Antimythological Myth: Auden's Critique of Stevens's Mythopoetics

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Abstract

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Between Wallace Stevens's "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" and W. H. Auden's two intertextual poems that allude to Stevens's poetics, "In Praise of Limestone" and "Miss God on Mr. Stevens," a critique of mythopoesis emerges. For Auden, Stevens has unknowingly created a myth of the mind in "Notes," which he playfully calls the "antimythological myth." Auden's critique of Stevens's mythmaking diagnoses a problem similar to Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment and the tendency to project oneself onto myth. For Auden, in asserting poetry as the "Supreme Fiction," Stevens has wrongfully imposed the poet onto his new mythology. I argue that Auden's critique of Stevens's antimythological myth pervades throughout "In Praise of Limestone," and allows Auden to consider whether poets can or should be mythopoetic.

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Dedication

To my parents, Terence and Jennifer.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This thesis examines W. H. Auden's critique of modern mythopoetics, specifically the "antimythological myth" that Wallace Stevens elaborates in his long poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1947) and in his poetological writings.[1] I will argue that two of Auden's works written soon after the publication of Stevens's poem—"In Praise of Limestone" (1948), a major poem written a year after "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and "Miss God on Mr. Stevens," a short poem written on the inside cover of *Transport to Summer* (1947)—constitute a sustained critique of Stevens's injunction to "clean the sun" of its mythological associations.[2] Auden argues that in stripping the sun of its mythological associations the poet only exposes a new "myth of the mind";[3] in effect, the Stevensian poet inevitably confronts their own mind after removing mythological associations. This confrontation is what Auden refers to as the antimythological myth. This concept resembles Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the enlightenment's positivistic mythmaking in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, whereby enlightenment, which is supposed to rid the world of myth and superstition, becomes itself an ultimate myth or explanatory system. Similarly, in "In Praise of Limestone," the figures of the scientist and the poet discover the persistence of mythological thinking within their own era and paradigm.

In 2003, the critic Liesl M. Olson discovered a poem addressed to Stevens written in Auden's copy of *Transport to Summer* entitled "Miss God on Mr. Stevens." Auden's literally marginal poem on Stevens is supercilious and campy. Through playful critique, the titular "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" appears unmoved by Stevens's assertions about poetics in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

> O my dear, more heresy to muzzle
> No sooner have we buried in peace
> The flighty divinities of Greece,
> Than up must pop the barbarian with
> An antimythological myth,
> Calling the sun the sun, his mind "Puzzle." (qtd. in Olson, 240)

"Miss God," a figure inspired by cross-dresser Bert Savoy's famous last words before being struck by lightning—"There's Miss God at it again"—was Auden's shorthand personification of an ironic twist of fate.[4] The discovery of Auden's marginal epigram opened a new line of

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[1] W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Modern Library, 2007), 540.75.
[2] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (Library of America, 1997), 329.I.10.
[3] Liesl M. Olson, "Stevens and Auden: Antimythological Meetings," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 27, no. 2 (2003): 240–54, 241.
[4] Edward Mendelson, "Auden and God," *The New York Review of Books*, December 6, 2007, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/12/06/auden-and-god/, qtd. in sec. 4.

comparison with Stevens, one which was previously only supported by Auden's allusions to Stevens in "Kairos and Logos" (Olson, 249). Auden directly alludes to Stevens in "In Praise of Limestone," through his inclusion of the last line of "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" in the final stanza, as well as his coined phrase, antimythological myth: "The poet,/ Admired for his earnest habit of calling / The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle, is made uneasy / By these marble statues which so obviously doubt / his antimythological myth" (Auden, 540.71-75). For Olson, "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" responds directly to the poet of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The poet of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" directs the ephebe, who is a younger poet seeking instruction from the elder poet speaker, to strip away the sun's mythological connotations and "see the sun as if for the first time" (Olson, 240). However, Auden attests that in the process of erasing these mythic connotations, the poet of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" merely replaces the sun's metaphorical associations with a reflection of his own mind. As Olson puts it, Stevens's poetics "is itself myth-making"—only this time it is a "myth of the mind"; the poet's mind becomes a puzzle to be worked out (240). This misdirection is what Auden refers to in the penultimate line as "an antimythological myth" (540.75). Olson frames this disagreement as Auden's rejection of Stevens's inherited "romantic principles" (241). Overall, Auden is suspicious of Stevens's notion that the imagination can "create its own world" (Olson, 241).

In 2013, *The Wallace Stevens Journal* published a special issue showcasing the lines of affinity and disaffiliation between the two poets, which was inspired by an MLA panel on the same topic. The two poets naturally provoke comparison. However, they seldom directly acknowledged one another. Comparisons of Auden and Stevens usually class Auden as the literary historian and poet and Stevens as more of a philosophical, mystical type. Edward Mendelson presents a similar dichotomy between civil and vatic poets, placing Auden in the former "noble civic tradition."[5] Auden is a master formalist, while Harold Bloom places Stevens among the "masters of nuance."[6] Bloom sets up a similar model of the two poets in his recollection of Auden's comments on Stevens: "[Auden] did not care for Shelley and had extended this distaste to Whitman and Wallace Stevens. . . . It was consistent of Auden to condemn Shelley, Whitman, and Stevens, who were not Christian poets but Epicurean skeptics, metaphysical materialists, and above all High Romantics" (133). There is consistency, therefore, in the critical understanding of these two poets as associated with two dichotomous schools, which aids our understanding of their disagreement in "In Praise of Limestone" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Elsewhere, Auden and Stevens have been compared through their responses to political and intellectual developments during WWII (Olson, 247). Writing in the shadow of the war, Stevens speaks passionately in his lecture, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (first published in 1942), of the "violence from within that protects us from a violence without" and upholds imagination's power to resist the "pressure of reality."[7] Meanwhile,

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[5] Bart Eeckhout and Lisa Goldfarb, "Stevens and Auden: Disparities and Affinities," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013): 127–41, https://doi.org/10.1353/wsj.2013.0026, 135.
[6] Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (Yale UP, 2011), 133.
[7] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, 1st ed. (Knopf, 1951), 36.

Auden's growing uneasiness towards the political position he presented in earlier poems, like "Spain 1937" and "September 1, 1939" is well-documented; beginning in 1940, Auden quietly began to eschew the Freudian Marxist persona for which he had been praised (Mendelson, sec. 3). As such, both poets were not unaware of their poetry's potential political force. Consequently, the inward-turning nature of "In Praise of Limestone" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" towards mythological and abstract topics is remarkable given the context of their post-war publication. Moreover, as critic Edward Ragg asserts, Stevens and Auden can also be analyzed via their philosophical and aesthetic backgrounds—for Stevens, the influence of Paul Cézanne and the myth of Ariadne; for Auden, readings in Kierkegaardian theology (Eeckhout and Goldfarb, 131). From Auden's association of Stevens with the "metaphysical materialists and High Romantics," one can already begin to see the nature of their disagreement that will later be borne out in a comparison of the two important postwar poems under analysis (Bloom, 133). Auden's growing allegiance with the Protestantism of Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich, whose theology "emphasized ultimate moral absolutes," would make him hostile to Stevens's persistent agnosticism and aestheticism (Mendelson, sec. 3). Stevens commented on his faith in his correspondence with critic Hi Simons: "It is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. . . . My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 966). These differences play a part in the air of haughty skepticism that can be found in "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" and in "In Praise of Limestone." Auden will see Stevens's poetic mythmaking attempt in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" as misguided—as merely a displacement of a myth of the mind onto imagery that was hitherto animated by mythology.

