The Poetry of Thought

When one says that the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry and when one considers with what thought has been concerned throughout so many ages, the themes of supreme poetry are not hard to identify.¹ Stevens

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Though now a minor passage in literary history, the imagist controversy made its point so thoroughly that idea has had no settled place in poetry since. New criticism (lately grown old) certainly insists on the something said in poetry, but it still seems questionable for a poem to be ratiocinative. Now as the stature of Wallace Stevens begins to show itself as above and apart from the disputes of his contemporaries, the place of abstraction in poetry must be sought, and on his terms; for in his work abstraction again becomes a major element in poetry.

Nearly everyone who writes about Stevens mentions the quasi-philosophical character of his poetry, and much of the

¹ OP, p. 188.
criticism of Stevens tends to turn into summaries and lists of his ideas. Because of the expository character of this poetry, preoccupation with its ideas is only natural. Some of Stevens' ideas resemble familiar concepts like Bergson's constant novelty of phenomena or William James' discrete reality or Santayana's essences. But even then they are not developed as arguments but are given unsupported as though they existed in simple immediacy without need of dialectic. When detached from its language and approximated in a summary, an idea from a poem of Stevens may emerge as only a slight hypothesis vanishing almost while spoken. Even when most solid and formulated, his abstract statements are often too much the common topics of philosophic writing to be valuable intrinsically as profundities or discoveries; yet, the poetry uses them as an intrinsic part of its own freshness and permanence and abundance.

Stevens plainly did not intend insignificance for his ideas. He maintained that "a poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems," but he also categorically stated that he was not interested in employing poetry as a medium for the presentation of a philosophy. A great many of his poems give an idea as an insight into the nature of the relationship of mind and reality, presented as an intuition that is both gnomic and intelligible. As for Stevens' own view of the

\[ ^2 \text{Reality, in Stevens' use of the word, may be the world supposed to be antecedent in itself or the world created in the specific occurrence of thought, including the thinker himself and his mind forming the thought. Often the term offers the assumption that if the self is the central point of a circle of infinite radius, then reality is the not-self, including all except the abstract subjective center. Sometimes reality is used in the context of the nominalist position—then the word denotes that which is actual and stands as a phenomenal identity, the existent as opposed to the merely fancied. Stevens usually means by reality an undetermined base on which a mind constructs its personal sense of the world. Occasionally he will use the word real as a term of approval, as a substitute for the word true, and, therefore, no more than an expression of confidence.} \]
nature of his experience of things, a final summary is in order as a basis for a discussion of the nature of these themes and their poetic significance.

The world of Stevens' poetry reflects the changes of the flux of experience. The common vision of poetry is usually that of an objective world whose changes are an effect of its own mechanism. Stevens' poetry envisions a world burgeoning in the flow of consciousness and created continually in his sense of it. Stevens finds the actual to be an intermutation of an outer reality and the life within; he knows it through an interpretation of the indeterminate course of perception that interpretation itself alters. The conventional implicit concept of the work of the artist assumes that he is a mere observer of things, and this concept is taken from the point of view of one looking out of the self at a world external to it, as though men stood behind their eyes like watchers behind windows. Stevens' mind is both participant and spectator, creator and observer of movement and variety. Thus, he distrusts set facts and finds the ultimate in the tentative. In "Description without Place" he uses the attributes of objects as indicating a state of consciousness, the "seeming" of the world of that occasion:

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are.

Many poets name and assess physical forms and use the value and sense of specific things to give an effect like that of live perception. They try to gain for language the physical qualities of bodies, their solidity, their actuality. Substances, physical objects, for Stevens, are subject to the transformations of the flow of consciousness and are known in all its changing lights, movement of values, attitudes, preconceptions, purposes. Thus, forms and objects have a use beyond their mere identity as, for instance, to embody concepts and
express the way the world seems in those situations in which they occur. An appearance of a thing is, therefore, both an
indication of the nature of the thing and a reflection of the self of that instant. In “Description without Place” the poet speaks of

The difference that we make in what we see
And our memorials of that difference.

