Irony in Wallace Stevens’s The Rock

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Discussion of Wallace Stevens’s final volume of poems, The Rock (1954), has been unnecessarily solemn and doctrinaire. On the one hand, much has been made of the poet’s debt to various philosophers. Marius Bewley, for example, writes, “Poetry is not metaphysics, but there is such a thing as a philosophical poet, and Stevens deserves this title.”¹ For Bewley, Stevens is essentially an American Transcendentalist whose verse is “on the point of tipping into mysticism.”² The Platonic influence has been discussed by A. Alvarez, the Santayana influence by Norman Holmes Pearson; and Frank Doggett has noted, in a recent article, that there are also parallels between Stevens’s thought and the doctrines of Bergson, Whitehead, and William James.³ On the other hand, Stevens’s late poetry is often deplored precisely because it does seem so “philosophical.” Thus, Roy Harvey Pearce argues that Stevens finally abandons the real world completely for an “ultimate humanism” which paradoxically “leads him toward a curious dehumanization.” Stevens’s late poems are “the poems of a man who does nothing but make poems.”⁴ “The tragedy,” Pearce says, “is that to say yes, Stevens had in the end to say no to so much—to jettison the creative for the decreative, the actual for the possible, men for man, the world for the Rock.”⁵ Pearce’s view is echoed by Howard Nemerov, who complains, “particulars are now being treated as though . . . they were already dissolved in generality,” and by G. S. Fraser, who declares that the late poems lack “the urgency of human passion” and “the highest tension” and are consequently “like commentaries

² Ibid., p. 619.
⁵ Ibid., p. 416.
on themselves that could be added to forever, section by section, like expanding book-cases."

All these approaches seem to miss a basic point about The Rock, namely that the mode of the last poems is essentially the ironic mode: the speaker in these poems is less a philosopher than a sophisticated, aloof spectator, whose attitude to the various "isms" he reflects upon is highly ambivalent. The poems in The Rock are marked by what might be called a "double vision" of material reality, the Stevensian "things as they are." For if the imagination is able, in brief moments, to transform reality into something radiant, the vision is only momentary and fragmentary, and it is always accompanied or succeeded by what Northrop Frye has called Stevens’s "autumn vision." As Frye puts it, "To perceive 'reality' as dingy or unattractive is itself an imaginative act... but an ironic act, an irony deepened by the fact that other modes of perception are equally possible... and there can be no question of accepting only one as true." Stevens himself, as Frye has observed, states the basic dilemma in a poem from Ideas of Order (1936):

From oriole to crow, note the decline
In music. Crow is realist. But, then,
Oriole, also, may be realist.

The ironic mode is not, of course, peculiar to Stevens’s last works: in the opening poem of Harmonium (1931), "Earthy Anecdote" (CP, p. 3), the tone is generally light and playful, but the symbol of the order that transforms chaos in the course of the poem is the strange and menacing firecat. In "Sunday Morning" (CP, p. 66), despite the imagery of luxuriance and splendor, there is a great deal of ironic qualification: the "green freedom of a cockatoo" is actually fixed in the pattern of the rug, the much-worshiped sun turns out to be "an old chaos of the sun," and the pigeons make "ambiguous undulations as they sink/Downward to darkness on extended wings." Even in the early poetry, it seems, Stevens is never quite what Randell Jarrell calls him with reference to The Rock:

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“the poet of well-being,” “all Windhover and no Jesuit.”9 In Stevens’s second volume, *Ideas of Order* (1936), the tone of the poems in *The Rock* is prefigured in a remarkable piece, “How To Live. What To Do” (CP, p. 125), in which the wind, first a frightening and ominous sound, becomes paradoxically “a heroic sound/Joyous and jubilant and sure.” By the time we come to *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), we find a great many poems in the final mode—particularly “Puella Parvula,” “What We See Is What We Think,” “The Novel,” and “St. John and the Back-Ache.”