In her article detailing the indirect correspondence between Stevens's poetics and Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" and his marginal poem, "Miss God on Mr. Stevens," Olson finds that imagination plays a key role in Auden's thinking about Stevens's poetics. Auden rejects Stevens's romantic tendency to view the mind as being able to "create its own world" (Olson, 241). For Auden, "Stevens's sun exists only in the mind of the poet, an imagined and inaccessible 'puzzle'" (Olson, 241). In other words, poets inevitably project their own preconceptions of the sun, the moon, or the stars on an image, after attempting to strip away whatever original mythological association it once had. In stripping the sun of mythic associations, Stevens only draws closer to a new "myth of the mind" (Olson, 241). In his own writing on poetics, Auden is freely aware of these myths of the mind—of the imaginative games that poets create: "The poet pretends for fun; he asserts his freedom by lying—that is to say, by creating worlds which he knows are imaginary" (qtd. in Eeckhout and Goldfarb, 138). Auden does not exactly condemn this aspect of poetry. His critiques of Stevens are a jab at the arch self-seriousness of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." But Auden's reservations towards Stevens's antimythological myth may well be unfounded; a closer look at "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is therefore necessary to confirm the specifics of Stevens's argument.

Wallace Stevens

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" begins with a short, almost syllogistic passage in which an elder poet inducts the younger poet, the "ephebe," into his manner of poetic thinking (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.1). This opening distinguishes "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" from Auden's "In Praise of Limestone," making it appear to be a poetic study towards a more precise, pure form of poetry, which Stevens—who may or may not stand in for the elder poet—expounds. The poem's opening has the air of a profound, logical unfolding of the speaker's poetics: "Begin, Ephebe, by perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world" (329.I.1-2). However, Stevens forgoes giving a precise definition of the supreme fiction. As Paul Mariani observes in his biography of Stevens, the poetic theory behind "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is itself paradoxical, as the attempt to strip "the imagination of all existing fictions" could inevitably lead to non-poetry.[8] Because, in stripping the imagination of its fictional beliefs, one effectively removes the metaphors and figurative language that themselves constitute poetry. Stevens did not set out resolutely to define the supreme fiction in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"; instead, in a letter to arts patron Henry Church, he stated that "the nucleus of the matter is contained in the [poem's] title"[9]—these are notes and they do not pretend to establish a precise definition. Moreover, it appears that Stevens was grappling with these ideas regarding poetry in the abstract as early as *Harmonium* (1923), of which the original title proposed by Stevens to Knopf was "The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutae" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry,* 964). Consequently, a reading of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" must take this challenge at face value and attempt to discern Stevens's definitions, even while they push poetry to be so abstract that it becomes evanescent. As Auden attests, the attempt to clean images of their mythic associations leads one instead to a myth of the mind, so is the supreme fiction that Stevens describes really what poets should strive towards?

Published first as a stand-alone text by Cummington Press in 1942 then later in *Transport to Summer* (1947), "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is Stevens's attempt to define his poetic philosophy. Dedicated to his friend and arts patron Henry Church, the poem is divided into three sections consisting of three directives for the supreme fiction: "It must be abstract. It must change. It must give pleasure" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry,* 329, 336, 344). After stating the first requirement, Stevens then introduces the poem's addressee, the "ephebe"—a conceit that echoes the tradition of an elder poet counseling a younger poet (329.I.1). The elder poet advises the ephebe to strip away common understandings of the sun and instead let it simply be "seen in its idea . . . expelled [of] us and our images" (329.I.10-12). It also begins with an epigraph that is at first glance for Church, though Stevens denies this association in his letters: "The first eight lines

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[8] Paul Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens* (Simon & Schuster, 2016), 276.

[9] Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (Knopf, 1981), 430.

have nothing to do with Mr. Church: they are by way of an introduction to the poem" (Stevens, *Letters*, 538). The poem also includes a short epilogue addressed to an unnamed soldier, which links the poem historically to the United States' recent declaration of war in 1941. Metrically, the poem is written in a casually adhered to iambic pentameter that, in Stevens's words, runs "over and under now and then" (Stevens, *Letters*, 407). The notion that these lines are notes also gives us some idea of its form. Generically, the poem might be considered a prolegomenon—a preparation in writing that intends to lay the foundations towards a more complete study of the author's subject. That Stevens would give his poem a title that echoes conventions for philosophical texts more than poetic ones—consider Immanuel Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*—affords the poem a characteristically ironized charge.

The poem also has a rigid numerical structure, being comprised of three larger sections containing ten stanzas of seven three-line verses each. This strict numerical form gives the poem a certain neatness and order, akin to a scientific study. However, scanning these sections contradicts this air of rigidity. Instead, we quickly find these seemingly rigid lines to be populated by onomatopoeia, sensuous description, and surrealistic imagery, which further ironizes the philosophical air implied by the poem's title. Another genre that is important to the first section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is that of the series of letters from an elder to a younger poet. In these letters, the elder poet counsels the younger on how to succeed in poetry. This can be seen right from the beginning of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" where we find the speaker addressing his notes to the ephebe. This conceit quickly dissipates across the first section's stanzas, but the speaker's general concern with poetry and its development remains.

The first part is interested in the impulse to write poetry and in poetry's effect. It also considers the relationship between the scholar and the poet. It is therefore most interested in poetry's beginnings. In the fourth section, the speaker describes the origin of poetry as emerging from "a muddy centre before we breathed" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 331.I.73). From this muddy centre, there is an original myth that arose before the first myth created by humans, and from this original myth "the poem springs" (331-332.I.74-76). This first poem describes the following: "That we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves / And hard it is in spite of blazoned days" (332.I.76-78). Through multifarious images, Stevens presents variations of this dislocation that the poet feels and attempts to describe: "The poem, through candor, brings back a power again / That gives a candid kind to everything" (331.I.53-54). Poetry's candor, its honest goodness and unreservedness, casts a brilliance on the world and aids our understanding. Through poetry, we find a "strange relation" in "life's nonsense" (331.I.63). It seems for Stevens that poetry has a naming power that gives a renewed clarity to the world: "The poem refreshes life" (330.I.43). The introduction of Adam in the fourth section of part one, also furthers this understanding of poetry's ability to name and clarify (331.I.64). As well, the third section's repetition of candor suggests the importance of poetry's clarifying, pure, and impartial nature (331.I.48-53). The first section ends with the speaker upholding "the idea of man" as the "major abstraction," yet he quickly changes terms, later calling "the commonal" the major abstraction (336.I.190-97). We are then directed towards a protean figure, who, though described both as a "rabbi" and a "chieftain" appears fundamentally to be an impoverished, paternal authority figure; his "slouching pantaloons" convey at once an array of interconnected images that link symbolically with the first part's focus on the archetypical scholar (336.I.199-204). As a symbol, pantaloons can invoke a weakened or foolish elderly authority figure or the

manner of dress from the Middle East or Asia; a Pantaloon ("Pantalone") is also a stock character from the commedia dell'arte: "a Venetian character representing authority and the older generation, typically depicted as a lean, foolish old man."[10] In the final lines of the first part, the elder poet commands the ephebe to consider him and "of him . . . to make, to confect / The final elegance, not to console / Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound" (336.I.208-210). The slouching Pantaloon then, perhaps incongruously, should provide impetus to the ephebe to create poetry.

Though the second part of the poem ostensibly provides another definition for poetry, namely, "It Must Change," it deviates largely from the tone of rational engagement with myth and poetry, and as such, is of less relevance to this thesis. However, though it might not deal with the nature of myth and poetry as extensively, it still engages with these concepts in a more sensuous, imagistic manner. The second part, "It Must Change," approaches similar questions regarding the nature of poetry from a different tack. This section is populated by bustling, somewhat one-dimensional characters, such as the bee, the President, and the General (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 337.II.7-22, 338.II.43). These characters are primarily used to invoke the poem's overarching concern with the martial.

