitude" speaks of last things, of a final "big chill" or a final conflagration, the two apocalyptic options considered by Frost in "Fire and Ice." Light itself seems frozen in these "frigid brilliances." The change foretold by the auroras' "gusts of great enkindlings" would put

30 Of course, the aesthetic success of those poems lies precisely in that effect of limit and constraint.

31 Leggett makes just this point toward the end of his reading of "Auroras":

It is true that the absence of the imagination in the poem had itself to be imagined--that Stevens's depiction of the subservience of the poet's imagination to a more powerful external presence represents one of his greatest feats of the imagination--but this is a trap Stevens is forced to consider in the poems following "The Auroras of Autumn"; it occupies him throughout his last poems, as Helen Reguiero has shown in her study of Stevens' attempts to transcend the limits of the romantic imagination. (Poetic Theory 193)

32 The conclusion of "From the Packet of Anacharsis" provides an interesting contrast to the concern with whiteness and colour in "Auroras" ii:

In the punctual centre of all circles white
Stands truly. The circles nearest to it share
an end to that orderly procession of the seasons in which Stevens situates his elegy.

Stevens' moment of seasonal change, a trope of crossing from summer's plenitude to "the nothingness of winter" (OP 123), also becomes a moment in which genres cross, in which the auroras and their apocalyptic intimations irrupt into the cycle of seasonal change and threaten to disrupt or end that cycle.

In fact, the relation between auroras and elegy proves still more complex, since the subtle presence, outlined above, of end-signs in Stevens' self-elegy suggests that the canto's concluding apocalyptic vision had actually irrupted backwards into the elegy, or perhaps that these apocalyptic fears had already been silently present within Stevens' farewell to the white cabin. The reduction of Stevens' world to whiteness in the face of an ominously gathering darkness, the sense that "an infinite course" might somehow end, the emptying of the beach's long lines, the accomplishment of an inhuman extremist, all contribute to this sense of finality. Stevens' series of receding farewells within farewells, a valediction which breaks with his earlier forms of farewell, stems from this sense of

| Its color, but less as they recede, impinged |
| By difference and then by definition |
| As a tone defines itself and separates |

And the circles quicken and crystal colors come
And flare and Bloom with his vast accumulation
Stands and regards and repeats the primitive lines. (CP 366)

It may seem surprising that Bloom does not repeat these primitive lines in his reading of "Auroras" ii (though he cites them as epigraph to his book on Stevens). Here, the movement away from whiteness involves both loss and gain, and one might note the double "quickening" of the "crystal colors [that] come/ And flare" in language similar to that found at the end of "Auroras" ii; the colors come to life, but they may also revivify those who view them.
impending apocalypse; there is no longer any new fiction to turn towards. And Stevens' version of apocalypse—an end with no promise of "a new heaven and a new earth"—involves him in a sort of double bind; it raises the need for elegiac consolation and robs him of consolation at one and the same time.

This canto is, I feel, crucial to the poem's—and my—argument, since it opens the tensions that generate the poem. The fact that this opening into finality occurs so early in a ten-canto poem is thematically significant, of course. It bespeaks the kind of premature, arbitrary cutting short of the plot which I discussed in the previous chapter. The poem paradoxically keeps itself going by elaborating this ever-early valediction, saying farewell not so much in order to put off the end as to find an appropriate stance toward it, and thereby complementing the vertical layering of palimpsests with an elaboration along a horizontal axis.

Stevens returns to the question of his poetry's durability in canto iii by considering the figure of the mother, a figure most critics read as a version of Stevens' muse, though no doubt she is also a version of Stevens' own mother. Yet in this case, Stevens' farewell and the ensuing silence introduce a new aspect of this old figure, a trope of complete fulfilment and unity:

Farewell to an idea... The mother's face,
The purpose of the poem, fills the room.
They are together, here, and it is warm.

Cf. Arensberg 164-65; Berger 48-49; Bloom, *Climate* 265; La Guardia 132; Vendler *Extended Wings* 256. The relationship to the muse is more implicit than explicit in La Guardia and Vendler.
With none of the prescience of oncoming dreams,
It is evening. The house is evening, half dissolved.
Only the half they can never possess remains.

Still-starred. It is the mother they possess,
Who gives transparence to their present peace.
She makes that gentler that can gentle be. (CP 413)

Mary Arensberg claims that "Perhaps the most dominant image of presence for Stevens
had always been 'the mother's face' . . . " (163-64). This statement seems debatable.
however; I know of no other similar appearance of the mother's face itself in Stevens'
poetry, and particularly not one which declares the mother's face to be "The purpose of
the poem" and which shows her completely possessed by her children. The
novelty of
this passage is heightened, in fact, by a comparison with what strikes me as the strongest
Stevensian intertext for this canto--the epigraph to Notes toward a Supreme Fiction:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?

34 Stevens' question to the "Timeless mother" (CP 5) of "In the Carolinas" (1917)--
"How is it that your aspic nipples / For once vent honey?" (CP 5)--offers an earlier and
deeply ambivalent image of the mother; the "return to birth, a being born / Again in the
savagest severity, / Desiring fiercely" (CP 321) of "Esthétique du Mal" x, presents
another reunion, though one that differs greatly in tone from "Auroras" iii. But these do
not focus on the mother's face, and it is unclear in these cases whether the mother is
possessed by or possesses her children. The "One of the Fictive Music," "Sister and
mother and diviner love" (CP 87) whom Stevens once asked to give back "The
imagination that we spurned and crave" (CP 88) remains a somewhat more distant and
elusive figure, hardly one that Stevens could claim to "possess." Arensberg gives a
Freudian reading of some of Stevens' mother figures in pp. 23-27 of "A Curable
Separation": Stevens and the Mythology of Gender." C. Roland Wagner's "Wallace
Stevens: The Concealed Self" explores the notion that "Ambivalent attachment to the
nurturing, pre-Oedipal mother is central to our understanding of Stevens" (125), and his
reading of canto iii of "Auroras" asks us to consider "whether Stevens' wife might be seen
as the mother who 'has grown old' . . . " (128).
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth.
Equal in living changiness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transparence that you bring is peace. (CP 380)

Stevens' echoes of "peace" and "transparence" direct us back to this passage, but here, we find only an unnamed and beloved "you," not the mother. Does the earlier passage elide the mother, the bringer of transparence and peace, while the later one, in spite of its ellipses and farewells, restores that figure? If the ellipsis after "farewell to an idea" in canto ii opened a whole series of elisions, the appearance of "the mother's face" in canto iii might now seem, if anything, to put an end to elision. Does this statement finally reveal, at this late point in Stevens' career, a long-excluded or silenced truth? At any rate, this passage acquires much of its peculiar poignancy from the fact that this full understanding of the mother's significance emerges only at the precise moment at which Stevens must bid her farewell. If Stevens is bidding farewell to old fictions in this sequence, the one that emerges here may, then, be one he has failed to articulate or realize fully and clearly in the past. Stevens' memory is doubly haunted here: this memory leads us back not to a presence but to an absence, an omission, an elision.

Canto iii withdraws into a more interior world than canto ii, troping the difference

35 Berger also emphasizes the novelty of this "extraordinary statement" (48), but his uncertainty over the object of Stevens' valediction seems puzzling. He writes that "Whatever idea Stevens says farewell to must have been something that kept him from the mother's face, and also obscured the purpose of the poem..." (48). The notion that the mother's face "becomes an image of presence" (48) does not preclude the possibility that Stevens must now say farewell to that image as it makes its last--and first--appearance; after all, the canto goes on to imagine the mother's dissolution and destruction.
between the realm of the aging mother and the disruptive auroras as the difference
between inside and outside. This figuration becomes most strongly marked in the canto's
final triplets:

They are at ease in a shelter of the mind
And the house is of the mind and they and time.
Together, all together. Boreal night
Will look like frost as it approaches them

And to the mother as she falls asleep
And as they say good-night, good-night. Upstairs
The windows will be lighted, not the rooms.

A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round
And knock like a rifle-butt against the door.
The wind will command with invincible sound. (CP 418)

Stevens' figure for the relation between elegy and apocalypse is more intense and
disturbing here than in canto ii, and it registers more of the disruptive force with which
the auroras enter into the poem. Stevens' house is a doubly interiorized space, a inner
space within the poem's inner world, a place of evening, a place to say good-night to the
mother, or farewell to an idea. Stevens reverses canto ii's figuration of white house and
darkening sky when he notes that "the windows will be lighted, not the rooms"; an inner
darkness is now threatened by the color of frost, if not of ice and fire and solitude. But
does this canto's figuration for the relationship between elegiac fictions and apocalypse--
that of an inner world threatened by an external force--correspond to the way in which the
two actually unfold in the canto? Stevens maintains a careful distinction between the
effects of time ("the house is of the mind and they and time") which lead to the mother's
dissolution, and the external "boreal night." Everything in this interior, elegiac space
belongs to the ordinary world of time and change, the world of changing seasons and
cycles of life and death: the mother "is dissolved. she is destroyed" because "she has
grown old" (CP 413). Tactile experience fades into visual memory with the passage of
time: "The necklace is a carving not a kiss. // The soft hands are a motion not a touch"
(CP 413). Yet when Stevens proclaims that "The house will crumble and the books will
burn" (CP 413) he unobtrusively crosses a line between the ordinary effects of time and
the sort of conflagration imagined at the end of canto ii, a fire in which "the books will
burn." The burning of books belongs more to that realm of figuration in which winds
"knock like a rifle-butt against the door"--an especially frightening image given the recent
horrors of Nazi Germany. And that prediction of crumbling house and burning books also
marks a shift from the present indicative which has dominated the canto to the more
prophetic future mode, a mode Stevens reserves here for the destructive external forces
that threaten the house and its inhabitants. The poem thus subtly registers the presence of
apocalyptic fears in the interior, elegiac world of the house. as though the outside were
already inside. There seems to be something about the auroras that resists or escapes
Stevens' attempts to contain them in this particular figuration.