But there is also, especially in the middle period, a second strain of poetry which is more directly philosophical and doctrinal, and which perhaps deserves the strictures of Pearce and Nemerov. Typical of this strain is the famous anthology piece, “The Idea of Order at Key West” (CP, p. 128). This poem ostensibly deals with “The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,” but, as Denis Donohue points out, the poor sea (reality) never gets its due within the confines of the poem, which thus becomes “a painfully narrow definition...of the liaison between the agent and the environment.”10 We are told that the song of the insubstantial heroine makes order out of the chaos of the observed reality (ocean, sky, wind, etc.). But why and in what sense does she become a “maker”? Stevens does not dramatize the “making” process; he simply insists that:

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

The climactic phrase, “Oh blessed rage for order,” is not intrinsic to this poem in which order has been achieved, not by means of “rage,” but with great ease. Northrop Frye, one of the few critics who does not admire “Key West,” points out that Stevens’s “deliberately magical” poems like this one “have the special function of expressing a stasis or harmony between imagination and reality, and hence have something of a conscious rhetorical exercise

Frye’s implication is that Stevens’s central theoretical principle, namely that poetry is “an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals,” must be dramatized, not merely stated. The poem itself should ideally be the “song” that makes “order” out of the flux of reality.

In *The Rock*, there are still a few “deliberately magical” poems, such as “The Song of Fixed Accord,” “The Planet on the Table,” and “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain,” but the bulk of the poems exhibits precisely that “rage for order” which was absent from “Key West.” It might be useful to begin our consideration of *The Rock* by looking at the widely discussed “The World as Meditation” (CP, p. 520), a poem at once very similar to and very different from “Key West.”

“The World as Meditation” is generally read as a serious account of the imagination’s creation of an invented world, more satisfying than the real one. Joseph N. Riddel’s reading is typical:

Penelope is like the poet whose search for fulfillment discovers only his own powers; she is, it appears, the self seeking reunion with the world from which it is separated, from Ulysses who is at once reality and its source. Ulysses is the sun which brings only its own presence, the vital energy of day or life, but that is assurance enough for the subjective self, which, however conscious of the abyss between itself and nature, manages composure in meditative union with its external paramour.

Is the poem, then, simply a restatement of its epigraph, the violinist Enesco’s reference to the “rêve permanent, qui ne s’arrête ni nuit ni jour,” the dream which distinguishes the mind of the artist from other minds? What, we must ask, is the speaker’s attitude to Penelope’s meditation?

Ulysses is first described as the “interminable adventurer,” a rather ironic reference, for we usually think only of events, not of people, as being “interminable.” In Penelope’s dream world, the

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11 Frye, p. 369.
12 *The Necessary Angel* (New York, 1951), p. 27. Subsequently cited in the text as NA.
speaker remarks, the trees do not blossom; they are merely “mended” and winter is “washed away.” Penelope is not a queenly figure; she is dressed in “cretonnes.” Her imagined future with Ulysses is defined in intentionally trite language: “Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend,” a phrase echoed later in “Yet they had met,/Friend and dear friend and a planet’s encouragement.” In the sixth tercet, Penelope begins to wonder whether the approaching “form of fire” is really Ulysses or whether it is “only the warmth of the sun on her pillow.” The next two lines contain the core of the poem:

The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day.

The words “only day” are the key words here. Penelope’s dream, unlike Enesco’s “rêve permanent,” is only a daydream, and the poem is an ironic version of the epigraph: the daydream serves as a comment on the dream. In this context, “The barbarous strength within her would never fail,” a line which is usually read as an affirmation of Penelope’s triumph, has an almost comic ring, for Penelope’s strength is at best a very dubious quality. Unlike the woman in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” who easily “makes” her song of the sea, Penelope does not arrive at her goal. The imagination, Stevens suggests, can do a great deal but not as much as people like Enesco think it can. The title of the poem is, then, finally ironic. “Meditation” does not constitute a “world”; Ulysses, the reality, “interminably” eludes it.