The continual shift of appearance, therefore, is an effect of the flux of experience and the changing perspectives of the changing self. For the world is seen from an occupied center, and the occupied center, as Santayana says, is always a transcendental and moral point of location that “moves wherever the animal moves.” The character of the perspective rearranges itself in relation to the active self, as in “July Mountain,” for instance, in which there is only a momentary organization of reality—momentary because it surrounds a volatile center. The poem begins with a statement that consciousness exists by instants of intuition separated by various spans of inattention and exists most of all in the highly organized instants of music and poetry:

We live in a constellation
Of patches and of pitches,
Not in a single world. . . .

The world is a multiple possibility and not a single or a fixed world because it is always organized around a self, is always relative to the motion and ferment of a transcendental and moral center. Santayana’s thought fills out the highly compressed context of the poem: “For even if nature as a whole has no centre, every organism is a focus for its external and changing relations to the rest of the world, and is the centre of a dynamic cosmos relative to itself.” Stevens’ cosmos is

9 Realms of Being, p. 244.
4 Ibid., p. 245.
incipient as well as dynamic because each present instant is the beginning of a new arrangement of the reality that each subjective center realizes about itself:

Thinkers without final thoughts
In an always incipient cosmos,
The way, when we climb a mountain,
Vermont throws itself together.

A present instant of realization is a peak of summer or “July Mountain,” when reality assembles itself like the spontaneous ordering of speech or the perfected arrangement of art.\(^5\)

Even from this brief account, it should be evident that idea in Stevens has a poetic rather than a philosophic function. If Stevens’ ideas are often undeveloped or trite or outworn, still the resemblance to philosophic writing is more than fortuitous. The evidence of “A Collect of Philosophy” is enough to support a suspicion that Stevens searched for ideas that might be used as a base for poems. When a passage of philosophic prose is placed beside a poem of Stevens the similarities and differences emerge, especially when the ideas in both are almost parallel. A passage useful as illustration is by a philosopher who is also a poet, and for this reason the language of the two works is closer together. It is not a technical passage, but still it is a philosophical passage and has

\(^5\) The image of a spontaneous creation of order at the moment of realization is similar to some of the ideas and images of “Connoisseur of Chaos,” especially the famous image of the eagle “for which the intricate Alps are a single nest.” The paradoxes in the beginning of this poem, “a violent order is disorder” and “a great disorder is an order,” are propositions that, in one form or another, are implicit in a great deal of Stevens’ work. Alexander, in *Space, Time and Deity*, p. 237, has an equivalent observation: “But system in general exists in every complex, even in the least organized; all disorder has its own complex plan.”
the advantage of being almost as self-contained as a poem. Santayana is describing the effect of the intuition of an essence on the self:

The important point, however, is not how intuition is reached, but that when reached it reveals an essence belonging of itself neither here nor there, but undated and eternal. Such essences are set over against existence everywhere and at all times, and it remains for existence, if it will, to embody their forms or to give attention to them, so that they may become evident to living spirits. And a living spirit finds a great joy in conceiving them, but because in conceiving them it is liberated from the pressure of ulterior things, energizes perfectly, and simply conceives.6

“Martial Cadenza” is an intuition of an essence, “undated and eternal,” without time, caught in an integration of experience. Although the word martial in the title may refer to the image of the silent armies of the second stanza, it conveys some of the effect of a bravery, a soldierly flourish in the face of oncoming time. The poem abstracts an evanescence, the present, into an essence that is a permanence, the point of unvarying light of the moment of consciousness like the star that is its image:

Only this evening I saw again low in the sky
The evening star, at the beginning of winter. . . .

Winter and evening in all these poems bear their burden of traditional connotations for age and approaching death, but the star is constant; it recurs “as if life came back,” he feels, seeing it shining again. In its recurrence, life recurs,

. . . as if it came back, as if life came back,
Not in a later son, a different daughter, another place,
But as if evening found us young, still young,
Still walking in a present of our own.

