CHAPTER XI

THE AURORAS OF AUTUMN : THE POETRY OF BEING

In the poems of The Auroras of Autumn Stevens attains grandeur and serenity as he turns to meditate on "the essential poem at the centre of things" (CP, 440), the being that resides in the visible, tangible things of the world. He directs his search at the "poem of fact... not realized before" (OP, 164), at the "poem of pure reality.... / Straight to the transfixing object, to the object / At the exactest point at which it is itself" (CP, 471) so that it may reveal itself in its being. The search culminates in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (CP, 465-489).

"The Auroras of Autumn" (CP, 411-421), the poem which gives the title to the book, describes an overwhelming experience of the flaring lights of aurora borealis and the self's discovery of them as a manifestation of the being, the "innocence" (CP, 418) of the earth. The experience of these changing lights is both fascinating and bewildering as they are seen sweeping through space and also through the self of the beholder as they leave him feel "tragic and desolate," (L, 852) until they are seen as part of the "whole" of the "innocence" (CP, 418) of the earth.

The first six cantos describe the auroras in their tumultuous change and motion, as an awe-inspiring yet frightening phenomenon; the last four cantos are a meditation on their significance.

The poem opens with the brilliant description of the borealis seen as a huge, "bodiless" serpent whose head is air, whose tip touches the top of the sky, who is in a perpetual motion, changing shapes and sloughing its skin. His nest is the whole of the ground as the lights are seen emerging from and falling on the earth:

> This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
> His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
> Eyes open and fix on us in every sky. ...
>
> This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
> These fields, these hills, these tinted distances
> And the pines above and along and beside the sea.
>
> This is form gulping after formlessness,
> Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances
> And the serpent body flashing without the skin.
>
> This is the height emerging and its base
> These lights may finally attain a pole.... (CP, 411)

The repetition of "this" creates almost a hypnotic effect as it insists on the presence of the lights which are overwhelming in their tumultuous motion. The image of the lights as a serpent in perpetual motion, enveloping the cosmic space from the centre of the earth to the centre of the sky, is indeed terrifying and the comparison of the flames with the serpent, as it evokes another

serpent in Eden, suggests the presence of a grimmer force, the Fate serpent. The flames then would be "a symbol of malice" (CP, 418), a sinister force that would devour us and destroy us. But the serpent of the Genesis is at once dismissed as the canto, in the midst of the cosmic convulsions, describes the serpent as

> Relentlessly in possession of happiness.
>
> This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
> Even that. (CP, 411)

The poison of the serpent is not to make us aware of our guilt, make us feel sinful. Its poison is that we disbelieve in his possible happiness, in his essential innocence. Paradoxically, Stevens here castigates the 'believers' in Original Sin who are actually disbelievers of the innocence of the terrible phenomena of the earth. The canto superbly negotiates the point by presenting an actual serpent, moving in the grass, a native in his world, a happy, innocent animal who is not a symbol of malice but one who meditates as he "make(s) sure of sun" (CP, 411), of light and warmth that make his living possible. We are sure of his natural living as we see him moving and he is described with the exactness of detail, his head "black beaded" on the rock, his skin "flecked" as he moves in the grass like "the Indian in his glade" (CP, 412). The serpent of the Genesis is finally demythologized as he is described as a primitive indigenous to his place, living in pristine innocence. By the end of the first canto, then, the poem has made its major affirmation that the aurora borealis are not to be seen as a symbol of some grim

destiny, and that in spite of the desolation and chill they bring, they are essentially innocent, part of the innocent earth. In fact, the entire poem is a displacing of the idea of sinister destiny, of the "jetted tragedy" (CP, 417) of the Genesis which haunts and intimidates and destroys men. There are several references throughout the poem to the fateful drama enacted in Eden and each time it is negated: The serpent as the presiding image of the first canto; the father's "angelic eye" described as moving faster than "bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames" (CP, 414) in canto IV; the musing on the borealis first as destiny that is "grim" (CP, 417) in canto VII, and then as "innocence" (CP, 419) in canto VIII, not as "the enigma of the guilty dream" (CP, 419); and finally the meditations of the "genius" (CP, 420) located not in "hushful paradise" but on the earth, in "hall harridon" (CP, 421) in canto X. The poem establishes very firmly that the experience of disaster and tragedy is not part of our belief in the sinister Fate, but of the innocence of the earth. We are in this sense "An unhappy people in a happy world" (CP, 420).

