Stevens' Poetry of Thought
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A naturalistic conception of things is a great work of imagination,—greater, I think, than any dramatic or moral mythology: it is a conception fit to inspire great poetry, and in the end, perhaps, it will prove the only conception able to inspire it.¹ Santayana

At the time of his first book, Stevens had already conceived for his poetry a minimum basis of thought or, if not thought, at least a consistent view of things. In Harmonium he expresses a rudimentary naturalism that is usually little more than a sense of the reality of things about him—things moving and changing in the flux of time and experience. Its basis is an inherent skepticism that rejects the transcendent and can never rest in any explanation or circumscription of the world. Limiting the scope of his confidence to the immediate,

¹ Three Philosophical Poets (Garden City, n.d.), p. 27. Although the naturalistic view is predominant in the poetry of Stevens, some few departures from this viewpoint can be found, for instance, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” the fifth stanza of Poem IV of the first section.
he conjectures an indefinite and unknowable expanse beyond the impression of the moment.

To hold that the world is an indeterminable presence is to reject the idea of the microcosm. Stevens is too much of a skeptic to feel that he can gain the whole through a part, that like Blake he can see the world in a grain of sand. "The Indigo Glass in the Grass" explicitly states that in no object nor conjunction of objects can the world be contained, and in "The Comedian as the Letter C" the poet doubts that the world can be comprehended in one man's vision of it or even in any conjunction of human points of view:

What is one man among so many men?
What are so many men in such a world?

In an illimitable and incomprehensible world of continual flux, the human element is only one among many elements. The unity of the world as composed by one mind is only the unity of one life lived, and even that, like Crispin's, involves a continual readjustment of the sense of the world; for as the poet asks in extenuation of these readjustments, these vicissitudes of anyone's idea of the world:

Can one man think one thing and think it long?
Can one man be one thing and be it long?

The unspoken reply is the obvious negative. Crispin's or anyone's next moment will differ from the last and most probably resemble it as well.

Resemblances and differences are significant elements in experience for Stevens. They structure the natural world for him and are constituents of his naturalistic emphasis on the appearance of things in poems like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" or "The Load of Sugar-Cane." Some years later than Harmonium he wrote "Three Academic Pieces," the

2 For a more elaborate discussion of the idea of resemblances in Stevens, see Robert Pack, Wallace Stevens (New Brunswick, 1958), Chap. 3.
3 See NA, pp. 71–82, for the quotations from this essay.
opening essay of which is a brief account of the unity that resemblance gives to one's sense of the world. Simple resemblance itself is considered here to be "one of the significant components of the structure of reality." Resemblance of one thing to another is part of the continuity of experience. "It binds together. It is the base of appearance," the essay explains. Several poems in *Harmonium* anticipate the idea discussed in his essay—the idea of the unity that resemblance gives to the content of experience. In "Domination of Black," for instance, resemblance binds together everything named and is the significant component of the sense of reality of the poem. The colors of the bushes and of the leaves recur in the color of fire; the movement of the leaves in the wind is repeated in the turning of shadows and flames; and the color and movement of the leaves suggest peacocks' tails:

The colors of their tails  
Were like the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind. . . .

The pivot of all these resemblances is the image of the movement of things in wind, and wind brings to mind the idea of the flux of time. By the same process of connotation, *peacock* symbolizes mind or self (at least for the speaker of the poem) with all its color turning in the flux and its cry against mortality. Connotation itself is created by the activity of a mind tracing resemblances. "Perhaps the whole field of connotation is based on resemblance," the essay conjectures. In the poem connotations for the idea of mortality shared by hemlock, shadow, and night are emphasized by resemblance, for all these things share a symbolic darkness. Stevens' essay says of this enhancement of a shared element or quality: "If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two dissimilar things have in common."
Resemblance is a thread of continuity from one impression to another followed by the mind seeking relations among things. Stevens probably was familiar with the chapter on "The One and the Many" in William James' *Pragmatism* and the discussion there of the various kinds of lines of continuity that bind the world together. James indicates the necessity of a sense of the continuity of things on the field of consciousness, notes that the mind can pass in many ways from one thing to another, speaks of the lines of influence or relationship that can be traced: "Following any such line you pass from one thing to another till you may have covered a good part of the universe's extent."¹ He says that to follow simple continuity, it is even enough to move from one thing to another and say that there is this and this and this.