In spite of the return of the valedictory formula which opened cantos ii and iii. and
despite the familial logic of following a farewell to the mother with one to the father.
canto IV differs considerably both in form and tone from the preceding two sections of
"Auroras." Little in this canto sounds elegiac. and although Stevens appears to be saying

36 Cook finds Stevens "punning gently and sadly on an embrace as a neck-lace" here ("King James" 251).
farewell to the idea of continuity, to the idea that "The cancellings, / The negations are never final" (CP 414), the father shows no signs of being dissolved and destroyed as the mother was, and indeed lives on to become the central figure of canto v. A certain tension thus enters the poem, as though the father could not be contained in Stevens' elegiac manner and insisted on breaking out of the pattern suggested by a second repetition of "Farewell to an idea." And yet canto iv. I hope to show, conceals further elegiac silences and losses beneath the father's confrontation with the auroras, silences that tell of the inevitable result of that confrontation.

Various critics have identified the father with some of Stevens' sublime seekers, such as Canon Aspirin of Notes III v-vi, Whitman (Stevens' "more severe, // More harassing master" [CP 486]), the crowned humanity of "Crude Foyer." or the angel of Notes III vii. But some of these same writers have also noted that the father first appears as one of Stevens' Jehovah-like figure--an odd conflation, since this latter figure only appears in Stevens' poetry in order to be rejected. Stevens' farewell to the idea of continuity emerges concomitantly with his desire to place himself in relation to a poetic tradition. The Jehovah figure and the sublime seeker share a visionary capacity: Stevens characterizes the more Jehovah-like father of the opening lines by his "bleak regard."

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37 For Canon Aspirin, cf. Berger 53, Bloom, Climate 267. and Vendler, Extended Wings 258; the "lasting visage in a lasting bush" of Notes III iii is Bloom's reading (266); Carroll makes the associations with Whitman, and "Crude Foyer." (246); for the angel of Notes III vii, cf. Carroll 245, Jarraway 245-46, Vendler, Extended Wings 258.

38 For these readings, cf. Arensberg 166, Bloom, Climate 266. and Vendler, Extended Wings 258.
regard of "one that is strong in the bushes of his eyes." The father's "flights of eye and ear," reminiscent of Canon Aspirin's flights in Notes III v-vii, invoke a familiar Stevensian rhetoric of revelation as they move the father "From cloud to cloudless, cloudless to keen clear" (CP 414). Stevens' sublime language of "the highest eye / And the lowest ear" (CP 414) -- the fall from high to low subtly reinforced by the drop to a lower line -- and "the supernatural preludes" and "angelic eye" (CP 414) contribute to that sense of an impending revelation, an apocalyptic unveiling or moment of clarity, even though Stevens finally gives us a revelation of perception itself, or perhaps of the artifice of perception: "the angelic eye defines / Its actors approaching, in company, in their masks" (CP 414). He sums up a history of fathers leading right back to the Father even as he bids that history farewell, thus establishing a sort of visionary lineage, a lineage in which "One father proclaims another, the patriarchs / Of truth" (OP 120). Stevens' elegy, then, encompasses all that is most visionary in himself and the tradition to which he belonged. The very intensity of his attachment to this aspect of himself, or perhaps the strength of visionary's voice within him, accounts for this passage's shift away from the elegiac tone and manner that dominate cantos ii and iii. Something about the father breaks, momentarily, with that elegiac mode and produces this more confident, forward-looking and visionary passage.

Yet the echoes of the Jehovah figure that haunt the sublime seeker have a slightly unsettling effect, since, as I mentioned above, Stevens has always been rejecting this

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39 Thus Stevens announces the vision of "the inanimate, difficult visage" of major man in Notes I x: "Cloudless the morning. It is he" (CP 389).
figure in his poetry. His concern with this figure seems to have become particularly intense in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, and "Auroras" iv gathers together echoes of that poem's "bleakest ancestor" of sound (*CP* 398) and "lasting visage in a lasting bush" (*CP* 400):40

Farewell to an idea . . . The cancellings,
The negations are never final. The father sits
In space, wherever he sits, of bleak regard,

As one that is strong in the bushes of his eyes. (*CP* 414)

The penultimate stanza of "Auroras" iv also echoes, through a slight displacement, *Notes*' "voluminous master folded in his fire" (*CP* 381) in Stevens' cry of "Master O master seated by the fire" (*CP* 414). Stevens' ellipsis asks the reader to listen for silences and elisions beneath the farewell to the father; an earlier farewell may haunt this canto. an earlier absence, the absence of that fiction of the divine whose end Stevens so beautifully describes in the essay "Two or Three Ideas" (1951). These echoes of the farewell to the Jehovah figure will prove appropriate to the peculiar apocalypticism that Stevens develops in cantos vi through viii; since Stevens will imagine an arbitrary end, an end without fulfilment, and in which "end" can no longer mean "goal" or "purpose," he silently marks his oft-repeated rejection of the author/God of that plot of history. And if Stevens says farewell to a tradition of fathers, he also says farewell to a tradition of farewells in his own poetry. In fact, just such a moment appears within Stevens' farewell

40 Some of these associations reappear in canto vi of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven:" there, "the hierophant Omega becomes "stooping, polymathic Z, / He that kneels always on the edge of space" (*CP* 469).
itself, since the father's "yes / To no" shows him confronting and accepting a principle of negation and cancellation: unlike the mother, who falls asleep at evening, the father sees right to the end, perhaps even to his own end. The father's "no to no and yes to yes" repeat that rejection of old fictions--such as Christian mythology--and affirmation of reality that one finds in "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard" (1941) and "Esthétique du Mal" viii (1944):

After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends.
No was the night. Yes is this present sun. (CP 247)

The mortal no
Has its emptiness and tragic expirations.
The tragedy, however, may have begun,
Again, in the imagination's new beginning,
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must
Say yes, spoken because under every no
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken. (CP 320)

But the father who "says yes / To no" says farewell to the logic of affirmation found in these earlier works; something has broken "the passion for yes," and the flickering auroras' displacement of "this present sun" has rendered the existence of "the future world" uncertain.41 He accepts a principle of negation and change and, perhaps, a final change, as though, perhaps, he has heard the "farewell" with which the canto opened and now echoes it, in a displaced form, by thus saying "yes / To no." Stevens says farewell even to this farewell.

41 Here I disagree with Joseph Carroll, who notes that "in the first two stanzas of the canto, [Stevens] sums up the dialectic of yes and no that has been expounded in Parts of a World, Transport to Summer, and 'The Owl in the Sarcophagus'" (244, my emphasis). Carroll discusses this dialectic on pp. 132-42 of Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction.
Thus, Stevens' elegy for the father's visionary powers, for his capacity to live on after each cancelling, nevertheless contains the kinds of elegiac silences which characterized cantos ii and iii, silences which Stevens thematizes at the end of the canto. The penultimate stanza of canto iv makes an abrupt shift in tone and poetic mode: the cry of "Master O master" moves us from visionary confidence to elegiac urgency and apocalyptic fear:

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

Profound, and yet the king and yet the crown.
Look at this present throne. What company,
In masks, can choir it with the naked wind? (CP 414-15)

Stevens' emphasis on perception throughout "Auroras" iv heightens the irony of his final injunction to the father to "Look at this present throne": this seer has failed to see or foresee something. But this passage also undertakes a shift from a predominantly visual and visionary rhetoric to a vocal and aural one. Troping the auroras as "this present throne," Stevens reveals to the seated father a higher power than his own, a power which calls into question his capacity to speak. In this question Stevens figures the difference between the father's visionary mode and the apocalyptic mode of the auroras as the difference between silence and speech: the "naked wind" can "choir" this present throne of the auroras, but the father's "company, / In masks," the players in his "Theatre / Of Trope" (CP 397) cannot. The father's yes's and no's are emptied into silence by "this present throne." Stevens' rhetorical question leads, of course, to a silent answer which is written into the question itself, a silence that tells us that no company of maskers can
"choir it with the naked wind." Is the father's visionary, creative power now to be elided, consigned to the silence of irretrievable loss which emerged after the canto's initial "Farewell"? Stevens' elegy and the father's visionary flights are alike silenced in the face of the auroras, and the question leaves the poem suspended at an impasse.

Another silence is buried beneath the words of canto v, however: the auroras and the apocalyptic fears they aroused are now thoroughly silenced; their absence is not even marked by the return of the ellipses that introduced the silences of cantos ii-iv. And yet canto v presents a paradoxical effort to prevent the irruption of such silence. Stevens gives consistent emphasis to the aural dimension of the father's entertainments: there are "tellers of tales" (CP 415), musicians who make "insidious tones" when "Clawing the sing-song of their instruments" (CP 415), childish laughter and jangling, sounds of a "barbarous tongue," "slavered and panting halves // Of breath" (CP 415) shaped into musical tones through the father's trumpet—all summed up as the "tumult of a festival" and finally dismissed as a "loud, disordered mooch" (CP 415). If canto iv ended by troping the relationship between the father's poetic abilities and the choiring of the boreal winds as the difference between silence and speech (or song), canto v ironically fulfills and undermines that figuration: the father does not speak of the auroras, but their silent presence, their absent presence, empties his creative efforts into a mere hollow display. By the end of the canto, his pageants are reduced to a meaningless, percussive "a-dub, a-dub" (CP 416), a tragedy in which "there are no lines to speak" (CP 416).