Having thus brilliantly described the experience of the borealis as something frightening yet not sinister in the first canto, the next three cantos say "farewell to an idea" (CP, 412), to an idea or concept or myth of a grim destiny, to "the negations" (CP, 414) as final, that is, to disaster as fate, and turn to present the borealis as what they are, as real yet overwhelming experiences of desolation in canto II and disaster in canto III, of which they are the immanence. The poems are perhaps unmatched

in their restrained yet haunting gentleness which is also perhaps the ultimate effect of the experience. In canto II the desolation of a cabin "deserted, on a beach... white" (CP, 412) is made more desolate by the whiteness of the flowers around it. The whiteness "from horizon to horizon" (CP, 412) is so complete and universal that things are indistinguishable. This is reflected in the uncertainty of the description - the flowers are "fresher or duller," "whether of winter cloud / Or of winter sky" (CP, 412). The desolation intensifies and becomes absolute with the wind "blowing the sand across the floor" so that finally "Here, being visible is being white" (CP, 412). With the oncoming darkness the desolation enlarges and "A cold wind chills the beach / The long lines of it grow longer, emptier, / A darkness gathers though it does not fall / And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall" (CP, 412). And finally, this enlargement is extended to, and reflected in, the sweep of the Northern lights:

> ... the north is always enlarging the change,
> With its frigid brilliancies, its blue-red sweeps
> And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,
> The color of ice and fire and solitude. (CP, 412-3)

The lights are as chilling and desolate as the wind and the cabin, yet as "great enkindlings" they are also exhilarating.

The picture of the dissolving mother in canto III is presented in even gentler terms than that of the cabin. The mother is the earthly mother, who will reappear later as the "innocent mother," the "innocent earth" (CP, 419). She is beautiful, "the

purpose of the poem" who gives "transparence" and "peace" and "makes that gentler that can gentle be" (CP, 413). Being of earth, rather being the earth, she is affected by time and change and so she "too is dissolved, she is destroyed" (CP, 413) by the immanent diaster. The prophesy of the oncoming end - "The house will crumble and the books will burn" - is made gently, unobtrusively as if it were a natural phenomenon. Even the family does not suspect it, "They are at ease in a shelter of the mind... / Together, all together." What is more, even the boreal night will give them no inkling, it "Will look like ffost as it approaches them / And to the mother as she falls asleep / And as they say good-night, good-night" (CP, 413). And the final extinction is first suggested as the extinguishing of the lights in the rooms and then only as the invincible consummation by the boreal fire:

> A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round
> And knock like a rifle-butt against the door.
> The wind will command them with invincible sound. (CP, 414)

The dissolving and destruction of the mother is a perfect example of what a later canto will define diaster as coming "in the simplest word, / Almost as part of innocence, almost, / Almost as the tenderest and the truest part" (CP, 420) and not as a sinister doom.

The figure of the father "seated by the fire" (CP, 414) in the next canto is the figure of the man of imagination who sits motionless yet whose "angelic eye" and "ear," whose imagination "leaps

from heaven to heaven more rapidly" than perhaps even the tumultuous motion of the flames. He is "strong in the bushes of his eyes," a man of powerful perception who has the strength to say "yes" to no" (CP, 414) to say farewell to negations as final fate. For he is "The scholar of one candle" (CP, 417), or, "the spectre of the spheres" who "meditates a whole, / The full of furtune and the full of fate, / As if he lived all lives" (CP, 420) in his imagination, so that he knows that "The negations are never final" (CP, 414). His is the "angelic eye," a benevolent imagination, and not the satanic malevolence, not the force of "bad angels." His benign and virile imagination "measures the velocities of change" so that he is capable of experiencing the changing lights and their chilling effect as part of the innocent whole. As he sits by his fire and watches the approaching flames, his eye first sees in them, the "actors approaching, in company, in their masks" (CP, 414), a great spectacle of life being enacted. both as comedy and tragedy as though in a floating theatre.

The pageant that the father summons up in air in canto V is first seen as the whole of humanity invited to the house of the mother engaged in revelry and fun as the father "fetches tellers of tales / And musicians," "negresses to dance" and "Scenes of the theatre, vistas and blocks of woods" (CP, 415). The comic festivity soon turns into a violent, disordered orgy as the father "fetches his unherded herds, / Of barbarous tongue" and the festival is rendered barbarous:

> We stand in the tumult of a festival.
>
> What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?
> These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests? (CP, 415)

And the scene finally turns into a dumb tragedy, a happening that needs no script, for the persons' merely being there is an act of tragedy: "There is no play. / Or, the persons act one merely by being here" (CP, 416). The father's imagination thus envisions in the changing lights the sweeping changes that occur in the spectacle of life, from pleasant festivity to chaotic brutality to mute and muted tragedy.

