Rituals of Reading in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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IN "THE SNOW MAN" STEVENS ESTABLISHES essential nothingness as the starting point for the exercise of the imagination. After reality has been stripped of all gaudy appearances, we are free to imagine the world anew. In his corpus of poetry, Stevens demonstrates an application of this doctrine in the act of reading: the page is the locus for our imaginative reconstruction of the world. A poem on a page is physical reality waiting to be absorbed by a reader's imagination, but it is also the record of the poet's imagination; that is, an index of a prior successful transformation of reality. The page thus becomes both focus (the burning point of a lens) and mirror in the interaction between reality and imagination. In the act of reading, apprehension of the physical reality of the page becomes cognition, mental reality. Not nearly as stark as "The Snow Man's" landscape, the page is not a "nothing that is not there," but "the nothing that is" (*CP* 10).[1]

The poem on the page is available to the reader as an instrument to heighten quotidien existence. The reader can approach the text in the fashion of a sacrament. In his persuasive essay, " 'The Reader as Thinker': The Figure of the Reader in the Writing of Wallace Stevens," Robert DeMaria has interpreted Stevens's portrayal of the reader as an illustration of the poet's conviction that "poetry in general [is] the outline of being in general." This ontological approach assigns to poetry a representational, microcosmic quality. The best poetry explains not only itself but life, since "[t]he theory of poetry is the theory of life" (DeMaria 264). Theoretical statements in Stevens's lectures and correspondence buttress this ontological assessment of what poetry should be. But the poems themselves suggest a practice at variance with the theory. Stevens's poetical meditations on the act of

reading reveal the need for an interactive relationship between text and reader that remains on the periphery of DeMaria's critical scope. I submit that Stevens envisions rituals of reading in his poetry.

Stevens's meditations on the act of reading fall into three groups. Four brief lyrics—"The Reader," "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "Large Red Man Reading"—appear to be straightforward phenomenological accounts of reading. Taken together, they illustrate four ways in which reading fuses reality and the imagination. Later, longer poems, "Description without Place" and "Things of August," examine in greater detail the kind of text that enables reality and imagination to fuse as the reader deciphers it. I propose a third group, to include poems such as "The Pure Good of Theory," "God Is Good. It Is a Beautiful Night," and "One of the Inhabitants of the West," which exemplify the theory of reading applied to life. After all—to adapt a phrase from the *Adagia*: "Literature is based not on life but on propositions about life, of which [every one of these poems] is one" (*OP* 171).

Over the course of his poetic career, Stevens develops three variations on his proposition that reading effects a transmutation of reality. First, reading is a healing activity that imbues the world with meaning through an active imagination. Second, reading the "poem of life" becomes the metaphor for a poetic transformation—in writing—of the world surrounding the individual. Third, the world is eventually perceived as one great text that can be read and translated into significance by an enlightened reader. This reader, prefigured in "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," will turn into a fully fledged prophet by the time we reach "One of the Inhabitants of the West." The prophet (or rabbi or scholar in other incarnations) is Stevens's ideal reader because he brings knowledge to the text.

1

The ostensible narrative of reading in the 1935 poem "The Reader" (from *Ideas of Order*) is undercut by its transformation into a simile in the second line, so that the remainder of the poem occurs only potentially, not actually. Reading, an act of perception, is postulated in this poem as the need to create meaning. Since the poem does not perform this creation yet, the reader of the poem is at first left in the dark much as the "reader" of the title is left in the moonlight:

> All night I sat reading a book,
> Sat reading as if in a book
> Of sombre pages. (*CP* 146)

Not quite as bleak as "The Snow Man's" winter landscape, the poem's nocturnal autumn setting is sufficiently reductionist. There is "no lamp"; there are only "burning stars." While the landscape is apparently unpeopled, it does contain "shrivelled forms / Crouched in the moonlight." Crouching is an activity of animals or human beings, and it is hard not to visualize the "forms" as anthropomorphic shapes, silent forebears of the ghosts with "thin" "spended hearts" (*CP* 424) who will return to earth in "Large Red Man Reading." Gerald Bruns argues that the disembodied voice that mumbles the words