Clearly, Stevens' tone in this canto suggests at the very least a certain uneasiness with the father's performance; in fact, I would suggest that here, to borrow the terms used
by David Shaw in his discussion of elegy and apocalypse, that the final question of canto iv has led not to a breakthrough but to a breakdown--into self-parody. Thus, while the canto's first stanza suggests that there may still be some life in the old fictions--they have survived the breaks between cantos, in spite of Stevens' farewells--their return is also marked by a loss in imaginative efficacy, a withdrawal or withholding of belief on Stevens' part, particularly in relation to the father. Canto v presents a thoroughly domesticated version of the father, who has abandoned his sublime questing and turned to the creation of more commonplace and worldly spectacles. Reading the poem as self-parody means, of course, identifying the father in some way with Stevens himself. This reading contradicts that of Bloom, for whom the father of this canto is Stevens' own father, and the "unherded herds" the amateur poet's works (Climate 268); but it might be useful to remember that Stevens himself was a father, and in particular a father who, as his letters reveal, was rather fond of "fetching" exotic and entertaining gifts, both for

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42 Shaw titles this section of his fifth chapter "Breakdown or Breakthrough? From Elegy to Apocalypse." Other critics of "The Auroras of Autumn" have certainly noted a major shift in tone between cantos iv and v. Berger, for instance, writes that in this canto "nostalgia soon turns to disgust . . ." (55). Vendler provides the most severe assessment: "The autumnal wind has blown pretenses away, and the creator-father becomes, in consequence, the object of contempt, the 'fetcher' of negresses and clawing musicians and slavering herds, the hospitalier of a disorderly riot" (Extended Wings 259). Even critics such as Bloom and Leggett, who take exception to these accounts of the poem, note a significant difference between cantos iv and v; Bloom, for example, describes it as "a total undoing of the father's optimism and of the son's poetry" (Climate 268). Leggett finds Vendler and Bloom "too strong in their condemnation of the father, and they ignore the inevitable direction of the poem's initial five cantos, in which the opening image of form gulping after formlessness is traced progressively through the realms of matter, mind or feeling, and, finally, art" (Poetic Theory 182). But Leggett's reading does not account for the very different tone of canto v.
himself and his family, at all times of the year, though most particularly as part of the Stevens household's Christmas festivities. Thus, in this canto, Stevens seems at least in part to be directing his "energy of repudiation" (Vendler, Extended Wings 248) against his own propensity for a certain sort of domestic magic and festivity. But more important. Stevens also engages in poetic self-parody in this canto, and in particular takes on that more celebratory, festive mode of utterance that emerges in canto xi of "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" (1942), the "jovial hullabaloo" (CP 59) of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (1922), the fireworks watched by "children there like wicks" (CP 346) in "Two Tales of Liadoff" (1945), the public, heroic mode of "Gigantomachia" (1943) or "Chocorua to Its Neighbour" (1943), or some parts of "A Primitive Like an

43 Stevens' obvious pleasure in arranging such fetchings emerges in a letter to Rosamund Bates Cary, dated May 6, 1935:

I thought it might be amusing to send you a little money, and ask you to make up a box of things that you thought that Holly might like and send it to her, so that she would have the thrill of receiving a box from Japan. (LWS 281)

On December 27 of the same year, Stevens reported to Mrs. Cary that Holly "very distinctly appreciates the delicacy of the little dolls sent by you, and their silk dresses" (LWS 304) and that she "is frightfully steamed up about the doll festival. She very much wants you to buy a set of the classical figures of which you write" (LWS 304). The following letter to Leonard van Geyzel, Stevens' correspondent in Ceylon, dated September 14, 1937, provides some further detail:

For my daughter there should be a considerable number of little things: not toys, because she has outgrown toys. There might be one or two small carved figures; in her case, too, a necklace might do very well. I am sure that she would be interested in having some colored postcards; if there are any strange things to eat that would pack and carry well, she would be glad to have them. But what would go over best with her would be a miscellany . . . . (LWS 324)
Orb" (1948) (stanza xi in particular, with its "whirroos / And scintillant sizzlings such as children like" [CP 442]). Stevens, in this canto, seems intent on raising the backdrop and exposing his own stage mechanics. We see the scene being made, put together by the father, now a Prospero-like figure who does not abjure his art, nor recognize that both his "pageants out of air" (CP 415) and "the great globe itself, / Yea, all which it inherit. shall dissolve, / And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, / Leave not a rack behind" (The Tempest IV i 153-56).

The stylistic disjunction between self-elegy and self-parody may seem enormous, but some of Berger's comments on self-elegy and self-disparagement in his chapter on Stevens' last lyrics suggest that the two modes may indeed overlap:

Sometimes this involves turning against the completed forms of art belonging to one's own past (especially the appearance of a Collected Poems) in a revisionary movement similar to the retractio. Disparaging what has already been fashioned clears ground for new work . . . . (146)

Stevens keeps himself going in canto v by disparaging an aspect of his earlier poetry, or an earlier poetic self. In some ways this mode is appropriate to the poem's concern with questions of form in a world in which no form is stable, as embodied in the shape-changing serpent of the first canto. Parody uses established forms while at the same time undermining them, never allowing the reader to invest fully in the disparaged idiom. It takes on a specific form in order to indicate its desire to slough of that very form; it is an always doubled and contradictory mode.44

44 Here, Linda Hutcheon's comments on parody in postmodern literature seem relevant: parody tends to "use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention" (23).
Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that "The Auroras of Autumn" unfolds along a disjunction between elegy and apocalypse, and I have emphasized, in my readings of cantos ii to v, the way in which this disjunction has led to an impasse that leaves both elegy and apocalypse silent. The moment at which Stevens silences the auroras is also the moment at which his self-elegiac movement breaks down into self-parody. If the poem has been concerned to a large extent with the loss of old fictions, it seems at this point to hold out little hope for a new fiction which might make good these losses and all the other losses which it has registered. Stevens' apocalyptic interruptions have not offered any sort of compensation, but have only enlarged the sense of loss. The poem thus far has dealt with a moment in which elegy and apocalypse are held together in a tense disjunction, moving from one to the other without completing the pattern of loss and recompense in which the two are traditionally involved. In cantos vi to x, Stevens turns from the division between elegiac retrospection and apocalypse which has marked the poem and develops the apocalyptic mode more fully, but all the while turning away from the idea of an end which provides fulfilment, or which recoups all losses.

If Stevens has, since canto i, limited the auroras to brief outbursts at the conclusion of his three self-elegiac cantos, and if canto v's self-parodic mode silenced the auroras altogether, canto vi, in contrast, allows the auroras to sweep through it as though finally given the "magnificent space" (CP 416) they so like:

It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
And mountains running like water, wave on wave,

Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed
To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
A season changes color to no end,

Except the lavishing of itself in change,
As light changes yellow into gold and gold
To its opal elements and fire's delight.

Splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence
And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space.
The cloud drifts idly through half-thought-of forms. (CP 416)

And yet the auroras remain strangely elusive throughout this passage. Stevens' figuration of the auroras opens into a near-abyss of metaphor, since the whole sequence depends on a single, unidentified antecedent, an "it" which itself demands, but is not given, a further antecedent, as though any essence or literal referent underlying this shifting figuration eluded language. The variety of critical responses to this "it"—it refers to the auroras, or the force behind the auroras, or the world itself, or something radically unidentifiable—attests to this effect. Certainly, Stevens' refusal to name names here induces a certain uneasiness for any reading that identifies this "it" as the auroras, though his refusal may be appropriate to the auroras' elusiveness; they are, in fact, never named "properly" within the bounds of the poem, and even the work's title gives only one half of the proper term "aurora borealis." In Stevens' extraordinary procession of embedded metaphors, nothing

45 For Jarraway, this passage concerns "a nameless 'nothing' that eludes all determination" (242); Leggett identifies the first "it" with the auroras, but cannot be so sure about the remaining "it"s in the passage cited above (Poetic Theory 183); and Berger wavers between "the auroras or the globe of the earth" (56).
remains itself for long. The constantly shifting language creates the impression that the unnamed auroras inhere not in any single item in the metaphoric sequence, but rather in the silent crossing of boundaries between elements in the series. They remain both inside and outside the poem at one and the same time: unnamed, and yet present everywhere.