In the light shining there an embodiment of an essence occurs, and by it the present is transformed into the eternal. As the eternal is a world without time, it is like something without being, "an essence belonging of itself neither here nor there," either because it is without factual existence or because it has existence no longer in the sense that past experiences have no existence since memory does not constitute an existence of the actual experience:

It was like sudden time in a world without time,
This world, this place, the street in which I was,
Without time: as that which is not has no time,
Is not, or is of what there was.

Then he thinks of the world of the past, that world abandoned by time, and in one of his supreme fictions, he realizes the silence of non-being and sees the dead world of past occurrence stilled in absolute vanquishment:

... full
Of the silence before the armies, armies without
Either trumpets or drums, the commanders mute, the arms
On the ground, fixed fast in a profound defeat.

With only the wisp of a memory of Matthew Arnold's ignorant armies or even of Keats' steadfast star, he sees his star again as a form of time itself, with time conceived of as that moment in which all reality exists, the eternal moment of being, reality in itself and apart from any mere temporary and individual consciousness:

... Itsel
Is time, apart from any past, apart
From any future, the ever-living and being,
The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire.

The star is the constant presence of the present, the eternal moment of an existent reality that is always there:
The vivid thing in the air that never changes,
Though the air change. . .

He sees it as a central reality—an essence, not a symbol—and in his realization he becomes one with that fire. He flashes again as it flashes. Thus, by a conjunction of opposites, the fragile temporary I is identified with the eternal vivid moment of time, the point of living present. In that identity the self, the living spirit of Santayana’s passage, realizing this essence, “energizes perfectly, and simply conceives.”

. . . Only this evening I saw it again,
As the beginning of winter, and I walked and talked
Again, and lived and was again, and breathed again
And moved again and flashed again, time flashed again.

Although Santayana’s prose is closer to poetry than is usual for philosophy and Stevens’ poems are correspondingly closer to philosophic statement than poetry usually is, the profound breach between them becomes plainer by their similarities. The obvious differences between the two—between the direct assertion of mere statement, of the voice speaking straight to the receiving mind; and the implications of the fictive statement, of the voice speaking in a situation, a condition of a place and a time, “this world, this place, the street in which I was”—these differences, enhanced by the different rhythmic effects of the passage of prose and of the poem, are the contrasting appearances of the two; but it is the subterranean root system of human experience of the poem that makes it a burgeoning tree to the simple monument of the prose.

For instance, Santayana means to say precisely what he says, but Stevens implies a secret and poignant denial of his conjunction of self and star. The poem expresses his sense of exaltation at this embodiment of the concept of eternity as the moment of living experience. That is what he says, openly and longingly. But there to deny the union of the self
and the image of eternity are his silent, defeated armies, instances of that mortal world with which his poem must cope.

We face here an instance of the intricate function of the fictive element in poetry. The fictive element in a philosophic passage consists of no more than the occasion of its utterance. In a poem, however, there is the presence of an implied and often intense human situation, and there are the purposes of the poem itself, fulfilled in its fictive character. The fictive aspect of poetry invades the normally simple and candid nature that a plain statement of an idea usually has. The ideas in Stevens' poems participate in the fictive character of the poem, especially in that they give the whole poem the guise of a moment of insight or realization or of an affirmation of belief. These ideas avoid the question of their truth value by their participation in the fictive.

It is important to remember that a statement, even an abstract one, cannot avoid a source of some kind for its words, an uttering voice with some sort of an occasion. Stevens' ideas are enveloped by the inevitable circumstances of language, the voice, and its situation. Therefore, what we have is either more or less of a fictive action. The action can be fairly overt, as in "Martial Cadenza," in which the speaker is in a specific place, his street, with the conflict of his mortality and his yearning for permanence; or the poem may hold no more than the elemental vestigial situation, the instance of utterance. A philosophic idea seems to hold aloof from the vestigial situation of a philosophic passage; and a poetic idea, to engage in that situation, in fact to amplify it. In a great many of Stevens' poems, his ideas, like the slight action usual in most lyrics, provide a surface for immediate attention and give the poem a guise or a role to perform. This guise for Stevens is that of an intuition of reality; thus, idea carries on for him a function for the whole poem that
resembles the function of an action in a poem with a dominant dramatic character. His poetic ideas engage us in a semblance of an experience that is specific in character and expresses a certain individual sense of the world. And when abstracted for purposes of study, that is what they mainly seem to do. The abstraction of ideas from poetry is an awkward but useful critical device that gives only a rough approximation of the cognitive material. Getting at this abstract content as best we can, in time it shows itself as a means of approaching intense experience in living, for Stevens uses his ideas almost as another poet would use a dramatic content. In this way Stevens' use of idea often inverts the usual relationship of experience and idea in a poem. We are accustomed to poems in which a fiction, an invented situation or a particular mode of action, becomes a representation of an abstraction by standing as symbolic of an idea, or as part and instance of a universal. Thus, the specified thing or event, transformed by implication, is turned into a general concept. Stevens' poems are often made of this traditional experience-into-cognition arrangement; but just as often he reverses it with an arrangement of idea into experience.