Later in part two, poetry is dealt with explicitly again: "Is [poetry] a luminous flittering / Or the concentration of a cloudy day? / Is there a poem that never reaches words // And one that chaffers the time away? / Is the poem both peculiar and general?" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 343.II.172-176). These rhetorical questions suggest a new lack of clarity on the speaker's part, but of course, in asking these questions, they make his definition of poetry increasingly more fulsome as they require us to consider them in light of his earlier assertions about poetry. The speaker registers the symbiosis between a poet's language, which is at first private and idiosyncratic, and the vernacular: "The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to / The gibberish of the vulgate and back again" (342.II.169-170). These lines reflect the poem's overarching concern with the poet's relationship to their creation. Where does responsibility lie in the creation of the poem? Poetry is either "a luminous flittering," an inconstant, sparingly epiphanic source, or it is "the concentration of a cloudy day," a prolonged meditative process of understanding (343.II.172-173). Again, these lines remind us of the central division in this thesis, between the desire to "clean the sun when seen in its idea" and Auden's critique of this process, which he claims produces only an antimythological myth (329.I.10). The speaker's assertion that poetry is "both peculiar and general," reintroduces this concern (343.II.176). Poetry is either merely the idiosyncratic creation of the poet's "mythy mind" or poets are alone capable of seeing the sun cleanly "in its idea," and from this clean perception, impose their own mythology after "the death of one god" (54.III.3, 329.I.10-13). The speaker asks: "Does the poet / Evade us, as in a senseless element?" (343.III.179-180). Throughout the final part, the relation of the poet to their work continues to be a concern for the speaker.

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[10] *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Pantaloon, N." (Oxford UP, June 2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4455922907.

Fitting to its title, the final part, "It Must Give Pleasure," opens with a celebration. Moving beyond the confusions of the nature of poetry, the speaker now exults in the bare fact of the enjoyment it brings. This section introduces Christian symbolism and characters, such as Canon Aspirin and Christ imagery: "An ancient forehead hung with heavy hair" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 346.III.18). This section is ecstatic, joyous, and at moments replete with angels. Early in the first section, the speaker invokes familiar poetic images. He remarks however, that the "difficultest rigor is forthwith, / On the image of what we see" (344.III.14-15). The poet catches from nature the "irrational moment" in "its unreasoning": "The sun comes rising, when the sea / Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall // Of heaven-haven (344-345.III.15-19). However, the poet does not transform these images, though "we are shaken by them as if they were" and "we reason about them with a later reason" (345.III.20-21). These lines further delineate the poet's role as someone who captures and reclarifies nature for the "vulgate" (342.II.170). It is only afterwards, with a "later reason," that non-poets affirm these images as traditional symbols (345.III.21). In the seventh section we come closer and closer to the supreme fiction: "To find the real, / To be stripped of every fiction except one, // The fiction of an absolute— Angel" (349.III.143-145). Once more we are presented with poetry as something created after the poet has successfully stripped away everything extraneous or common to their image. The final part ends by bringing us back to earth: "Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night" (351.III.190). Now, instead of intuitively understanding the luminous, ethereal nature of poetry, we are back with the scholars "at the Sorbonne" (351.III.205). From this experience, and after settling back to earth, the speaker appears to have an epiphany regarding poetry, and we arrive at a more solid definition: "That's it: the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that" (351.III.203-204). After feeling comes fiction and this fiction, poetry, is contradictorily a rational distortion of the familiar images seen before—the deep sea and moon on the wall. The poem ends with the speaker mentally "revolving" his crystallized beloved "in a gildered street" (351.III.208-210).

In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the elder poet impels the ephebe to find his own order in nature: "To discover an order as of / A season, to discover summer and know it, / To discover winter and know it well, to find, / Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* 349.III.134-137). So, in poetry, we are to find order, not to impose it, which directs us to the problem of projection proposed by Auden. If, in understanding divinity, there lies the pitfall of imposing one's own image on to God, then in poetry too—in the attempt to see God with ignorant eyes—there is also the error of simply reimposing oneself onto a given image. In Auden's eyes, the Stevensian poet imposes their own myth of the mind onto the image.

Moreover, the speaker alludes to and directly comments upon various theories of art, including mimesis: "We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry,* 332.I.79). And clouds return later in the first canto with a reference to Dutch painter, Frans Hals, who, ironically, is better known as a portraitist: "Weather by Franz Hals, / Brushed up by brushy winds in brushy clouds, / Wetted by blue, colder for white" (333.I.108-110). Stevens's misidentification of Hals's primary subject matter is not an error but a purposeful misdirection away from the central subjects of his portraits, and towards the divine, persistent subject of the sky and clouds creating the portrait's artifice—just as "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" asks us to consider the apparatus and purpose of poems themselves. But in a unique move, Stevens, in

viewing poetry as the "muddy centre before we breathed," places the poem as coexistent with Stevens's myth of the mind, as a fundamental impetus allowing humanity not only to enjoy or bear the world—but to perceive it (331.I.73). Poetry is therefore fundamental for the speaker; it allows us to conceive the "inconceivable idea of the sun" (329.I.3). Crucially, we are not led to conceive the sun through poetry, but only the idea of the sun. This section approaches Auden's critique of Stevens; in positing poetry as the supreme fiction, the poet only finds themselves confronting a myth of the mind. In attempting to move beyond mythology, the speaker of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" has merely created an antimythological myth.

However, Stevens is careful to note that the "first idea"—the idea of poetry—"was not to shape the clouds / In imitation" (330.I.23, 331.I.71-72). Instead, he affirms the natural world's seeming strangeness to the observer: "The clouds preceded us" (331.I.72). It is from the "muddy centre" that "the poem springs" (331-332.I.73-76). The poetic impulse arises from humanity's essential condition: "That we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves" (332.I.76-77). "Centre" appears again in the following section, directed toward the ephebe: "You look / Across the roofs as sigil and as ward / And in your centre mark them and are cowed" (332.I.100-102). Though the ephebe has mysterious authority over the rooftops, he is ultimately cowed by them. The ephebe is cowed because, unlike the speaker, he is unable to access his centre and depict the rooftops through poetry. In these lines, we find the central concern of this poem, which is the relationship between the poet and their image. For Stevens, the poet must strip away the image's mythological trappings from after the "death of one god"; for Auden, this stripping is a misdirection, for the poet merely creates a new myth of the mind from reflecting on their centre (329.I.13).

Further to this point, the speaker remarks: "How clean the sun when seen in its idea" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.10). Poetry attempts to clean the sun of its mythic contingencies. To write, understand, or appreciate poetry, the ephebe must "become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it" (329.I.4-6). But with the "death of one god," we lose all mythologies—originary myths and names of natural phenomena, which circumscribe and explain their interdependence and behaviour (329.I.13). Thus, "Phoebus" becomes sun, though somewhere in that indeterminate space—perhaps in the "muddy centre before we breathed"—between sun and Phoebus is the poet (329.I.14, 331.I.73). And the myth of the mind is the "myth before the myth began"—that which gave life to Phoebus and made him "venerable and articulate and complete" (331.I.74-75).