> Everything
> Falls back to coldness,
>
> Even the musky muscadines,
> The melons, the vermilion pears
> Of the leafless garden (*CP* 147)

is an internal voice, "our old nemesis," which "in a poetry of world-making . . . is inimical" (27). I agree that the voice originates with the reader of the poem. But since it is impossible to take the message that the voice mumbles from pages that "b[ear] no print" or, at any rate, a very faint print ("the trace of burning stars" *CP* 147), the mumbled words are not part of the printed book at all. Instead, the reader himself brings this portion of meaning to the book he is reading. David Walker concludes that "the reader . . . must bring his or her own illumination to what is often a necessarily impoverished text" (52). I would add that Stevens, having earlier introduced a lyrical "I" as the reader, specifies "A voice was mumbling," not "I mumbled." He implies that only interaction between reader and text makes the meaningful statement possible. Reading in this early poem is not deciphering, but—to cite the title of a later poem—a "Continual Conversation with a Silent Man," in which

> It is not speech, the sound we hear
>
> In this conversation, but the sound
> Of things and their motion. . . . (*CP* 359-60)

The reader, then, needs to begin creating his own world. The entire poem is an extended simile that foregrounds its experimental and postulatory character. The stark contrast between the somber pages without print and the intelligible sentence that the voice mumbles

suggests that reading is a creative act. Should the reader fail to bring meaning to his book through imagination, its pages, whether real or metaphorical, will remain somber even with ever so many burning stars above.

"Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" (*CP* 267) clarifies Stevens's distinction between right and wrong readers by contrasting "Phosphor" with a "realist." Phosphor, who takes his name from the bioluminescent element phosphorus, is a shorthand formula for the imaginative reader we already know from the poem "The Reader." Owing to his clearly defined expectations, which originate in his self-illumined character, Phosphor will be able to decipher even a "dark" or a "blank" page. The "realist" reader, whom the poem's speaker distinguishes by apostrophe in stanza 4, is uncreative and therefore overwhelmed as the greenness of night launches into a speech:[2]

> Look, realist, not knowing what you expect.
> The green falls on you as you look,
>
> Falls on and makes and gives, even a speech.
> And you think that that is what you expect. . . .

Unable to provide his own illumination and his own creative approach to the world, the realist reader rashly accepts as truth what the greenness of night, in its speech, gives to him. The sarcastic note in the last quoted line above discloses the poet's opinion that the green speech of night can be misleading and untruthful.

Green is Stevens's symbol for plain reality. The opening lines of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" establish the opposition between the blue of the imagination and the green of the day:

> The man bent over his guitar,
> A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.
>
> They said, "You have a blue guitar,
> You do not play things as they are." (*CP* 165)

If both day and night can be green (i.e., real), why then is the realist in the "Phosphor" poem misled? After all, green is his color, and he should receive a satisfactory speech. Yet we should notice that the night is not green of its own accord, but because Phosphor makes it so. With the adjective "elemental" Stevens refers us to the chemical properties of phosphorus. It is green in itself, and it makes its sur-

roundings appear green. Phosphor, who has been actively and creatively reading in stanzas 1 and 2, has left some of his greenness on the page (stanza 3), and this is the green the realist encounters. But the realist receives only a limited message from "[t]hat elemental parent, the green night, / Teaching a fusky alphabet."[3] An alphabet at best provides the material for a speech, but is not identical with it. The realist mistakes the alphabet for the entire speech, when in fact he only perceives the surplus of green that Phosphor, the imaginative reader, has left on the nocturnal page.

The poem, in short, establishes two different kinds of greenness. Phosphor, the right reader, makes sense of an impoverished or blank page because he glows with creative imagination from within. He has so much of it that he even illumines the night around him. True, Phosphor deciphers only an "alphabet," but at least he recognizes it for what it is. The realist, on the other hand, who does not know what to expect and cannot provide his own imaginative light, is so limited that he mistakes a "fusky alphabet" for a complete speech. He thus surrenders any possibility of deeper insight. Impoverished himself, he remains in unadorned reality. For Phosphor, however, a limited understanding of even a dark page is possible because he knows what he expects. The world is a meaningful book for him because he will acknowledge that "[i]t is difficult to read." Phosphor, too, is a kind of realist—he is green, after all—but a self-reliant and self-sufficient one; in short, an Emersonian.

