# CHAPTER IX

## NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION : IDENTITY OF POETRY AND REALITY

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP, 380-408), Stevens' central work, is his most sustained effort at defining poetry as disclosure. The poem, as the title suggests, makes a few basic affirmations that point "toward" a new understanding of poetry, a new area of poetics in which the abiding but still largely undetermined relationship between poetry and reality seems to exist. The tentativeness of the title is not so much a matter of uncertainty or frustration as it is an acknowledgement of the enormous breadth of the subject and a confessed awareness, that though it can be illumined, it will not allow any precise answers. Stevens is, in Heidegger's words, 'on the way' to articulating some aspects of this new, developing understanding of the supreme fiction.

The poem makes three major affirmations about poetry. First, "It must be abstract" (CP, 380), that is, it must recover, through decreation, the being of things. Secondly, "It must change" (CP, 389), that is, it must be grounded in temporality

and dis-cover the being that resides in ever-changing reality. Finally, "It must give pleasure" (CP, 398), that is, it must celebrate the disclosure of things in their true being. The supremacy of poetry lies in that it makes possible a fuller realization or recognition of things in their radiant presence. It is this identity of poetry and reality, their "amassing harmony" (CP, 403), that is the central preoccupation of the poem. More than any other of his poems, perhaps, "Notes" brings into focus the various aspects of the affinity between Stevens' poetic affirmations and Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics.

The introductory lines, addressed perhaps to the supreme being of poetry, speak of the poet's total and sincere commitment to poetry as its presence helps him to see the "single, certain truth" in its "living changingness" (CP, 380), the abstract or being in its change, in life itself, and so live "in the central of our being," live poetically as a human being and hence find "peace," and joy that arises from such authentic living. The brief dedication, in its vibrant meditativeness, introduces the three central affirmations that the poem undertakes to develop at length.

## It Must Be Abstract

The supreme fiction, first of all, must be abstract. Stevens uses the word "abstract" in an unexpected way. It does not imply abstraction or withdrawal from the concrete and

existential world, turning it into an unreal, mental fiction. Rather, it involves a phenomenological reduction of our habitual ways of perception of the real world, the destruction of the conceptual encrustations that obfuscate our experience of primordial reality. The phenomenological destruction, however, is not a return to a transcendent origin as in Husserl, as J. Hillis Miller suggests.[1] Stevens' notion of abstraction is closer to Heidegger's 'destruction' which leads to the retrieval of existential things in their ontological plenitude.

The word "abstract" in "Notes" thus also suggests another meaning which identifies it with Heidegger's being, or what Stevens calls "the first idea" (CP, 381), which is not a definite entity in itself that can be externalized and defined as such, but can be seen immanent in things, as always embodied and realized in actual phenomena, as "abstraction blooded" (CP, 385). The first idea thus is not a Platonic Idea or a transcendent, absolute truth existing as an atemporal ideality distinct from temporal existence. Rather, as the poem shows, it is to be located only in "change" or time. The statement that the supreme fiction "must be abstract," then, might be the same thing as saying that it must dis-cover, through a process of decreation, the being or the first idea that resides in the real, temporal things.

The first task is then to get rid of all the existing

conceptions of the first idea. The first poem opens with an address to ephebe, who perhaps represents a modern sensibility which needs to be initiated into an entirely new way of looking at things. Ephebe must begin afresh. He must become an ignorant man again, must shake off all his arrogantly anthropomorphic "invention," his knowledgeable, confident mastery over things. Ignorance, like poverty, is Stevens' image of the decreated self when it is shorn of all its subjective supremacy over things. Only when he gives up inventing things, assigning them names and images, can he begin to discover them in their first idea:

> Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun.
>
> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
> And see it clearly in the idea of it.
>
> Never suppose an inventing mind as source
> Of this idea.... (CP, 380-381)

What is required is a phenomenological epoché, or what Heidegger calls the destruction of the traditional, metaphysical egocentric view in order to return to the primordial world in which we can see the sun as it is, "clearly" and "clean," in its true being. The first idea is not an invention of the mind. The mind is not the source or locus in which divine truth is vested. Rather, it dis-covers the truth in its perception of things. The emphasis in the first lines is on perception. The first idea is not conceived as separated from the thing seen. The essential is

inseparable from the existential, and the visible. The poem rejects the notion of being, as the transcendent divinity:

> The death of one god is the death of all.
> . . . . .
> Phoebus is dead, ephebe. (CP, 381)

The sun must be given no more names, must not be transformed into an image of some invisible god, but be "In the difficulty of what it is to be." The "difficultest rigor" (CP, 398), Stevens says later in "Notes," is to see the sun not as transformed and yet feel as if it were. It is the most difficult perception which is to see it in the phenomenological/ontological plenitude.

The second poem reiterates the need for the decreation of the conceptions of the mind, and even more directly speaks of change or temporality as integral to the first idea. To see the sun as Phoebus is a revishing temptation. But soon we get tired of our fragmented vision, our partial, subjective image of what is an inexhaustible whole. "It is the celestial ennui of apartments / That sends us back to the first idea, the quick / of this invention" (CP, 381). It is the first idea which is the source, "the quick" of our inventions, and not the inventing mind that is the source of the first idea. The revishing images of the first idea are "fatal" and "poisonous" because as soon as we feel the ennui of a certain image or conception, we give it another image, another name, so that the first idea lives

"in a poet's metaphors," in one image after another like a "hermit" who "comes and goes and comes and goes all day" (CP, 381).

