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By Amal Mohan M. S. & Prof. A. Khaleel Rahuman

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Troubles with Reality and Order through the Imagination in a World of Disbelief and Disorder: Wallace Stevens and Supreme Fiction

Amal Mohan M. S. [α] & Prof. A. Khaleel Rahuman [σ]

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There have been a lot of writers throughout history who praised or criticized the world's beauty and ways. They all had their ideas and advice for humanity. But America's most celebrated twentieth-century poet Wallace Stevens did not just rain down his ideas in his writings but took them as his motto for life. And he called the sum of his ideas 'Supreme Fiction'. This Supreme Fiction, according to Stevens, is a supreme level of poetry that cleanses the mind and soul of its readers and reduces the hardships they have to face in real life. In other words, Supreme Fiction is Stevens' replacement for the idea of God. Deeply influenced by the Nietzschean idea of the 'Death of God', Stevens wants to create a replacement for God for people to find comfort in a world of disbelief and disorder in the twentieth century.

Fascinated by all kinds of philosophical and imaginative ideas found in the world, Stevens considered the idea of God as a supreme creation of the human mind. It is the supreme poetic qualities of the human mind that helped and shaped the creation of the idea of God, he believed. Now the man-created God is dead, why cannot the humans replace Him with something new, a new fiction? Nietzsche's famous dictum, "Gott ist tot" - "God is dead", created a huge vacuum in the heart of humanity in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche examined the terror of mankind that had arisen from a world forsaken by God. Nietzsche also proffered ideas for bringing back the order of the world by replacing god with another idea. And for him, the replacing idea was art. Art can replace the absent God. But he never said how or discussed anything as a solution to the death of god. Stevens saw this problem as an opportunity for all the poets to take the seat of the Almighty now dead. Stevens believed that the death of one god was the death of all gods. He firmly believed that it is now the duty of poets to bring order and peace back to the heart of humanity bereft of belief and bounded by disorder. And for that, he makes an effort to differentiate his conception of God's death and the role of poets in a frustrated world. He creates his own re-imagining of an orderly world through a mode of enchantment called the 'Supreme Fiction'.

Why did Stevens think the world was out of order with the man-proclaimed 'death of God'? What was wrong with the world? And why did he believe it is all because of God's death and only a Supreme Fiction can save humanity out of all disorder in the absence of God? This paper attempts to focus mainly on what Stevens was trying to say through his poetry and how he was striving to save the people from disbelief and disorder with his creation of Supreme Fiction. The article examines his troubles with reality and the order of the world bereft of an order-giving God. It is a journey through Stevens' mind to find whether we need a supreme belief in our world to live in harmony with reality.

Keywords: *Stevens, supreme fiction, reality, the imagination, Nietzsche, death of god, world, disorder, poetry, order*

Author α: M.A. English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Tamil Nadu, India. e-mail: amalmohanacr@gmail.com

Author σ: Head, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Tamil Nadu, India.
e-mail: khaleelniu@gmail.com

I. Introduction

Even from the very beginning of Stevens' literary career, he was very much fascinated by the difference and relation between Reality and the Imagination. He is one of the poets, as with Coleridge, who could bring something to reality with his poetic imagination. His fascination has led him not only to examine the works of his present-day writers but even those from the early ages such as Plato too. He was led through the philosophies of Plato, Kant, Goethe, Nietzsche, Freud, and a host of others. He studied them and arrived at conclusions for himself. He respected them and took them as motivation for his writings. What Stevens learned from his exploration into the writers is that the writers in the past and their writings felt more unreal and were devoid of the imagination that would change the reality of the perceptible world.

The perceptible world was a constantly changing wonder to the young mind of Stevens. No matter what, we can never totally rely on the past to find meanings for our present life. This is the same with writings too. Some of the writings of Plato may seem absurd to the present-day readers, and they will accept them only up to the extent their imagination allows it. And this imagination is linked to reality. As reality changes, so does the imagination. Stevens is more than addicted to his search for the relation between reality and the imagination in his writings. Surprisingly enough, there is no theory for a relation between reality and the imagination to be found in the whole of Stevens' writings.