A reader of the two poems discussed so far needs to bring imagination to the lines he is reading because the text on the page is impoverished. The poems thus enact their contents. In his third poem on the topic of reading, "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (*CP* 358-59), Stevens employs a similar method. He describes the close communion of a reader with a book and suggests the concentration required for this exercise. As we will see, "perfection" and "truth" mysteriously enter before the poem circles back, in its last line, to "the reader leaning late and reading there." The poem clarifies its meaning in an interplay of assertions in the past tense and the present tense. As the reader "bec[omes]" the book, the physical reality of the book begins to disappear. In this "intensest rendezvous"[4] between reader and book a timeless present tense steals into the text:

> the reader leaned above the page,
>
> Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
> The scholar to whom his book *is* true, to whom

> The summer night *is* like a perfection of thought.
> (my italics)

This is the midpoint of the poem, further foregrounded by the grammatical violation of "much most," which signals an extraordinary intensity of effort. As the poem returns us to the reader in the end, a limited achievement can be confidently pronounced:

> The truth in a calm world,
> In which there is no other meaning, itself
>
> Is calm . . . itself
> Is the reader. . . .

The terms "perfection" and "truth" do not appear in the poems discussed previously. Here, the possibility of their gradual arrival is held out. "Perfection" is nascent, and it is created when parts come together: "The quiet was *part* of the meaning, *part* of the mind: / The *access* of perfection to the page" (my italics). "The House Was Quiet . . ." is finally a poem of desire—desire on the part of the reader to engage intensely with the text and, through the text, with the "scholar." This scholar is not necessarily the author of the book; instead, it may be the reader himself at his most attentive. If the reader becomes the scholar, the book is true. Right reading is self-transformation.

Having discussed different readers in "The Reader" and "Phosphor" and the nature of text and scholar in "The House Was Quiet . . . ," Stevens turns to a third angle of approach by considering the effects of reading aloud. Charles Berger sees in the title of the poem "Large Red Man Reading" (*CP* 423-24) a witty autobiographical allusion because Stevens was tall and heavy and his birthplace was Reading, Pennsylvania (99). Yet the reader in the poem is never described; instead, we get vivid descriptions of the longing of ghosts who have returned to hear the poet read. Since ghosts appear only at night, this poem, like the preceding three with their more explicit references to darkness, must be set at night. The poem describes the literary communion between ghosts of impoverished capabilities and a poet of strong feeling (indicated by the word "red" in the title), who reads from "tabulae" that contain poems of imagination (as indicated by "blue" in the second line). Strong feeling and imagination flow together when the tabulae subsequently turn purple.[5] The ghosts, in their real life, must have been starved for sensory experience because hearing the poet read makes them frantically overreact:

They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And . . . seized on what was ugly

And laughed. . . .

This ghostly ecstasy is brought about by the recitation of the sober "law" inscribed on the tabulae. More precisely, as Phosphor only teaches a fusky alphabet, so the poet merely reads the *syllables* of the law, its linguistic building blocks: "The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law: / *Poesis, poesis,* the literal characters, the vatic lines. . . ." This suggests that imagination needs both discipline and expectations in order to be *poesis* (the Greek ποιησις means originally 'a making' or 'a creation'). The particular *poesis* here is created out of both perception and prophecy ("the literal characters, the vatic lines"). In explaining the identity of the ghosts, it is helpful to apply Harold Bloom's reading of *apophrades*, spirits of former poets, only if one assumes that Stevens's poetic defense is driven by "anxiety of influence."[6] The present reading instead grants the living poet power over his literary forebears. The power of poetry lies in its cooperative creation between poet and reader, not in its having at one time been created by the mighty poet. The reactions of the ghosts are testimony to the power of the written and spoken word in the here and now: the syllables suffice to stimulate them. How much more stimulation should a living reader be able to expect!

"Large Red Man Reading" invites us to identify with the ghosts. The identification is an uneasy one, since we might have to admit that we are constantly striving to experience the world in a frenzy yet lack the feeling that only imagination gives. Aiming to assist his readers, the poet opens up for us the world of imagination by making life into "the poem of life" and by causing "the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them" to take on "color . . . shape and the size of things as they are." The poet here assumes the role of Phosphor in investing plain reality with imagination. He demonstrates for us (i.e., the ghosts) how to read by reading his own poems. And those of us who have never been able to get enough of reality are now enabled to experience "feeling," so that we might do as the ghosts did when they "laughed, as he sat there reading."