At the same time, the auroras overflow the boundaries of our fictions, and particularly our teleological narratives of history, Christian and other. Many critics have touched upon the theme of teleology in canto vi. Berger's comments on the question of teleology prove as suggestive as they are puzzling; he describes the Stevens of canto vi as a writer moving toward "the sublime perspective, the aerial view." but goes on to note that

Such a view rises above all human pain and sees history as "theatre." The problem, however, is that there is no plot; history, from this height, merely changes "the way / A season changes color to no end." (58)

Berger's association of plotlessness with the "sublime perspective" contradicts the way in which apocalypses, as I have suggested in Chapter One, rely upon the assumption of just such a point of view for their visions of the plot of history. Even in ordinary historiography, plot and pattern emerge from the flux of events only when the past is viewed from the more "comprehensive" and "distant" vantage of the present. Stevens does adopt, or imagine, the "sublime perspective" on history here, the god-like point of view expressed in the opening lines of the canto:

Joseph Carroll, reading the passage in relation to In Memoriam 123, writes that "the central issue for [Stevens], as for Tennyson, is whether the world contains a teleological principle that would give shape and meaning to the spectacle of phenomenal change" (250). For Jarraway, "There is, consequently, no fixed or determinable teleology at back of change, save for the 'misted rock' of change itself" (242). For Vendler's and Bloom's views on this issue, see fn. 13 on p. 175 above.
view from which all history may be resolved into a single plot. but instead of discovering any teleological plot in history, he finds only a chaotic series of events:

The theatre is filled with flying birds.
Wild wedges, as of a volcano's smoke, palm-eyed
And vanishing, a web in a corridor

Or massive portico. A capitol.
It may be, is emerging or has just
Collapsed. The denouement has to be postponed . . . (CP 416)

This moment marks a point of particular tension in Stevens' engagement with the discourse of the end: the auroras now seem to speak of endless, purposeless change—a major theme throughout Stevens' oeuvre—and yet have also brought Stevens forebodings of an end to such change. This tension registers the challenge posed by the auroras to our attempts to find definitive patterns in history. If the auroras, in changing "the way / A season changes color to no end." force Stevens to postpone any denouement, it is because they remain beyond all plots; they overflow all our myths of beginnings and ends, our traditional, linear narrative structures, and resist any sort of "containment." In this sense, the characteristically Stevensian non-narrative structure of this sequence proves entirely appropriate to Stevens' aims. The auroras signal an end to the fiction of an orderly progression from start to finish, and particularly to the fiction of an end to history which was established as a telos before the beginning. Stevens thus continues to adjust his earlier statement that "there is no play," suggesting instead that while there is (a) play, he cannot determine its meaning; he can no longer decide whether "A capitol / . . . is emerging or has just / Collapsed. The denouement has to be postponed . . ." Stevens' ellipsis proves especially telling here; it signals an incompletion which provides the only
appropriate (non)completion to this sentence; it silently speaks of the impossibility of speaking with certainty of the end. Is this the beginning or the end of the plot?

   Stevens' strange figure of palm-eyed birds and volcanic smoke\(^{47}\) rather oddly conflates figures of autumnal change and a classical topos of sublime terror, foreshadowing, perhaps, the crucial crossing which occurs in the last two stanzas of this canto:

   This is nothing until in a single man contained,
   Nothing until this named thing nameless is
   And is destroyed. He opens the door of his house

   On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
   An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
   Of everything he is. And he feels afraid. (CP 416-17)

Most critics have implicitly or explicitly associated the first sentence cited above with the logic of abstraction outlined in Notes I i; the auroras must become a nameless rather than a named thing (which is also "nothing"), just as "Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named" (CP 381).\(^{48}\) These readings generally suggest that the final

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\(^{47}\) Critics tend to emphasize the difficulty of this passage; Bloom, for example, calls it "the most unrealistic [passage] in all of Stevens" (Climate 270), and Vendler writes of "The surrealism of the birds, dehumanized into wedges" that forms "the poet's terrified response as he feels himself momentarily caught up into the metamorphoses of the lights . . . " (Extended Wings 262). Berger is more down to earth, noting that "Stevens' birds are responding to the coming of winter . . . " (59). "Wild wedges" certainly refers to the V-formation adopted by wild geese and other migrating birds ("wedge," OED), and there is nothing surrealistic about such a sight in an autumn sky.

\(^{48}\) Cf. Bloom, Climate 270-72, Carroll 251, La Guardia 135, and Vendler, Extended Wings 263. Berger links this passage to "the process of internalization" that "will be expounded fully in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'" xxii (60).
moment of fear marks the failure of this attempted abstraction or internalization; but the passage, I believe, describes not so much the failure of the "scholar of one candle" to contain the auroras, as the terror attendant upon such interiorization. In a sense, it is an act of containment in which the container ironically loses all emotional "containment" or restraint; he is anything but a "single man contained." unless at the same time contained by the auroras which yet surround him. Stevens subtly marks the crossing from outside to inside throughout this passage. His phonic play on "f" and "r" sounds--"Arctic effulgence," "flaring," "frame," "afraid"--delicately links the external phenomenon with the scholar's psychological state as the sounds echo from sky to scholar, outside to inside. The fearful scholar of canto vi also contrasts the more detached "man who is walking" of canto ii, who merely "observes how the north is always enlarging the change" (my emphasis). Canto iii. which develops the figure of the house more fully, appears to maintain the separation of inside and outside: "The windows will be lighted, not the rooms," and the wind will "knock like a rifle-but against the door" (my emphasis).

49 Bloom, for example, writes that "this time [Stevens] is not able to cry triumphantly. 'How clean the auroras when seen in their idea.' Instead, having prepared himself for this great battle of the mind against the sky, he opens the door of his house, his entire consciousness, to find that the whole sky is on fire, as the auroras triumphantly quell his challenge and reduce him to fear" (Climate 271). For Carroll, this passage is a moment of collapse which represents "the failure of the poet's effort, announced in canto four, to become pure imagination and thus to achieve apotheosis" (240): "When at the end of canto six he turns again to the 'Arctic effulgence,' he quails before the inhuman force it represents, and in expressing his fear, he tacitly concedes the limitations of his visionary power" (242). Jarraway, reading the poem as a sort of allegory of deconstruction, finds that "the scholar of one candle fails us in his desire to presence the productive absence of 'nothing' in canto VI . . . " (245). Berger, too, finds in it "a quixotic charge against the forces of annihilation" (59).
though I also observed that the poem subtly undermines this distinction. But now Stevens' scholar responds to that knock and opens his door—the door of his consciousness, but also of his house of fiction and of this poem itself—to the auroras. and *feels* their full force. Stevens makes the reader aware of other crossings in these lines: one must cross a break between stanzas and between lines respectively in following the movement from "house" to "On flames," from "sees" to "An Arctic effulgence." And, as I have already suggested, canto vi as a whole seems to have abandoned the effort to restrict the auroras to disjunctive outbursts within an elegiac frame and allowed them to flow over the whole canto. If the poem itself "contains" the auroras, it does so only by figuring them as something which cannot be contained, at least not within the elegiac fictions of the first cantos, which have now vanished.

I would even question the idea that the "named thing" refers exclusively to the auroras, as some critics suggest, or to "the single man" who must "contain" them.50 Does this moment of fear annihilate not just the "name" of the auroras or the capacity to name them, but also the scholar's sense of self? Such doubleness seems entirely appropriate to this crucial moment of crossing in the poem. The auroras are "nothing" until a single man contains this annihilating fear, until they cross from outside to inside and erase both their name and the human observer's in that moment. This moment of unnaming marks a crucial point in the poem's concern with narratives of the end, since in being unnamed the auroras and scholar would both appear to be removed from the realm of discourse and

50 Cf. Berger 59-61; Jarraway 241-42; Carroll 251.
fictions; another silence thus appears in the poem.

In canto vii, Stevens turns to the notion of an author of this elusive fiction, an author who transcends Stevens' own authority:

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops

To imagine winter? When the leaves are dead,
Does it take its place in the north and enfold itself.
Goat-leaper, crystallized and luminous, sitting

In highest night? And do these heavens adorn
And proclaim it, the white creator of black, jetted
By extinguishings, even of planets as may be.

Even of earth, even of sight, in snow.
Except as needed by way of majesty.
In the sky, as crown and diamond cabala? (CP 417)

Eleanor Cook has related this passage to the visions of God's throne-room in Ezekiel 1-2, as well as Revelation 4:6 and 20:11 ("King James" 246. 248), the latter of which presents the Last Judgement. There are other biblical allusions, too, since as Bloom (Climate 273-74) and Vendler (Extended Wings 264) also point out, Stevens echoes Psalm 19 in questioning whether "these heavens adorn / And proclaim" the enthroned imagination.

And Stevens' denomination of the auroras as "diamond cabala" and "mystical cabala" (CP 417) relates it to a Jewish mystical tradition of esoteric cosmogony, theosophy, and eschatology (Ginzberg 3:456-57). Cook reads the canto as an "anti-pastoral or anti-Christian pastoral" (250) in which Stevens replaces the enthroned Lamb of Revelation with a whole range of goatish word-play: goat-leaper, the (possibly false) etymological "goat-song" of tragedy, caprice, the auroras as "les chèvres dansantes," and the
eschatological separation of the sheep and goats of Matt 25:32-33 (247-50). Cook wonders, then, whether the canto "celebrates, not a grim goat but a leaping goat" ("King James" 248); Stevens seeks to "undo the jetted tragedy of goats, their black destiny" (248). I wonder, though, whether Stevens' refusal to separate the goats and the sheep by placing the goat on the throne also makes it impossible to separate the leaping goat from the grim goat, or whether this leaping goat--or rather, this enthroned imagination which leaps like a goat, as Cook points out--has something grim about it:

It leaps through us, through all our heavens leaps.
Extinguishing our planets, one by one,
Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where

We knew each other and of each other thought,
A shivering residue, chilled and foregone,
Except for that crown and mystical cabala. (CP 417)

If Stevens refuses to separate goats from sheep here, one might also wonder if he refuses to separate genres or modes--jetted tragedy and comic flippancy--in the canto's final lines. Critical response to this passage suggests the sort of challenge presented by this move. Vendler, for example, complains that canto vii concludes with "an imposed order, not a discovered one, and Stevens' uneasiness with it is visible in his inference from 'must' to 'can' (Extended Wings 266). Bloom separates tragedy from comic flippancy by assigning the latter to "man as the only maker of meaning" (Climate 276), and describes the poem's conclusion as "an imaginative gesture of a Shelleyan kind, though not a very wholehearted one" (Climate 276). Leggett is critical of Bloom and Vendler (Poetic Theory 186-89), but also diminishes the poem's challenges and the unsettling force of its mixture of tragedy and flippancy by giving tragedy the upper hand. as Carroll
does: "the 'jetted tragedy' of Stevens's cosmic principle is that it dare not leap by chance . . . " (Poetic Theory 186). He later suggests that the auroras only "seem to an observer" (188, my emphasis) to make "a flippant communication." All these readings may be informed not just by the apparent obscurity of these lines, by the difficulty of grasping the significance of the leaping imagination's leap from tragedy to flippancy, but by a certain discomfort with the poem's own mixing of jetted tragedy and comic flippancy, or of the sublime and the ridiculous (if one may use that word without any pejorative connotations)--a mixture which Cook's reading elucidates. The whole canto plays with opposites--grim and benevolent, just and unjust, white and black, summer and winter, comic and tragic--but refuses to separate them. Has apocalypse swept aside elegy only to create or reveal another area of tension? Berger notes that this passage characterizes poetry as "the antithesis of tyranny" (64), but it may also present the tyranny of antithesis.