Tracing the structure of reality through the discernment of resemblance or of any other lines of continuity that bind the world together, the mind is engaged in its natural activity and becomes the "secretive hunter" of "Stars at Tallapoosa":

Let these be your delight, secretive hunter,
Wading the sea-lines, moist and ever-mingling,
Mounting the earth-lines, long and lax, lethargic.
These lines are swift and fall without diverging.

The swift lines falling without divergence and the lines between the stars of the first stanza are all lines of relationship and cognitive interconnection, as even the imaginary lines of starlight must be. All these lines are part of the continuity of experience and compose what William James describes as "innumerable kinds of connection that special things have with other special things."² The poet finds that this tracing of relations and interconnections is like the interior life of feeling and association:

¹ New York, 1955, p. 93.
² Ibid.
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A sheaf of brilliant arrows flying straight,
Flying and falling straightway for their pleasure.

Then the poet reconsiders and discards the old figure of the arrows of thought to describe the successive impulses of immediate experience. The quick activity of memory is a closer parallel with its "nimblest motions," as the poet beautifully describes the instant and straightway recoveries of the fervor of past experience hidden in the darkness of possible remembrance:

Or, if not arrows, then the nimblest motions,
Making recoveries of young nakedness
And the lost vehemence the midnights hold.

*In no sense a source, Santayana’s Realms of Being (New York, 1942) has several images that parallel and illuminate Stevens’ poem. For the darkness of the lines between the stars in Stevens’ poem ("The lines are much too dark and much too sharp"), Santayana has this parallel concept of light: "It traverses space unceasingly in a thousand directions, leaving it perfectly black and cold" (p. 237). For Stevens’ “sheaf of brilliant arrows”—arrows that are "in yourself"—there is this passage of Santayana that relates Apollo’s arrows to the inner light of intuition: "To call this cosmic agency light is a poetic metaphor, as if we called it Phoebus; which indeed we might do without absurdity, since Apollo besides his golden locks had his invisible arrows; and these were the dread reality of the god. Only the obvious essence of brightness shining in intuition is light proper" (p. 237). For Stevens’ line "The body is no body to be seen," there is Santayana’s parallel concept: "Sometimes, as in deep thought, no image of one’s own body figures at all in intuition" (p. 246). For the idea of continuity in Stevens’ poem—the earth-lines, the sea-lines—there is Santayana’s image of “the substantial thread” connecting phenomena: "Action cannot accept phenomena simply as phenomena, but must trace the substantial thread on which they are strung together" (p. 220). Santayana speaks also of “a thin thread of calculable continuity that runs through immediate experience” (p. 226). For Stevens’ “secretive hunter” there is Santayana’s characterization of the self as a hunter of the real in this passage (the chase here is Santayana’s figurative expression for all physical experience): “The hunter and the hunted believe in something ambushed and imminent: present images are little to them but signs for coming events” (p. 201).
The mind, the secretive hunter that seeks within itself the various forms of relationship, imposes the unity of its own being upon all of its experiences. As Stevens goes on to explain in “Three Academic Pieces,” a spontaneous mythology results when the mind projects the human image outward and interprets the world anthropomorphically. Like Narcissus discovering himself in the mirror of the pool, the human self sees his humanity reflected in the world around him: “he sought out his image everywhere because it was the principle of his nature to do so.” The image seen may be no more than a formulation of a feeling of simple pleasure in normal experience; it may seem to be a discovery of the appealing nature of the scene although only an echo of inner health and wakefulness.