These four brief and meditative poems offer us four perspectives on reading: the eponymous "Reader" of the first brings imagination

to his task; self-illumined Phosphor is contrasted with the ignorant realist; the book dissolves into the essence of summer night in "The House Was Quiet . . ." and; finally, the "red" poet provides imagination for impoverished spectres hungering after experience. In all cases, the protagonists of these poems undergo a development from "less" to "more." Leaving aside the "realist" for the moment, all characters add a significant dimension to their existence that they have previously lacked. The concentrated encounter with a page, a book, or the poem of life enriches them by turning impoverishment to wholeness. Reading, or being read to, "heals" the characters in the basic sense of making them whole. Stevens proposes in the *Adagia*: "Poetry is a health," and, "Poetry is a cure of the mind" (*OP* 176).[7] The metaphor of "healing" is apt because it suggests urgent necessity. Someone who requires healing is by definition ill. Only health opens the way to the fullness of life. Without imagination or poetry, then, life is unhealthy. Reality needs the imagination as a complement, not just as a supplement, if it is to be made whole. Right reading provides the path.

2

In some of his longer poems Stevens develops "reading" into a metaphor for poetic transformation of reality. Helen Vendler's comment on Stevens's poem "Description without Place" provides a good starting point:

> Though, strictly speaking, we can verify no system of value, all our motivation nevertheless arises from our notion of the past, our judgment on the present, and our vision of the future, or, as Stevens said, "We live in the description of a place and not in the place itself." (218)

The notion of "description" becomes especially significant as "Description without Place" (*CP* 339-46) moves towards its climax in section VI. Both Lenin the realist and Nietzsche the man of imagination become meaningful only by being *described*. In fact, the description of the two, which contains within itself both seeming and being, is more genuine than either reality or imagination alone. Description comes into existence, in its unique oneness of seeming and being, as an artificial thing, namely, a text:

> Description is revelation. It is not
> The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming,
. . . . . .
A text we should be born that we might read. . . . (*CP* 344)

By placing the grammatical object, "a text," conspicuously at the beginning of the line, Stevens gives it significance. The experience of reading is still a desideratum ("should" / "might"), yet Stevens makes sure to cast it not only in personal terms ("we" / "Intenser than any actual life could be"), but to eulogize it in religious metaphors:

the book of reconciliation,
Book of a concept only possible

In description, canon central in itself,
The thesis of the plentifullest John. (*CP* 345)

Seen in conjunction with the poems on reading, this section tells us more about the book the quiet reader may be leaning over. He knows that "description is revelation." The "plentifullest John" is not John the evangelist, but John of Patmos, the author of the last book of the New Testament. This allusion in the work of a professed agnostic is astounding but appropriate: John's revelation looks towards the future, towards the possibility of reconciliation between seeming and being. The New Testament "Apocalypse" describes this revelation in prophetic terms reminiscent of the "vatic lines" of "Large Red Man Reading."

Not only does the prophetic character of revelation refer us back to the "Large Red Man Reading," but the concluding couplet of "Description without Place" echoes both this and the "Phosphor" poem:

[W]hat we say of the future must portend,

Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be
Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening. (*CP* 346)

Helen Vendler has pointed out that " 'redden' is one of those verbs of progressive action which Stevens finds immensely useful in his desire to guarantee the future" (228). While there are apparently rubies intransitively "reddening," other rubies are "reddened" by the first set of rubies. The grammatical paradox illustrates the semantic paradox expressed in "what we say of the future must portend, / Be alive

with its own seemings." "Portend" is stronger than its possible synonym "foreshadow," and thus all our revelations of the future must be self-fulfilling prophecies. Seeming and being are inseparable, necessary parts of the same whole. Like Phosphor who reads by his own light, the rubies here are reddened through their own reddening—the two sets of rubies collapse into one as seeming and being complement each other.