"The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words"

Stevens's own writings on poetics reveal the philosophy behind "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," specifically how mythology relates to his understanding of the imagination. In his essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he establishes his own definition of poetry during the radical upheaval of WWII. Stevens describes—borrowing a phrase from Samuel Taylor Coleridge—the "gorgeous nonsense" of Plato, specifically regarding his chariot allegory (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 4). But why does this allegory become "merely the emblem of a mythology, the rustic memorial of a belief?" (4). Through poetry, we are moved to delight "in the nobility and noble breed" of the winged horses, alongside Socrates (5). However, ultimately, we cannot yield ourselves to fully delight in the nobility of this image. In Plato's "figure" of the chariot, we can reflect on the successive changes throughout history of this original image of nobility—though it is estranged from us in our present position (6). Plato's figure has lost its vitality because he has adhered to the unreal, rather than the real, and readers "concede that the figure is all imagination. . . . It has not the slightest meaning for us, except for its nobility" (6). Stevens appears to be struggling with similar issues in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Though we are pleased by Plato's allegory, he remarks that we cannot fully embrace this image because it has lost its nobility. Similarly, in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Phoebus demarcates "something that never could be named" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.17). "Phoebus is dead" and as such, the speaker of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" offers the supreme fiction, to replace this dead god (329.I.16). As opposed to Plato's figures, the supreme fiction will adhere to the real and thereby retain its vitality throughout time.

Stevens proceeds to trace the concept of nobility "as a characteristic of the imagination," and touches upon several concepts important to his conception of poetry and the imagination (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 7). He cites Coleridge's understanding of fancy as "an activity of the mind which puts things together of choice, *not* the will, as a principle of the mind's being, striving to realize itself in knowing itself" (10). He concludes that the primary cause of nobility's degeneration in art is due to the "failure in the relation between imagination and reality" (13). For Stevens, this failure is best exemplified by the Equestrian Statue of General Andrew Jackson in Lafayette Square, Washington D.C., especially as it compares to Andrea del Verrocchio's statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni (10). The former statue, Clark Mills's representation of Jackson, does not contain "the slightest trace of the imagination" (11). Instead, it is a work of fancy; the statue helps Americans to attain self-knowledge of who they are and who they were, but in the statue, there is "neither the imagination nor reality" (11). Stevens later defines poetry as "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (27). In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens prefers the term "imagination" to describe what the poet uses to write poetry. The imagination produces the poet's unaffected creation; in ideal circumstances, it is wholly unaffected by the societal pressures that, for example, the sculptor of a general's statue must consider. The poem is an attempt to unify imagination and reality in poetry and expose poetry's unfanciful nature. Though, of course, Auden will argue that this creates only a myth of the mind, which cannot ultimately escape the contexts that the speaker of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" wishes to banish.

Later, Stevens remarks upon the suppression of romantic "commonplaces" in contemporary times: "All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence" (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 17). "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" expresses a similar concern and is also an effort to address this diffusion of conflicting narratives; it is Stevens's attempt to convey a new unifying theory under his concept of the supreme fiction. The term, "supreme fiction" itself could be thought of as one and the same as Auden's term of critique: antimythological myth. That a fiction could be supreme, or, in other words, divine, is a similarly self-defeating notion. For most, it would be undesirable to rest questions of morality onto fiction. However, Stevens was adamant regarding the importance of fiction in guiding belief. As he once remarked to a young student, he believed that we have "reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction" (Mariani 275). For Stevens, fiction guides us constantly as we suspend our disbelief; the belief in heaven is just one of these many fictions (275). Consequently, the supreme fiction figures monumentally in Stevens's vision of society after the death of God. The correct articulation of the supreme fiction is of utmost importance, as it could act as the guiding principle for an increasingly secular society.

Near the essay's conclusion, Stevens mentions the supreme fiction by name, by defining the poet as someone who "creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 31). In this definition, we use the poet's supreme fiction to aid us in understanding the poet's invented world; the supreme fiction makes conceivable the "inconceivable idea of the sun," which we consider reflexively in our day to day lives (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.3). The supreme fiction would therefore play a fundamental part in the structure of a secular society. But to become a poet—a creator of supreme fictions—one must become "an ignorant man again" (329.I.4). This is precisely what makes the poet the "potent figure that he is"; poets invent the world and guide individuals (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 31). The importance of this role infuses poets' words with a profound gravity. Again, on this score Auden's poems will counter Stevens's perceived sententiousness. Stevens's divine view of poetry, though not entirely incorrect, errs in its belief that the supreme fiction can supersede mythology; instead, as in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightenment, the supreme fiction only creates a new antimythological myth in the old gods' stead.

The rest of *Transport to Summer* picks up on several recurring images also present in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The speaker of "Description Without Place" also uses the sun as a philosophical example: "It is possible that to seem—it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 296.1-2). Similar to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," this line also uses the sun as an image of ultimate being. The appearance of the sun is coincident with its being, which recalls the injunction in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" to try to see the sun cleanly. The scholar also reappears in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm": "The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom / The summer night is like a perfection of thought" (312.8-9). Similarly, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" begins: "Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man / Close to me, hidden in me day and night?" (329). These lines associate the abstractions of the scholar with the experience of waking life. The scholar's words serve to support the poet of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" in his creation.

Transport to Summer's poems convey a mysterious koan-like absence. Several poems in this collection develop a unique mathematical metaphor, as Stevens uses variables as a poetic device. "The Motive for Metaphor" insists on the second-person's admiration of fall and spring as allowing them to give voice to "things that would never be quite expressed" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 257.9-10). The same poem culminates in an image of "poetry [as] change"—of creation as urgent, almost violent industry, which reveals the "vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X" (Stevens, *Letters*, 430, *Collected Poetry*, 257.20). Elsewhere, the algebraic theme is followed, as in "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch" which considers the contingencies of a particular sitter, who the speaker, in the parlance of a geometrical paper, suggests "suppose we call it Projection A" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 262.3). The casual, forgetful expression "so-and-so" itself foregrounds the difficulties and absurdities inherent in engaging directly with the world in poetry—a central concern of this collection and Stevens generally (262). "X is an obstruction," as Stevens summarizes this issue later in the same volume in "The Creations of Sound" (274.7). X, the direct object that the metaphor seeks to describe, is an obstruction from the purer "idea" (329.I.10). Indeed, many poems in *Transport to Summer* include abstract variables; counterintuitively, these poems often profess ignorance of the very subject at the heart of their narrative. In this sense, they take seriously and enact the call to "become an ignorant man again" (329.I.4). By using these variables in his poems, Stevens foregrounds the emptiness of metaphors, which demonstrates the necessity for the poet to see images cleanly.

Bringing all of this to bear on "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," we can see more clearly the problem of the poet's anthropomorphizing mythology. In a proclamation akin to "Pan is Dead," the speaker describes Phoebus's insufficiency as a heuristic for understanding the sun, its motions, and its effect on the harvest season: "Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest, / Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.14-15). And just as Pan is dead, "The death of one god is the death of all" (329.I.13). If these heuristics are dead, then it is up to the wiser poet and the ephebe to perceive the universe's fundaments in their newly desacralized form. The variables Stevens uses in the rest of *Transport to Summer* is one way that he thematizes this seeker's search for an absent subject. The scholar, also, intimates this theme of the unfulfilled pursuit that finds its satiation in the "moment in the central of our being, / The vivid transparence that you bring is peace" (329). Auden's response to Stevens in "In Praise of Limestone" and "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" will clarify the specifics of his divergence from Stevens on the issue of the poet's role in mythic creation. For Auden, Stevens's injunctions to the ephebe are shortsighted, and his repartee in "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" ridicules the notion that the individual psychology is superior to the sun or can elude the mythology of the sun surrounding it.