Any idea, the transforming idea of a poem or the literal idea of expository prose, bears as an inherent flaw the difficulty of its acceptance by a reader. We accept an action as performing the functions of the fictive and do not demand historicity of it in the way that we demand verity of an idea. But an idea in a poem is inextricably mingled with the human situation in which it exists and in which it is imagined. By no means, however, does the fictive element impugn the poet's sincerity; yet, it would be naive to abstract an idea from a poem and ask whether or not the poet believes in it. First of all, an idea thus abstracted from a poem is a critic's hypothesis and never identical to the idea in the poem.
Ideas are truly offered only according to their use and presentation in the poem, and by this particular presentation the poet defines his position in relation to these ideas. When the ideas of a poem are presented as though they had truth value and not as the mere expression of a role, the poem has the effect of a personal affirmation. Unlike a philosophic statement, the truth value of an affirmation in poetry does not require a logical justification but depends on elements that gain simple and universal acceptance like those that are an abstraction of evident and common human experience.

Here it should be repeated that Stevens himself insists on the value of his ideas, but he also insists that this truth value exist only in the particular sense of existence given in one of his poems; for the kind of truth value that an idea in a poem by Stevens normally has is intuitive and revelatory rather than practical and applicable beyond the context. His realizations or "secretions of insight," as Stevens calls them, embody experience as though the idea created special circumstances in which the world could be known but only in a certain way and according to the terms of the idea itself. The idea of "On the Road Home" has such a function. Its contrast of the old philosophic pair, the one and the many, is no more than a simple rejection of one and vindication of the other in terms of a new realization of living, a result of his awareness of the vividness and particularity of immediate experience:

It was when I said,
"There is no such thing as the truth,"
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole.

This is that fox who, now turned pluralist, finds the grapes of reality no longer sour. Was it not truth, that most fabulous of ideas, this same bare unrealized thought, that Keats found one with beauty, thereby conjoining the ultimate in abstraction with the ultimate in experience?
You . . . You said,
"There are many truths,
But they are not parts of a truth."

Whoever the "you" may have been, William James, writing in *Pragmatism* about the truth, saw it dissolved into the pluralism of the specific items of the moment of consciousness: "For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All 'homes' are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies."

It was in "On the Road Home" that Stevens says that he became aware that anything real is individual and exists only in a particular experience of it. Thus it is that pluralism gives the real things within the flux, and man standing in that flux stands alone. Then, in that realization, the tree becomes an experience and the real (the green) becomes the blue (the conceived):

Then the tree, at night, began to change,
Smoking through green and smoking blue.
We were two figures in a wood.
We said we stood alone.

Introducing truth as an almost sacred idea to monists—one of the idols of the tribe of men—William James finds it a mere form of speech, unlike the pluralism that he conceives as made up of the particulars of consciousness: "What hardens the heart of everyone I approach with the view of truth sketched in my last lecture [truth as relation among the details of experience] is that typical idol of the tribe, the notion of the Truth, conceived as the one answer, determinate and complete to the one fixed enigma which the world

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7 P. 169.
is believed to propound." At another time he says, "The Truth: what a perfect idol of the rationalistic mind!" Stevens, too, finds the truth falsely enshrined; and finding reality in the idea of pluralism, like a poet but unlike a philosopher, he turns it into a way of regarding the world, and the idea is dissolved in an experience:

It was when you said,
"The idols have seen lots of poverty,
Snakes and gold and lice,
But not the truth";

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
And longest, the night was roundest,
The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
Closest and strongest.