Personification is the verbal form of this spontaneous mythology. Stevens’ own use of myth usually goes no further than a basic central image that embodies a complex of feeling and desire related by metaphor to the natural world. In “The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage,” there is the first bare showing of the season, a few weeds seen in thin sunlight, and, above them, the symbolic figure of the early year, the paltry nude starting on the spring voyage that would assuredly transform her into summer’s goldener image of spontaneous desire. Spring is the time of year associated with the archetypal image of bareness and immaturity, the Kore or maiden, and the poet remembers her even in the midst of summer as a time “when radiance came running down, slim through the bareness.” Long awaited before it comes, its weather and its essence are desired like the desired image of woman. “Depression before Spring” expresses this desire in the figure of one expected in “slipper green”—in the verdure of the season. It is one of Stevens’ many adapta-
tions of the archetypal image of woman projected as a personification upon the world of one's impressions.

The crow of the cock in "Depression before Spring" carries an echo of the idea of the procreative urge, for the cock elsewhere in *Harmonium* represents the primal creative element by a phallic pun that recurs as "damned universal cock" in "Bantams in Pine-Woods" and as "the perfect cock" of "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws." Finding in the desire of male for female an analogy to the desire of life for springtime, in "Depression before Spring" the poet sets up a series based on the analogy: cock for hen, man for woman, poet for springtime personified as woman. Male calls, cock crows, but no hen answers:

But ki-ki-ri-ki
Brings no rou-cou,
No rou-cou-cou.

The male "Ho! Ho!" and even the poem itself, which seems to be a poet's invocation of the longed-for season, brings no apparition of the first green answer to desire:

But no queen comes
In slipper green.

"The divine ingénue" of "Last Looks at the Lilacs" is also a personification of reality manifested in the essence of a season. Her indifference to what it is that embraces her innocence is consistent with the usual indifference of nature to man in Stevens' work, and her innocence is that of the undirected accidental course of reality. Personified as one having the innocence that is an ignorance and an absence of any ill intention, Nature does not care who "marries her innocence thus, / So that her nakedness is near."

Her companion, the analytical but unintuitive caliper, is man in his practical, unimaginative relationship with earth; he is a boorish instrument of measurement who has lost the
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mythic vision of things and is no longer able to sense the primal heat of the season of procreation, the Floréal or month of flowering. Practical, reasonable man is adjured to take his last look at the lilacs, whose lavender bloom displays the proliferation of things in nature; for seeing this flowering as no more than meaningless detail, as trash, he cannot see it as the outward manifestation of the vital principle of natural growth, and no longer feels

Her body quivering in the Floréal

Toward the cool night and its fantastic star,
Prime paramour and belted paragon,
Well-booted, rugged, arrogantly male. . .

Union with the male principle, "patron and imager of the gold Don John," is a metaphoric account of the fruition of the year—the springtime earth suffused in the warmth and light that transform it into the earth of summer.

"O Florida, Venereal Soil" uses a kindred body of personification. Addressed to the archetypal woman as earth image—here identified with the actual place, the soil of Florida—the poem beseeches her to reduce the meaningless variety of disparate objects that distract the consciousness and asks her to conceal herself in darkness and quietude. After the dreadful sundry of miscellaneous reality and the confusions of daylight, the mind is tormented even at night by the ferment of undirected feeling. What the poet seeks instead is the calm of the night sea and sky with its simple composition of cloud and stars:

Donna, donna, dark,
Stooping in indigo gown
And cloudy constellations. . .

Invoking the vision of myth, the poet asks of the symbolic figure of earth that she reveal to the lover of reality, to the consciousness, no more than the few specific things that the
mind can attend when it gives something significance or regards something for its own sake. "Conceal yourself," the poem entreats, or if you manifest yourself in the darkness, disclose through the mythical vision

Fewest things to the lover—
A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit,
A pungent bloom against your shade.

These are significatory images for the consciousness that is the lover of reality—an image of creativeness (the hand symbol) holding an emblem of fruition, or a perfection, some ideal form emerging out of creative darkness.