If our images of things give us ennui, then there can be an ennui of the first idea also if it is not seen in its living changingness. The poem gives examples of the monastic man and the philosopher as artists because they do not see the first idea as an image or an atemporal ideal conceived by the self. They are ignorant, poor men who do not have anything: "And not to have is the beginning of desire" (CP, 382). They throw away the encrustations and staleness of images "As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep" and desire to see, for a moment, abstraction "breaking into reality" (CP, 255), to perceive being as it presents itself in the change of season, in its weather, in its songs:

> It is desire at the end of winter, when
>
> It observes the effortless weather turning blue
> And sees the myosotis on its bush.
> Being virile, it hears the calendar hymn. (CP, 382)

The creative act, the third poem tells us, "refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea" (CP, 382). We experience being, not as existing in an abstract realm beyond our existence, but in our very life, in things around us as we discover it residing within them. The poem

> satisfies
> Belief in an immaculate beginning

> And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
> To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
> From that ever-early candor to its late plural
>
> And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
> Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
> Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,
>
> An elixir, an excitation, a pure power. (CP, 382)

"The immaculate beginning" is the first idea, seen clearly, in its nakedness without any encrustations of images. It is "candor," pure and white radiance, free of all limited and limiting, biased conception of it. The "immaculate end" is life, existence, the "late plural" of being, its manifestations in things. The experience of the "candor of them," of the presence of things present is an experience of sharing, "Of what we feel from what we think," an experience not of the transcendent reflective mind, but of the living participation in things. This is the experience that gives real exhilaration. By the middle of the third poem, Stevens has already spoken of all the three aspects of the supreme fiction, the "abstract," the "change" and the "pleasure." That is inevitable, for they are simultaneous and inseparable.

The creative experience, then, is one of feeling everything in its candidness, seeing "strange relation" in life's nonsense. From the serene meditativeness of the first four stanzas, the poem turns to the most unexpected language, the nonsensical sounds of hooble-how, hoobla-hoo and hoo, in which the Arabian moon, the wood-dove and the ocean make their random

appearances. They are all nonsensical — the moon in its dream-like fancy whose astronomical inscriptions are "unscrawled" or undecipherable; the wood-dove in its primitive, inchoate response to nature; and the ocean in being a totally unintelligible, inhuman universe. And yet their nonsensical howling creates a stimulus that "pierces" us with a strange relation, the relation that results from feeling, not from thinking or reasoning.

Poem IV is a direct rejection of the reasoning self, the Cartesean cogito, the subject for whom the things exist as objects of its own anthropomorphic projections:

> The first idea was not our own. Adam
> In Eden was the father of Descartes
> And Eve made air the mirror of herself. (CP, 383)

This is the traditional metaphysical imagination which, posited as the central subjective self, views reality as a reflection of itself, "as in a glass," the race of Adam and Eve living on an earth "varnished" by their own conceptions.

But reality is not our invention; it is something wholly other:

> But the first idea was not to shape the clouds
> In imitation. The clouds preceded us
>
> There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
> There was a myth before the myth began,
> Venerable and articulate and complete. (CP, 383)

We must effect the phenomenological reduction, destroy our

arrogantly anthropomorphic view of reality and return to the primordial world, the physical myth, that has always been there, before we cover it up with the layers of our myths. We are not masters of this world, viewing the world from its inner relation to our central self; rather, we are strangers to its mystery and the importance of poetry or creative experience lies in experiencing, or responding to, the mystery of this primordial world, "Venerable and articulate and complete":

> From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves. (CP, 383)

Once we learn to do this, the air ceases to be a mirror and becomes the mere air we inhabit, in which our lives occur, bright and dark, and make irrelevant the "sweeping meanings that we add" (CP, 384) to it.

The contrast between the existence of the animals and that of ephebe in poem V is the contrast between the life that is lived in agreement with reality and the one totally alienated from it. The lion, the elephant, or the bear, each in his own way, appropriates the world in which he lives, lives adequately, as a "match," an equal to the surrounding reality. Ephebe, on the other hand, is a "creature of the roofs" (L, 434) who lives in his attic, confined within its bounds, an enclosed, stifling existence, separated from any lived contact with reality. Ephebe, thus, represents the existential dread of the modern self. He can produce only a painful "bitter utterance" (CP, 384). Unable

anymore to live in the immediacy of things with dignity as a strong, powerful being, he turns to master and subjugate things which, ironically, reduces him to the ludicrous role of a ring master in a circus:

> These are the heroic children whom time breeds
> Against the first idea - to lash the lion,
> Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle. (CP, 385)

Stevens ridicules, rather devastatingly, the modern sensibility, anguished and frustrated, that having failed to make a lived contact with reality, attempts to consume it within its controlling power. But his "heroic" efforts reveal in fact how "cowed" (CP, 384) he is by it, lacking as he does the energy and strength of the animals to be part of the external world.