Although there is some appearance of a source for Stevens' poem in "Pragmatism and Humanism," from which these passages by James are extracted, conjunction of the poetry and prose is made in order to exhibit the different functions of a similar idea in each. James' discussion is a contributing one, a tributary of his main stream of argument; for he goes on to show that pragmatism is pluralistic, and he raises the old philosophic dispute of the one and the many in order to define the position of pragmatism and to oppose the position of rationalism. Stevens, using the same dispute, takes his pluralism as a way of seeing the world. He does not reinforce any larger theory of pragmatism or of anything else. Pluralism is an intuition of reality in Stevens' poem. The abstract element becomes the poet's means of certain realizations. To turn to the poem's last two stanzas, silence for Stevens has implications of non-being and of a universe indifferent to

man, and it was at that moment of grasping plurality and seeing the idols, in association with immediate human experience rather than rationalistic Truth, that this silence becomes "largest and longest." In contrast with that silence, he enters intensely his own immediate sense of the round night and the warm fragrant autumn.

Obviously the ideas of a philosophic passage tend toward concatenation. Stevens' ideas are independent realizations even when the poem is only a part of a larger composition. Thus devoid of a logical basis, his ideas appear under the guise of intuition. Also, the special qualities of the language of the prose are of minor importance, but Stevens' ideas live only in the specific conditions of language and feeling of the poem. Poetry has an incantatory quality that suggests a revelatory or intuitive meaning, and intuition is the traditional import of poetry. The intuition of a poem of Stevens is both an outward and an inward regard. It is a realization of the world that in its abstractness, unsupported by the special pleading of logic, gives an effect of objective and immediate vision. In "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" Stevens' own personification of intuition, his necessary angel of reality, says:

... in my sight, you see the earth again,
Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said
By repetitions of half-meanings.

This very realization is inevitably the poet's personal expression, existing only in the individual verbal form of the poem. For one of Stevens' generation and interests, it would be difficult to speak of intuition without some attention to the emphasis on intuition in philosophy at the turn of the
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The poems of Stevens remind us of the intuition of Bergson in that many of these poems are an insight into an aspect of reality by the self, an intuition of an object by a subject; and they remind us of Croce in that they are, too, an expression of that unique self and represent the poet’s sense of the world in his own individual language form. Thus, inasmuch as a poem of Stevens is composition as realization, it is a Bergsonian intuition, and it becomes at the same time a Crocean intuition in that it is composition as expression. Obviously, any poem may be an intuition according to Croce’s meaning; the Bergsonian sense of the term is more restrictive. The poetry of Stevens achieves the status of an intuition according to both interpretations of the word.

It would be a mistake, however, to look to Bergson or Croce or Santayana or anyone else for a specific source here. Stevens does not go into the matter enough to make a search for philosophical affinities worthwhile; in fact, he never goes into any of his ideas, especially the ideas in his poems, far enough to relate him other than as an eclectic reader. These ideas of his have other purposes than philosophic ones and are really only half ideas after all. Stevens in his poetic wisdom never made them more.

The secret of the effect of these ideas is their lack of elaboration. Stevens’ usual plan for cognition in a poem is to use an abstraction as an over-all expository scheme and then within that scheme to move from one idea to another, these contained ideas being almost discrete and used to support the emotional implications of the major ideas rather than to express abstract import. In other words, his subsidiary ideas do not elaborate the over-all idea; they elaborate its emotional implications. Stevens is too knowing a poet to subject his poems to an overwhelming cognitive content. What appears to be an elaboration of an idea may only be the repetition of its slight meaning.
To show Stevens' ideas as only "meanings said / By repetitions of half-meanings," a poem and a passage of philosophy will again be placed in juxtaposition. The two contexts have such similar ideas that one could almost be used to explain the other.