As reality is constantly changing, Stevens sees the contemporary Americans leaping into fancy, an inferior faculty of the mind. He is so disappointed that his people are running away from the reality of the

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perceptible world, especially, of the godless world of the twentieth century. Stevens agrees with Coleridge that fancy is not the same as the imagination but more of an activity of the mind, which puts things together by choice and not by will, as a principle of the human mind to strive towards realizing itself by knowing itself. Without having the imagination, Americans of his time are easily pulled to satisfy themselves with anything that never shows who they are. The American morals and codes in the post-Nietzschean godless world are only for their self-satisfaction. This leads to the creation of unreal works that include poems, paintings, or anything in which no imagination or reality is present. But for Stevens, these two factors – reality and the imagination – are the most important mediums to sustain life in this godless human world in the 'post-death-of-god' scenario.

Stevens explains that the relation of reality to the imagination will always vary. This variation may exist between the works of one age and the works of another. What exists today was never there before and will never be after. And in the present day, this relation has diminished and degenerated much from its state of being noble. The prime reason for that, Stevens adds, is the "pressure of reality". This variation happens because of the pressure of reality that binds us. It always differs in each era of human life or history. Stevens makes a very easy example of this pressure of reality by noting the changes in the language of writing through the ages. There was a period of mathematical language, scientific language, the language of poetry etc. in the reality of this world. All these are the products shaped by the changes in the reality of the world at different times. In the period of the English language of 1700 and the language of Wordsworth or Joyce, these changes are clearly visible. This is the same pressure that leads Freud to write the *Future of an Illusion.* The object of Freud's essay is to suggest a surrender to reality. He speaks of how the promise of religion has become less credible to people and an unreality in the twentieth century. He notes that there is no need for religion for men to cope with the 'cruelty of reality' and he supports the decline of religious belief. His advice is that accepting reality is a better way of living a healthy life, and without that, there is no hope for humanity with its simple dependence on art or God.

In a constantly changing world, people experience new kinds of mythological, political, economic, or poetical aspects in their life. People are being connected more than the past ever saw, and the connection will only increase irrespective of any prior acquaintance in time and space. "We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo, and so on. There is no distance. We are intimate with people we have never seen and, unhappily, they are intimate with us" *(Necessary Angel 18).* Stevens thinks that the desperate intimacy of his time is a threat to poetic imagination. The more the people are connected to each other, the more they would want to be accepted. And Stevens believes that this connectivity of huge masses influences little learning about everything in the world and people will always fail to see what is in front of them in reality. The calmness in one's life is directed by something far away, and this leads to the tormenting of the mind and a life of chaos and disorder. It is a great pressure of reality on society, and in turn, society is always directed by such pressure.

A kind of pressure from the news in the present times can make ordinary people lose hope in humanity. Pressure has been stormed into human lives for years, whether it is about the corruption of the country or news of a new world. This pressure gives us more confusion about life itself. For an American, there comes a need to know more news about England, Germany, or Russia, and the news just spreads to every nook and corner of the country without any contact in reality. And for many years, these events or news have made the ordinary movement of life more complicated. The present becomes a time for repenting. And this is a matter of seriousness for the artists and the poets. During the Napoleonic era, the news of the present world had little or no effect on the artists or the poets. Coleridge and Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen did not have to cope with the events of their day as much as the people of the twentieth or twenty-first century should know about the interior bombings of China or London or Montreal or the destruction of the Twin Towers.