A second example of Stevens’s deepening irony in The Rock may be found in comparing “One of the Inhabitants of the West” (CP, p. 503) to an earlier poem which deals with the same theme, “Martial Cadenza” (CP, p. 237). In “Martial Cadenza,” the speaker sees the evening star, in its solitude and lonely splendor, as a symbol of the eternal renewal of life and hence of the imagination:

Itself
Is time, apart from any past, apart
From any future, the ever-living and being,
The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire,
The vivid thing in the air that never changes,  
Though the air change.

In “One of the Inhabitants of the West,” this theme is handled more indirectly. A basic contrast is established between the “blaze” of the single, isolated evening star (the inhabitant of the West), which is visible at the “earliest fall of night,” and the gaudy opulence of a cluster of stars (“horrid figures of Medusa”) in the constellation Perseus, which is still hidden from sight. The evening star (the planet Venus) has, of course, only reflected light, while the “real” stars have a “well-rosed two-light/Of their own.” Yet, as the “reader of the text” realizes, the planet whose light is merely reflected light seems, in its very apartness from the darkness that falls over Europe and the “sheeted Atlantic,” paradoxically brighter than the constellation with its own bright lights could ever be. Brightness is, then, not an absolute quality but a matter of context, of relationship. It is the perceived relationship of light to light, and of light to darkness, that defines the value of “this one star’s blaze,” and so there is no need for the slightly pretentious list of epithets for the star which Stevens provides in “Martial Cadenza.”

In “Martial Cadenza,” the narrator’s reaction to the star is very serene and confident:

... I walked and talked  
Again and lived and was again, and breathed again  
And moved again and flashed again, time flashed again.

But in “One Of The Inhabitants,” the moment of insight seems fragmentary and muted. “Our divinations” are, at best, fleeting; our reason quickly recalls that “So much guilt lies buried/ Beneath the innocence/ Of autumn days.”

“Prologues to What Is Possible” (CP, p. 515) is a much more extended and compelling treatment of our “mechanisms of angelic thought”; one might call it Stevens’s “Immortality Ode.” Marius Bewley believes that “Prologues” is an Emersonian poem, describing Stevens’s “inner illumination in terms that are either frankly or approximately mystical.” In Part 1, the metaphor of the journey in the boat “built out of stones that had lost their weight,” which is

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14 Note that the evening star motif, just discussed with reference to “One of the Inhabitants,” appears in “Prologues” in lines 16-17.

15 Bewley, p. 621.
"carried forward by waves resembling the bright backs of rowers/ Gripping their oars, as if they were sure of the way to their destination," is used to convey a moment of insight into supernatural reality; the speaker perceives "a meaning" which is "Removed from any shore, from any man or woman." The self is momentarily transcended in an "approximately mystical" experience, as Bewley says.

But Part ii opens with the short, striking sentence, "The metaphor stirred his fear." The speaker comes down to earth: "... he knew that likeness of him extended/ Only a little way, and not beyond...." There is, ultimately, no "meaning" that is "Removed from any shore, from any man or woman," for the only "intimations of immortality" come, paradoxically, from our own daily, palpable experience, from "The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes." We recall Stevens's dictum: "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (NA, p. 6).

It is important to note that, contrary to Bewley's statement, "Prologues" cannot be called a Transcendentalist poem. Emerson, like Stevens, takes the real, the material, as his starting point and discovers that nature is the symbol of spirit, but his emphasis is quite different from that of Stevens. While Stevens talks of "A flick which added to what was real," Emerson typically asserts, in a much more positive tone, "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God."16

Emerson's words are full of resolution and conviction, a conviction nowhere to be found in "Prologues." Even the metrical form of Part ii suggests Stevens's hesitation: the eight-stress line of Part i is still the norm, but the range is from six stresses per line (line 8) to ten per line (line 2). The regularity of Part i is thus replaced by irregularity in Part ii. The title of the poem is, in this context, ironic: the "possible" is, as the poem has shown, also the "impossible." It is natural, Stevens suggests, for man to want to transcend the self, and in certain moments of illumination he feels he can do so, but such "spiritual" experience is, in the end, an illusion. One

is reminded at this point of his discussion of Plato's myth of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*; it is a beautiful myth, Stevens says, but because it "does not adhere to what is real" (NA, p. 6), it is ultimately "gorgeous nonsense" (NA, p. 4). The metaphor of the boat journey is as remote as Plato's myth, and the speaker of Part II knows that he must reject it.