Stevens' apocalyptic/anti-apocalyptic context places a particular pressure, though, on the word "foregone," which can imply inevitability. Stevens' last two stanzas raise the question of teleology in a characteristically paradoxical fashion: the enthroned imagination "dare not leap by chance in its own dark. / It must change from destiny to slight caprice" (CP 417). Cook ("King James" 248-49) suggests that these lines bespeak the constraints destiny places upon the goat-leaper. Other critics have read this "change from destiny to slight caprice" as an anti-teleological gesture, suggesting that the auroras here "are turned away from destiny's straight path" (Berger 63): in Bloom's words.

51 Carroll writes that "Caprice and flippancy are gestures of self-defense against an ultimately inescapable tragedy" (253).
Stevens' enthroned imagination is "a caprice, and not a destiny; it is an inclination or clinamen to make a change . . . . It is not a necessity at all, moving by laws of its own, but an interplay, an endless decentering of itself" (Climate 275-76). Leggett, in contrast, takes issue with all such readings, and insists on the element of necessity; this imagination is "not lawlessness but an inexplicable law" (Poetic Theory 187). Both readings, however, may miss the passage's complexities and paradoxes. Stevens' "But it dare not leap by chance in its own dark" remains a dark line, since it is difficult to determine the force of the "but" precisely enough. Should we be surprised that the "white creator of black" needs to avoid the very darkness it creates? Or does the "but" point to an apparent contradiction between the random leaping of the goat-leaper and the one restriction placed on this randomness? Oddly enough, the leaping imagination avoids the darkness of tragedy and destiny only by avoiding the operations of chance. The imagination "must change from destiny to slight caprice" (my emphasis); "its jetted tragedy, its stele / And shape and mournful making move to find / What must unmake it and, at last, what can" (CP 418. my emphasis). Stevens presents an operating principle behind the auroras which by necessity avoids the law of necessity, but which "dare not leap by chance in its own dark." Stevens' paradox points toward an unnameable, lawless law which remains beyond the logic of our concepts of chance and destiny. Stevens asks us, as Steven Shaviro

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Carroll, too, finds here "a teleological principle of sentient relation" (255).

Leggett touches upon this issue, but his formulations--"this law operates not by chance" and "they must obey their own law, one of constant flux" (Poetic Theory 188)--do not fully engage with Stevens' paradoxical rhetoric.
suggests, to rethink our notions of fate and destiny, though I would differ here with Shaviro's definition of a "fatefulness" which "inheres not in finality or transcendence but in the impossibility of any conclusion" (227). In "Auroras." Stevens does imagine a conclusion, but one that comes about through a sort of necessary randomness, not as the predetermined end of a perfect plot. "The Auroras of Autumn" makes us ask whether randomness, and a random end, might be necessary or inevitable in a random universe.

Stevens' turn to the question of innocence seems startling after canto vii, though I hope to show that it returns us to the impasse of elegiac consolation which emerged in the poem's first five cantos. Berger has suggested the relevance of innocence to an apocalyptic scene of judgement, and, as I mentioned above, Cook finds Stevens reworking just such a scene in canto vii. Stevens, though, is not concerned with the innocence of individuals (or their lack thereof) but with a more general concept of innocence:

There may be always a time of innocence.
There is never a place. Or if there is no time.
If it is not a thing of time, nor of place.

Existing in the idea of it, alone,
In the sense against calamity, it is not
Less real. For the oldest and coldest philosopher.

There is or may be a time of innocence
As pure principle. Its nature is its end,
That it should be, and yet not be, a thing

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54 "The emergence of innocence as a theme might appear anomalous, but I think that the apocalyptic situation accounts for Stevens' effort to find a place or a time free of guilt" (Berger 64).
That pinches the pity of the pitiful man.
Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue,
Like a book on rising beautiful and true.

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is. (CP 418)

Eleanor Cook relates this search for innocence to the grimness and benevolence, the
justice and injustice, mentioned in canto vii. and turns this question toward the poem's
place in a post-war world ("King James" 246, 248, 250). As Bloom suggests (Climate
277), Stevens also returns to an earlier place of innocence in his poetry, the place in "Like
Decorations" in which he noted that "There is no such thing as innocence in autumn. /
Yet, it may be, innocence is never lost" (CP 157). "Auroras" earlier cantos mourned the
loss of consoling fictions in autumn, and now Stevens proposes a new fiction, a consoling
innocence existing "in the idea of it, alone." "As pure principle." not so much a text or a
fiction as something "like" a fiction, like our beautifully true and untrue books. But
Stevens' language here remains extraordinarily elusive. His line breaks keep innocence
hovering between non-being and being: "If it is not a thing of time, nor of place . . . // it is
not / Less real"; innocence "is like a thing of ether that exists / Almost as predicate."

Between these two statements, Stevens undertakes a more complex play across line and
stanza breaks, suggesting that innocence's "nature is its end, / That it should be, and yet
not be, a thing // That pinches the pity of the pitiful man." Meaning shifts as this sentence
proceeds, and Stevens leaves us wondering whether the final phrase--beginning with "a
thing"--serves as complement, or as an appositional phrase further modifying "it."
Stevens' innocence seems to defy language. It does not exactly exist, but does not not
exist. It hovers in some unnameable state between being and non-being, as though it could emerge not in words but only in the spaces between words, spaces Stevens marks by so deliberately suspending meanings over line and stanza breaks. This suspension makes Stevens' word-play on "ether" especially resonant; he asks us to hear either "ether" or "either" or both. Is judgement again being suspended?

One might wonder if this elusive innocence could satisfy the need for consolation opened in the poem's first half. Should we identify Stevens with "the oldest and coldest philosopher" for whom this elusive innocence exists as a "pure principle"? One might also point to Stevens' later wariness of "pure principles" (OP 137) in "Solitaire under the Oaks" (1955), and also to the "oldest and the warmest heart" (CP 523) of "A Quiet Normal Life" (1952), for whom there was "no fury in transcendent forms" (CP 523). "I am not a philosopher" (OP 275). Stevens wrote in his 1951 essay, "A Collect of Philosophy," a work which, for all its interest in the poetic nature of some philosophical concepts, nevertheless suggests why "the oldest and coldest philosopher" might not be a positive figure for Stevens.\footnote{55} This thinker might sound a little like a Snow Man with a

\footnote{\textit{55} Eleanor Cook notes Stevens' word-play on "Descartes" ("of cards" in the poem [\textit{OP 137}]), and observes that M. Descartes has forgotten "trees and air and indeed the cards themselves (which is to say, himself) as facts rather than as principles" ("Riddles" 228).}

\footnote{\textit{56} Stevens' comments on Leibniz seem instructive:}

\begin{quote}
The concept of this monadic creation seems to be the disappointing production of a poet \textit{manqué}. Leibniz had a poet's manner of thinking but there was something a little too methodical about it . . . . Leibniz was a poet without flash. (\textit{OP 268-69})
\end{quote}
degree. All this raises the question of how we should read the "but" which introduces Stevens' declaration that "innocence" is visible, and visible in the auroras. Does this "but" reject only the notion that this elusive innocence is not visible, or does it turn against that very elusiveness itself, against an innocence that exists only as "pure principle," and only for the oldest and coldest philosopher? Does Stevens displace an innocence that exists only "in the idea of it, alone" with a visible "innocence of the earth"? Here, another extract from "Two or Three Ideas" may point toward an answer:

[The poet] is intent on what he sees and hears and the sense of the certainty of the presences about him is as nothing to the presences themselves. The philosopher's native sphere is only a metaphysical one. The poet's native sphere is the sphere of which du Bellay wrote: "my village . . . my own small house . . ." (OP 277)

Stevens appears, in "Auroras" viii, to turn from a concern with "the sense of the certainty of the presences about him . . . to the presences themselves" (OP 277). This movement resembles that of "Esthétique du Mal" ii, whose unnamed protagonist finds elegiac consolation only when he turns from "His meditation" to discover "a supremacy always /
   Above him" (CP 314).