W.H. Auden

"Miss God on Mr. Stevens"

Auden's marginal poem in his copy of *Transport to Summer,* "Miss God on Mr. Stevens," provides a commentary on Stevens's antimythological myth. "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" was written in Auden's personal copy of Stevens's *Transport to Summer*, which was published in 1947 and so predates his composition of "In Praise of Limestone" by approximately one year. "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" is a concise and focused reaction to Stevens's concept of poetics and mythology:

Miss God on Mr. Stevens

O my dear, more heresy to muzzle

No sooner have we buried in peace

The flighty divinities of Greece,

Than up must pop the barbarian with

An antimythological myth,

Calling the sun the sun, his mind "Puzzle." (qtd. in Olson, 240)

In "Miss God," Auden evidently felt provoked to playfully critique "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." For Auden, Stevens's poetics is a "heresy to muzzle," one that at first seems to banish the old gods, but then unknowingly revives these "flighty divinities" through the creation of an antimythological myth (qtd. in Olson, 240.1-3). As well, Stevens is a "barbarian" from a land unfamiliar and hostile to Auden (240.4). Auden's use of barbarian is also ironic given his own status as a non-native to the United States, which gives another hint at the poem's overall tone of gentle teasing.

The final word, "Puzzle," is enigmatic, pointing either towards Stevens's opacity or the speaker's unconscious self-delusion in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (qtd. in Olson, 240.6) The final line of "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" directs us to the same conundrum that the speaker of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" faces. In the poem's opening lines, he directs the ephebe to consider his mind's idea of the sun and the mythology that precedes it. Indeed, the last two lines of "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" make explicit reference to the opening lines of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The puzzle is the "inconceivable idea of the sun" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.3). Auden accuses Stevens of engaging in mythmaking while contradictorily asserting "an antimythological myth" (qtd. in Olson, 240.5).

In her paper on this dialogue between Auden and Stevens, Olson states that, in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens asks us to "erase our assumptions about what the sun

represents, mythically and poetically," yet it is not altogether clear whether Stevens suggests that one can elude the mythological associations of nature, nor is it certain if he asks us to take an active role in erasing these associations (Olson, 240). True, Stevens states that "Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named," but, though this statement suggests that mythologies cannot fully capture the essence of objects, it does not appear to reject the practice of mythmaking and poetic association altogether (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.16-17). This is the perspective from which Auden critiques Stevens—is it not contradictory to claim that the sun could never be named in a poem which itself constructs and commends the process of poetic creation—the process *towards* a supreme fiction? The injunction that the "The sun / Must bear no name" cannot be separated from the earlier stanza which asks the poet to "See the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it" (330.I.19-20, 329.I.5-6).

In "Miss God," Auden asks if it is possible to demythologize. The speaker of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" assumes that the myths of nature must be stripped away and that there is also a supreme fiction to be found beneath these mythic trappings. Stevens's "antimythological myth" is just another of the "flighty divinities" that Auden's persona "Miss God" must quell (qtd. in Olson, 240.3-5). The ideal poet must strip away everything that they have come to associate with the sun—its cultural associations of it promoting happiness, growth, fertility, masculinity—and contribute their own understanding. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is partly a document of the seeker's quest; a romantic retelling of Stevens's meditations in Hartford to "find the real" and "be stripped of every fiction except one" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 349.III.143-144). "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" also queers Stevens's quest to define the supreme fiction. In this playful epigram, Auden pokes fun at the self-seriousness of the speaker in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and broadens the queer implications of the homoerotic mentor-mentee dynamic that Stevens sets up.

As mentioned earlier, Mariani relates an anecdote about Stevens that is telling regarding Stevens's views about the philosophy behind *Notes*. Stevens remarked to a younger student that "the modern mind had now 'reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction'" (Mariani 275). For Stevens, people believe and follow fictions all the time—put into poetic terms, this is what Coleridge describes as suspension of disbelief (275). Taken in this sense, the use of fiction in supreme fiction is not necessarily pejorative; it is merely another fiction among a multitude that we live by for guidance in our lives.

So, potentially, Auden's reading of Stevens in "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" rests on a misunderstanding of Stevens poetics. Olson frames this disagreement as Auden's suspicion towards Stevens's "inheritance of the romantic principles that [Auden] himself sought to reject" (Olson 241). These romantic principles would conflict with Auden's Christian faith. Arguably, this debate goes deeper—between Auden's Christianity and Stevens's agnosticism, which Auden dubs the "flighty divinities" of his poetry (qtd. in Olson, 240.3). And, as Olson discovered, this critique cut further in earlier drafts of "Miss God," where Auden writes "polytheism of Ancient Greece," estranging and further mystifying Stevens's worldview from his own, though "heresy" survives through all versions (qtd. in Olson, 241). But perhaps it is worth taking a deeper look into Auden's worldview as it is expressed in "In Praise of Limestone" to better understand its intricacies and the many errors contained in Stevens's heresy.

"In Praise of Limestone"

Written in Ischia in May 1948 and later published as part of his collection *Nones* in 1951, "In Praise of Limestone" is a multivalent work. Above all, it deals with the shaky foundations of history, memory, and nostalgia through a consideration of limestone as fundamental to civilization. "In Praise of Limestone" blends Ischia and his home of the Yorkshire Dales into a murky composite, which is considered via various interconnecting figments of the poet's mind. The poem is divided into three long stanzas. The stanzas are themselves made up of long, flowing sentences connected by colons and semicolons. The poem's first quoted line of dialogue is given emphasis by a large caesura in the second stanza. Visually, the poem has something of the appearance of a loose or toppling limestone column; each successive line demands close attention and reliance on those prior, and the liberally employed colons and semicolons act as logical supporters for the poem's weighty, expansive structure. In the wideness of the poem's purview, the speaker plays with locution and sprezzatura and constantly threatens to topple his own pillars under the weight of his poem's successive, recondite logic.

The first stanza of "In Praise of Limestone" begins by describing limestone, the essential metaphor of this poem: "If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones, / Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly / Because it dissolves in water" (Auden, 538.1-3). From the outset, we are met with a flurry of contradictions. However, they are contradictions that explain the bittersweet sensation of nostalgia, as the speaker remembers the Yorkshire Dales from Ischia, which themselves are both limestone landscapes. The speaker's itinerancy feeds his homesickness, and the beauty of limestone as a building block of ancient culture is beautiful only now in our remembrance of what it may once have been, as tourists survey the decaying ruins of the Mediterranean. We then follow the limestone dissolving in water, and the speaker takes us to the subterranean, where we witness the limestone ruin's interiority: "A secret system of caves and conduits; hear the springs / That spurt out everywhere with a chuckle" (538.5-6). The cave system is revealed to be a kind of pleasure dome for "the butterfly and the lizard" that call it home (538.9). Although, we begin with the speaker's nostalgia, this is quickly undercut by imagery that presents a hospitable, favourable underworld. Interpreted psychologically, this is the speaker's subconscious, though, this psychological reading is not demanded of us until we meet the speaker's mother; who is not more like these caves, the speaker asks, than his Mother? (538.11). Her "flirtatious" son is responsible for the variety of landscapes and architecture around them (538.12-15). Auden also uses a geological pun to make the son inextricable with the surrounding limestone landscape: "For all his faults he is loved" (538.14).

In the next stanza, we meet the "band of rivals," who inhabit an Escherian, urban or suburban area: "They climb up and down / Their steep stone gennels in twos and threes" (Auden, 539.21-22). In the Yorkshire dialect, a gennel, ginnel, or snicket is "a long narrow passage

between houses, either roofed or unroofed."[11] As such, it is strange to say that the rivals are climbing, or that the gennels are in any way steep. Auden also makes this architecture appear impossible by making the rivals stand three abreast, which would be difficult given the narrowness of gennels. The rivals seem like automatons, as they walk incessantly up and down, but not, however, "in step," which seems to imply the speaker does not intend this as a parody of fascists (539.23). The speaker then reveals the rivals to be theologians, perhaps representing different aspects of a religious divide: "Unable / To conceive a god whose temper-tantrums are moral / And not to be pacified by a clever line / Or a good lay" (539.26-29). Their theological beliefs are then subtly alluded to, primarily by negation: "Accustomed to a stone that responds, / They have never had to veil their faces in awe" (539.29-30). Auden invokes again the problem of attributing human-like qualities to God through the rivals' distaste for the "insects of the jungle. . . . With which we have nothing, we like to hope, in common" (539.37-38). The poem then hinges at an approximate midpoint around an ellipsis. Now, the landscape itself speaks. The "granite wastes" and the "clays and gravels" witness and comment upon large-scale historical movements occurring around them: "On our plains there is room for armies to drill" (539.49-53). The stanza ends with an "oceanic whisper," one that is more primordial than the rest: "There is no love;/ There are only the various envies, all of them sad" (540.58-61).