Transcendentalism receives more direct treatment in the enigmatic poem, "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly" (CP, p. 517). Mildred E. Hartsock reads the last tercet as containing Stevens's credo that "The duty of men is to go 'as far as they can.'"17 This reading is probably the result of the unfortunate habit of detaching lines or groups of lines from Stevens's poetry and treating them as so many more "Adagia." Surely the final tercet refers to the thoughts of Mr. Homburg, whose foolish name (humbug? hamburger? Homburg hat?) suggests that he is not likely to be a mask for the poet. Bewley has been the first to point out that Mr. Homburg of Concord is, no doubt, meant to be Emerson, and that the reference to the "pensive nature," the "mechanical/ and slightly detestable operandum" of the third tercet is most probably a reference to the Emersonian Over-Soul.18 Bewley, however, implies that there is only one speaker in the poem, when there are, in fact, two: 1) Homburg (ll. 4-11), whose view is that there is a spiritual reality, "free/ From man's ghost, larger and yet a little like . . ."; and 2) a "new scholar replacing an older one" (l. 37), whose thoughts are contained in lines 12-36, the three dots at the end of line 11 signalling the transition. The view of the "new scholar" begins at the opposite pole from Homburg's; we must, he says, adhere to

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What we know in what we see, what we feel in what
We hear, what we are, beyond mystic disputation....
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(ll. 19-20)

But, curiously enough, the speaker's thoughts move further and further away from the present (see ll. 28-30), and finally they are not very different from Homburg's thoughts. At this point, the speaker becomes annoyed with himself and calls his own rumination a "fantasia" (l. 37). He dismisses it, and in the last two tercets

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18 Bewley, p. 620.
we return to Mr. Homburg, who tries to confine the essence of nature in a neat little container ("The mannerism of nature caught in a glass"), until it becomes only "a spirit's mannerism." Since they are "caught in a glass," the "things going as far as they can" (l. 45) cannot, of course, go very far.

Neither Homburg's doctrine nor the speaker's "fantasia" seems to provide a ready solution. Can man, then, do no more than the title of the poem suggests, that is, quite literally look across the fields and watch the birds fly? There is no resolution of these alternatives in the poem, only an ironic juxtaposition. There are, one surmises, still at least "thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird."

II

I should like to consider next a group of "life cycle" poems in The Rock; these dramatize what Frank Doggett has called "the turning instant of the now,"19 when, to use Northrop Frye's terminology, the winter vision gives way to the spring vision, the summer vision is replaced by the autumn vision, and so on.20 According to Doggett, this is the moment "when the meaningless becomes awareness, when attention selects and interprets external chaos . . .,"21 but, as we shall note, the shift works both ways: sometimes awareness becomes the meaningless.

The most interesting of these poems is the little-known "The Green Plant" (CP, p. 506). In the first three stanzas the narrator surveys, from the vantage point of his window, the decaying late-autumn foliage. The stasis of October ripeness22 is dissolved:

Silence is a shape that has passed.
Otu-bre's lion-roses have turned to paper
And the shadows of the trees
Are like wrecked umbrellas.

20 The most important of the "life cycle" poems in The Rock is, of course, the title poem, "The Rock." Since an adequate analysis of this long and complex poem would take a great deal of space, and since it has already received extensive discussion, I prefer in this essay to talk about some of the shorter poems which have, so far, received almost no attention. For comment on "The Rock," see Pearce, pp. 409-411; Frye, p. 362; Jarrell, p. 342; Hartsock, p. 741; Riddel, p. 491; Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (New York, 1961), p. 123; and Ralph Mills, "Wallace Stevens: The Image of the Rock," Accent, XVII, 75-89 (Spring, 1958).
22 The personification of October as a showman-vendor, who must resort to hawking dead flowers, is particularly apt here.
The next two stanzas carry out the logical implications of the first, but, in Stanza 4, the narrator turns to the indoor scene:

    Except that a green plant glares, as you look
    At the legend of the maroon and olive forest,
    Glares, outside of the legend, with the barbarous green
    Of the harsh reality of which it is part.