To be part of the external world is to see, to realize, to experience actual things as poem VI illustrates. It is only in such concrete, immediate, real experience that we come upon "the giant of the weather" (CP, 385), the abstract, the being, the first idea of the weather. The abstract is never realized if it is not seen in the actual things, says the poem: "Not to be realized because not to / Be seen, not to be loved or hated because / Not to be realized" (CP, 385). On the other hand, the giant of the weather is revealed in Franz Hals' perception of it. The abstract is "not to / Be spoken to" without actual things like a roof, "First fruits," "the virginal of birds." It must be made visible in particular things like flowers that look gay

against the Northern sky. The abstract must be seen and "imagined well," discovered in things, so that, it may in turn, appear to transform them:

> My house has changed a little in the sun.
> The fragrance of the magnolias comes close,
> False flick, false form, but falseness close to kin.
> (CP, 385)

The change of weather, the light of the sun, the fragrance of flowers "change" the house; it appears a little "false" because of its transformation, but this is "falseness close to kin," to its real self. The house is not a thing transformed into something else, and yet it appears as if it were transformed. The paradox is described in the following stanza:

> It must be visible or invisible,
> Invisible or visible or both:
> A seeing and unseeing in the eye. (CP, 385)

We see the actual house, and we see it transformed. Similarly, we see things and we experience the being of things. The abstract, can be seen only in things visible, though it is itself "invisible." The poem, after a constant movement between the abstract and the real, finally settles to a realization that the abstract is accessible only in the actual and the real, that the giant of the weather is discovered only in the actual weather, and the poem insists on this: "Say the weather, the <u>mere</u> weather, the <u>mere</u> air: / An abstraction blooded." (CP, 385) (Emphasis added).

Having given up the search for the abstract, the ideal,

the first idea in its separation from the real world of things, poem VII turns to those casual, common experiences in which the first idea is revealed; in which nothing is transformed, yet we are moved by them as if they were:

> It feels good as it is without the giant,
> A thinker of the first idea. Perhaps
> The truth depends on a walk around a lake. (CP, 386)

These are the times of "inherent excellence," of balances,

> not balances
> That we achieve but balances that happen. (CP, 386)

This is an experience in which we awaken to and discover the mystery of living.

The last three poems of the first part speak of the major man, the major abstraction, the being of man. We have been already prepared in the preceding poems to recognize him. He is a monastic man (II), the man who is essentially poor, who has nothing, who has shaken off the encrustations of subjective projections. He is not an heir to Adam and Eve (IV), not the Cartesian self who sees the external world as an object of his representations. He does not, like ephebe, live cut off from the external world (V). Rather, ephebe is asked, at the end of the first part, as he was in the beginning, to initiate himself into perceiving and recognizing this "new" man, who appears like an "old fantoche" (CP, 182) in his most common, ordinary guise.

Stevens' meditations on the major man have a two-fold implication : his refutation of a notion of the self, the Cartesian cogito, and the retrieval of the essential human self. Writing about poem VIII, Stevens said, "the trouble with humanism is that man as God remains man" (L, 434), that is, man remains central as God. What happens with Descartes is that man becomes the first and final subject, the centre to which the world is related. Stevens criticizes the tradition of subjectivity which celebrates and apotheosizes this centrality of the self and its supremacy over things. Poem IX refutes such apotheosis: "apotheosis is not / The origin of the major man" (CP, 387). Stevens' major man is not presented as a god or a hero, but in his most normal, natural, ordinary character, as "MacCullough" (VIII), who is "any name, any man" (L, 434). And the last poem deliberately deflates the traditional, heroic image of man by presenting him "In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons" (CP, 389). The major man is most certainly not what the humanistic tradition has made of man - the central subject who masters and conquers the whole existent - but a decentralized and demystified self.

Stevens' major man, in the first place, is a real, normal ordinary man, "the MacCullough is MacCullough" (CP, 387). But he is also a man who exists in his essence, in his being. He is a poet, a "Beau linguist," a man of imagination who recognizes his true essence, the "leaner being, moving in on him" (CP, 387).

The next poem ends with an affirmation that such a man exists, his being manifesting itself in his visible gestures:

> He is and may be but oh! he is, he is,
> This foundling of the infected past, so bright,
> So moving in the manner of his hand. (CP, 388)

Ephebe, then, must not give him images and name, fix him in his conceptions, but simply let him be, see him as he is.

The final poem describes the major man, in a language of plain propounding:

> The major abstraction is the idea of man
> And major man is its exponent, abler
> In the abstract than in his singular. (CP, 388)

"The idea of man", is, what the dedication calls, "the central of our being" (CP, 380), the being of our be-ing. This abstraction, however, must not be conceived of as 'subject' or 'transcendent ego,' or in any case a transcendent self that does not exist in real time and place, but a "part, / Though an heroic part, of the commonal" (CP, 388). The major man is perhaps he who appropriates this central of his being to his be-ing in the world. He bears affinities with Heidegger's 'Dasein' or man who is literally 'the there of being,' in whose existence being or essence occurs, or who ek-sists, 'stands out' into the 'truth of being'. He is not the master of beings, but as Heidegger describes him, a shepherd of being and therefore lives in essential poverty and in the commonal way so that he may live in the intimacy of the central of his being.

The major man is presented finally in clear, invincible form:

> Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man
> In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,
>
> It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
> The final elegance, not to console
> Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound. (CP, 389)

He is not the romantic, superior, subjective self that takes upon as his mission to console or sanctify, but who in his ultimate elegance, merely propounds, that others may heed his words.

