

## Imagination and Insurance:

### Wallace Stevens and Benjamin Whorf at the Hartford

Ives: Mr. Stevens, nothing is empty. I'm an insurance man, Mr. Stevens. I guarantee the future. I let a man sleep nights because he knows that his family is protected from the random cruelties of this world. Can you call that empty?

Stevens: Insurance? Did you say you were an insurance man?

from *American Life and Casualty* by Stuart Flack

### Preface

For the last few years, I have been at work, time permitting, on a book entitled *Genius at Work: Three Portraits of Avocational Creativity*, a biographical and interpretive study of three individuals, Wallace Stevens, Benjamin Whorf, and Owen Barfield, all of whom combined full-time careers in one field of endeavor (surety bonds, fire prevention engineering, the law) with creative achievements in another (poetry, linguistics, philology). Using Howard Gruber's case study method for the study of creative work, I will seek to explain how these individuals were able to do it—to be both insurance executive and the most imaginative of poets, solicitor and student of the evolution of consciousness. The ideas I want to share with you today represent one “cutting” from my research.

Ironically, I find myself these days, because of my own, new vocation, increasingly incapable of finishing this project born out of my own wonder, as a professor and father, at the achievements of such individuals. Writing memos, listening to late-add pleas, handling student complaints—these have become my creative life of late. I have found myself wondering if fire insurance might be more conducive to the life of the mind than being a department chair.

### I. At the Hartford

From 1918 to 1941, the main office of Hartford Insurance Company on Asylum Avenue Hartford, Connecticut, “a solemn affair of granite, with a portico resting on five of the grimmest possible columns,” housed two most unusual employees. Upstairs in a big corner



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office, a Harvard graduate bond-surety lawyer, who became (in 1934) a vice-president of the company, and, on the side, wrote poetry. Downstairs, in the fire insurance division, a fire prevention specialist, an engineering graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who on the side practiced linguistics. There is no clear evidence they knew each other,<sup>1</sup> no evidence—other than a misdirected correspondence concerning language that was mistakenly addressed by name to the poet but which did eventually reach the linguist on the first floor—that they ever became aware, prior to the fire-prevention linguist's death from cancer in 1941, of each other's avocations. The bond-surety poet was thirty nine years old when the fire prevention-linguist, eighteen years his junior, joined the company. He would outlive him by fourteen years.

While the bond-surety poet was still a young man, a Parisian stockbroker fled business and family to pursue his own creative vocation in the South Seas. A contemporary of both the poet and the linguist, an American business man, suffered a nervous breakdown and ran away from a successful career to become a writer. Such desperate acts were, of course, quintessentially modernist. For how could a creative individual possibly nurture art and mind in the midst of bourgeois values?

Wallace Stevens and Benjamin Whorf were not, however, Paul Gauguin or Sherwood Anderson. They stayed at work, moonlighting genius, finding ways to contribute to the intellectual life of this century while dutifully doing their job. Like their contemporary Charles Ives, a Connecticut insurance executive-avant garde composer, they not only discovered the means to pursue the risks of avocational creation in an industry dedicated to the management of risk but became, each, in his own way, the ultimate risk takers: proponents of the relativity of perception, champions of the "real" as imaginary.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brazeau's comprehensive oral biography of Stevens contains only the following brief mention (in a footnote) of Whorf:

The most distinguished scholar among Stevens' colleague at the Hartford was Benjamin Lee Whorf, the pioneering linguist who worked at the home office as an engineer for Hartford Fire from 1919 until his death in 1941. The support that top management at the company gave to Whorf's linguistic studies suggests the respect for the life of the mind among Stevens' fellow executives. In 1930, for example, James Wyper, a vice president at the home office, wrote to the company's agent in Mexico City that the Hartford had two purposes in sending Whorf to Mexico: to consult with the agent on company business and to continue his studies of the Maya and Aztec civilizations and language on which he was an authority. (PW 19)

## II. Wallace Stevens

The acute intelligence of the imagination, the illimitable resources of its memory, its power to possess the moment it perceives—if we were speaking of light itself, and thinking of the relationship between objects and light, no further demonstration would be necessary. Like light, it adds nothing, except itself.

Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (61)

Wallace Stevens was born on October 2, 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, the son of a lawyer (and sometime poet) Garrett Stevens and Margaretha Zeller Stevens. After graduating from Reading Boys High, he entered Harvard University in 1897, pursuing a special three year course of study in English. While at Harvard he served for a time as President of the *Advocate*, and his poetry and prose appeared in various campus publications. After working for a short time as an apprentice journalist in New York after leaving Harvard in 1900, he entered New York Law School, graduating in 1903. The following year he was admitted to the bar and worked without great success for various New York firms.

In 1908 he joined an insurance company—the first of several such positions which would lead to a lifetime career in the field. In 1904, he had met Elsie Kachel, whom he would marry five years later. (The marriage would appear to have been, at least on the face of it, loveless: in the years ahead very few acquaintances, either from the world of business or the world of poetry, would be invited into the Stevens' home. "We are quiet, mouse-like people," Stevens would later admit, "so timid. We would die in the company of eight people" [Lensing 65].) In 1916 Stevens joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and was transferred to the home office in Connecticut.



In 1914, Stevens had begun to publish poetry for the first time since his years at Harvard fifteen years before. As his career with the Hartford advanced, he continued to write poetry. His first book of poems, *Harmonium*, appeared in 1923, when Stevens was 44. The following year he and Elsie gave birth to a daughter, Holly, their only child. For the next five years, 1925 to 1930, he would hardly write at all. In 1934, at the age of 50, he became Vice-President of the Hartford, head of the bonding division. The

following year, a new book of poems, *Ideas of Order*, appeared, published by a small press. In 1937 he published *The Man With the Blue Guitar*. Various universities (and other forums) invited him to speak and during the thirties, forties, and fifties he lectured occasionally on poetry and poetics and the nature of imagination.

Several more books of poems followed with regularity in the decade ahead: *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), *Parts of a World* (1942), *Esthetique du Mal* (1945), *Transport to Summer* (1947), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). In 1951 his lectures and occasional pieces were published as *The Necessary Angel*. After long opposing its publication, Stevens finally cooperated in Knopf's edition of his *Collected Poems* (1954).

His reputation grew, leading to the conferral of several honorary degrees, election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, a national book award, the Bollingen Prize for poetry, and two Pulitzer Prizes. He continued to work at the Hartford, long past mandatory retirement age, turning down an offer to become Charles Elliott Norton Professor at Harvard. He died on August 2, 1955 after a short illness.

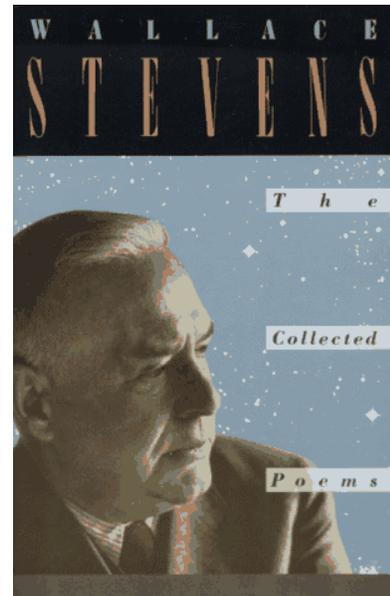
On March 18, 1948, Stevens delivered the Bergen Lecture at Yale, "The Effects of Analogy."

Professor Louis Martz recalled the visit for Peter Brazeau:

He came up from New York with a big briefcase because he had been down doing legal business and came directly here . . . As he was arranging to give his lecture, I took him back to my office. He opened up the briefcase and said, "Now you see everything is neatly sorted out here. Over in this compartment is my insurance business with the farmers, and over in this compartment, this is my lecture and some poems that I want to read. I keep them completely separate." (quoted in *Parts of a World* 172)

According to some reports, Stevens kept his affairs completely separate at the Hartford as well: Colleague Richard Sunbury recalls that

He'd be writing [poems] right there at his desk, because he would stop dictating to Mrs. Baldwin. He would stop right in the middle of dictating, and



he would reach down in his right-hand drawer, and he would just write down [something], put it back. I've seen him do that. He had a peculiar filing system. He always filed his poetry notes in his lower right corner of his desk, which open most of the time to a degree. It seemed to me there were sheaves and sheaves. And sometimes he would reach down, and he'd shuffle through three or four. He'd scratch out something or put something in. Or he might take the top one and just add a line or two. All of a sudden, he'd be reading a case, and I've seen him reach down in his drawer and just pick something up. His private copies of his commercial work or his business letters would go in his lower left-hand drawer. And when he finished signing the mail at night, the signed copies of his letter would be thrown on the right-hand side of his desk and the case that were to go back to file would be thrown on the floor on the left-hand side. (*Parts of a World* 38)