These considerations, of course, do not resolve the more difficult question of how the auroras are innocent. Stevens seems to transform the very force which robbed him of consolation in the first five cantos into the consolation he has been seeking. Those critics who express dissatisfaction with this passage for its too-easy undoing of the auroras' apocalyptic threat tend to simplify Stevens' concept of innocence, and might be best
answered by observing that Stevens does not so much change the auroras' meaning as redefine "innocence." Some of the canto's more enthusiastic readers reduce its complexity. Leggett, for example, claims that the auroras in canto viii have become "the embodiment of a benevolent force" (Poetic Theory 190-91). Berger, who comes closer to the complexity of Stevens' resolution when he suggests that innocence here resembles Yeats' "murderous innocence," complains that Stevens comes close to "dismissing the poem's prime area of tension" (66) and later abandons this radically ambivalent notion of innocence. Carroll moves in the opposite direction. He proposes first that Stevens achieves a "mythic resolution" as the auroras become "the fulfillment of an inherent good, a teleological principle of sentient relation that organizes phenomenal reality into a meaningful whole" (255), but later notes that "Although [Stevens'] recollection of the transcendental, Romantic sublime cannot effect a complete resolution of his fear, it modulates the harshness of his foreboding..." (257). Bloom, I feel, gives the best sense of this gesture's complexity and duality when he compares the auroras' innocence to "the

57 Vendler, for example, complains that the canto begins "in the arid vein of Description without Place, in a toying with the philosophical mode" (Extended Wings 267). In her view, the poem's crucial turn consists of "gestures of willed assertion" (Extended Wings 266), and the whole canto proves to be "a centaurlike poem, half abstract discussion, half wish-fantasy" (Extended Wings 267). Berger, comparing the discovery of innocence in the auroras to the more cautious "It must be visible or invisible" (CP 385) of Notes I vi, writes that "when it is a question of innocence [Stevens] grows more insistent, if not more convincing..." (65). Leggett, too, is puzzled here, and notes: "Curiously, the existence of innocence is proven by the visible northern lights..." (Poetic Theory 190).

58 "Canto viii ends by pushing the notion of nature's innocence over the line separating it from radical innocence, by invoking the image of the mother playing a lullaby for her children on her accordion" (Berger 68).
innocence of living" of "Esthétique du Mal" x, which shows Stevens "holding the
imagination open to death" (Climate 277). The conflicting responses which Carroll and
Berger assign to different parts of the poem are, I believe, inherent in this single act of
naming. If apocalypses like Revelation move beyond the destruction of the last days to a
realm of final peace, Stevens makes disruption itself into a paradoxical and profoundly
ambivalent form of consolation:

So, then, these lights are not a spell of light,
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.
An innocence of the earth and no false sign

Or symbol of malice. That we partake thereof,
Lie down like children in this holiness.
As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep.

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark
Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,
Created the time and place in which we breathed . . . (CP 418-19)

In Revelation, the catastrophes of the last days occur only in the name of a final
compensation or recouping of all loss, so that this rending is only a moment in a
movement toward wholeness in a perfect plot created by the author-God. The auroras
have spoken instead of an absolute destruction without purpose, which leaves only "a
shivering residue." Stevens' peculiar definition of innocence includes everything that
makes the auroras disruptive, everything that places them outside of our terminal
narratives and myths of a purpose in history—their elusiveness, their apparent absence of
intention or purpose, their necessary randomness. This innocence must include or be
composed of opposites: it is "the white creator of black." Stevens' strategy is not so much
to contain the auroras in a myth of innocence, then, as to suggest that this innocence
contains our world, our selves, our lives and our deaths, and that we may "partake thereof." Paul Endo writes that "Innocence is not capable enough to absorb disaster . . . " (47). But this innocence seems instead to be capable of absorbing everything. Stevens' partaking is deliberately double: both a sacramental taking within ourselves of this innocence, and a participation in the whole which contains our lives and deaths. Thus, while the final stanzas of canto viii adopt a consoling tone and rhetoric in their images of "the innocent mother," the premonitions of destruction nevertheless return in cantos ix and x, so that the reader may well wonder what, if anything, has been resolved. The fact that Stevens allows the mother, unheard since the opening of canto v, to return only within the fictive frame of a repeated "as if," suggests that this return is a willed interpretation of the disruptive innocence of the auroras. In this fiction, the mother of canto iii is no longer subject to time, and becomes the force that "Created the time and place in which we breathed . . . " (CP 419). It is, perhaps, for this reason that the mother's song is only "half-heard."

Stevens' declaration of the auroras' innocence also returns us to the question of the relation between elegy and apocalypse, which Stevens seemed to abandon as his apocalyptic fears came to dominate cantos vi-viii. Cantos ii-v unfolded along a disjunction between elegy and apocalypse which only multiplied Stevens' losses and allowed silence to irrupt in the poem, and eventually broke down into self-parody. The more fully apocalyptic--or anti-apocalyptic--mode of cantos vi through viii has offered no compensation for such losses, no final fulfilment; Stevens' terminal visions have been of an end without purpose, an end which brings no return. By declaring the auroras innocent
in Canto viii, does the poem move beyond this disjunction and make good its losses? The climactic resolution of the poem, I would suggest, does not so much move beyond this disjunction as return us to that very point of loss, since the "innocent" auroras remain the auroras that enjoined the abandonment of fictions in the earlier cantos: the poem does not offer recompense for the losses and silences it registered in its opening sections. This move in itself registers a loss, since it excludes from the poem the promise of final recompense envisioned in apocalypse. The poem thus may seem to complete the consolatory movement of an elegy, and yet it does so only to have the disruptive force of the auroras explode that pattern at the very moment in which it is completed.

The ellipsis between cantos viii and ix seems, at first, to have precisely the opposite effect of the ellipses of cantos ii through iv; rather than bringing silence and loss into the poem, it connects the two cantos in a gesture toward structural wholeness and continuity. Stevens instructs us to "Lie down" as if

    the innocent mother sang in the dark
    Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard.
    Created the time and place in which we breathed . . .

IX

And of each other thought—in the idiom
Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth,
Not of the enigma of the guilty dream. (CP 419)

Berger writes that "The ellipsis between cantos viii and ix is the most natural in the poem, a true gliding connection with little hint of disjunction" (69), though it is unclear why an ellipsis that indicates connection should be somehow more "natural" than one that indicates silence, loss, the drifting of thought. Certainly, Stevens' crossing of the gap
between cantos suggests a certain imaginative confidence, a desire for expansion beyond the limits imposed by his chosen form, an overcoming, perhaps, of the disjunctive tendency of much of this poem in an assertion of structural continuity. This gesture is thematically significant, too, since it draws the cantos together in a concern with community and social continuity, as evinced by the "hale-hearted landsmen" who "fed on being brothers." "knew each other well." and "of each other thought" (CP 419). Stevens also rescues these last two phrases from canto vii: there, the place "where we knew each other and of each other thought" had been reduced to "a shivering residue, chilled and foregone." It seems now that a redeemed earth has risen from the destructive flames of canto vii, or at least a renewed vision of earth, if not the new heaven and earth of Revelation. And yet, without the ellipsis between cantos viii and ix--in fact without any punctuation--the passage extending from "That we partake thereof" (canto viii line 19) to "the guilty dream" (canto ix line 3) would remain grammatically correct, and would cross the break between cantos with even greater confidence. Here, it may be worth noting that while Stevens rarely crosses between numbered stanzas or cantos in this manner, such moments are nowhere else marked by an ellipsis. In fact, when Stevens uses ellipsis between cantos or numbered stanzas, as in "Farewell to Florida" (stanzas ii-iii), "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (cantos iii-iv, xiii-xiv, and xx-xxi), or "A Primitive Like an Orb" (stanzas iii-iv), he does so to heighten the disjunction between sections, rather than to

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59 According to Carroll, this ellipsis "subsum[es] the opening stanzas of the canto within the vision of the innocent mother" (255).
connect them. Contrary, then, to Berger's reading, this ellipsis seems to work against the poem's movement toward a vision of wholeness and community; it introduces a moment of hesitation, uncertainty, indecision, and disjunction at the very moment at which the poem expands to its most confident vision of community and makes its strongest gesture toward structural continuity. It suggests, perhaps, the fragility of Stevens' fiction of "the innocent mother," introducing a silence, a gap, at the very heart of that vision, as though that vision itself elided some other knowledge. It reflects, perhaps, Stevens' doubts about developing so positive an account of that ambivalent and dangerous innocence which has been at the centre of so many of the poem's tensions.

Similar tensions determine the whole form of canto ix, which shifts back and forth between memories of familial security and premonitions of impending disaster. Stevens dismisses his vision of hale-hearted landmanship with a disjunctive line--"This drama that we live--We lay sticky with sleep." Of course, a more radical tension emerges with Stevens' dismissal of this vision in the abruptly disjunctive poetry at the middle of the canto:

This drama that we live--We lay sticky with sleep.
This sense of the activity of fate--

The rendezvous, when she came alone,
By her coming became a freedom of the two.
An isolation which only the two could share. (CP 419)

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60 When Stevens crosses between numbered stanzas, as he does in "Chocorua to its Neighbour" (stanzas v-vi, x-xi, xvi-xvii, xvii-xviii, xx-xxi, and xxii-xxiii) or "A Primitive Like an Orb" (stanzas iv-v, v-vi, vii-viii, and viii-ix), he does nothing to disrupt what might ordinarily be the punctuation of each sentence. The act of crossing is more forceful when it occurs between cantos.
In this passage, Stevens may, as Bloom suggests (Climate 278), commemorate an incident from his own life, but he also remembers a "Re-statement of Romance" (1935), which sets a similar sense of isolation against the backdrop of the night sky. That poem's lovers--be they Wallace and Elsie or Wallace and his "internal paramour"--are

So much alone, so deeply by ourselves.
So far beyond the casual solitudes,

That night is only the background of our selves.
Supremely true each to its separate self,
In the pale light that each upon the other throws. (CP 146)

In the "Auroras," such experiences of autonomy take place only against the background of fate. Most critics have noted the tension between fate and freedom in the passage from "Auroras," but have tended to subsume the former within the latter. "The visionary fulfillment Stevens celebrates as 'a freedom of the two' is part of 'the activity of fate'" (256). For Doggett and Emerson, the unnamed woman "is the anima which awakens each brother to his own individuation and she is his fate . . . " (64).