IT MUST CHANGE

If the task of poetry is to perceive the first idea, the being of things, the poems in the first part have shown that it cannot be grasped except by being made visible in its temporal character. The first idea cannot be conceived in isolation, as a figment of the subjective self that claims to be the locus of all knowledge. It is to be seen within the horizon of time, the "giant of the weather," "the invisible," made manifest in "the visible," the "mere weather" (CP, 385). The interpretation of the first idea is thus deeply interconnected with temporality or change. This is similar to Heidegger's notion that time is our only access to the being of things, for 'beyond' or 'behind' the phenomena of the world there is essentially nothing.

Poetry is, for Stevens, a creative act that does not isolate itself from the temporal, existential world by creating its

own world of atemporal ideality, but an act that locates itself in temporality and involves a participation in the living, changing things in such a way that they reveal their being. The poems in this section move toward the participation in the living and the changing (I, II, V, VII, X) and the rejection of the changeless, the immortal (II), the inhuman (III), the monotony (VI) and the inflexible (VII).

The first two poems describe the coming of spring which is only truly experienced, as the second poem suggests, as a "beginning" and not a "resuming" (CP, 391) or a repetition. The poems seem to reject the notion of natural change as the mutable cyclical repetition of the immutable order, or of life as a mechanical existing ordained by an immortal order.

The first poem opens with a traditional description of spring which is seen as a resurrection of the eternal spring. There is a sudden exuberance of life, expressed in the overwhelming profusion of things of spring - violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths, all seen in motion. The effect of the spring on the old seraph is obviously of the sameness and constancy of its objects. He inhales the perfume of violets as he expected, as "appointed." The doves are resurrected from their ghosts, "phantoms" out of history. The girls are seen as representatives of generations together. And the booming of the bees is seen by him as if they had been a constant factor, as if they had never gone. The old seraph, experienced in age, yet an angel not of

earth but of ether, "parcel guilded," sees in spring the principle of sameness and constancy, of the repetition of the origin. There is a feeling, conveyed in the unreality of his experience, expressed in phrases like "appointed," "phantoms" and "as if they had never gone," that he misses the newness and freshness of life around him. His view of spring as a recurrence, a "resuming," and not a beginning, therefore, stands corrected that these "constant" objects are in fact "inconstant objects of inconstant cause / In a universe of inconstancy" (CP, 389). And the poem modulates, with a very subtle yet perfect stroke, this correction by introducing as ephemeral and evanescent an image as the night air - "This means / Night-blue is an inconstant thing" (CP, 389-390).

Having established inconstancy and not the constant repetition as the source of change, the poem once more corrects the view of the seraph, who now in winter, in his role of a reveller in Saturnalia,[2] "satyr in Saturn," looks at "this withered scene" and feels "distaste" for it as he sees in it the blunt, crude, inelegant and grotesque repetition of spring. He does not identify with the change in the scene, does not see winter in its real being:

> ... the distaste we feel for this withered scene
> Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,
> It is a repetition. The bees come booming
> As if - The pigeons clatter in the air. (CP, 390)

In the midst of the withering winter scene he feels hypnotized by the summer bees and his distaste results from remembering the

doves deteriorating into clattering pigeons, the seductive perfumes of violets and the Italian girls into "an erotic perfume" and the booming of the bees as "blunt."

The second poem is a continuation of the idea and the images of the first poem and distinguishes again between repetition and change. The poem begins with a question whether life is a mere mechanical repetition of some immortal order. "The President ordains the bee to be / Immortal" (CP, 390) but the bee disobeys, and what is more, resents and mocks at the pointless, perpetual reincarnation:

> Why should the bee recapture a lost blague,
> Find a deep echo in a horn and buzz
> The bottomless trophy, new hornsman after old? (CP, 390)

Why should the bee turn the present life into a nonsense by imitating what it once was and sing of it as the memorial of the past? The metaphysical perfection of the President, with his devout servants "who adjust/The curtains to a metaphysical t" (CP, 390) may establish his determinist truths, but he is incapable of controlling the movement of the wind at which "the banners of the nation flutter" (CP, 390). This leads to the final rejection of immortality and the acceptance of life present and actual:

> Why, then, when in golden fury
> Spring vanishes the scraps of winter, why
> Should there be a question of returning or
> Of death in memory's dream? Is spring a sleep?
> (CP, 390-391)

Why in the midst of spring, remember past springs? Spring is not a sleep or a dream but life that we live and experience in its perpetual renewal. Stevens wrote of this poem: "We cannot ignore or obliterate death, yet we do not live in memory. Life is always new; it is always beginning" (L, 434). It is now at the end of the second poem that spring is seen as it is, not as the booming of the bees in their "resuming" "as if they had never gone" but in their perpetual "beginning" and ever-changing newness:

> This warmth is for lovers at last accomplishing
> Their love, this beginning, not resuming, this
> Booming and booming of the new-come bee. (CP, 391)

The poem ends with the celebration of the be-ing of bees which is forever renewing.[3]

The third poem offers another rejection of the immortal, the changeless, this time the statue of the General Du Puy that stands immobile and changeless though the generations that pass by it change. The "rigid" and static statue of the general is nothing more than a piece of curiosity for the bourgeois lawyers and doctors, who anyway find it a little "absurd" (CP, 391). A lifeless statue, it is turned into a "rubbish in the end" (CP, 392).

