

ANALYSIS

“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942)

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

“Composed of a prologue, 30 poems divided into three sections (‘It Must Be Abstract,’ ‘It Must Change,’ ‘It Must Give Pleasure’), and an epilogue, each comprised of seven stanzas containing three verses in a metric form like iambic pentameter, the poem does not attempt to develop a sequential argument but is comprised of meditations concerned with the nature of reality, man’s perceptions, and poetic imagination. Reality is always changing; to treat reality requires imagination that may comprehend its variety. The poet in treating reality is concerned with providing a fiction that will please in the way that once a belief in a personal deity gave spiritual joy. In turn such fiction provides a faith by which man, a soldier in wartime, can live and die.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,’ built out of epistemological and ontological propositions, is a poem about belief. Nominally it turns on the nature of our Supreme Fiction, our supreme center of belief. Yet Stevens can describe the form of our fiction only by indirection, in terms of what it must be, not what it is; and so he perforce meditates its attributes as he may reveal, or disclose, them to himself. The dialectical mode is developed most fully, as the possibilities of metaphorical representation of the Supreme Fiction are carried to their farthest limits. Whereas in the earlier poems metaphorical language has been made to be self-expressive, with no hint to us of the possible similitudes involved, here the essence of the poetry is a ‘testing’ of metaphor, an inquiry into its grasp of ‘reality.’ For the questions Stevens asks are: What, and how valid, is our Supreme Metaphor? How may we know it? Why must we know it?”

‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,’ then, is Stevens’ major statement of what can be believed in, his mapping-out of the area in which reality and the imagination are conjoined. (Like any good map, this one is no more than a guide to a journey into understanding which we may, or may not, take.) His statement of the form of belief goes not much beyond the headings of three sections—‘It Must Be Abstract,’ ‘It Must Change,’ ‘It Must Give Pleasure.’ The ‘Must’ in each of these headings is a sign of the limiting conditions under which the poet-philosopher works. He is under a necessity set by a pair of indubitable facts—that he is in reality and that his imagination inevitably transforms it. These are facts whose necessity is sufficiently demonstrated by the earlier poems. Now Stevens writes a poem in order to work out in all its dialectical fullness the consequences of such a necessity. He does not, because he cannot, define ‘Abstract,’ ‘Change,’ and ‘Pleasure,’ but rather infers their nature as he meditates on what he calls in his prologue the ‘final’ (i.e., ultimate) meeting of ‘mind’ and ‘sky,’ imagination and reality. Instead of prayer and revelation, he has inference. This is the argument:

‘It Must Be Abstract.’ (I) We must begin with perceived reality, and argue from it to... ‘this invented world’... yet we must not suppose that our perception of reality argues for our creation of reality. We must, in fact, dispose of the idea of any creator, even for the reality which exists outside our perception... (II) Still, we are driven by the very divisiveness of our lives to seek a unitive source of our idea of reality: ‘Not to have is the beginning of desire.’ (III) Poetry is our means to this source... (IV) Thus the origin of poetry, of our ideas of the world and of ourselves, is in our concrete past and present... (V) The act of the poetic imagination is the source of human power over the world. (VI) Perception, knowledge, and feeling are interdependent—in origin and end really one... (VII) Hence we must hold to reality if we are to hold to abstract truth; for, once more, the source of truth is reality. (VIII-IX) It follows then that our hero, our ‘major man,’ will be man imagining—discovering a Supreme Fiction in the flux of reality and so making it available to us; moreover, his discovery will be that our Supreme Fiction is, in fact, ‘major man’ (the abstraction) known through man (the concrete particular man). Analytic reason abstracts man from reality,

but it is the creative imagination which reveals him to us. (X) Finally there is triumphant affirmation... Man, the Supreme Fiction, moves us as an abstraction, yet is known as a particular. The 'major man' is the poet ('any man of imagination'), he who makes us know as the 'final elegance' even that man whom our religionists and rulers see only as a poor bedraggled creature.