61 Carroll writes that "The visionary fulfillment Stevens celebrates as 'a freedom of the two' is part of 'the activity of fate'" (256). For Doggett and Emerson, the unnamed woman "is the anima which awakens each brother to his own individuation and she is his fate . . . " (64).

62 "No portion of 'Auroras' is more daring in its sharp transitions than the middle section of canto ix. Beginning with 'This drama that we live,' Stevens switches frames of reference as abruptly as he will do anywhere in his poetry" (Berger 70).
of the activity of fate" and the reality and intensity of his experience of an earlier freedom, a freedom which appears isolated from "the activity of fate." Perhaps the very capacity for such an experience to survive in the form of memory, to persist in a universe of constant change, offers some sort of escape from fate. Stevens may continue his refashioning of fate here, asking us to conceive of a fate which can tolerate such apparently spontaneous ruptures with itself, or which is composed of such breaks, as though the freedom of a random universe were a kind of fate.

The conclusion of canto IX provides the mostly sharply etched apocalyptic moment of the entire poem, and yet rather than moving beyond the intersection of seasonal change and apocalyptic intimations which dominated the first half of the poem, it returns to canto ii's moment of two-fold crossing between seasons and genres:

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

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

It may come tomorrow in the simplest word,  
Almost as part of innocence, almost,  
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part. (CP 419-20)

Rather than seeing an enlargement of seasonal change in the auroras, Stevens now understands the former as the "imminence" of some unnamed or unnameable "disaster." an ill-starred event. But if this figure suggests that the end is approaching, Stevens' language--"The stars are putting on their glittering belts," donning "cloaks that flash / Like a great shadow's last embellishment"--moves against the notion of any sort of final
uncovering. Here, one might contrast the donning of glittering belts with Nanzia Nunzio's removal of "her stone-studded belt" (CP 395), stripping herself "more nakedly / Than nakedness" (CP 396). On an autumn evening, such uncovering is not even attempted: Stevens speaks only of covering and cloaking.

The earlier portions of this chapter said a great deal about silence in cantos ii-vi. but it has been notably silent itself on that subject throughout its analyses of cantos vii-viii. My readings of the latter portions have been dominated by attention to Stevens' transformation of the aurora borealis into an apocalyptic omen, and to his simultaneous attempt to put an end to the discourse of the end and to the idea of the end as a fulfilment ordained from the beginning. Stevens' project, as I have suggested throughout this dissertation, is a paradoxical, and perhaps impossible one. In the remaining pages, I wish to explore the kind of formal closure Stevens moves toward in his last canto, and hope to show that the poem is haunted by the kind of ends it seeks to avoid.

The last canto begins with a paradoxical gesture towards wholeness and completion, a search for an aphorism that can sum up this disjunctive and divided poem:

An unhappy people in a happy world--
Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference.
An unhappy people in an unhappy world--

Here are too many mirrors for misery.
A happy people in an unhappy world--
It cannot be. There's nothing there to roll

On the expressive tongue, the finding fang.
A happy people in a happy world--
Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar.

Turn back to where we were when we began:
An unhappy people in a happy world.
Now, solemnize the secretive syllables. (CP 420)

Stevens' logic seems in keeping with the complexity of the poem he is attempting to bring to such a summation. Yet his decision to "Turn back to where we were when we began" proves richly suggestive. It speaks not just of return to the first aphorism proposed at the canto's beginning, nor only of a return to the entire poem's opening, in which he speculated on a "master of the maze . . . / Relentlessly in possession of happiness": it tells also of a return to human origins and the beginning of human history. But for Stevens, this circle of return differs from the closure of the apocalyptic plot; it does not return us to the lost innocence of a "hushful paradise" (CP 421) of "a happy people in a happy world," but rather leaves us in an already fallen world, a world we were always in and never left, a world characterized by the difference and disjunction between "an unhappy people" and "a happy world." The "full of fortune and the full of fate" (CP 420) thus remain limited to this earthly and finite circuit. The only return, for Stevens, is to a place of division and difference, not wholeness and completion, a fact indicated by Stevens' multiple disjunctiveness here: he interrupts his proposed aphorisms with dismissive comments, and the aphorisms are themselves mutually incompatible.

The impossibility of moving beyond this difference haunts "Auroras" even as the poem moves toward that more inclusive point of view which Berger, in his discussion of canto iv, described as a "sublime perspective":

Read to the congregation, for today
And for tomorrow, this extremity,
This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres,
Contriving balance to contrive a whole.
The vital, the never-failing genius,
Fulfilling his meditations, great and small.

In these unhappy he meditates a whole,
The full of fortune and the full of fate,
As if he lived all lives, that he might know.

In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,
To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick. (CP 420-21)

Stevens' rhetoric of completion—extremity, spheres, balance, whole, fulfilling, full—all—accumulates as the poem approaches its conclusion; we have arrived at "this extremity." an end-point. "This extremity" also may refer to the whole poem, a poem of extremes. "An extreme measure" in response to this terminal situation ("extremity," OED), and also a poem of last things. In thus describing itself as it approaches its conclusion, the poem turns back on itself like an ouroboros in an attempt to contain itself; it emulates, perhaps, the circular closure that might be contrived by "the spectre of the spheres." And the poem does show other signs of having come full circle; the echoes of its first cantos recall the serpent's hypothetical and relentless "possession of happiness" and "His meditations in the ferns," as well as canto ii's "accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise." Does Stevens also fulfil his own meditations, great and small? Or is there something a bit contrived about this "contrivance of the spectre of the spheres"? Carroll suggests that the double meaning of "of" in Stevens' phrase, "This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres," creates "a closed transcendent structure" (259); but while it may describe

63 "The 'spectre of the spheres,' essential imagination, is at once the object that is contrived and the source of this contrivance" (259).
such a structure, it creates one which does not settle into a single meaning on this crucial point. In fact, the paradox of self-reference would leave such a structure terminally open. Is Stevens exposing his own stage mechanics here, deflating his poem's most extravagant figure? His metaphor of the spectre "Contriving balance to contrive a whole" might also be read as a somewhat suspicious economic metaphor, a motif which also appears in the "haggling of wind and weather" of the penultimate line. If we are still haggling, the deal is not complete, the bargain not struck, the balance still lacking. Stevens thus subtly undercuts his final movement towards wholeness. As Bloom notes, the poem "concludes by returning us to the wind and to the flaring auroras that we now see have never been absent from the poem" (Climate 279); but for all the sense of completion provided by this return--Bloom even suggests that Stevens creates a sense of continuity that had earlier been lacking--Stevens returns to a world in which there is no sense of completion, only the oddly intransitive knowing of a spectre of the spheres, a process without any goal in sight.64 The poem's final image of "a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick" returns it one last time to the moment of seasonal change, balanced now between an ordinary bonfire and an apocalyptic conflagration.

Clearly, Barbara Herrnstein Smith's comments on the anti-closural closure appropriate to the "anti-teleological character of contemporary art" (Poetic Closure 239) are relevant to the kind of closure Stevens achieves in "The Auroras of Autumn." She notes, for example, that in twentieth-century poetry "the only resolution may be in the

64 Both Bloom (Climate 279-80) and Berger (78-80) discuss this use of the verb.
affirmation of irresolution, and conclusiveness may be seen as not only less honest but
less stable than inconclusiveness" (241). Such paradoxes come to the fore in a poem like
"The Auroras of Autumn," which takes the teleological element out of its concern with
last things. As in "Lebensweisheitspielerei." Stevens' vision of an arbitrary end proves to
be the only kind of end possible "In a world forever without a plan / For itself as a
world," a world governed by the leaping of an enthroned imagination. This anti-closural
tendency, though, is enriched and complicated by "Auroras"' development along that fault
line between elegy and apocalypse. The poem itself achieves formal closure not by
resolving the disjunction between the two, but by remaining faithful to the impossibility
of overcoming that disjunction, the impossibility of fulfilling the elegiac desire for
consolation by moving beyond the existing order--or disorder--of things. Here, I wish to
return to Patricia Parker's distinction between the twilight world of elegy and the morning
of apocalyptic revelation. Stevens, in refusing to move beyond the disjunction between
elegy and apocalypse, may end by making this disjunction itself a place of revelation. He
reveals this world of twilight and flickering lights as a world final in itself.
Conclusion

I began this dissertation with a series of epigraphs which spoke of a complex of relations between the end, or at least belief in "the End," and the meaning or pattern of the whole; it may thus seem appropriate not only to return to this beginning at the end of my project, but also to sum up all that has been written between that beginning and this end. But since I have also been concerned with the ways in which Stevens works against this very set of relations, and against the idea of terminal summations, such a viewpoint might appear inappropriate, or even self-contradictory. Is it possible to provide a summarium in excelsis of the opposition to summation? Here, the words from Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* which I cited in my first chapter seem even more relevant than they did at the outset: Ricoeur writes that "the search for concordance is part of the unavoidable assumptions of discourse and of communication. Either discourse or violence . . ." (2:28). Stevens, of course, gives us discourse and not violence, and it is difficult to imagine a body of work which could not become part of any critical effort toward such concordance--in fact Ricoeur's comments declare such a situation to be impossible. And if apocalypse is one of our most basic discourses of concordance, as Frank Kermode suggests throughout *The Sense of an Ending*, it should not be surprising that this tendency towards concordance returns even in Stevens' anti-apocalyptic poetry, and in a critical account of that poetry.