Change, in poem IV, is seen as co-existence and gradual inseparableness of polarities. Their union is first described as a sharing, a dependence, "as a man depends / On a woman, day

on night, the imagined / On the real" (CP, 392). This sharing grows into an "embrace" as "Morning and afternoon are clasped together," and this leads to the merging of the identities into a "couple" or a "plural" as in the case of "North and South" and "sun and rain." Finally they are seen as inextricably and intrinsically united as one, "like two lovers / That walk away as one in the greenest body." The poem, in its lyrical meditativeness, in a perfectly balanced verse, establishes the indistinguishability and inseparability of the imagined and the real, poetry and reality, mind and world - for "the sailor and the sea are one" - in which neither can exist without the other, either is inadequate and incomplete in itself. The perfect balance between the two is not achieved through the supremacy of either, least of the mind; rather it is the balance that happens when both reveal themselves as one. We are once again in the central site of Stevens' poetry where imagination and reality are one and cannot be thought of in isolation. The balance or synthesis is not seen as the binding or agreement of something inside with something outside, of subject and object, but as the mutual belonging together of the two.

Poem V is another illustration of the mutual belonging together of man and the world. The general celebrations of the previous hymn are modulated into the particular life of a simple planter who lives as a native in the world and finds perfect happiness in adapting himself to his environment. This is one of

the most beautiful lyrics in "Notes" in which the planter's relation to his land is rendered wholly through the description of the place, without any general assertions. First, his planterdom is described as neglected in the planter's absence, after his death, and then, in contrast, his cultivation of it while he was alive, the citrus trees and the vegetation: "His oranges blotches... his zero green. / A green baked greener in the greenest sun" (CP, 393). Then another change of place is introduced in the farmer's recalling of the island from which he came. "How that whole country was a melon, pink," that showed fond maternal affection. There was another island, beyond his, of pineapples and bananas, to which he looked yearningly. In each scene the planter is described, not as Crispin, "An unaffected man in a negative light," but as a man positively affected by his places, that is, not as a disinterested and insensitive man who lives detached from his surroundings but one who finds happiness in situating himself in the surrounding world.[4] In spite of his exile from his homeland and his yearning for the Southern island, in spite of the disillusion with past and future, the planter lives in the present, in a positive light, as a man deeply affected by his island and so bears his labour and dies with dignity, sighing only that he would have to leave the simple pleasures of his "benjo's twang" (CP, 393). The planter is a simple, laborious man who has always lived in perfect harmony with his world and enjoyed the small pleasures it offered without living under illusions of finding pleasure 'beyond' that world. He is a perfect illustration of the self that is rooted in the world and finds greatest happiness

in its involvement with the real world.

The next poem is a violent one in its expressed contempt for the staleness of monotony. And the monotony is so unbearable that, as Stevens explained, "the desire for change creates change" (L, 438). The poem juxtaposes the sound of the sparrow, "bethou me" (CP, 393) and the sound made by the other birds, "ké-ké" (CP, 394). "Bethou is intended to be heard; it and ké-ké which is inimical, are opposing sounds," said Stevens (L, 438). The sound ké-ké repeated by the wren, the jay, the robin merges into one monotonous sound:

> One voice repeating, one tireless chorister,
> The phrases of a single phrase, ké-ké,
> A single text, granite monotony, (CP, 394)

The separate sounds unite into one monotonous sound, as "a number of faces become one, as all fates become a common fate, as all bottles blown by a glass blower become one, and as all bishops grow to look alike" (L, 438).

In this monotony the sudden "bethou"s of the sparrow break in. The change, Stevens remarks, "is an ingratiating one and intended to be so. When the sparrow begins calling be-thou: Bethou me... he expresses one's own liking for the change; he invites attention from the summer grass; he mocks the wren, the jay, the robin. ... In the face of death life asserts itself. Perhaps it makes an image out of the force with which it struggles to survive. Bethou is intended to be heard... Bethou is

spirit's own seduction" (L, 438). 'Bethou' brings a refreshing change to the monotony of 'ké-ké'. 'Bethou' then is truly celestial in contrast to the eclesiastical ké-ké of the "chorister" and of "episcopus" with "a single text" (CP, 394), for against the tedious monotony of the idiot chorister, the sparrow's song heralds change and is of the nature of change: "It is / A sound like any other. It will end" (CP, 394). Vendler sees in the bethous of the sparrow another danger of dreadful monotony and the poem therefore an example of perpetual delusion.[5] This is perhaps latent in the poem, and Stevens' own remarks support this reading: "All this insistent totoyant becomes monotonous and merges into a single sound" (L, 435). Yet the point the poem seems to make is one of contrast between the tedious monotony and the refreshing change. The sound of the sparrow, unlike the constant ké-ké, will "end," and the poem thus closes with the final emphasis on change.

Poem VII speaks of "The easy passion" "the ever-ready love" (CP, 394) that we feel for the things of the earth, things about us and not for anything beyond them. It is the passion we feel for the lilacs, for instance, their perfume, encountered in the "middle of the night / The purple odor, the abundant bloom," "An odor evoking nothing, absolute" (CP, 395). This is the "accessible bliss" we feel for the things close to us, without any need of evoking anything beyond them:

> For easy passion and ever-ready love
> Are of our earthy birth and here and now
> And where we live and everywhere we live. (CP, 395)

We find joy in things actual, thinga accessible to us and not in the unreal inaccessible "heaven or its "seducing hymn" (CP, 394). The scholar finds his bliss not in a final, absolute, atemporal truth but in "The fluctuations of certainty, the change / Of degrees of perception" (CP, 395). In the intuitive perceiving and grasping of things he dis-covers their truth.