'It Must Change.' (I) Change is part of the flow of reality; thus the Supreme Fiction must partake of Change. (II) Growth, mortality, mutability—these are change and so are real. Immortality, which is not change, is not real... (III) Art which does not express the sense of change violates reality. (IV) Change originates, and we come to know it, in the opposites (man-woman, day-night, winter-summer, and so on) of which our world is constituted. (V) It is, in fact, growth and change which make life bearable. Here, in a poem strikingly in the manner and form of 'Sunday Morning,' Stevens again points to a resolution of the problem of *Harmonium*. He writes of a planter who had lived and died on a tropical island... (VI-VII) The positive existence of change is evidenced everywhere—in the beauty of sound which will end, in the earthbound quality of emotional experience. (VIII-IX) Our knowledge, which is 'never naked,' has always a 'fictive covering' involved in temporal reality; it is thus poetic knowledge.... (X) Change thus manifests the movement of reality, movement which can be perceived everywhere.... Man comprehends change by conceiving of the idea of order, by making poems which express it.... Order is a mirror the mind holds up to change.

'It Must Give Pleasure.' (I) To celebrate our belief regularly and ceremoniously, according to tradition—this is 'a facile exercise.' But the 'difficullest rigor' is to celebrate our belief from moment to moment, in the very flux and disorder of reality... (II) What is needed is the pleasure of things-in-themselves. This is a pleasure in particulars, certainly; but yet we know the general, the Supreme Fiction, ourselves, in particulars... (III) the love of children which gives beauty and life to the ugly, in (IV) the love of two persons for the portion of reality in one another, and negatively in (V-VII) the parable of the canon who would impose an alien order on reality and so drive delight from it, who does not know that 'to impose is not to discover.' (VIII) The poet affirms that he cannot believe in the abstract in and of itself; he can believe in it only as it is given delightful embodiment in informed reality... (IX) Things-in-themselves, repeated, reexamined, perceived again and again—these are a final good. For through repetitions of things-in-themselves, we approach our Supreme Fiction... It is 'the vast repetitions final in themselves' which make for the Supreme Fiction. (X) The essential problem is to name one's world, to poeticize it, to see it as a general structure of pleasurable particulars, and to possess it...

Here the poem ends—the possibilities of the reasoned abstract having been realized in the imagination which, as it works, adjusts itself to the distortions of reality, to change, and so adjusting, discovers the rich pleasure of existence. Belief in the world of 'Sunday Morning' is not only possible but necessary.... The final condition for belief in the Supreme Fiction is the acceptance of reality. The final condition for the acceptance of reality is the acceptance of evil, which is one of its necessary attributes...made good and evil, pleasure and pain, are now comprehended one with another."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 395-400

"The 'Notes' reflect Stevens' tendency to shift away from the rich metaphor and imagery of his earlier poetry toward a more abstract poetic statement about the nature of poetry. They begin with a flat, almost conversational statement and become progressively more metaphoric. The poem is divided into three sections labeled 'It Must Be Abstract,' 'It Must Change,' and 'It Must Give Pleasure.' The supreme fiction, the poem, says Stevens, 'refreshes life so that we share / For a moment, the first idea.' The 'first idea' must be abstract, the semi-Platonic idea of the thing; it must change, since life and perspective are constantly changing; and it must give pleasure, when the abstraction is blooded by human thought."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“The tentativeness of Stevens’ title is neither humility nor irony, for the poem is an attempt at a final belief in a fiction known to be a fiction, in the predicate that there is nothing else. The fiction is broadly poetry itself, and poetry is necessarily the subject of Stevens’ poem. The ‘Notes’ move toward the creation of a fictive hero who quite simply will become the real, and thus bring to a climax the whole movement of poetry in the Romantic tradition. In the closing sections of the third part of ‘Notes,’ Stevens is able to gather together, in an astonishing splendor of integration, all the major themes of Romantic poetry, and so brings to a present perfection everything that is most vital in the imaginative legacy of Blake and Wordsworth.