The glaring plant is part of the "harsh reality," but, ironically, its green is not the green of spring renewal; it is "barbarous green" because the indoor plant, artificially cultivated, is really less, not more, alive than the dying autumn foliage. As the plant's "reality" impinges upon the narrator's mind, a strange transformation takes place: the ugly outdoor scene becomes a "legend" into which the plant cannot enter; the "wrecked umbrellas" become a "forest," and "red" and "yellow" become the more refined "maroon" and "olive." The "effete vocabulary of summer" does say something after all.

Notice that in "The Green Plant" "things as they are" are not simply transformed by a "blue guitar" (CP, p. 165); rather, one aspect of reality transforms the other, and both are fused by an imaginative act which is the poem itself. The creation of order is not only described; it is dramatized. There is also the implication in "The Green Plant" that man must not be smug about his knowledge of "reality." In some of his earlier verse, Stevens was so intent on defining the transforming power of the imagination that he did not do justice to the "real," although he insisted again and again that "The real is only the base. But it is the base."23 When he came to write The Rock, he had become aware of this discrepancy between theory and practice, and "Madame La Fleurie" (CP, p. 507) can be read as a kind of symbolic farewell to the poet's former self. The persona of this poem is punished for his hubris; his knowledge is "crisp" because "He looked in a glass of the earth and thought he lived in it." This line may be read in either of two ways: 1) the speaker thought that he could see through the objects of the external world, or 2) the speaker lived in a world of mirrors, of reflections once removed from reality. In either case, his punishment is that there are no bluejays for him to remember now that he is dead, and Mother Earth becomes for him a "bearded queen, wicked in her dead light," rather than a "Madame La Fleurie."

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"Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It" (CP, p. 513) is another interesting cycle poem. It is divided into two parts: the first, "The Constant Disquisition of the Wind," presents the winter vision, and the second, "The World Is Larger in Summer," the sunny summer vision. The dichotomy, however, is not at all sharp. Part i begins on a note of gloom:

The sky seemed so small that winter day,
A dirty light on a lifeless world,
Contracted like a withered stick.

The key word here is "seemed." As the poem progresses, the seemingly hostile wind stirs the speaker's imagination, and he is able to overcome, at least partially, the mood of barrenness and emptiness, and to become creative:

The appropriate image of himself
So formed, became himself and he breathed
The breath of another nature as his own.

The creative vision is only "momentary," but it does occur, and so "Sunday's" "idleness" becomes, ironically, "violent idleness."

In Part ii we have the reverse. The artist's imagination flourishes in the summer world: "He discovered the colors of the moon/ In a single spruce, when suddenly,/ The tree stood dazzling in the air," and, finally, "The master of the spruce, himself,/ Became transformed." But this vision does not last either; in the end there are "only the fragments found in the grass/ From his project as finally magnified." The world, then, is not really much "larger" in summer, and, as the title of the poem tells us, "the world is what you make of it." Despite all appearances, winter may be the proper imaginative context and summer, to use Eliot's phrase, "the dry season."

The "turning instant of the now" is the subject of another cycle poem in The Rock, "Long And Sluggish Lines" (CP, p. 522). It begins as follows:

It makes so little difference, at so much more
Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before.

The winter vision is conveyed in the three following couplets, of which only the first rhymes. The highly irregular cadence of these lines, with their numerous spondees, makes them indeed "long and
sluggish.” But in the fourth couplet the “opposite” sets in, and what follows is the early spring vision: the “yellow patch” made by sunlight on a wall, the “first fly,” the “babyishness of forsythia,” and the “makings of the nude magnolia”—all these are humorously described as “these-escant-issant pre-personae,” suggesting that which is “incessant,” “effervescent,” “nascent,” and so on. Death is once more “the mother of beauty” (CP, p. 68), and life is renewed. But the last two couplets contain a note of hesitancy unknown to the woman of “Sunday Morning.” “Wanderer,” the poet-narrator addresses himself,

this is the pre-history of February.
The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.
You were not born yet when the trees were crystal
Nor are you now, in the wakefulness inside a sleep.