> If it is not possible to assert that the Napoleonic era was the end of one era in the history of imagination and the beginning of another, one comes closer to the truth by making that assertion in respect to the French Revolution. The defeat or triumph of Hitler is part of a war-like whole but the fate of an individual is different from the fate of a society. Rightly or wrongly, we feel that the fate of a society is involved in the orderly disorders of the present time. We are confronting, therefore, a set of events, not only beyond our power to tranquilize them in mind, beyond our power to reduce them or metamorphose them, but events that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real, and events that involve the concepts and sanctions that are order of our lives and may involve our very lives; and these events are occurring persistently with increasing omen, in what may be called our presence. *(Necessary Angel 22)*

This is what Stevens means by the pressure of reality, "a pressure great enough and prolonged enough to bring about the end of one era in the history of the imagination and, if so, then great enough to bring about the beginning of another" *(Necessary Angel 22).* It is the pressure that demands the role of the imagination in human affairs in a world of disorder.

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In such turbulent times, the imagination, Stevens argues, is our most strong survival mechanism; those with a significant magnitude of it are better able to endure the crippling pressure of reality: that it is often at the end of an era is one of the peculiarities of the imagination. What happens is that it often binds itself to, and adheres to, a new reality. It is not that a new imagination emerges, but that a new reality is present. Of course, the pressure of reality might be less than the general pressure. It occurs to people in tune with the conditions of their lives or according to the features of their minds. To sum up according to Stevens, the pressure of reality is the determining factor in an era's artistic disposition and also the determining factor in an individual's artistic character. It is the imagination that is pushing back against reality's pressure.

According to Stevens, the subject matter of poetry is not that "collection of solid, static objects extended in space but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is the things that are" *(Necessary Angel 25).* And in reality, there is pressure from everywhere in the forms of violence, especially, physical and spiritual violence. They are projected onto the world problems. By confronting all such events from the world, life becomes more anesthetized and the mind is left with no imagination. By the end of imagination, Stevens means that we are attaching ourselves to a new reality that is not created by our reality. But Stevens believes that this can vary from individual to individual because whatever happens, it is in our hands to carry on with life. It depends on the circumstances of our lives and the characteristics of our minds. So to be clear, the artistic character of each individual depends on this pressure of reality and how one confronts it. This is where Stevens sees the possibility for the poets and the purpose of their works. So it is the "pressure of reality" that controls the poetry and thus the poets are asked to take the colossal part in bringing order to the world in disorder.

For Stevens, a poet is a well-developed individual, the "master of life". He searches for a high order man to give that which the society needs. And this requires a man who could control the imagination and reality so easily. He should commit himself to reality. Stevens speaks of the way of a poet as the "way of reality", as the way of truth. "In all his poems with all their enchantments for the poet himself, there is the final enchantment that they are true," says Stevens in his Bard College Address *(Collection of Prose and Poems 838).* Truth in poetry is created by an agreement with reality, by a powerful wave of the imagination. As the "orator of the imagination" *(Collection of Prose and Poems 730),* the poet should give people a faith in an era of disbelief, and he should provide the satisfactions of life that only the imagination can supply by holding onto reality.

People are struggling to live their lives and becoming more careless about the world's problems caused by man. These are the times of confusions in the present and the confusions are still increasing. People face a huge pressure of reality to push life forward, and in that race, everything they must feel, everything they must notice, is completely ignored. Thus, they lose the balance of nature. Here is where the role of the poet comes in, and that role is of paramount importance. People's imagination should be provoked. Stevens declares that "Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality; that is to say imagination and society are inseparable" *(Necessary Angel 28).*

No politician can command the imagination. It requires a genius, a poet. Poetry should be the home for the sick. It should eradicate the dirt of life and make it purified. A poet should be more concerned with social obligations than moral obligations. He should use whatever imagination and senses he could find in the world for that purpose, because it is always the imagination pressing backward the pressure of reality. But this cannot be done if the poet names himself an elite. Certainly it is not to lead the people out of their confusion as Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, but to comfort them. He has to make his imagination theirs and thus igniting the light in their minds and their lives. Only then a poet fulfills himself as a poet.