‘Notes’ opens with eight lines of dedication, appropriately celebrating the relationship of loving friendship, for in the mutuality of such confrontation there appear all the characteristics of the Supreme Fiction. The love of friends, as a marriage of reality and the imagination, depends upon an abstraction in Stevens’ sense of that word, and clearly is subject to the necessities of change and of pleasure that serve further to define Stevens’ version of the Romantic Imagination. The moment of communion caught in the dedication is one of the enlargements of life, bringing a central man into being through two men sitting at rest together, peaceful in a world still undergoing the living change of natural process, yet made vividly transparent by the light of common day....

Stevens gives the first part of ‘Notes’ the admonitory title ‘It Must Be Abstract.’ Elsewhere in his work the idea of abstraction is what more usually would be called ‘fabrication.’ The possible poet had the power to abstract or withdraw himself from outworn conceptualizations of reality, and to live in the world, yet outside the existing conceptions of it, and he can do this only by fabricating his fictions. When these fictions become supreme, in the work of a central poet, a Wordsworth or a Stevens, it is because the abstracted reality has been married to the possible sublimities of the imagination....

Even as ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ mixed the modes of allegorical romance and spiritual autobiography (a thoroughly Romantic mixture) so the ‘Notes’ mixes quest romance with the poetry of vision, again according to Romantic precedent. Stevens presents us with a long poem whose continuity is utterly dependent upon the impatient obsessions of an imagination determined to possess reality without altering it. He therefore declines the normal chronology of quest; the ephebe seeks, does not find, and finds, but all in a simultaneity. Stevens has no truth to make us free except the truths that together define the Supreme Fiction: the truth of separation or withdrawal of the imagination from its worn coverings and reality from its stale disguises; the truth of mutability and natural renewal; and the great truth of *Harmonium*, a humanism of love liberated through pleasure....

As a modern humanist the poet begins by a rejection of invisibles: God, ‘a voluminous master folded in his fire,’ is dead...with the third poem of ‘It Must Be Abstract’ Stevens touches on greatness as he considers how the poem refreshes life... The belief here is also that of Coleridge and Wordsworth; the rapture, authentic and heartening, is Stevens’ own.... Stevens has grasped, with imaginative sureness, the honest despair of Romantic humanism.... Stevens is more adept than most poets at creating a dialectic of distinctions, and proceeds in the next two poems to distinguish such visionary naturalism from any form of pantheism. Sections IV and V of ‘It Must Be Abstract’ are as rigorous as Blake in disengaging the origins of imagination from unredeemed nature....

In Section V the elegant pathos of this alienation is transformed by an extravagance of color into a pitying mockery of minor man, the ephebe as he has become.... Section VI subtly alters the entire tone of the work, as a gentler insistence on the continued possibility of relationship begins to draw the object-world and the poet together again. Stevens is very much a poet of the human seasons, like Keats, and Section VI of ‘It Must Be Abstract’ is his hymn to the weather and the giant man the weather almost evokes.... Section VII celebrates those ‘times of inherent excellence’ which are Stevens’ modest equivalents of the state celebrated by Wordsworth in ‘Tintern Abbey.’ There is an instructive sadness in contemplating the exhaustions that attend the increases of self-awareness in Romantic tradition.... Section VIII is Stevens in the vitality of his ironic extravagance, which habitually precedes the direct presentation of what is hottest and purest in his heart, a vision of major man.... ‘It Must Be Abstract,’ in its two final sections, seeks another tone...as befits a bad time for the imagination. It is the Stevens who wrote ‘The Man on the Dump’ whose voice is heard as an undersong in Sections IX and X...