The parable of Nanzia Nunzio in poem VIII speaks brilliantly of the confrontation of the ever-moving Nanzia Nunzio and the inflexible, changeless Ozymandias. Nanzia Nunzio, we are told, prepares for her final consummation by the inflexible order of Ozymandias and so strips herself of all her coverings to reveal herself in her bare essence, beyond even her physical appearance, "Beyond the burning body that I bear" (CP, 395). She stands thus "stripped more nakedly / Than nakedness" (CP, 396) so that she may be united with the ideal, inflexible order of Ozymandias. She asks to be clothed with his words, with the "spirit's diamond coronal," in the ultimate investiture, its "final filament" (CP, 396) so that she may attain perfection.

But Nanzia Nunzio's vain and foolish idea of such a marriage is frustrated, for, as Ozymandias tells her, it is not only not desirable, but is inconceivable. The idea of the world in its bare essence and its consummation into the inflexible ideality of the word is inconceivable, for, Ozymandias says,

> ... the bride
> Is never naked. A fictive covering
> Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind. (CP, 396)

The world is never stripped of, not separable from, our imaginative creative experience of it. The poet's word does not fix its naked essence into an unchanging order or conception of its "own only" precious subjective mind. Rather it is more truly mated to the world as it weaves it through an imagination experience. This is the mutual belonging together of the two, not the consummation of the world by the word.

The poet, the next poem continues the argument, never evades the world. How could the poet evade the world who depends on "The gibberish of the vulgate" (CP, 396)? "Evade, this hot, dependent orator, / The spokesman at our bluntest barriers...?" (CP, 397) The poem is "both/At once," the common, the actual and the imaginative, the creative; it is both, about the things present and their presence as the poet seeks "To compound the imagination's Latin with / The lingua franca et jocundissima" (CP, 397) The final poem is an illustration of the result of such a compounding.

The poem begins, in an unexpected, reverse way, with the imagination's Latin and then turns to the lingua franca of the real with which finally it is found coexisting. The man sitting in the park feels transformed at the sight of the lake and the swans moving in it. He sees one thing turn into another as if in a "Theatre / Of Trope" (CP, 397). Thus the lake is "Like a page of music, like an upper air," a changing color in which the swans

change from one appearance to another. However, his own transformation is soon seen to be the transformation occurring in the external world, as the west wind transforms the blank sheet of the lake with multi-coloured prismatic crystals, "iris," and with its force causes the swans to move:

> The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
> The which the swans curveted, a will to change,
> A will to make iris frettings on the blank. (CP, 397)

The external world is "a kind / Of volatile world" in which the will to change is "necessitous / And present way" (CP, 397), it is inherent in its ever-changing present and these transformations catch our eye and impel our response, in which we feel transformed as we discover the freshness of the "beginnings," as we encounter things in their freshest present moment, in a most transparent way:

> The freshness of transformation is
>
> The freshness of a world. It is our own,
> It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,
> And that necessity and that presentation
>
> Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer. (CP, 398)

This is another instance of "the balances that happen" (CP, 384) and not the balances that we achieve. And "These are not things transformed. / Yet we are shaken by them as if they were" (CP, 399). An imaginative response to the external world is to discover it in its living changingness. The creative transformation is not a transportation of real things into some timeless

images, but a transformation into their true being, as they come to exist through it more fully.

IT MUST GIVE PLEASURE

"The essence of poetry," Stevens wrote, "is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure" (L, 430). Poetry, as the second section has emphatically shown, is deeply rooted in the actual, temporal world and the pleasures it offers arise not from the self's conceptions of it but from its ability to imaginatively participate in the things of "earthy birth" (CP, 395). Poetry thus offers "accessible bliss" of things "here and now" (CP, 395) and not the inaccessible, unreal bliss of any transcendence.

The first poem exposes the absurdity of the celebrations of the anonymous multitude, singing hymns of joy as if in the crowd at the parade: "To sing jubilas at exact, accustomed times, / To be crested and wear the mane of a multitude / And so, as part, to exult with its great throat / ... to feel the heart / That is the common.... / This is a facile exercise" (CP, 398). It is perhaps also facile to sing like Jerome of spiritual hymns on his instrument, solitary and rhetorical, to arouse the veneration of the multitude. But "the difficultest rigor" is the joy that comes from the experience of the perceptive response to the real world and

> to catch from that
>
> Irrational moment its unreasoning.
> As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
> Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

> Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.
> Yet we are shaken by them as if they were. (CP, 398-399)

The origin of joy lies not in our transformation of things into a transcendent ideality, but in a creative transformation in which things reveal themselves more truly and fully. The blue woman in the next poem experiences such joy in the intense and clear perception of actual things. She "Did not desire that feathery argentines / Should be cold silver, neither that frothy clouds / Should foam, be foamy waves.... /.It was enough/For her that she remembered" (CP, 399). There was no need for her to change clouds into foam, living blossoms into something else, the heat of summer night into a part of her fantasies, thus to reduce the living world to the abstract images of her mind. It was enough for her to remember that "the frothy clouds / Are nothing but frothy clouds" (CP, 399).