In "Description without Place," then, Stevens describes the future as a text we will need to read. By referring back to his other poems on reading, he stresses the importance of exercising the imagination in deciphering that text. If, like Phosphor, we know what to expect, our reading in the future will fuse being and seeming. The words we use to describe the future will matter because they will be the theory of description:

> Thus the theory of description matters most.
> It is the theory of the word for those
>
> For whom the word is the making of the world. . . . (*CP* 345)[8]

Sections III, IV, and IX of "Things of August" (*CP* 489-96) echo the concerns of this discussion. The new aspect Stevens introduces here is a peculiar emphasis on intelligence in conjunction with both the reader and the listener. The root of *intelligence* contains *legere* 'to read,' and the term is used both to describe intellectual aptitude (in "intelligence test") and as a synonym of *knowledge* (as in Central Intelligence Agency). The main stanza of section III, although its atmosphere recalls "The House was Quiet . . . ," remains cryptic because the section revels in noun phrases without a predicate:

> The speech of truth in its true solitude,
> A nature that is created in what it says,
> The peace of the last intelligence. (*CP* 490)

Section V presents us with someone we have long waited for: a tangible reader. He is a rabbi, a wise man who both reads and writes, meditates on, and absorbs what he reads. For the rabbi, the word is truly "the making of the world." This reading rabbi has attributes of the large red man reading, since what he reads is part of "ghostly celebrations" (*CP* 492). But he is also endowed with the quality of the rubies so that he combines seeming and being. Last, like Phosphor, he has his own light:

The thinker as reader reads what has been written.
He wears the words he reads to look upon
Within his being,
. . . . . .
A *reddened* garment falling to his feet,
A *hand of light* to turn the page. . . . (*CP* 492; my italics)

We are made the rabbi's audience through Stevens's use of the first person plural pronoun: "We'll give the week-end to wisdom . . ." (*CP* 492). Those who listen to him absorb what they hear, not in the form of words, but in the more elusive manner of a "secretion." Unlike the "realist" of "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" who thought he heard a speech when he was only taught the alphabet, these listeners know that the text they hear "has no speech," but that the rabbi "wears the words." This knowledge frees us and all listeners to recline at ease: the setting is a weekend, they lie on the grass and have a picnic. It is in this state of relaxation that both we and they absorb "[t]he secretions of insight" (*CP* 492).

For the first time, then, imaginative understanding of the world is explicitly equated with the scholar's wisdom. It can now be shared and absorbed by disciples. It applies not only by night but also by day. It gains universal significance in space and time; it looks towards the future and is the property of intelligent listeners. Section IX summarizes:

A new text of the world,
. . . . . .
In which
. . . . . .
The meanings are our own—
It is a text that we shall be needing,
To be the footing of noon,
The pillar of midnight
. . . . . .
A text of intelligent men
. . . . . .
. . . for us to think,
Writing and reading the rigid inscription. (*CP* 494-95)

The preposition "of" in "of the world" dispels any doubt that this mysterious text might possibly be found in a book. No, it is truly a creation of the reader, a ποιησις that will not try to deny its artificial character. The "text of the world" is what men and women make of

the world. Reality complemented by imagination becomes a "text," "at the centre of the unintelligible" (*CP* 495).

In this way, Stevens's apparently simple phenomenological accounts of reading provide the material for more refined thoughts on the essential unity of writing and reading in later poems. "Reading" slowly establishes itself as a metaphor for imagination in general. The intense concentration which led to communion with the text in the early poems has slowly given way to playfulness imbued with feeling ("Large Red Man Reading") only to turn into complete relaxation in "Things of August." Right reading is scholarly reading.

3

The rabbi section of "Things of August" shows us the first reader in full daylight, at noon. As reading has now advanced from a nocturnal to a diurnal activity, the light that Phosphor originally emanated has gained additional significance. In section III of "The Pure Good of Theory" (*CP* 329-33) entitled "Fire-monsters in the Milky Brain," Stevens proposes that Adam "woke in a metaphor" (*CP* 331). By naming the world around him, Adam is able to speak of "the whole world as metaphor" (*CP* 332), which enables him to believe because he has helped create it through naming. The nature of this belief is explored in the following section in a string of explanations, all of which lead up to "the beast of light" (*CP* 333), a grown-up and more violent version of Phosphor. The beast "inscribes ferocious alphabets" (*CP* 332), a combination of Phosphor's "fusky alphabet" and the "rigid inscription" that concludes section IX of "Things of August." In an apotheosis of illumination, the poem conveys us into the light of summer, true to the letter and spirit of *Transport to Summer*, the volume in which it appears. "The access of perfection to the page" in "The House was Quiet . . . ," which follows only a few pages later, is here triumphantly prefigured in the lines:

> The need of its element, the final need
> Of final access to its element—
> Of access like the page of a wiggy book,
>
> Touched suddenly by the universal flare
> For a moment, a moment in which we read and repeat
> The eloquences of light's faculties. (*CP* 333)

Reading is now circumscribed as the perception and appropriation of the enormous light of the world that produces enlightenment in the

perceiver. The Adamic imagination, which makes naming possible and leads to belief, is secularized as the imagination of the reader.