The paradox, “wakefulness inside a sleep,” implies that the sense of renewal of life, the spring vision, is perhaps only a fantasy. At any rate, Frank Kermode is not quite accurate when he says of this poem, “despair at repetition . . . gives way to a certainty of freshness yet to come.”

Stevens is much more positive about the renewal of life in another poem in The Rock, “The Hermitage at the Center” (CP, p. 505). Here “death is the mother of beauty” with a vengeance. The first four tercets each divide into two parts: the first line defines the winter vision, the harsh reality; the second two lines present a spring vision, in which “the desired/Reclines in the temperature of heaven.” The fifth tercet then fuses the two:

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.

We are told here that death and life meet to form a circle which is eternity, but I do not think that the first four tercets have prepared us for this insight. It is, for one thing, almost impossible to read the lines in sequence because the break after each opening line is too abrupt. What we must do is to read the four opening lines as one unit and the four couplets as a second unit. Despite the dash after each opening line and the repeated indentation of lines

24 Kermode, p. 122.
two and three, the poem seems to split apart into two poems; there is no fusion in the first four tercets, and so it is difficult to believe in the assertion of fusion in the fifth tercet. The hermitage "at the Center" seems, in fact, to be perilously close to the edge: there is a split vision rather than a double vision here.

What is to my mind the most beautiful cycle poem in The Rock is the final poem, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" (CP, p. 534). Again, the moment presented is the mysterious turning point from winter to spring, from death to life. The "bird's cry" which comes from "outside" at "the earliest ending of winter," arouses the aged speaker from "the vast ventriloquism/ Of sleep's faded papier-mâché." The bird, "A chorister whose c preceded the choir," heralds the return of the sun which "was rising at six/ No longer a battered panache above snow..." And the knowledge that the life-giving sun is about to return is "like/ A new knowledge of reality."

It is a moment of insight, of great splendor, but also one of pain. The bird's cry is twice referred to as "scrawny," and the speaker has to tell himself three times that the sun is coming from "outside," as if he wants to convince himself that it really is outside and not "a sound in his mind." In the end, the "colossal sun" is "Still far away." The renewal of life is sensed intuitively, but the awareness of continuity is muted and hesitant; the short, choppy lines as well as the repeated use of the "It was..." construction emphasize this quality. The title of the poem is particularly ironic because the poem, it turns out, presents, not the "thing itself" at all, but a very individual "idea about the thing"—one man's sense of the world.

"Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" may be glossed by a stanza from the famous "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (CP, p. 508), in which the seasonal metaphor is discarded, so that we are left with the life-death antinomy in its starkest form:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room....

28 For an earlier, less satisfactory treatment of a similar theme, see "The Brave Man" (CP, p. 138).
Riddel, in an otherwise excellent discussion of "To an Old Philosopher," argues that the life of Santayana provides a "most powerful metaphor for Stevens' belief in the redemptive powers of the secular imagination."26 This is, it seems to me, to overstate the case, for the poem abounds in oxymoron and paradox: i.e., "Unintelligible absolution," "master and commiserable man," "Your dozing in the depths of wakefulness," "afflatus of ruin." In the last stanza, the crucial words "As if" are often overlooked: does the "design of all his [Santayana's] words" really "take form"? There is no "total grandeur" "at the end," only "a kind of total grandeur," a "kind of solemnity" ("An Old Man Asleep"), or "the stale grandeur of annihilation" ("Lebensweisheitspielerei"). The "Rock" of the title poem, "the gray particular of man's life" can be "covered" and "cured" by "leaves," but it is above all,

The stone from which he rises, up—and—ho,
The step to the bleaker depths of his descents....

III

This essay has dealt so far with one type of irony typical of the poems in The Rock, namely the thematic. A second type of irony which deserves mention with reference to Stevens's late poetry is that which arises from a calculated discrepancy between sound and meaning. Again, such irony is not a feature peculiar to this late poetry, but it is more prominent in The Rock than in the earlier volumes.