Male and female principles in the poetry of Stevens are often representations of consciousness as male lover and of reality as anonymous woman—unknown because reality can never be realized objectively. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," however, presents the male-female relationship as simply what it is, for this poem is a discourse by man to woman on love looked at through the monocle, the point of view of middle age. In the opening poem the poet, from the vantage of his years, addresses the beloved, mocking her as the mythical goddess of love. He deprecates her powers, for he has come to the time of life when love is not all. Now there is nothing that can overwhelm him like the magnificence of poetry and its sharp verbal paradoxes:

There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
Like the clashed edges of two words that kill.

The poem clashes its negatives against each other with a display of the combat of words and their cancelings. Then the poet remembers his beloved in the time of youthful love,
and from deep within him sorrow for what love once was rises into expression as from a well of tears:

... And then

A deep up-pouring from some saltier well
Within me, bursts its watery syllable.

The naturalistic significance of the poem, its major theme, is revealed in the poet's recognition that the course of love is only the course of nature. There is first the common ground of human experience: “Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing,” this common theme of love, the poet asks, and in the eighth stanza he finds love to be a cycle, the stages of which are repeated for each individual:

An ancient aspect touching a new mind.
It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies.

And they, the poet and his beloved, have come to that time in the course of love (and its course is only an aspect of the course of nature) when they are overripe fruit of a tree. The tree he has in mind has a certain tip, he says, indicating by the phallic image the fact that the sexual nature of love remains while the individual passions that visit it come and go:

It stands gigantic, with a certain tip
To which all birds come sometime in their time.
But when they go that tip still tips the tree.

The law of sexual motivation is not the sole factor, the poet maintains in the eleventh stanza, for choice of one by another is selective and passionate. The stanza concludes with an image that illustrates the ambivalent nature of love—its primal organic basis and its shared imaginative quality. Lover and beloved sit beside the pool of pink, “clippered with lilies scudding the bright chromes,” depicting the conceptual nature of their affections, while a frog “boomed from his very belly odious chords.” The image of the frog
Stevens' Poetry of Thought is one of many that set forth as the major theme of the poem the idea that love, with all its imaginative and affective involvement, is a natural event emanating from an organic source.

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In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" the course of love is no more than the course of nature, and in "The Comedian as the Letter C," the course of thought is only the natural course of a man’s life. Crispin, like any man, must live by synecdoche and conceive, in terms of the small part known, the indefinite unknown. Reconstituting his philosophy, his idea of the nature of the world, over and over, Crispin composes each time out of his minuscule point of view and out of his vagrant subjectivity what he trusts at the moment is a true and permanent conception of reality, as valid for the next altered moment as for the present.

To illustrate the fact that the human idea of the world is a continual revision, Crispin's life is traced in terms of shifting perspectives of reality. From sea to tropics and then to North America, from introspective sea voyager to settler in Carolina and father of four—these changes of place and role are also changes of mind. Crispin's continual effort to adjust his philosophy to reality is only a form of adaptation to place and condition. During his voyage he loses the beliefs of his homeland and sees himself as diminished in the midst of ocean. Confronted by the blankness of matter during his ocean voyage, Crispin assumes that now he is able to see the veritable thing in itself. He looks at vast sea and endless sky and asks what it is that all this mystery of appearance could be since apparently it has no source in anything as human as a deity, for all the pretences and stratagems of the human ego are lost in the blankness of the non-human.
Crispin seeks to intuit the reality of things, wishes to realize them as he trusts they may be in their own objective existence. Just as the later poet of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” sought “nothing beyond reality,” the younger poet of Harmonium refused to look beyond reality because he believed there was nothing beyond it. In a naturalistic conception, the sole ground of an existence is its reality. To be real is almost a quality in itself for reality is the truth of existence, a feeling of the verity of things. Since a trust in the reality of things and selves fills out the void that would otherwise exist without a belief in a transcendent ground of being, the word reality holds an unconscious store of feeling in Stevens’ use of it.