The third and final stanza begins with another shift in address. The speaker affirms that "they were right, my dear, all those voices were right / And still are; this land is not the sweet home that it looks" (Auden, 540.62-63). This series of lines goes on to consider the persistence of historical strife in the landscape; the remote romance of the ancient world is now only "a backward / And dilapidated province, connected / To the big busy world by a tunnel" (540.65-67). But "not quite" the speaker corrects, these ancient limestone landscapes still have a "worldly duty," which the landscape's presence consistently calls into question; the persistence of these ancient landscapes hang an air of doubt over the legitimacy and eternal authority of the "Great Powers" (540.68-71). The next shift in this stanza deals most explicitly with Stevens's poetics, because of the lines it shares with "Miss God," the initial poem Auden made in his copy of *Transport to Summer*. The speaker describes the poet's errors. The poet is "admired for his earnest habit of calling / The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle"; in other words, the poet demythologizes the sun (540.72-73). He strips away its common associations until he is left with the sun in itself. Concurrently, the poet is psychologized. He now views his mind as a psychological puzzle to be solved, and his poetry is merely the result of this interrogation of his mind. Yet, the poet is also overshadowed by the ancient landscape he inhabits. The weight of history "so obviously doubt[s] / His antimythological myth" (540.74-75). The speaker also alludes to the movement out of benighted mythology and into enlightenment: "To resemble / The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water / Or stone whose conduct can be predicted" (540.80-82). These elements of nature are now losing their typical mythological attributes. In an image with a dual meaning, the stone's movements are predicted deterministically. But the stone's conduct also implies its volition; it is also "a stone that responds" (539.29). The poem

[11] George Redmonds, "Ginnel," in *Yorkshire Historical Dictionary* (University of York), accessed July 4, 2025, https://yorkshiredictionary.york.ac.uk/words/ginnel.

concludes with the speaker's affirmation that the nostalgic and inspirational landscapes of Yorkshire and Ischia, as well as the "underground streams," influence his understanding of "a faultless love / Or the life to come" (540.93-95).

"In Praise of Limestone" is pertinent to this paper for its clear intersection with the poetics of Wallace Stevens, particularly, as Olson points out, due to the lines it shares with Auden's "Miss God on Mr. Stevens":

> The poet,
>
> Admired for his earnest habit of calling
>
> **The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle**, is made uneasy
>
> By these marble statues which so obviously doubt
>
> His **antimythological myth** (Auden, 540.71-75)

This section, with its introductory clause, emphasizes "the poet" and in doing so seems to offer not just commentary on a particular poet—whom we might by this point assume to be Stevens—but on poets in general (540.71). But this short section could also be remarking specifically on the poet of Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," who might also make weighty declarations about poets and poetry.

Of course, these lines from "In Praise of Limestone" and "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" are not identical, and they diverge in some telling ways. First, "Miss God's" initial sarcasm has been tempered for the press; no longer is it Auden's version of God, Miss God, giving her witty judgement of Stevens; instead, it is the sagacious speaker of "In Praise of Limestone" In this later version, the poet of "In Praise of Limestone" is "admired for his earnest habit," and the "flighty divinities" that he resists are replaced by "marble statues which so obviously doubt" his poetic heresy (Auden, 540.71-74). Putting aside the oddity of "obviously" doubting marble statues, which may be intentionally opaque, this version places the gods of Ancient Greece in a much more active role of judgement on the Stevensian poet (540.74). The degree to which this section loses its humorous bite is arguable. This time around, we get "earnest," but it is unclear whether this is earnestness in its sense of amiable sincerity or in the sense of naïveté (540.72). In the second version, we also get the poet's reaction to this ancient voice; he is made "uneasy" by it—a marked difference to his static position in "Miss God" (540.73). Auden's wisecrack about the puzzle is retained but the notion of the "antimythological myth" is moved to become the clause's punchline (540.75). With this passage, Auden steps out of the Miss God persona, preferring instead a less overtly humorous analysis of Stevens. This time, we get something more in the vein of gentle philosophical musing; the conscious positioning of Stevens as weathervane for "poets" is a subtle move which shifts the tone towards curiosity about the historical world that poets now inhabit. The speaker describes how the poet, a nameless stand-in for "poets today," is admired for his modern frankness of speech. Again, the process of stripping away is inevitably harrowed by the past, which is inextricable from the concrete descriptions a poet like Stevens strives after.

Let's look now at the rest of "In Praise of Limestone" to find other evidence of engagement with myth or Stevens. The poem carefully subverts and toys with the sense of homesickness at the heart of the pastoral poem. Throughout, the poem is a strange remembrance of place, it is remarkably open and encompassing of many different interpretations of place, the limestone landscape it directs itself towards. The speaker is also ambiguous, possibly an individual, possibly a god or many gods in multiple voices; the speaker is also addressed by inanimate things such as the water, gravel, and dirt of the landscapes the speaker pursues throughout the poem.

The "limestone landscape" described is involuted, seeming to twist or expand, at times appearing like a pocket Eden and at others appearing byzantine and sinister, such as the "band of rivals" who "climb up and down / Their steep stone gennels" (Auden, 539.21-22). The poem also has the feeling of movement, though the reader is never quite sure where they are headed or where they have just come from. Despite this apparent cacophony and spatial chaos, which threatens to undermine this poem completely, its tone and rhythm ride along unbothered and assiduously, despite its water-like flux. What lends this poem an air of control, despite its vertiginous expansiveness, is partly the speaker's ratiocinative language and elegant introductory clauses, which mimics the circumlocution of polite society, though the range of topics is high-minded and philosophical, at times the subject matter turns humorously lurid and bathetic: "These modifications of matter into / Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains" (540).

A larger notion captured in Auden's critique of Stevens, regarding the tendency to project oneself onto God, recalls perhaps the earliest such claim made by Xenophanes in his fifteenth fragment: "If horses had hands, or oxen or lions, or if they could draw with their hands and produce works as men do, then horses would draw figures of gods like horses, and oxen like oxen."[12] Xenophanes' argument that we wrongfully impose ourselves onto divinity is shared by Auden as well, who grappled with this issue in the evolution of his own faith; he once wrote a poem about the faith of microbes, in which he implicitly conflates human theology with an imagined microbial one (Mendelson). And later, he would return to this same concern over human ignorance and the insufficiency of our understanding of the divine with his Miss God persona; in his conception of God, Auden was aware that he strives to find "an image of his image of himself" (qtd. in Mendelson, sec. 4). Like Xenophanes, Auden critiqued understandings of God and other central tenets of Christianity that were anthropocentric, for example, he discredited the popular conception of Hell as erroneous, "because it is conceived of in terms of human criminal law, as a torture imposed upon the sinner against his will by an all-powerful God" (qtd. in Mendelson). For Auden, Miss God represents the human urge to identify design in one's fate; it is a caricature of providence that highlights the ironies laden in life. The phrase comes from cross-dresser Bert Savoy's last words as he observed a thunderstorm—moments before he was killed by a lightning strike: "There's Miss God at it again" (qtd. in Mendelson, sec. 4). Returning to Stevens's position on this matter, in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" the speaker remarks how one commonly sees the sun in their own image, but a poet must see the sun

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[12] Patricia Curd, ed., *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, 2nd ed., trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd (Hackett, 2011), 34.