These last points, I hope, have been demonstrated in the body of this dissertation, and I wish to return briefly to a few of these issues in order to turn them in a new
direction. There is some risk that the details of Stevens' engagement with the discourse of the end, the particular nuances and subtleties which are so vital to his poetry, might be lost in the effort to resolve his "intricate Alps" into "a single nest" (CP 216). But I wish to end by making my own gesture towards wholeness and continuity. This dissertation has dealt with two different stances toward apocalypse in Stevens's poetry: the one found in the war poems considered in the second chapter, which turn against the very idea of the end, but which also embrace a rhetoric of new beginnings; and the one adopted in those autumnal post-war poems, which turn towards the idea of an end not just of the individual life but of all life. It seems appropriate to ask how, if at all, this disjunction may be bridged; and in answer, I wish to return to that question of disjunction which has appeared in different forms throughout this study, and which unites Stevens' two different stances toward the end.

In my second chapter, I argued that Stevens' opposition to apocalyptic rhetoric, his anti-apocalyptic strategy, did not depend on a straightforward assertion of continuity in the face of apocalyptic fears, but involved a desire to break with the past, and inaugurate a new age, an anti-apocalyptic age. As I suggested in Chapter One, this rhetoric also has a place in apocalypse, and I was concerned in Chapter Two with showing the ways in which Stevens' desire to break with the place of final fulfilment in this discourse could not escape certain aspects of apocalyptic language. Stevens might appear to be caught in a sort of double double bind, putting an end to the end, and replacing apocalypse's new beginning with a new kind of beginning. Perhaps Stevens' strongest assertion of continuity resides not in any individual statement of a desire for
continuity, but in the mere fact that this rhetoric of the new beginning, of the end of the old era of the End, recurs so often throughout his poetry. Stevens' poetry of the war years demonstrates considerable continuity with the anti-teleological stance of *Owl's Clover* and in particular with that poem's final desire to make "a gesture spent / In the gesture's whim" (*OP* 101), a desire to live in a time "without past / And without future, a present time" (*OP* 101). The echo of this last phrase in "Martial Cadenza"—Stevens writes of a present "apart from any past, apart / From any future" (*CP* 238)—bespeaks Stevens' own sense of continuity, in spite of the war and its disruption of both inner and outer peace, with a previous poetic self.

One more paradox emerges from the three poems of war discussed in the main part of my second chapter: the increasing disjunctiveness of Stevens' poetry as it becomes more concerned with the relations between past, present and future. "Girl in a Nightgown" and "Contrary Theses (I)" register the psychological disruptiveness of war without attempting to close off that disruption, without attempting to assert a sense of wholeness or continuity in the face of catastrophic violence. Both poems place us in a present which speaks of a break with the past, with the world that existed "before, before," and the earlier poem's echoes of biblical eschatology give its fears a particularly apocalyptic dimension. "Martial Cadenza" and "Dutch Graves" both turn against the psychological disruption registered in these poems, and speak of a desire for continuity, for more time; and yet the disjunctive techniques used in the earlier poems—dashes that interrupt the poem's movement or move it forward by a process of interruption, and refrains of the past that interrupt the movement of the poem—these techniques are, if
anything, intensified in the two later works. But it might also be possible to figure the relationship between these two pairs of poems in terms of a change in Stevens' stance toward the kind of disruptiveness which appears in the first two. "Girl in Nightgown" in particular might be seen to adopt a largely passive stance toward the apocalyptic fears aroused by war or the threat of war; "Martial Cadenza" and "Dutch Graves" in contrast seem determined to turn disruptiveness against itself and to build a new sense of continuity out of that moment. This change in stance emerges most clearly, perhaps, through Stevens' use of the dash in the later poems; there, instead of merely disturbing the peacefulness of the present with thoughts of war, the dash marks the desired return to and of the freedom of the present, a present which breaks with the past. If, in "Girl in Nightgown," the dash marked the return of a loss, in the later poems Stevens appears determined to turn a profit on its return.

In my fourth chapter, though, I considered another sort of disjunction, namely, the disjunction between elegy and apocalypse which works throughout "The Auroras of Autumn" to keep that poem terminally open. That tension, I feel, is crucial to Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance, and indicates one of his differences from the apocalyptic tradition. I suggested, both in my first and fourth chapters, that apocalypse is borne of a desire to do away with the existing order of things, to find fulfilment or recompense for all past losses by making a break with that past and inaugurating a new and radically different realm under the rule of God and or the Messiah. As Gershom Scholem has noted, the fate deserved by history, according to the apocalyptists, "can only be to perish" (10); I also discussed Patricia Parker's sense of the apocalyptic desire to arrive at the end.
or at knowledge of the end, before its time. This tendency seems profoundly at odds with
the retrospective aspect of elegy, which is intensified by the absence of heavenly
consolation in Stevens' versions of the genre, and with the work of mourning itself: one
does not mourn or memorialize that which one wishes only to perish. The fact that
Stevens' most apocalyptic poem also is one of his most deeply and movingly elegiac
works indicates the tensions between these two genres in his poetry, and in particular the
ways in which the elegiac mode undoes the apocalyptic, or at the very least refashions
apocalypse in quite radical ways. The desire for more time, the desire to stay in this
world, for more of the existing order of things--this desire which was marked by the
disjunctive dashes of "Martial Cadenza" and "Dutch Graves," may appear in "Auroras" as
the disjunction between apocalypse and elegy, in the retrospective turn to mourn the
world whose end seems to be announced in the ominous lights of the auroras. This
tendency turns Stevens' apocalyptic fears back to a concern with this world, not another
world, back to this place "where we were and looked . . . where // We knew each other
and of each other thought."

But if it is possible to read this disjunction between elegy and apocalypse in "The
Auroras of Autumn" as another version--or perhaps a displacement--of the different
disjunctions discussed in chapters Two and Three, it may also prove possible to turn the
question of genre back upon those poems. To what extent has Stevens' anti-apocalyptic
stance informed, or been informed by, a similar series of disjunctions or tensions between
different genres? One might consider the way in which "Martial Cadenza," for example,
sets the topoi of war poetry against the erotic force of the returning evening star, and the
way in which Stevens' simile of a static "world without time" is broken by that star's return, by the figure of his desire for more time. Stevens' figure of the planet of love as the present itself, as time itself, turns against all apocalyptic desires for an escape from time and the present world, and projects all desire towards this world and the present; but in doing so it turns toward a world characterized as much by the violence of war as by love, by the presence of both Mars and Venus. In "The Hermitage at the Center." Stevens' dashes mark a disjunction between his tropes of autumnal dissolution and his tropes of desire. tropes not so much of paradisal beginnings as of paradisal changes, the changes which are Stevens' imperfect paradise. Stevens' erotic retrospective thus works against the apocalyptic tenor of the poem's autumnal tropes, and again projects all desire back towards the world which appears to be undergoing a terminal unravelling. And "Burghers of Petty Death" returns to the graveyard genre in order to mark a disjunction between that place and any idea of an end to the world; one might wonder about the relation between the "man and a woman" "like two leaves that keep clinging to a tree" and Stevens' own desire for life.

Such considerations reconfigure that question of Stevens' relation to an apocalyptic tradition, a question which has been central to this dissertation. The issue of genre shifts the ground of inquiry from a straightforward relation to or break with an apocalyptic tradition to one of a relation between traditions, a complex of relations between different literary genres and modes which have their place within literary tradition in general. Stevens' anti-apocalyptic stance would thus appear to begin with his assumption of a place within literary tradition, a position from which he pits different
elements within that tradition against each other with the specific aim of undoing the forms and rhetoric of an apocalyptic tradition. Here, Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* offers a useful framework for a discussion of this aspect of genre in Stevens' poetry. Fowler writes that the relation of individual literary works "to the genres they embody is not one of passive membership but of active modulation" (20), and goes on to insist that "to have any artistic significance, to mean anything distinctive in a literary way, a work must modulate or vary or depart from its generic conventions, and consequently alter them for the future" (23). The tradition consists only of changes to the tradition. In this sense, Stevens' stance against an apocalyptic tradition may be conceived of as profoundly traditional, and one might think of Stevens as engaging in various forms of what Fowler calls "genre transformation" and "genre modulation" in order to create an "antigenre." Such a conclusion to this dissertation may be conceived. I hope, as appropriately apocalyptic/anti-apocalyptic. It looks back over the material covered to reveal a meaning or an aspect of the argument which at times has only been implicit in the detailed

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1 Ricoeur's understanding of tradition and genre also emphasizes the role of change and temporality in their development:

One aspect of the very idea of traditionality--that is, of the epistemological aspect of "making a tradition"--is that identity and difference are inextricably mixed together in it. The identity of style is not the identity of an achronic logical structure. Rather it characterizes the schematism of the narrative understanding, such as it becomes constituted through a cumulative and sedimented history. This is why this identity is transhistorical rather than atemporal. (2:20).

2 Fowler devotes a chapter to each of these processes: cf. "Transformations of Genre" (170-90) and "Generic Modulation" (191-212) in *Kinds of Literature*. He discusses antigenres on pp. 174-79 of that work.
discussions of individual poems (though I hope not at the cost of casting out the entire body of the work). It suggests, perhaps, something of an anti-apocalyptic movement within the dissertation as a whole: this study moves away from Stevens' paradoxical desire to make a break with the past to show him working with and exploiting the tensions between different elements within literary tradition.
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