There is a dramatic passage in Francis Herbert Bradley's Appearance and Reality that follows a long skeptical introduction discrediting all objective evidence of reality. After almost 150 pages in which he reduces apparent reality to the status of mere appearance, he suddenly affirms his belief that reality is made of feeling and experience:

I will state the case briefly thus. Find any piece of existence, take up anything that anyone could possibly call a fact, or could in any sense assert to have being, and then judge if it does not consist in sentient experience. Try to discover any sense in which you can still continue to speak of it, when all perception and feeling have been removed; or point out any fragment of its matter, any aspect of its being, which is not derived from and is still not relative to this source. When the experiment is made strictly, I can myself conceive of nothing else than the experienced. Anything, in no sense felt or perceived, becomes to me quite unmeaning. And as I cannot try to think of it without realizing either that I am not thinking at all, or that I am thinking of it against my will as being experienced, I am driven to the conclusion that for me experience is the same as reality.⁹

Remember from this passage that anything, any piece of existence, even a fact, must consist of sentient experience, that the existent cannot exist without perception and feeling, that "experience is the same as reality," and then turn to Part II of Stevens' "Holiday in Reality":

The flowering Judas grows from the belly or not at all. The breast is covered with violets. It is a green leaf. Spring is umbilical or else it is not spring. Spring is the truth of spring or nothing, a waste, a fake. These trees and their argentines, their dark-spiced branches, Grow out of the spirit or they are fantastic dust. The bud of the apple is desire, the down-falling gold, The catbird's gobble in the morning half-awake— These are real only if I make them so. Whistle For me, grow green for me and, as you whistle and grow green, Intangible arrows quiver and stick in the skin And I taste at the root of the tongue the unreal of what is real.

The obvious thing about these two quotations is what was mentioned in relation to James and Stevens. Bradley's is a small part of a long work with a remarkable continuity and unity, and the idea of his passage quoted above is only a fragment of his elaborate abstract structure. He qualifies and defines this element of his thinking, building to it and beyond it his intricate argument. Taken alone it would have strong implications for Bradley's thought, implications that he hastens to correct, such as its suggestion of solipsism. And all its implications are cognitive ones.

Stevens' passage is a whole poem, an integer. The first part of "Holiday in Reality," which is not quoted here, is, in fact, another separate poem, with a separate idea. Stevens takes this bare concept, the identity of reality and sentient experience, and makes his poem out of its repetition. His expression of his idea is a paean of amazement almost, an utterance with a certain feeling and manner, intent upon the way this idea seems and upon the way reality seems in this idea. It is certainly not a prayer, but it does have some qual-
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ities of reverence. It has implications, but they are implica-
tions of feeling rather than of cognition. These implications
certain quality of being and particular forms of
tain to a certain quality of being and particular forms of
experience. The cognitive and logical implications of this
fragment of idea are of minor consequence in the poem. To
pursue them would be to leave the poem for one's own
speculation.

What we have in Stevens' poem is an idea that, in its own
proper native language, functions as a vehicle of particular
experience itself. With "I taste at the root of the tongue the
unreal of what is real," Stevens is giving the intuition of his
poetry, not an intuition of a particular thing but a particular
intuition, and one of that reality that is indistinguishably
both mind and world.

In the common sense, intuition leans toward an appercep-
tion of specifics and away from abstract concepts; but the
intuition in Stevens' poetry is an idea that gives a particular
sense of the world, and its specifics are those of a certain
integration of experience. Although this integration is gained
through an abstraction, even one that is only the slightest
kind of an idea, it contains something of the drama of being
and of a specific existence. It does not have to contain a
listing of specifics, an itemization of single certain forms or
even of single certain moments. It itself is a single certain
experience.

As a matter of fact, the specific items and specific images
in Stevens' poem are generic ones: the flowering Judas is any
flowering Judas; the breast and its violets are any breast and
its violets. More than that, these generic images are trans-
formed into larger abstractions, and the breast and its violets
become sentience and its created reality. Thus, even while
grasping for their specificity, these apparent items expand
into vast and simple abstractions. The one most particular
thing here is the individual experience, the "I taste at the
root of the tongue." What is it, then, that is tasted there but
the whole unbounded content of experience?