The poem becomes better as it develops, 'It Must Change' being superior to the first part, and 'It Must Give Pleasure' finer still. 'Notes' could therefore be judged as an uneven poem, but the ascending intensity of the work is certainly a matter of design, a movement from the essential prose of our condition in 'It Must Be Abstract' to the ecstatic celebration of the marriage between flesh and air in 'It Must Give Pleasure.' The principal Romantic vision of mutability stems from Spenser, who lamented natural change and yet found in the cycle of the months an augury of salvation, an eternal principal surviving amid the particles of decay.... This negative judgment upon natural cycle, to be found again in the later Yeats, has no relevance to Stevens, who shares the more positive Spenserianism of Wordsworth and Keats, an attitude that recognizes the tragedy of mutable existence, but insists also on the necessity of celebrating the values of organic repetition. The heroic faith in the merely natural of Keats in particular, who praised as true humanists those who 'seek no wonder but the human face,' is carried on in Stevens....

The first two sections of 'It Must Change' are devoted to a celebration of the advent of spring which is worthy to be compared with any similar celebration in English poetry.... After...the poem's midpoint, there are no flats or resting places in 'Notes,' no section that is not poetry of the highest order. Section V of 'It Must Change' is Stevens at his most characteristic, recalling 'Sunday Morning' and other poems in *Harmonium*. The island solitude in a wide water without sound reappears, blue with the color of imagination, and 'a green baked greener in the greenest sun' of summer's reality. The 'possible red' of the autumnal vision is suggested also, preparing us for its full development later, in 'It Must Give Pleasure,' Section III. The planter of "It Must Change," Section V, is an imaginative brother to the woman who meditates on death and change in 'Sunday Morning,' and like her he understands that death and change are the mothers of beauty. He is the man positively affected by change in a positive light, and he dies in the dignity of major man....

Stevens ends more in Shelley's spirit than in Blake's, with the hint that all dialogue must fail at last.... This theme of lovers' confrontation is raised to its apotheosis in Section VIII, a passage at once comically grotesque and seriously moving.... Since the poem is itself a fictive covering, it too must change, which is the central point of Section IX, following. Not only must the poem resist the intelligence almost successfully, but it must take on a different form with each fresh reading. That miracle Stevens does not accomplish, but he approaches it as nearly as any poet of our time. Haunting him in Section IX of 'It Must Change' is the fearful question every poet in the Romantic tradition is compelled to ask: 'Does the poet evade us, as in a senseless element?' The true Romantic Agony is the feat of solipsism, the horror of becoming a monster like Blake's Urizen, self-absorbed in the deathly perfection of silence. To avoid this fate the poet performs his difficult quest....

The third part of 'Notes' gives us a continual though difficult greatness. Four of the sections, the Canon Aspirin group, V to VIII, are I think the height of Stevens' achievement, and can scarcely be matched in English poetry since the Romantics. They are to Stevens what the Byzantium poems are to Yeats, the central works of a clarified vision, but their difficulties are more subtly integrated with their themes than the complexities of Yeats's poems, and much more relevant to a reality centered in common experience. Like the Byzantium poems and Keats's odes, they concern the poet's stance in relation to his own poetry, and they render the teleology of the imaginative life with an appropriate intensity.

The Supreme Fiction, now seen as the poem of reality, or nature conceived as a general being and human universe, must begin and end in delight, in the poet's creative joy and the reader's exuberant response. Pleasure is the power that liberates vision, that shows us the new earth given to us by the great marriage between reality and imagination, specifically celebrated by Stevens in 'It Must Give Pleasure,' Section IV, the prelude to the Canon Aspirin poems. The necessary joy for the poet is of course the explicit theme of much of Coleridge and Wordsworth, but Stevens is again deliberately their poverty-stricken heir. The joy of the Romantics elevates its possessor to the experience of a theophany, and becomes an intimation of immortality. The pleasure Stevens exalts is another rich confirmation of mortality, as indeed it was for Keats, and leads to a manifestation of major man, the real man slumbering within us....