"with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.5-6). Xenophanes provokes us to imagine the divine as free from any particular epithet or physical feature, just as the speaker of *Notes* prods the ephebe to see the sun with ignorant eyes. Yet, Stevens acknowledges man's creation of the Gods; in his adagia he says: "This happy creature—It is he that invented the Gods. It is he that put into their mouths the only words they have ever spoken" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 906).

Somewhat more difficult to interpret however, is Auden's assertion that the poet's mind is a puzzle. How does this relate to his larger point about Stevens's mythologizing? The puzzle is what the poet must inevitably confront after stripping an image of its mythic associations. But this leads us to a seeming contradiction, for if the poet wishes to see the sun cleanly in its *idea*, then are they really seeing it cleanly at all? This is a tacit acknowledgment that the poet of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" will always be at one point of remove from experience of the sun in itself. This is what leads Auden to wittily reply that this poet will find themselves puzzling over their mind in their poetry. To a lesser extent, it could also be interpreted as a criticism of the star-gazing poet's lack of self-knowledge. By favouring contemplation of the sun, the poet has foregone the self-development necessary for poetry's feeling, instead preferring the kind of abstract contemplation that is the domain of the philosopher.

Both versions of the Stevens critique in Auden's poem seem to hinge on Auden's coinage, "antimythological" (Auden, 540.75). What does antimythological mean in this context? And how is Stevens's poetry antimythological? If Auden considers Stevens's poetry antimythological, then how might "In Praise" propose a different viewpoint on mythology—if not on poetics also? To reiterate, the critique that Stevens is antimythological, is that he is in some part naïve, in thinking that the poet can fully do away with mythology in his poetry and is not beholden to the same mythological context that influences all artists. In Auden's view, Stevens's poetry has rejected mythological influence, yet it persists in creating mythological systems, such as the supreme fiction.

The Dialectic of Enlightenment by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer

A remarkable similarity shared between both "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and "In Praise of Limestone" is their focus on a youthful, idealized poet. In both poems, there is an elder poet and younger poet or admirer of the elder poet. Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" features the "gamins,/ Pursuing the scientist down the tiled colonnade / With such lively offers" (Auden, 540.75-77). Though, the speaker specifically targets a scientist in these lines, I view this figure as being conflated with the poet in earlier lines, as a similar mythmaking figure in modernity. The conceit in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" of the elder poet instructing the ephebe, especially with its repeated use of the sun as a philosophical example, draws to mind the allegories used in the dialogues and the relationships found between the *erastes* (lover) and the *eromenos* (love object), such as Socrates and Alcibiades. However, Auden's entry into this exchange with "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" upsets the traditional dynamic, for Miss God, Bert Savoy, and Auden's drag queen version of God constitute a reversal of this typical dynamic between the enamoured elder poet towards their younger protégé. Auden's introduction of camp into this dynamic introduces a ludic dimension to Stevens's poetic arguments; however, this is not to say that "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is entirely devoid of humour. In effect, Auden is humorously reading into Stevens's poem the homoerotic tensions that are arguably not fully addressed by Stevens. As well, "Miss God's" camp juxtaposes humorously with the professional persona of Harvard man, Stevens.

The extent to which Auden's queering of Stevens's poem affects this debate around the antimythological myth depends on the seriousness of Auden's own critique in "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" and "In Praise of Limestone." The humorous language of "Miss God," such as "muzzle," "pop," and "barbarian," reflects earnest but playful engagement with Stevens's thinking (qtd. in Olson, 240.1-4). The initial address of "O my dear" also affirms this reading of an indulgent, mock-concern on Auden's part (240.1). It becomes clear that Auden is not trying to completely undercut Stevens's, but instead to introduce a playful satire of his high-minded poetics. Auden's Miss God figure, itself a projection of human intelligibility onto God, gently chides Stevens's pretensions toward the poet's mythopoetic ability. Miss God herself, appears to embody these critiques implicit in "In Praise" and this epigram. If Stevens's poet in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" has unknowingly created a myth of the mind from his cleansing of the sun, then Miss God also represents Auden's own version of locating one's mind in a myth. Miss God is Auden's own idealized vision of a God with an intelligible, sometimes ironic, design. But, putting Auden's personal interpretations of the Miss God figure aside, she is a fundamentally campy figure. Consequently, "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" is both the exemplar and the critique of Stevens's mythopoetic aspirations.

As well, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the enlightenment lends a useful angle of analysis for these poems. If "explanations of the world as nothingness or as the entire cosmos are

mythologies," then Stevens's totalizing myth of the mind would also appear to qualify.[13] According to Auden, in placing the poet as the sole expositor of the sun's meaning, Stevens has merely created a new myth of the mind in mythology's stead; this myth is what the poet will fruitlessly puzzle over in their poetry. Adorno and Horkheimer diagnose the same inevitable process of mythmaking, self-conscious or otherwise, that Auden judges Stevens to be participating in. The desire to cleanse the sun of its mythic associations follows the same positivistic impulse of the enlightenment. But in applying "the machinery of thought" so rigorously to existence itself, the enlightenment project became more unaware of the fact of its mere reproduction of existence (Adorno and Horkheimer, 20). It is this aspect that inevitably returned the enlightenment back to mythology. Auden finds in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" a similar error in development.

In their dialectical critique of the enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer see mythology and the enlightenment as enmeshed; they are not distinct epochs fundamentally divorced from one another by the linear progression of rationality. This line of thinking drives them to acknowledge the derivation of the enlightenment from the practice of magicians and ritualistic cults: "The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 6). In the enlightenment era, the same kind of totalizing worldview that links the death of an animal with a successful harvest can be found replicated in the view of "the world as a gigantic analytical judgement"; this view, Adorno and Horkheimer assert, "is of the same kind as the cosmic myth which linked the alternation of spring and autumn to the abduction of Persephone" (20). Similarly, in Auden's critique of Stevens's antimythological myth in "In Praise of Limestone," he also warns how the poet's "earnest habit" of clarifying the sun with the analytical powers of the mind can lead him back to the same superstition he sought to avoid (Auden, 540.72). Mythology pursues the "scientist," who is tempted by the "lively offers" of the "gamins" (540.76-77). Again, Auden uses antiquated language describing young men to queer Stevens's poetics; here as elsewhere, the gamins refer to a repressed dark age of mythology that Stevens appears unable to banish in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The gamins "rebuke his concern for Nature's / Remotest aspects" (540.77-78). The scientist, in attempting to subjugate what was previously "wholly alien, as in the earliest mythology," finds himself still at the whims of these chaotic, homeless youths (Adorno and Horkheimer, 33). In these lines, Auden depicts the porousness of the seemingly separate spheres of the mythic and the enlightenment age. The setting of this encounter within a "tiled colonnade" compounds this allegory for the encounter between myth and the enlightenment; the colonnade provides the thematic backdrop for the scientist's temptation, as it evokes the foundation of Western philosophy and mythology (Auden, 540.76). This entire sequence depicts Auden's critique of Stevens, as the poet and the scientist are shown to be foiled by the same totalizing mythologies they sought to avoid.