The poem that opens *Transport to Summer*, read in the light of this discussion, sounds like a program for the art of imaginative reading. The "Reader," Phosphor, the rabbi, and the "scholar to whom his book is true" (*CP* 358) are all blended into one in "God Is Good. It Is a Beautiful Night" (*CP* 285). The setting is again nocturnal and the color brown ("fusky") is the first thing perceived. But the poem goes on to barrage all senses with a virtuoso display of paradox and synesthesia:

> Look round, *brown* moon, *brown* bird, as you rise to fly
> . . . . . .
> In your *light*, the head is speaking. *It reads the book.*
> It becomes the *scholar* again, seeking celestial
> Rendezvous,
>
> Picking thin music on the rustiest string,
> Squeezing the *reddest* fragrance. . . . (my italics)

This program, announced at the volume's opening, is exfoliated through "The Pure Good of Theory," "Description without Place," and "The House Was Quiet . . ." and culminates in the volume's climax, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" (*CP* 380-408).

While a full examination of "Notes" is beyond the range of this essay, a brief glance at the way in which Stevens imagines the reader in this poem is necessary. "Notes" employs all the key terms I have isolated as relevant to the definition of Stevens's reader. Within the ten subsections of "It Must Be Abstract," the terms "inscribes," "green," "redden," and "rabbi" take prominent positions. More important, however, the entire poem resonates powerfully with the preparatory theoretical statements in *Transport to Summer*. "Notes" is, ultimately, interested in defining the supreme fiction, not the supreme reader, yet if we employ the poem as we would a mirror, its reflection returns to us our image; the inverted outline of the reader. The supreme fiction "must be abstract": it concretizes itself in every act of reading, and in different ways for every reader. It "must change": if the verb is intransitive, the fiction changes according to the needs of the reader; but if it is transitive, the reader enters into a relationship of mutual influence with the text. Both views are perfectly legitimate, and their coexistence underscores Stevens's conception of a fluid text; or better, his "fluent mundo" (*CP* 407). Finally, the fiction "must give pleasure":

short of an autoerotic model of textuality, this demand requires a reader as receptor of the fiction. The eight prefatory lines, whether addressed to Henry Church or not, apostrophize a "you" that will read the poem.

4

In Stevens's last word on the topic of reading, "One of the Inhabitants of the West" (*CP* 503-04), the speaking head familiar from "God is Good . . ." turns into a reader without a body. This poem provides an apocalyptic finale, as reader and text join to become indistinguishable. The "Inhabitant of the West" (Latin: Hesperus/Vesper) is Venus as the evening star, commonly known as Phosphor when referred to as the morning star.[9] This evening star can be seen early at dusk, a good time for prophecies,

> When the establishments
> Of wind and light and cloud
> Await an arrival. . . .

The world is now ready for the "pastoral text" brought by Hesperus, the evening star. This text cannot be read as though it were a book; rather, it must be absorbed. As the reader reads quietly, quotation marks indicate the terrifying message or prophecy uttered by the text:

> "Horrid figures of Medusa,
> These accents explicate
> The sparkling fall of night
> . . . . . .
> I am the archangel of evening and praise
> This one star's blaze. . . ."

The prophecy, then, is a truly apocalyptic description. John's thesis finds its "plentifullest" expression here. In astronomy, the "Head of Medusa" is the former byname of the constellation Perseus (Allen 329). Perseus is "visible in the night sky of the northern winter" (Weigert 305). Algol, or β Persei, is "a famous eclipsing binary star" (Wallenquist 179). We speak of a binary star when stars are so close together that they orbit each other. We know that β Persei is, in fact, two stars because we can observe one passing in front of the other by noting the variation in light intensity. The star, which lies outside of our solar system, glows, like Phosphor, with its own light; unlike Venus, which has only the reflected light of our own sun.[10] Since the

paired stars eclipse each other, producing variations in light intensity, they fittingly illustrate the argument of the poem, in which text and reader merge.