> A world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or… from the world in which we shall come to live since what makes poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he 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. *(Necessary Angel 31)*

While philosophy tries to satisfy our reason by truth, poetry uses imaginative ideas to satisfy the imagination, according to Stevens. There can be no imagination in philosophy but there can be truth in poetry. So if the poet, in order to fulfill himself, should accomplish a poetry, that satisfies both reason and the imagination, to achieve something philosophy could never. This idea could even compare with the idea of God. Stevens writes "…If it happened, for instance, to be an idea of God, would establish a divine beginning and end for us which, at the moment, the reason, singly, at best proposes and on which, at the moment, the imagination, singly, merely meditates" *(Necessary Angel 42).* Philosophy in despair, the poet finds a sanction of life in poetry that satisfies the imagination and reason. Thus it makes poetry not equal to philosophy but superior to it. Yet there is no definition for poetry because, according to Stevens, not that it has not been found, but that there is none.

Poetry is universal. Aristotle once cited "in relation to the point that poetry is a process of the

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personality of poet. This is the element, the force that keeps poetry a living thing, the modernizing and ever-modern influence" *(Necessary Angel 45).* Everything that makes a poet an individual, all external and internal factors depend on the creative process of poetry. There is both aspiration and inspiration which lead to liberation of the poet's life by himself writing poetry that accomplishes the purpose of his life. Stevens speaks here of an experience that is liberating. These feelings of the experience are a kind of purification of the soul and establishing a self, and Stevens says these experiences are not different from the degree of experiences of saints, a kind of a mystic one. Stevens is clearly not trying to make a saint out of poets or poet out of saints. But this idea is common place knowledge for aesthetic satisfaction.

> On the other hand, if we say that the idea of God is merely a poetic idea, even if the supreme poetic idea, and that our notions of heaven and hell are merely poetry not so called, even if poetry that involves us vitally, the feeling of deliverance, of a release, of a perfection touched, of a vocation so that all men may know the truth and that the truth may set them free - if we say these things and if we are able to see the poet who achieved God and placed Him in His seat in heaven in all His glory, the poet himself, still in the ecstasy of the poem that completely accomplished his purpose, would have seemed, whether young or old, whether in rags or ceremonial robe, a man who needed what he had created, uttering the hymns of joy that followed his creation. This may be a gross exaggeration of a very simple matter. But perhaps that remark is true of many of the more prodigious things of life and death. *(Necessary Angel 51)*

He was very much attached to this idea. Everything we believed so far is just an imagination created by man with all his poetic qualities. And Stevens thought of a replacement that could change the future of humanity and him. This is the beginning of Stevens' idea of 'Supreme Fiction'.

Stevens believes that this imagination could be his supreme force; a remedy for all the chaos and disorder created by the 'Death of God', but recognizes that it needs more reachable and strong demonstration, one that poetry provides:

> The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination, as the highest objective of the poet, appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and, for that matter, greater, if the idea of God is only one of the things of the imagination...Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination. A good deal of my poetry recently has concerned an identity for that thing. *(Letters 369-370)*

Stevens raises pure poetry beyond the spiritual, to an ultimate value and entraps himself to this only task of defining the essential of poetry. He takes this task throughout the rest of his career and calls it the 'Supreme Fiction'.

Why does Stevens believe that "God is dead" as Nietzsche declares? Why does he want a replacement for the idea of God instead of anything in the world, or what is the trouble in believing in a God and things coming with Him? The main reason is, to Stevens, God was a lie or a great artistic creation of compassion, made for humanity and by humanity. So with the death of God, Stevens felt the void left in the mind of humanity for leading a life in harmony. It is here where the poet comes in with his artistic qualities. Stevens writes, "...in an age of disbelief, when the gods have come to an end, when we think of them as the aesthetic projections of a time that has passed, men turn to a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style of bearing themselves in reality. They create a new style of bearing in a new reality" (*Collection of Prose and Poems 844).* He turns to art for defining this new style of bearing, specifically poetry, to investigate its role in a godless society. And it is here where he turns to the role of poetry and the purpose of a poet. "The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary" *(Letters 378).* The substitute hinted at here later becomes Stevens' 'Supreme Fiction'. Stevens believes that with the death of God, there comes a time when people will believe that God is a fictive idea or a being, and humanity will search for a new replacement idea. He thinks that the responsibility of finding such an idea rests in the hands of the poets. But to believe it requires a great inspiration. And it is that inspiration Stevens is trying to provide to humanity through his poems.