Even the self becomes a configuration and essence of surrounding reality in a naturalistic poem; therefore, it is fitting that Crispin considers man to be only a product of the complex of what is specific for a certain place and time. This is a conclusion offered in “Anecdote of Men by the Thousand,” with its statement that the self is formed by its perceptions:

The soul, he said, is composed
Of the external world.

The poet of “Theory” in like manner accepts David Hume’s notion that the self is composed of the floating empirical moment and flatly asserts, “I am what is around me.” Similarly Crispin concludes that “his soil is man’s intelligence,” and this remark holds many of the implications of the assertion, many years later in “Things of August,” that “the world images for the beholder” and the self is “the possessed of sense not the possessor.” All of these assumptions about the nature of the self make it a natural part of a natural world.

At the end of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Crispin is the realist for whom “what is is what should be.” He discovers that the good of experience emerges from the fecundity of the natural world and that its events include him and its
forces impel him. If the ordinary round, composed of daily joys and evenings that disclose the infinity of night, if the succession of days "saps" any man, as it does Crispin, it is not that it diminishes or draws away his hopes and ambitions but that the quotidian "saps" as the sun does, draining away each day and giving another.

Crispin's last deduction is that the world, simple and familiar as a turnip, is the same unknowable but ponderable reality, for as a totality the world is only an imagined thing. At the same time, it is the true substance of experience. Hence, it is "its ancient purple," according to Stevens' blue-red color symbolism (blue for the imagined and red for the real), the imagined-real colors merging into purple; for the world, in itself the essence of the real, is only a conception carried wherever man goes and reproduced in each generation. It is always the same incomprehensible whole, "the same insoluble lump"; and the fatalist who believes that what is, is what must be

Stepped in and dropped the chuckling down his craw,
Without grace or grumble. . . .

To swallow the realization that the world is unknowable is a simple and spontaneous act for the naturalist who assumes that man and his works are a part of the natural order and do not transcend it.

The poet concludes that all of Crispin's philosophizing, all his attempts at

Illuminating, from a fancy gorged
By apparition, plain and common things,

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7 For a general study of this subject, see George McFadden, "Probings for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens," *MP* (February, 1961). Santayana uses the color purple to designate a subjective version of the real. Speaking of the subjective bent of thinking that sees the universe from a moral and religious point of view, he says, "But this strain of subjectivity is not in all respects an evil; it is a warm purple dye." *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York, 1956), p. 20.
Sequestering the fluster from the year,
Making gulped potions from obstreperous drops,
are a natural effort to comprehend the nature of reality in the
midst of the confusion of the flux of feeling and thought and
changing appearance—an attempt to understand a whole
from a part and to see the world in an impression. Crispin’s
philosophizing is a natural response of the conceiving crea­
ture. Like Santayana, the poet realizes that “thought is a
form of life, and should be conceived on the analogy of nu­
trition, generation, and art.”

Although Crispin has proved nothing by all of his speculation, his shifting philosophy is
the natural course of one man’s mind, and his life is only
another incident in the course of human life:

. . . what can all this matter since
The relation comes, benignly, to its end?
So may the relation of each man be clipped.

The end is benign because the course of Crispin’s life is the
course of nature. Crispin’s vain attempt to understand a
world from the small vantage of an impression, confused and
muddled by the subjectivity and irrational reflection of self­
hood, is only the tale or relation of each man. It is an ex­
pression of the human nature that is only a part of the larger
nature of things and events. And so, the poet concludes
ambiguously, may the account of each man be ended; or (as
the alternate meaning) the account of each man may be
ended thus.

According to the narration of Crispin’s peripatetic specula­
tion in “The Comedian as the Letter C” and the explanation
of the organic nature of love in “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,”

thought and affection are conceived to be parts of the natural world. In “Sunday Morning” Stevens places the whole man in the natural order, and in the skeptical tradition of naturalism, he draws a parallel between the indigenous life of man and that of the wild creatures: man is a natural creature like the deer and the quail and has his cycle of maturity like the wild berries. His descent to death is represented symbolically by the descent of pigeons to darkness at evening, sinking downward with “ambiguous undulations.” The world that man inhabits is the chaos of chance and the accidental being of naturalism; he is isolated from all moments other than his own by the inescapable separations of expanses of time:

    We live in an old chaos of the sun,
    Or old dependency of day and night,
    Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
    Of that wide water, inescapable.