This realization that external things have a reality of their own, validated by her memory, makes her experiences of them more intense and clear, for there is no intrusion here of the wilful transformations of the mind. She sees

> The corals of the dogwood, cold and clear,
> Cold, coldly delineating, being real,
> Clear and, except for the eye, without intrusion.
> (CP, 400)

Stevens wrote of this poem: "One of the approaches to fiction is by way of its opposite: reality, the truth, the thing

observed, the purity of the eye. The more exquisite the thing seen, the more exquisite the thing unseen. Eventually there is a state at which any approach becomes the actual observation of the thing approached" (L, 444). The actual observation of the coral dogwood is both a seeing and an unseeing of the eye, both visible and invisible. It is seeing the corals as they are in their idea, their being. And this is the reason that, even though they are not transformed, "we are shaken by them as if they were" (CP, 398).

Poem III shows how the changeless monotony of a worn-out deity makes imaginative improvisation necessary. The poem describes, with exhaustive repetitiveness, "A lasting visage in a lasting bush" (CP, 400), for five out of its seven stanzas. The shapeless colossal head of a god that no longer claims one's faith, is first described in generalized terms, then from a closer perspective - "The vines around the throat, the shapeless lips, / The frown like serpents besking on the brow" (CP, 400). Stevens explains the purpose of this close scrutiny thus: "When the compulsion to adoration grows less, or merely changes... the face changes, and in the case of a face, at which one has looked for a long time, changes that are slight may appear to the observer melodramatic. We struggle with the face, see it everywhere and try to express the changes. In the depths of concentration, the whole thing disappears" (L, 438). "Red-in-red repetitions never going /

Away" (CP, 400) bring about, almost inevitably, their counter-force. And after the long, concentrated description of the fading deity, the poem suddenly and abruptly breaks into an improvisation - the description of Orpheus with his music, the children playing in love and the freshness of early flowers, "no two alike" (CP, 400). The point that the poem seems to make is not to juxtapose one god against another, but to show, how the ennui of an adoration of a warn-out image "Too venerably used" created an intense desire for joy in a fresh improvisation. The tedium of repetition needs five long stanzas to be expressed, the joy of creation a short and sudden burst of feelings.

The mystique of the romantic love which swears by love eternal, love transcending time and place, is deflated in poem IV in a light fable of the marriage of the great captain and the maiden Bawda. For Stevens the bond between the two is not grounded in subjective and privative appreciation of their personal attributes, but in their loveful sharing of and responding to the place, Catawba, the surrounding environment. For Stevens, this is a "mystic marriage" (CP, 401), a celebration of human love as part of the celebration of the world in which it takes place.

The story of the Canon Aspirin in poems V and VI also speaks of the "amassing harmony" (CP, 403) of world and self, of reality and imagination. The Canon, a sensible, sophisticated

man, with a taste for Meursault and lobster Bombay, finds a "sensible ecstasy" (CP, 402) in his sister's life as she rejects all dreams and brings up her children in poverty, without any expectations. The Canon is conscious of this and sings in praise of her. His sister lives in a world of facts and has "never explored anything" (L, 445).

But soon the Canon begins to feel the finality and limitation of the world of fact, a sense of nothingness. A man of his sensibility who has thought to the very depth of his mind feels a sense of inadequacy in the face of facts and attempts to incorporate what he knows into an imaginative recreation. With a supreme effort he escapes fact, fleeing on the wings of imagination. But he arrives at another nothingness, the limitation of thought, of imagination. It is not, then, as Stevens says, "a matter of eluding human pathos, human dependence. Thought is part of these, and they are part of thought and imagination" (L, 445). The Canon has no choice but to include both, because either in itself is inadequate:

> It was not a choice
> Between, but of. He chose to include the things
> That in each other are included, the whole,
> The complicate, the amassing harmony. (CP, 403)

Having come upon a sufficing fiction at last, which is neither of reality itself, nor of the imagination itself, but of their belonging together, the next poem turns to the celebration

of it, "The fiction of an absolute" (CP, 404), the poetry of the real. It is not, however, to impose the mind's arbitrary, abstract fictions on the real. This may establish mind's superiority, it may be "a brave affair" (CP, 403), but a more triumphant thing is to "discover" (CP, 404) the absolute in the real, the first idea in things themselves, the being in beings, the "major weather" (CP, 404) in mere weather:

> to impose is not
> To discover. To discover an order as of
> A season, to discover summer and know it,
>
> To discover winter and know it well, to find,
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
>
> It is possible, possible, possible. It must
> Be possible. (CP, 403-4)

This is the supreme moment of "Notes." A quiet and unassuming affirmation is made for poetry which needs not the trumpeting of the arrogant supremacy of the self. The poetic act involves, not the self's arrogant impositions on the real which reduce it to abstract images, but the self's dis-closure of the mystery of the real, of the radiant presence of present things. The incredulous angel of the imagination, on whose wings the Canon in the previous poem had flown to the utmost limits of the thought is asked to be silent, so that he may "hear / The luminous melody of proper sound" (CP, 404), may respond to the poetry of the real.