Throughout "In Praise of Limestone" one finds this dialectic recurring, as the speaker depicts these intermingling epochs on ancient soil. This meeting of the moderns with the ancients

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[13] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford UP, 2002), 18.

plays out elsewhere; in an earlier stanza, the ritualistic priests, who are "accustomed to a stone that responds . . . never had to veil their faces in awe / Of a crater whose blazing fury could not be fixed" (Auden, 539.29-31). The speaker finds that, inhering in the priests' fear of nature, is the inevitability of the enlightenment's subjugation of nature to rationality. The speaker expresses fear of becoming "caught" in this dynamic and becoming beholden to the capitalist forces driven by the enlightenment: "Not to lose time, not to get caught, / Not to be left behind, not, please! to resemble / The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water / Or stone whose conduct can be predicted" (540.79-82). Once more, the inextricability of the enlightenment from mythological thinking is represented by the animated stone, which responds with a predictable outcome when given an offering, but simultaneously, in the enlightenment's deterministic universe, nature can also be predicted and profited from.

The poem concludes, however, with a note of hopefulness, as the speaker affirms what in our nature is separate from the profit motive: "These / Are our Common Prayer, whose greatest comfort is music" (Auden, 540.82-83). Music, he goes on, is accessible to all and abundant (540.84-85). Art, therefore, in the speaker's view, is still something "made solely for pleasure"; the fundamental beauty of humanity and its creations, the "innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains" still provide the speaker with joy in the face of death (540.89-90). The speaker then strains to envision a "faultless love" and rests again on the utopic, nostalgic landscape of Yorkshire and the eternal summer of Ischia: "When I try to imagine a faultless love / Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur / Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape" (540.93-95). The speaker ultimately sidesteps the dialectic presented by Adorno and Horkheimer and turns his attention instead to the central paradox of life: "In so far as we have to look forward / To death as a fact, no doubt we are right" (540.86). But he continues by affirming his faith in the promises of Christianity: "But if / Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead" (540.87). If these impossibilities are possible, then there remains hope for emancipation from "the self-destruction of enlightenment" (xvi). However, the speaker does not rest merely on blind faith, for he admits, "I know nothing of / Either" (540.92-93). In a final affirmation of art and the imaginative capacity, the "faultless love" and "the life to come" appear to him as coincident with the beautiful limestone landscape in his memory (540.93-94).

In the beginning of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the speaker asserts the necessity for the poet to perceive the world's inventedness. In other words, it is only through acknowledging the natural world's subjugation to the self that the ephebe can begin to supply his own understanding. In the context of the enlightenment, the "truth in general" is "equated" with the classification of nature into "fixed distinctions"; in fact, this process itself provides the necessary context for the self to exist at all (Adorno and Horkheimer, 10). But implicit in the speaker's assertions, if the sun must be cleansed of its associations with Phoebus, then so too must nature's "order and subordination" be revoked (10). To achieve the supreme fiction, these typical understandings must be done away with and the ephebe "must become an ignorant man again" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.4). Reading "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" alongside Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of the enlightenment clarifies how the speaker's purview contains both the mythic and enlightenment age. The invented world is both the world of the venerated idol, which is "subject to the law of equivalence," and the logical universe, wherein "equivalence itself becomes a fetish" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 12). The perhaps idealistic goal of the poet is therefore to pierce this artifice and to contribute one's own meaning

to the world. The speaker goes on to resolutely defy the enlightenment "project" to reduce and classify the world: "But Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named. / There was a project for the sun and is" (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 329.I.16-18). The speaker now appears to reject the fear-induced urge to reduce the sun, either to Phoebus or to a celestial body. Instead, the ephebe must be brave enough to dwell in the awed state of the ignorant before nature: "The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be" (330.I.19-21). When understood through Adorno and Horkheimer's framing, the speaker of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" appears capacious and less single-mindedly antimythological. Instead, the speaker presents the ephebe with a dual front from which he should safeguard his poetic clarity. The reductive vices that afflict poetics are both modern and ancient; indeed, the enlightenment is inextricable from the mythological worldview that grounds it. Of course, whether the poet really has this power, to see the sun "washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven" is another question entirely (329.I.11).

More generally, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction's" insistence on the pure and clarifying nature of poetry and the necessity for the poet to cleanse images of their typical associations is clearly at odds with the enlightenment as defined by Adorno and Horkheimer. The enlightenment sees anything that cannot be "resolved into numbers" as illusory (Adorno and Horkheimer, 4). However, as mentioned above, Stevens understands the ubiquity and importance of the fictions individuals rely on to live their lives. The concept of the supreme fiction itself, and much of the poem's meta-poetic commentary, asserts the value of fiction against the positivistic impulse to vanquish "all gods and qualities" (5). "The poem refreshes life" and "satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning"; art makes life worth living and is resistant to the enlightenment's subjugation (Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 330.I.43-45). However, it is unclear whether Stevens was hostile to these forces. Instead, he frames this issue as a conflict between the imagination and the pressures of society—as "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 36). For Stevens, the sound of poetry's words has "something to do with our self-preservation" and the expression of poetry "helps us to live our lives" (36). Reading these statements from his speech, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" alongside "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" reveals his belief in poetry's use as a much larger, guiding force for humanity. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, Stevens appears unshaken by the supremacy of positivism in his era; instead, he affirms the importance of art in its own sphere, and he is confident in the imagination's ability to depict reality. In the pejorative sense, escapist art occurs when the poet is detached from reality (31). Poets should seek to enrich their readers with their own imagination, and he deemphasizes the social role that poets could play (31). Consequently, Stevens is uniformly unthreatened by the enlightenment's dominance in his century; he is earnest in his belief in poetry's enduring and fundamental value.

Conclusion

Auden's epigram, "Miss God," begs to be understood by the reader because of the inventiveness and humorousness of his language. The dialogue between these two poets arises from Auden's reading of *Transport to Summer*, and, as I have argued, his attention to specific sections of Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" that espouse the view that the supreme fiction is achieved by the procedural cleansing of the image of its mythic associations. This view is what led Auden to accuse him of creating an antimythological myth. Auden sees Stevens's aim to create a supreme fiction as replicating the mythic urge to create a totalizing explanatory system. In "Miss God on Mr. Stevens" and "In Praise of Limestone," Auden elaborates this critique, and in the latter poem he depicts Stevens as the prototypical poet and weaves him into his larger study of how the crises of his era are inextricable from the history and mythology that precede them. As I have also shown, Auden is not alone in diagnosing how modern explanatory systems become once again mythical in their insistence on infallibility. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer view the enlightenment as inseparable from the mythological era that preceded it. At the same time as the enlightenment banishes ritual and magic as bygone superstitions, it replaces these practices with its own logic of equivalence and unity, which themselves become fetishized and used as justification for the subjugation of nature. Similarly, in "In Praise of Limestone," Auden dramatizes this meeting between old and new, yet fundamentally similar, systems of thought. As well, studying "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and Stevens's broader poetological thinking in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" garnered a deeper understanding of what Stevens's sought to achieve with his concept of the supreme fiction. The supreme fiction is Stevens's ideal art, and it is achieved when the poet can adequately match their imagination to reality. If the poet fails to relate their imagination to reality, their creation is a work of fancy, which will not stand the test of time. He uses Plato's chariot as an example, claiming that its total unreality causes it to lack meaning, though we can still appreciate its nobility. Borne in part from Stevens's agnosticism, the supreme fiction was a concept that held poetry in the highest regard as something that could guide individuals in the absence of God. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the elder poet speaker of that poem instructs the ephebe on how to create such a poem. The process that the speaker describes—of cleansing the sun of its mythic trappings to see it fully in its idea—provokes Auden to call it an antimythological myth. From this dialogue between Auden, Stevens, and Adorno and Horkheimer, we find an example in poetry of an ill-fated attempt to move beyond mythology into reality. Nevertheless, despite the apparent impossibility of Stevens's supreme fiction, it is undeniable that there is great beauty in his poem's ceaseless upward ascension toward that lodestar.

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