Through a journey through the poems of Stevens, we can really understand his need for replacing the idea of God with a 'Supreme Fiction'. To him, poetry and God are equal fictions of the human mind. As God is a supreme fiction of the human mind, poetry is the Supreme Fiction of the poetic imagination. Poetry is the Supreme Fiction of Wallace Stevens.

Stevens questions the beliefs of paradise offered by the gods and religions and criticizes them as false and unrealistic. He disagrees with the beliefs brought in along with God. He also stands against the human thoughts on death. He asks humanity to see death as a positive thing and to accept it. To him, it is only the end of life, a normal and inevitable occurrence. Rather than running hard on life or trying to conquer every height of life, Stevens advises to stand still and enjoy life as simple as one can. Life is this simple to Stevens. He explains that in a world without God or faith or reason, the imagination is the door, and modern poetry or Supreme Fiction is the key to an interesting and satisfying life. Unlike God, poetry, through its artistic imagination, helps humanity see the beauty of life and

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brings order to a disorderly life. It reassures faith and hope in oneself and the world around inhabited by human beings.

Stevens' poems never define what his Supreme Fiction is, but one can find the remains of his Supreme Fiction in them. In the poem *To a High-Toned Old Christian Woman,* he compares poetry and God as equal fictions of the human mind and explains the powers of poetry, which is what Supreme Fiction also demands. Poetry's dominance as a means of expression and enjoyment, and also as a means of sublime experience is important to Stevens. And in *Sunday Morning,* he shatters the traditional beliefs of paradise offered by the religions and criticizes the false hopes and ideas provided by the religions and myths, and calls them unrealistic. He asks humanity to see death as a good thing like life and advises to accept it as it is. In *Of Modern Poetry,* Stevens discusses poetry as an idea of Supreme Fiction by explaining that the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure. A poetry that reconciles and satisfies the people who lost all the beliefs and faiths in troubled times and brings order to the reality of their life is 'Supreme Fiction'. Through this poem, Stevens gives a clarion call to the poets to create a 'Supreme Fiction'. And in the poems *Disillusionment of Ten O' Clock* and *The Idea of Order at Key West,* Stevens explains that in a world without god or faith or reason, imagination is the door and modern poetry or supreme fiction is the key to life. *Anecdote of the Jar explains* the supremacy of nature's beauty and creativity of the imagination and how the imagination can act on reality and be used to bring beauty and order to life. The poem *The Snow Man* explains the way of poetry in bringing order to the life of humanity, and the poem *The Man with the Blue Guitar* gives hope and reassures faith in the mind of humanity through Stevens' incredible talent and work of genius manifesting through his poetry.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction really opens up the way for 'Supreme Fiction' with a more philosophical tone and at a critical level where Stevens talks a lot about its idea, essence and possibility. This is the Supreme Fiction, the new experiment by Stevens with poetry that brings back a much-needed order to a society that suffers from a lack of focus and a total lack of belief but still possessing a fervent need for both. Poetry is supreme in that it is light, life-affirming, earth-affirming, enchanting, mysterious, and, above all, conscious of its fictional nature. And further, the poem is something so effortless and pleasant to believe in. Stevens proclaims that poetry is no less a fiction than God. This is the basis of Stevens' conception of the poem's redemptive essence. It is what flows out of the friction between reality and imagination while embodying both.

II. Conclusion

At a philosophical level, the debate on man's rational thought against the beliefs and the faiths in a Supreme Being dawned on humanity only during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries with the advent of Nietzsche, and it still continues through the veins of the twenty-first century. Nietzsche and Kant are such examples of philosophers who dared men to know, to think for themselves, and then depend on any other way of life other than the way of God or a religion. To them, faith has caused a lot of problems historically. Therefore, they tended to choose reason instead of faith. They started to believe in science and evidence rather than in faiths and beliefs.