The onset of night, expressed by Stevens as the "sparkling fall of night" in an image that associates demise with occasional brilliance, moves inexorably from Europe westward over the "sheeted Atlantic." An array of metaphors of finality is presented to the reader: nightfall, archangel of evening, blood, guilt, autumn days—all denote endings. Medusa, usually represented with a head full of snakes, suggests guilt as well as mortality, as she is the only mortal one among the Gorgons. The "archangel of evening" is to my knowledge not a documented figure, but I understand him to be a kind of Lucifer turned Satan. Lucifer ("Latin: Lightbearer, Greek: Phosphorus, . . . the morning star" [Weigert 305]) would have been the archangel of morning and herald of dawn before his fall. In his fallen state he is associated in the last stanza with "blood." His prophecy climaxes in a vague, almost unspeakable insight: "So much guilt lies buried / Beneath the innocence / Of autumn days." The closing quotation marks signal the end of the poem which, unlike "The House Was Quiet . . . ," never returns to the reader of the text. Rather, the reader and the prophecy he reads have become one, because he has fully absorbed it.

This nameless and bodiless reader achieves what none of his predecessors managed to do. They knew, increasingly well, that imagination provides access to the world and that they could make themselves whole by complementing reality with imagination, by reading "the poem of life" ("Large Red Man Reading" 423). But only this last reader achieves oneness with his text. The colors blue and green are now conspicuously absent, while the strong red has faded to "well-rosed" to indicate complete absorption.

"Description is revelation," we learned in "Description without Place." The biblical overtones of "revelation" have in this final poem given way to a literal uncovering of what "lies buried / Beneath. . . ." As a result of a poetic closure that has become Stevens's trademark since "Sunday Morning," the insight we take away from this poem is profoundly secular. Our interest is in the sky and its astronomy, not the heavens. The poem promises the oneness of reader and text and, by extension, of ourselves and our world. The revelation of the true nature of the world empowers imaginative union.

If, then, we refuse to engage ourselves, we will become as impoverished as the ghosts in "Large Red Man Reading." If, however, we dare decipher the "rigid inscription," we will recognize that "the

world imagined is the ultimate good" ("Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," *CP* 524). This world *imagined* is clearly one imagined by its reader; it is not invested with imaginative quality in and of itself. The interdependent and paradoxical relationship of reality and the imagination comes full circle when we recall that the imaginative understanding of the world is something preconceived in our own minds, as we saw in reference to "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light." Phosphor knows what to expect and takes from this knowledge his strength to encounter reality. While for Stevens's interior paramour, "God and the imagination are one," for Phosphor and every reader of Stevens's poems thereafter, reading and the imagination merge into one. Right reading is substitute theology.

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NOTES

I wish to thank Jack Levenson for his careful reading of an earlier draft of this essay.

[1]In parenthetical references to Stevens's works, *CP* refers to Stevens's *Collected Poems*; *OP*, to *Opus Posthumous*. Since many of the poems are short, page citations are generally given only for the entire poem rather than for individual passages, and line numbers are not generally given; page citations are given for individual passages from the longer poems, however.

[2]Critics differ in their assessment of this poem's dramatis personae: Doggett treats Phosphor and the realist as identical (*Stevens' Poetry of Thought*, 80-81); Kronick also considers them one (91). Walker sees two characters (53). The description of Phosphor in the third person, contrasted with the second-person apostrophe of the realist, is, in my estimation, the strongest textual index of a two-character cast.

[3]The *OED* defines "fusky" as "dark brown, dusky, fuscous."

[4]This phrase occurs in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (*CP* 524).

[5]Stevens's "color code" has long been a critical commonplace. See Doggett, "Wallace Stevens and the World We Know" esp. 372. The *OED* defines *tabula* as "a body of laws inscribed on a tablet."

[6]See Bloom ("*Apophrades* or The Return of the Dead") 129 and passim.

[7]For a skillful *mise en abyme* of the word "cure," see Miller 10-11.

[8]This line, which follows three lines after the "plentifullest John," seems to echo the prologue to John's gospel, "In the beginning was the word. . . ." But I am inclined to regard this allusion to the evangelist as a tease on Stevens's part—the reference is to the Apocalypse by the other New Testament author named John.

[9]The *OED*'s first definition of *Phosphor* with capital initial is "the morning star." Poetical usage is well established from Abraham Cowley to Alfred Lord Tennyson.

[10]I borrow the insight about Venus from Perloff 332.

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