Thanks to Brazeu's meticulous interviews and some contemporary accounts, we know a little about Stevens' methods of composition. We know that he frequently wrote lines in his head as he walked, and he walked all the time, winter and summer. (Miller, the janitor in Alex Cox's *Repo Man*, insists that "the more you drive, the less intelligent you are": Wallace Stevens never owned a car.)

As reported in the *New Yorker* during Stevens' lifetime, a neighbor once bore witness to Stevens' poetry under construction:

Once, my sister, glancing out of a window, saw Stevens going by her house. As she watched, he slowed down, came to a stop, rocked in place for a moment or two, took a step backward, hesitated, then strode confidently forward—left, right, left, right—on his way to work. It was obvious to her that Stevens had gone back over a phrase, dropped an unsatisfactory word, inserted a superior one, and proceeded to the next line of the poem he was making." ("Here at the *New Yorker*" 57; cited by Lensing 133)

As Stevens himself admitted, "You see, actually I bring my poetry to work and my secretary [Marguerite Flynn] types them up for me. It's my way of being disloyal" (*Parts of a World* 207). (Flynn, by the way, was said to be the only person who could possibly decipher his handwriting. It was an up-and-down series of V's for practical purposes." (*Parts of a World* 23).

Described by John Rogers as “a very meticulous worker,” “a terrific man for legal research,” and “the grindingest guy they had there in executive row” (*Parts of a World* 20), Stevens was not terribly disloyal, though he was protective of his privacy, and his grinding may have been a way of maintaining his creative space: “By and large, he did not have an invitation hanging on the door,” Hale Anderson, Jr. recalled, “—quite the reverse. He was always, to most people who didn't understand him, formidably busy. . . . He just concentrated on what he was doing, unless he pushed everything aside and began to scribble some poetry. One could never tell whether he was writing poetry. I never peeked over his shoulder—not by any means. But there were times when he would just put everything aside and be working on some personal notes.” (*Parts of a World* 23; Hale Anderson, Jr.)

An office boy, John Laddish, likewise recalled that Stevens might be discovered “making a lot of notes, and he wouldn't have a file there. So you would say that he was just jotting down something [related to his poetry] that came into his mind. He asked us occasionally to go to the State Library and look up certain words and their definitions, not only in the American dictionaries but the Oxford English and any others that he would tell us to check. These were just words that he wanted to fit into his poetry” (*Parts of a World* 25).

Whether or not the Hartford actually approved of Stevens' avocation is still a matter of some controversy. According to Clifford Burdge, his position provided Stevens with “a little enclave in the Hartford Accident. In other words, he didn't fit into the pattern of a senior executive of an insurance company, personality-wise. And I had the feeling the company was proud to have this world-famous poet as a senior officer and would go out of its way to avoid interfering with him” (*Parts of a World* 30). And according to his daughter, Holly Bright Stevens, being named vice-president was in fact a major step in his poetic career:

at last, he felt safe in devoting some of his time and energy to poetry without fear of being “passed over” as an oddity, although he concealed his creative work from most of his insurance colleagues as well as he could for many years to come. (Letters 256)

When fellow poet Delmore Schwartz claimed that Stevens had asked, after delivering a lecture at Harvard, “I wonder what the boys in the office would think of that,” Stevens angrily denied that he had said any such thing:

I feel quite sure that there is nothing to the point that I said something in that lecture by way of commenting on the oddness of an insurance man reading a lecture on poetry. I have never made any such comment and have never felt that it was odd for me to be doing such things. . . . Is any man supposed to be engaged in his business to the exclusion of everything else and, if he is, what do people think of him? (*Parts of a World* 163)