Stevens' 'later reason'...becomes the subject of Section IV of 'It Must Give Pleasure' (where the first line is nearly identical with the final line of Section I). Between the first statement of a reality now beyond

the necessity for abstraction, and the chant celebrating a marriage of reality and imagination, come two poems presenting the waiting bride and the heroic bridegroom. The bride is 'the blue woman,' or poetic imagination, of Section II; the groom is the 'lasting visage' of Section III, red with the color of autumn reality. In the fourth poem they appear, respectively, as "the maiden of Bawda" and "great captain." Together the three sections serve to introduce the Canon Aspirin poems, at once the climax of 'Notes' and the fulfillment of Stevens' poetic promise...

The powerful chant of Section III brings into counterpoise with this summer of our content the red countenance of autumn, where the human visage falls back into the rock that is the gray particular of man's self...this is a marriage between sun and moon, a natural meeting that shatters the context of nature.... From this marriage proceeds the Supreme Fiction, whose exponent, major man, now enters the poem in the exhilarating person of the Canon Aspirin, Stevens' finest invention. The Canon is the cure for our current headache of unreality, even as St. John prophesies the cure of the backache of our fallen history in a later poem by Stevens. In his activity the Canon first becomes the angel of reality, then is tempted too far in his benevolent impositions, and finally is surpassed by the poet himself, who discovers an order that his created angel could only impose. The Canon therefore has his limitations, but that is only to say that one instance of the Supreme Fiction is finally inferior to its maker's desires....

It is because Stevens is daring so fiercely Romantic a vision that he begins in such deceptive inconsequence. The Canon, one soon understands, is not far from being 'that brave man,' our abstraction of the sun. His sister is an abstraction of the moon, mother of the months, and her two daughters make up the lunar cycle, as one is the four weeks and the other the seven days.... The Canon's apotheosis is the subject of Section VI, the first of three sections forming a miniature dialectic among themselves. In this triad, Section VI states the thesis of the Canon's quest toward an integration of all reality, fact and thought together. Section VII is the antithesis, presenting the Canon's surrender of his quest to the angelic impatience that imposes rather than discovers order. The synthesis is in Section VIII, which one does not hesitate to call Stevens' finest poem, where the poet's discovery of reality is both given and celebrated. Sections IX and X, following, are commentaries on this discovery, after which 'Notes' concludes with an invocation of the soldier, who is man embattled in the real world even as the poet is man embattled in the fictive or verbal universe. Section VI is at once the most Miltonic and the most strenuously heroic of Stevens' poems....

Like Wordsworth, the Canon needs to wait upon the initiative of nature, but instead 'he imposes orders as he thinks of them,' in Section VII. Though this 'is a brave affair,' the exhausted Canon has forgotten that 'to impose is not to discover.' The passion of Stevens slowly mounts in an extraordinary emotional progression as he states his own version of a Romantic faithless faith.... Stevens rises to his own challenge and gives us his ultimate poem, the supreme achievement of post-Romanticism and the culmination of Coleridgean and Blakean poetic theory....

What the poet comes to believe, in Stevens' late plural of Romantic tradition, is that his disinterested joy in his own creation is more than a final good. In that profoundest of satisfactions, the stance of the creator before his own isolated and splendid artifact, the poet ceases to possess but is, at last in the full difficulty of what it is to be. Most central is that he ceases to have the sense of possessing himself, but is one with that self. In that heroic integration, what is outside the self can be dismissed without fear of solipsistic self-absorption, for the self has joined the major man.... The rest of 'Notes' is epilogue. The song of the birds rises again in Section IX, renewing the vast repetitions that both continue and exalt our lives... In the last section of 'It Must Give Pleasure' the poet invokes the universe he has created...with a homely affection appropriate to his achieved peace,"

Harold Bloom

"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": A Commentary"

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Michael Hollister (2015)