In "The Plain Sense of Things" (CP, p. 502), for example, the sound subtly contradicts the meaning. The first two lines state that "After the leaves have fallen, we return/To a plain sense of things." Then Stevens writes:

It is as if
We had come to an end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

The sound structure of these lines intimates that, contrary to what is said, the imagination is indeed active. There is complex assonance of the phonemes /ae/ and /i/, the former occurring seven times and the latter nine times. The phrase "in an inert" echoes the word "Inanimate," and the incantatory effect is completed by the soft

26 Riddel, p. 492.
vowel and consonant sounds of the final word “savoir.” Such intricate patterning is hardly Stevens’s stock-in-trade; as Frye has observed, Stevens’s rhymes are usually “sharp, barking assonances, parody-rhymes.... and the metres, like the curious blank terza rima used so often, are almost parody-metres. A quality that is not far from being ‘anti-poetic’ seems to emerge.”\textsuperscript{27} The emphatic assonance and alliteration in the passage quoted above seem, then, to be used by Stevens for a special purpose: the sound structure serves as an ironic comment on “this blank cold,” “this sadness without cause.”

In “Lebensweisheitspielerei,” an extremely simple and effective piece (CP, p. 504), there is a similar use of sound. The last line is:

\begin{quote}
In the stale grandeur of annihilation.
\end{quote}

If we diagram only the vowels phonetically, we find the following pattern:

\begin{center}
i a e y ae a e ae ay i ey e
\end{center}

The eleven vowel allophones are reducible to five phonemes, and the complex assonantal pattern of the line suggests fusion rather than “annihilation.” Fusion is further suggested by the half-rhyme of the first and last morphemes, \textit{In} and \textit{-tion}.

Examples of such irony of sound versus meaning could be multiplied. To take just one more example, let us look at the first tercet of “Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make It”:

\begin{quote}
The sky seemed so small that winter day,  
A dirty light on a lifeless world,  
Contracted like a withered stick.
\end{quote}

The theme of gloom and despair of this tercet is contradicted by the intricate assonance of long and short “i” sounds and the approximate rhyme of “life-” with “light” and “like.” There is also alliteration of /l/ and /s/, and each line has four stresses. The tercet has, in fact, a singsong quality which questions the very meanings of the words that comprise it.

\textit{IV}

In discussing Stevens’s ironic mode, I have hoped to direct attention to the poems as poems, rather than to the poems as phil-
osophical arguments, as most critics would have it. If we insist on tracing Transcendentalist, Platonist, or Bergsonian themes in *The Rock*, we are likely to be disappointed and to find, as do Pearce and Fraser, that the late poems lack “tension” or “humanity” or “particularization.” If, on the other hand, we take the poems at face value and read them quite literally, we shall find a very artful “reconciliation of opposites.” In *The Rock*, reality and imagination are at last the coequals Stevens had always wished them to be.

Denis Donohue has suggested that the poet’s evolution from *Harmonium* to *The Rock* is very much like Yeats’s evolution from *The Green Helmet* to *The Wild Swans at Coole.* The point is very well taken: one need only compare, say, “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (*Harmonium*) to “St. Armorer’s Church From The Outside” (*The Rock*), both poems that ostensibly reject orthodox religion, to note the difference. In the early poem, there is a slightly unpleasant note of bravado; the speaker seems to take excessive delight in debunking the old woman with her narrow religious views. In “St. Armorer’s,” the boastful tone is no longer present. The speaker’s private “chapel” is won only by means of severe mental strain. This personal chapel, which is to replace St. Armorer’s, the symbol of orthodoxy, rises from “Terre Ensevelie,”

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An ember yes among its cindery noes
His own: a chapel of breath, an appearance made
For a sign of meaning in the meaningless....
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The chapel, symbolic of Stevens’s private religious faith, is further defined as “A sacred syllable rising from sacked speech. . . .” This line sums up the central ironic tension, not only of this poem but of *The Rock* as a whole: the “sacred syllable” and the “sacked speech”—the two must, finally, coexist.