But the voice of the angel is heard once more in poem VIII before it is finally dismissed, offering a heroic possibility of

"expressible bliss" (CP, 404). The mind's expansive explorations and evasions are first considered and seen in their majestic bliss and only later repudiated in disgust. The entire poem is made up of hypothetical questions as the voice of the angel takes over and the voice that made the quiet affirmation in the previous poem feels a bit shaken: "What am I to believe?" (CP, 404) The self wonders, "If the angel in his cloud, / Serenely gazing at the violent abyss, / Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory / ... needs nothing but deep space, / Forgets the gold centre... / Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight... / Is it he or is it I that experience this?" (CP, 404) The implied answer is that the angel's fantastic flights are the mind's own and this leads to another hypothesis about the bliss of the mind's own creations:

> Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
> Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have
>
> No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
> Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
> And if there is an hour there is a day,
>
> There is a month, a year, there is a time
> In which majesty is a mirror of the self,
> I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

This loud and boastful exhilaration of the central, subjective self, expanding in its expressible bliss, replacing the majesty, by turning itself into a majesty, is a moment of the apotheosis of the subjective self. In its arrogantly subjective assertion it forms a contrast with the unassuming affirmation made by the major poet in the previous poem. But the romantic "apotheosis

is not / The origin of the major man" (CP, 387). And the hypothetical assertion of bliss- it is in any case the "expressible bliss", of the self, not the "accessible bliss" (CP, 395) of the things of the earthy birth - collapses at once, as such explorations of the mind are seen as nothing more than escapes or Cindrella's wish-fulfilments:

> These external regions, what do we fill them with
> Except reflections, the escapades of death,
> Cindrella fulfilling herself beneath the roof? (CP, 405)

Helen Vendler has noticed this collapse of the majestic self, but she misses the irony latent in the hypothetical vision of that self.[6] Bloom, on the other hand, sees in this poem Stevens' supreme affirmation of the romantic self but fails to see the self-disgust implied in the last stanza.[7] In fact the projections of the self that expand over the external world are seen not only as unreal but also as fatal.

The question that was posed at the beginning of poem VIII, is answered at the opening of poem IX, that the poet is not to believe in the song of the angel but in the song of the birds, because by now he has separated himself entirely from the flights and escapades of the angel:

> Whistle aloud, too weedy wren. I can
> Do all that angels can. I enjoy like them,
> Like men besides... (CP, 405)

Angels are not men. But the poet enjoys both like an angel and like men. He is "the necessary angel of earth" (CP, 496). He is

the "man-hero" (CP, 406) who finds joy in singing and merely circulating, and not a "monster" who leaps through space and gazes at "the violent abyss" to "pluck abysmal glory" (CP, 404). His songs are of this world, of the "accessible bliss" of a birdsong, of merely circulating, of sipping wine at a table in the wood, of looking at the spinning of a leaf, for

> These things at least comprise
> An occupation, an exercise, a work,
>
> A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
> One of the vast repetitions final in
> Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round
>
> And round and round, the merely going round,
> Until merely going round is a final good....
>
> Perhaps
> The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
> But he that of repetition is most master. (CP, 405-406)

He is a master of repetition because he affirms that existence is always, at each moment, in the process of becoming. It is an involvement, an "occupation" with the living, the temporal, and a joy that is grounded in novelty and becoming, not in the disinterested and indifferent contemplations of the "exceptional" monster.

"Notes" comes then to its most proper and moving conclusion in poem X with the celebration, not of the "exceptional" angel, but of the most "familiar" (CP, 406) earth and the poet speaks to her in a language "that results from feeling," in words pleasant and intimate:

> Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night.
> How is it I find you in difference, see you there
> In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?
> (CP, 406)

Earth is not seen as terra paradiso, but the real mundo that is always moving, different at each moment, engaged in a process of becoming and renewal, "a change not quite completed" (CP, 406). It is seen not through a "varnished green" (CP, 383) but as real "green, ... fluent mundo" in its inexhaustible fecundity.

It is this earth that the poet feels the desire to "name." It is of it that he writes poetry, and his poetry is part of, or the result of, his feeling for her, his loving and belonging to her. His poetry, in other words, results not from a detached and disinterested contemplation of her, but from a direct feeling for her. He, therefore, is able to "name" her as she is, "flatly," without "evasions," he "waste(s) no words" so that he can hold her to herself. In his poetry she comes to be herself. The direct intuitive experience through which the earth is revealed or discovered in her true being as "more than natural figure," is the greatest poetry or "fiction." This is the final discovery "Notes" makes and it is announced most confidently:

> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.
> (CP, 406)

The force of the last two words emphasises the fact that this and no other fiction can suffice. The poet expresses

apprehension that the rationalists, and they include all those who swear by the most anthropomorphic attitude of the imagination, "at the Sorbornne," may perhaps never realize this experience. Meanwhile, the poem recaptures the joy of the belonging together of the poet and his mundo, without which the poet has no fictions and without his fictions the mundo has no existence.

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" occupies a central place in Stevens' poetry, not only in developing major ideas of his poetic, but also in being his greatest achievement in writing poetry. The poem has the amplitude that no other poem of Stevens has. It does not have the tight and somewhat strained tone of his earlier poetry, nor its limited approach to his central concern. Meditations and fables, profound thoughtfulness and humorous amusement exist side by side without disturbing each other. And both have a more natural, familiar, human tone than before. The equilibrium "Notes" creates in its verse and language is the equilibrium it seeks to achieve between poetry and reality. The supreme fiction -- and this term includes poetry in the widest sense of the term as any supremely creative act—is, "Notes" affirms, a joy of perception or experience of the "abstract" in "change," of "the single certain truth" in its "living changingness," of being in temporality. By revealing temporal things in their true being the fiction gives us a world in which we dwell most authentically as human beings.