Still, co-workers recalled (as Brazeau summarized) that

He was inclined to keep his poetry a secret from [the men in the field], many of whom knew him only by mail. In the mid-1920s, for example, when it was common knowledge among home-office staff that he was a writer, Stevens cautioned a lawyer in the field who stumbled upon *Harmonium* "not to speak of his literary efforts among our acquaintances, as it might hurt his business influence." Among his fellow businessmen, who sized him up from the distance, say, of Sinclair Lewis' *Zenith*, Stevens was concerned that his reputation as an insurance man not be tarnished by stereotypes of the poet among the Babbits of business. Ironically, when young Stevens had begun writing seriously, he had not been altogether free from at least some of these American images of the poet as eccentric. (*Parts of a World* 48)

An art dealer, whose New York gallery Stevens visited regularly and who often witnessed his secretive behavior, speculated that It could be that Stevens "fear being considered a 'bohemian' was genuine at first, but later became a habit and a pose" (Lensing 92).

**It should not surprise us that from *Harmonium* to *The Rock*, Wallace Stevens wrestled with, in almost endless variations, the relationship between the real and the imaginary, the primal conflict between ordinary and extraordinary. Did he not wonder aloud in his "Adagia" whether there might not be "a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible or possibly accessible to the poet or, say, the acutest poet" (OP 166). Did he not hope to be that poet? Was not his *ars poetica* a vivid rationalization of his life situation? Was not his desire—expressed most brilliantly in the extraordinary final**

stanzas of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”—to discover once and for all those “things [that] at last comprise / An occupation, an exercise, a work,” his career long yearning to finally possess “A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:/ One of the vast repetitions final in / Themselves and, therefore, good,” answered through embracing the repititious, the ordinary:

the going round

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

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf  
Above the table spins its constant spin,  
So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps  
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,  
But he that of repetition is most master. (CP 405-406)

And perhaps (who knows) the great poet could even be an insurance executive.

**In a letter written near the end of his life Stevens** answered a friend’s question about his possible regrets about pursuing a career in insurance rather than as a poet. He replied in the following words:

If Beethoven could look back on what he had accomplished and say that it was a collection of crumbs compared to what he had hoped to accomplish, where should I ever find a figure of speech adequate to size up the little that I have done compared to that which I had once hoped to do. Of course, I have had a happy and well-kept life. But I have not even begun to touch the spheres within spheres that might have been possible if, instead of devoting the principal



amount of my time to making a living, I had devoted it to thought and poetry. Certainly it is as true as it ever was that whatever means most to one should receive all of one's time and that has not been true in my case. But, then, if I had been more determined about it, I might now be looking back not with a mere sense of regret but at some actual devastation. To be cheerful about it, I am now in the happy position of being able to say that I don't know what would have happened if I had had more time. This is very much better than to have had all the time in the world and have found oneself inadequate.

*(Letters of Wallace Stevens 669)*

Wallace Stevens had only enough time, made only enough time, it is now apparent, to become perhaps the most important poet in English of the twentieth century.

### III. Benjamin Lee Whorf



To restrict thinking to the patterns merely of English, and especially to those patterns which represent the acme of plainness in English is to lose a power of thought which, once lost, can never be regained. It is the "plainest" English which contains the greatest number of unconscious assumptions about nature. . . . I believe that those who envision a future world speaking only one tongue, whether English, German, Russian, or any other, hold a misguided ideal and would do the evolution of the human mind the greatest disservice.

Western culture has made, through language, a provisional analysis of reality and, without correctives, holds resolutely to that analysis as final. The only correctives lie in all those other tongues which by aeons of independent evolution have arrived at different, but equally logical, provisional analyses.

Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (244)

Born on April 24, 1897 in Winthrop, Massachusetts, Benjamin Lee Whorf was the oldest of three sons of Harry, a commercial artist who experimented with playwriting and stage design, and Sarah Lee Whorf. Whorf graduated from Winthrop

High School in 1914 and went on to MIT, receiving a B.S. in chemical engineering in 1918.

After graduation, Whorf joined the Hartford Fire Insurance as a trainee in fire prevention engineering. He remained with the Hartford for the rest of his short life, developing a national reputation as an expert in industrial fire prevention and authoring several articles on the subject. On Nov. 6, 1920, he married Celia Peckham and settled in Wethersfield, Connecticut, a suburb of Hartford, becoming the parents of three children.