A life without faith cannot be in order, cannot be in harmony. The world cannot fully understand the scientific findings through rationality alone. Human existence is full of paradoxes, and it requires irrationality to live it. We cannot write a book on how to live. We only have to live it. And life is a mixture of rational and irrational beliefs. To live in harmony with oneself and the surroundings, a 'supreme belief' is required. When God is declared dead in human history, people's faiths and beliefs are to be put somewhere else other than science. That is why humanity requires a 'supreme being' as God. But when people become more rational and start to think by themselves, harmony is more in conflict and disorder is the result. And it is here where Stevens wants to save humanity. When everyone started to lose belief and when the twentieth century god-free world stood still with chaos, Stevens stood up, tried to create something magnificent and beautiful as a new order through the power of the imagination, through the avatar of 'Supreme Fiction'.

Wallace Stevens calls upon his fellow poets, and this new responsibility makes him charged, with the creation of new values, and with the inputting of a new faith. The disenchanted and gloomy tone in a world generated by the death of God can be recreated by the unique capabilities of the poet. He can reproduce the world's mysteries and illusions it once held. He should create 'the necessary angel', the illusory faith, which is the only kind of belief that could hold a modern society in order. In a letter to Henry Church, Stevens writes, "I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction" *(Letters 430).* This is the very kind of fiction that the poet can supply. This is the very kind of fiction that Stevens, as a poet, supplies. But Stevens repeatedly emphasizes that this is an exceptional skill the poet has to instill in himself.

In the *Adagia,* Stevens writes, "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" *(Wallace Stevens:*

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Collected Poetry and Prose 901). Poetry becomes the ultimate value after God because of the curative and cleansing myths it is capable of spinning. Miller rightly points out that "In defining poetry as a substitute for religion, Stevens is joining himself to a tradition extending from the romantics through Matthew Arnold down to our own day" *(Miller Poets of Reality 24).* Arnold predicted in 1888 that "...most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" *(Essays in Criticism 2)*. Stevens' conception of the poem and its redemptive qualities is much the same, but less of a hypothesis than of a fact, one which Stevens expresses and explores simultaneously in his poetry.

For Stevens, God has been a fiction, and to poetry He is no less a fiction than reality. Supreme Being gone, Supreme Fiction is born. Stevens writes, "By supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry" *(Letters 407).* Stevens' development of this new kind of poetry, that replaces God from his throne, reaffirms order in the society and needs a much greater reparative work. In his great poem, *'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,'* Stevens tries to describe how the poem weaves the magic. As Stevens writes, "It is implicit in the title that there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction," *(Letters 430)* and in "Notes," he sets out to show us how.

Stevens believes that language is important, that poetics would overcome nihilism in the wake of a departed God. But Stevens does not see this as a question of sickness and moral value, but merely as a desperate need for order, for rework and revival of the world through the poetry supplied by the "benign illusion" of the imagination. Stevens sets tirelessly to satisfy this need, to find a poetic theory and practice, to find the 'Supreme Fiction', a poetics of freshness and a poetics that "rejects trash" *(Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose 185).* And Stevens' idea of 'Supreme Fiction' shares some important points with Nietzsche, especially, in how they both choose art to deal with the Death of God, which takes on an almost celestial importance, but which carries a crucial element of scepticism and lightness. Each confers praise on abstract art that changes and gives pleasure. The art both emphasized carries key world affirmations, the order in a disorderly world of no gods. Nietzsche just delivered an important message: "God is dead," and disappeared behind it. Stevens is embodying that message a step beyond. His poetry is, in fact, the embodiment of a completely reverent, metaphorical, and necessarily redemptive new kind of faith. Poetry is the fundamental creative creed Nietzsche refers to. The Nietzschean guideline to a deified art is eventually realized in Wallace Stevens, in his poetry, in his 'Supreme Fiction'.

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