Since for Stevens nothing is truly credible except present being, happiness occurs only in immediate experience. The earth itself offers man his only possible paradise because it is the only possible location for his existence. Therefore, the proper subject of the poet who is also a naturalist is his individual sense of the world. This is a continuing conviction of Stevens, and many years after Harmonium he observes in “A Collect of Philosophy” that the poet’s world is his constant subject: “the poet’s world is intended to be a world, which yet remains to be celebrated and which, at bottom, the poets probably hope will always remain to be celebrated.”9 In the same essay he says that the poet’s world is his native sphere, the sphere that he has made his own by the individual version of it that he conceives: “The poet’s native sphere is the sphere of which du Bellay wrote: ‘my village . . . my own small

9 For the three quotations from this essay, see OP, pp. 198–99.
When Stevens adds that "the poet's world is this present world plus imagination," he means that the poet's world is the world that he knows and continually realizes in the many variations of his own individual conception of it. Thus, the poet's world is the same world that any man finds in his vivid actual apprehension of it, that he finds

... in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth. . . .

In the infinite complexity of multiple experience, the world, by its occasions, continually opens out for the endless celebration of poetry or the endless enrichment of the self. In the seventh stanza of "Sunday Morning," the symbolic image of the ring of men chanting their celebration of the paradise of present being and "their boisterous devotion to the sun" represents the celebration of poetry and the enjoyment of sensibility. By their devotion to the sun, they address themselves to both a symbol and an instance of the objective reality about them—objective only as a source because existing in the inner conceptual life of organic being. Their chant arising "out of their blood returning to the sky" is addressed to the non-human or savage source of experience and they address it

Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.

In this early presentation of the sun symbolism that recurs in all the successive volumes of Stevens' poetry, the basic elements are present. The reality for which the sun stands is, as a savage source, a primal base from which the elaborations of an individual understanding of it may arise. It is naked in the special sense that Stevens has for the word—naked in that it is unconscious and is a presence in itself before it is clothed by conception. Santayana uses the word in this sense
in the long philosophical metaphor from *Scepticism and Animal Faith*,¹⁰ in which ideas are clothes and things are bodies. Reality is bare of conscious thought, or as Santayana says,

All nature runs about naked, and quite happy; and I am not so remote from nature as not to revert on occasion to that nakedness—which is unconsciousness—with profound relief.

The chant of the ring of men is a poem to the reality of existence and a hymn of faith that men themselves are only a manifestation of the natural world and part of the infinite variety of the natural order. The dew upon their feet, from the grasses of that earth from which they come and to which they will return, symbolizes the likeness of man to the natural growth of the fields:

And whence they came and whither they shall go
The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

As to this origin and destination, “Anatomy of Monotony,’” a poem that substantiates the naturalism of “Sunday Morning,” is even more explicit. Earth, the mother, and all her creatures share, the poem implies, the same nature and the same fate. Man emerged from the creative energy of an earth lewder or more procreant in its creative phase than now. Whatever he may be, his nature can never transcend hers:

If from the earth we came, it was an earth
That bore us as a part of all the things
It breeds and that was lewder than it is.
Our nature is her nature. . . .

Stevens’ naturalism is immediately apparent in the basic mythic vision of nature as woman, whether mother or be-

loved. The apparent duality of mind and world that permeates his poetry may seem, in a superficial view, to be at variance with a naturalistic conception of things, but mind in Stevens, as in Schopenhauer or Santayana, is only nature looking at itself. If the world exists as it is only in a particular experience of it, if the world that we know is a conceived world, the one who conceives is only a part of that world. His nature is her nature, or, to state the figure in an abstraction, the subject is part of the object.