A childhood love for ciphers and puzzles, and wide sparetime reading and directed self-study in a number of fields, led to the development of a profound avocational interest in linguistics, pursued in off hours and on business trips. Under the influence of the French mystic Fabre d'Olivet, himself an amateur linguist, and his own strong religious background (he was a Methodist), his study (including actual field work) of American Indian languages like Aztec, Mayan, and Hopi led to his development of a theory of "linguistic relativity"—an approach to comparative linguistics which he shared with Yale anthropologist Edward Sapir.

In the late 1920s he began a prolific correspondence with noted scholars in anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics,<sup>2</sup> demonstrating a distinct talent for self-promotion as he sought to convince readers that he had in fact discovered a new frontier of human inquiry. In 1931, he even enrolled as a graduate student at Yale in order to study under Sapir, thus beginning one of the most interesting cases of intellectual collaboration in this century,<sup>3</sup> And he began to publish his ideas on linguistics not only in major scholarly journals (*Language*, *American Anthropologist*) but in more popular forums like M.I.T.'s *Technology Review*. His three essays in the latter journal—"Science and Linguistics" (1940), "Linguistics as an Exact Science" (1940), and "Languages and Logic" (1941)—helped to disseminate his ideas widely. During 1940 and 1941, his essays and reviews on a wide variety of topics appeared

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<sup>2</sup> The Benjamin Lee Whorf Papers in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale include letters from/to Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, Oliver LaFarge, Herbert Spinden, Clyde Kluckhohn, W. V. Quine.

<sup>3</sup> Until 1931, Whorf was completely self-taught. The extent of Sapir's influence on Whorf's ideas is difficult to ascertain. According to Trager (537), Whorf had already formulated his basic ideas on linguistic relativity, prior to encounter with Sapir; Sapir, however, "enthusiastically encouraged [Whorf] to pursue his own special kinds of insights." Carroll (820), however, suggests that the theory of linguistic relativity (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) emerged directly from his work on Hopi in the 1930s, after *his* meeting with and apprenticeship to Sapir.

regularly in the pages of the journal *Main Current in Modern Thoughts*. He died of cancer on July 26, 1941.

Under the editorship of John B. Carroll, many of Whorf's most important essays were collected in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, published in 1956 by the M.I.T. Press. He left behind a number of manuscripts on an astonishing range of subjects—gravitation, "being," trees, color theory, evolution, a translation of Genesis, large stemmed plants, electromagnetism, the trinity, dreams, a Hopi dictionary—which remain unpublished. We know less about Whorf's methods than we know of Stevens'.

Howard Gruber contends that underpinning the creative achievements of an individual like Thomas Edison, whose "network of enterprises" seemed almost infinitely complex, there may well lie a singular, possibly esoteric, world view, a generative heuristic that yields different fresh ideas when applied to distinct fields of inquiry.

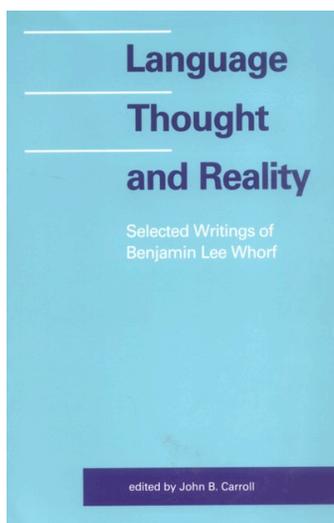
Though not an inventor, Benjamin Whorf's "light bulb" seldom stopped going off in his short creative life. This "tall but frail" man, who "moved and talked deftly and gracefully," spoke with a thick eastern Massachusetts accent, and accomplished a great deal "without seeming to have great energy" (Carroll 820), this who inherited from his mother a "deep sense of wonder at the mystery of the universe" (Trager 537) and from his father-as-model commitment to a interdisciplinary set of intellectual interests,<sup>4</sup> this man who loved to talk about his sea captain ancestors, waxing eloquent about the exploration of unknown lands (Trager 537), led a life committed to discovery, dedicated to breaking the cryptogrammatic codes that gloss our ordinary, culture-bound experience of the world.

A participant, with Sapir in one of the most interesting cases of intellectual collaboration in this century,<sup>5</sup> the "linguistic relativity" he championed sought to find "in all those other tongues which by aeons of independent evolution

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<sup>4</sup> The accomplishments of all three of Harry and Sarah Lee Whorf's sons were accomplished individuals: brother Richard worked in the theatre; John Whorf was a water colorist.

<sup>5</sup> Whorf was completely self-taught until 1931, when he enrolled at Yale University in nearby New Haven to study linguistics under Sapir. According to Trager (537), Whorf had already formulated his basic ideas on linguistic relativity, prior to encounter with Sapir; Sapir, however, "enthusiastically encouraged [Whorf] to pursue his own special kinds of insights." Carroll (820), however, suggests that the theory of linguistic



have arrived at different, but equally logical, provisional analyses” the necessary “correctives” to the narrow limitations single language determinism places on the world. As much as his fellow relativist Einstein, Whorf was at heart a cosmologist, seeking to convince his narrow-minded contemporaries that they must no longer

see a few recent dialects of the Indo-European family, and the rationalizing techniques elaborated from their patterns, as the apex of the evolution of the human mind, nor their present wide spread as due to any survival from fitness or to anything but a few events of history—events that could be called fortunate only from the parochial point of view of the favored parties. They, and our own thought processes with them, can no longer be envisioned as spanning the gamut of reason and knowledge but only as one constellation in a galactic expanse. A fair realization of the incredible degree of diversity of linguistic systems that ranges over the globe leaves one with the inescapable feeling that the human spirit is inconceivably old; that the few thousand years of history covered by our written records are no more than the thickness of a pencil mark on the scale that measures our past experience on this planet; that the vents of these recent millenniums spell nothing in any evolutionary wise, that the race has taken no sudden spurt, achieved no commanding synthesis during recent millenniums, but has only played with a few of the linguistic formulations and views of nature bequeathed from an inexpressibly long past. (LTR 218-219)

**Concerning Whorf’s amateur pursuit of linguistics,** his editor John B.Carroll has observed

It was truly remarkable that he was able to achieve distinction in two entirely separate kinds of work. During periods of his life, his scholarly output was enough to equal that of many a full-time research professor; yet he must have been at the same time spending some eight hours every working day in his business pursuits. His friends often speculated on why he chose to remain in his occupation. Although several offers of academic or scholarly research positions were made to him during the latter years of his life, he consistently

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relativity (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) emerged directly from his work on Hopi in the 1930s, after his meeting with and apprenticeship to Sapir.

refused them, saying that his business situation afforded him a more comfortable living and a freer opportunity to develop his intellectual interests in his own way. (*LTR xxx*)

In an obituary, Whorf's colleague Herbert Hackett noted that "only the very busy have time for greatness." And Benjamin Whorf was very busy, busier almost, than it now appears possible to imagine.

#### IV. To Live a Creative Life

"In his explorations of the world, " Howard Gruber has written, "the [creative] individual finds out what needs doing. In his attempts to do some of it, he finds out what he can do and what he cannot. He also comes to see what he need not do. From the intersection of these possibilities there emerges a new imperative, his sense of what he must do. How 'it needs' and 'I can' give birth to 'I must' remains enigmatic" (*Darwin on Man 257*)

Stevens and Whorf needed to work, needed to be part of the "real world" of work in order to free that part of themselves which was creative. They both knew what they could not do, knew well what they need not do. They discovered as well as they went along what they must do: the poetry they must write, the linguistic theory they must promulgate.

Juan Ramon Jiminez has spoken of creative work as either "voluntaria," work that is undertaken under one's own volition, and "necessaria," the work one *must* do—work required by one's own nature, one's own psyche. Jiminez's distinction is obviously productive, but it was formulated with the modernist artist/intellectual in mind, the creative individual who leads an essentially solitary life dedicated, almost solipsistically, to his vocation. But what are we to say of the creative individual whose necessaria includes real work an actual desk job in, say, an insurance company?

Stevens and Whorf were necessarians of imagination. The necessaria of work did not, for them, preclude, as did for Gaugin or Sherwood Anderson, the necessaria of their mental lives; for them the boundary between vocation and avocation, between work and life's work, remained permeable. Perhaps this should not surprise us as much as it does. After all, "To live a creative life," Gruber's method has revealed, "is one of intentions of a creative person" (Wallace 29). A creative life, it now seems apparent, always requires making peace between voluntaria and

necessaria, is always at the core the result of “a different organization of the system, an organization that was constructed by the person himself in the course of his life, in the course of his work, as needed in order to meet the tasks that he encountered and that he set himself” (FES 177).