The image of the theatre continues in canto VI, this time to describe the actual aurora borealis in the tumult of their change:

> It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
> Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
> And mountains running like water, wave on wave,
>
> Through waves of light. (CP, 446)

The aurora borealis are seen in their perpetual transformations, occuring idly and lavisly "to no end." The light of the aurora is "Splashed wide-wise" because it "likes magnificence / And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space." It is a beautiful phenomenon, magnificent and exhilarating in its changes, for the essence of change is that it exhilarates. And yet at the same time there is something terrifying about them:

> The theatre is filled with flying birds,
> Wild wedges, as of a volcano's smoke, palm-eyed
> And vanishing, a web in a corridor
>
> Or massive portico. A capitol,
> It may be, is emerging or has just
> Collapsed. The denouement has to be postponed. (CP, 416)

The picture of the birds, flying and disappearing, like the wedges spurting out of the smoke of a volcano, mysteriously palm-eyed, and making a web in their flight through the massive corridor like space, constantly changing without any meaningful stop or "denouement," is indeed frightening. And the father seated by his fire, who has been watching the theatre, finally "opens the door of his house / On flames" (CP, 416-417). "The scholar of one candle" (CP, 417) confronting the phenomenon feels intimidated and sets himself to discover its significance. At the end of canto VI, the poem reaches its climactic point.

The experience of chill and terror in the presence of the flaring lights raises many apprehensive questions in the next canto: Is there a malevolent force? "Is there an imagination that sits enthroned / As grim as it is benevolent?" (CP, 417) Are the leaping flames the deathly throne of that grim power? "When the leaves are dead, / Does it take its place in the north and enfold itself, / Goat-leaper, crystalled and luminous, sitting / In highest night?" (CP, 417) The horror accumulates as the mind speculates on what the heavens proclaim. Does this light adorn itself in black by extinguishing planets in its white radiance, leaving only those that it needs for its crown?

A sublime picture of the leaping and extinguishing of the aurora appears:

> do these heavens adorn
> And proclaim it, the white creator of black, jetted
> By extinguishings, even of planets as may be,
>
> Even of earth, even of sight, in snow,
> Except as needed by way of majesty,
> In the sky, as crown and diamond cabala? (CP, 417)

It extinguishes not only the planets and earth but also us as it leaps through us, our very being, leaving us "A shivering residue," "chilled and forgone" (CP, 417) dispossessed and yet leaving a brilliance like a diamond crown.

But in spite of its chilling and extinguishing, the tragic imagination cannot be regarded as a "destiny." Rather "It must change from destiny to slight caprice / And thus its jetted tragedy its stele / And shape and mournful making move to find / What must unmake it" (CP, 417-418). The three remaining cantos speak of how it is unmade.

To see the lights, with all their desolation and disaster, not as grim destiny is to believe in the existence of innocence, and the next canto affirms such a belief:

> It is like a thing of ether that exists
> Almost as predicate. But it exists,
> It exists, it is visible, it is, it is. (CP, 418)

With this realization, the auroras are finally discovered in their

essential innocence:

> So, then, these lights are not a spell of light,
> A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.
> An innocence of the earth and no false sign
>
> Or symbol of malice. (CP, 418)

The apprehensions that first terrorized the mind as to whether these leaping flames enthroned and crowned a grim and sinister force, a malevolent, unjust destiny, are finally dismissed and seen as part of the innocence of the earth. With this belief in their essential innocence, "we partake thereof" and participate in "this holiness" (CP, 418). Our unwillingness to believe in the serpent's relentless happiness was described in the first canto as his true poison. Now, when seen in the essential innocence, the leaping flames, paradoxically, are described as holy. To experience the aurora as "innocence" is to realize that they are not some impersonal, sinister power torturing and destroying us, but, as "Esthétique du Mal" puts it, to realize "That he might suffer or that / He might die was the innocence of living, if life / Itself was innocent" (CP, 322). And "innocence" alike is not just an idea "A saying out of a cloud" (CP, 418) but "the innocence of living," our ability to live in the physical world, to live in harmony with it, to live like natives, "as Danes in Denmark" (CP, 419), as the serpent moving in the grass (CP, 412). It is

> the time and place in which we breathed...
>
> And of each other thought - in the idiom
> Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth,
> Not of the enigma of the guilty dream. (CP, 419)

As children of the innocent earth we live in the time and place that from part of her, live in the physical world which is here and now. "Merely in living as and where we live" (CP, 326) we establish within the horizon of the world a brotherhood of men as we speak and understand the familiar language of the things of this world and not "of the enigma of the guilty dream," not the enigmatic speech of some impersonal destiny that would reduce our living to an expiation of some unreal and impersonal sin or guilt. With this awareness that we belong to the earth which is here and now we live authentically and find our true "home" on this earth. And in such living "this drama of life" we experience its tragic parts, desolation and disaster, "This sense of the activity of fate -" (CP, 419) coming

> in the simplest word,
> Almost as part of innocence, almost,
> Almost as the tenderest and the truest part. (CP, 420)

The poem ends with this final realization that we are "an unhappy people in a happy world" (CP, 420). This is the realization, the "contrivance of the spectre of the spheres," of the scholar with one candle, the father seated by the fire, the man of imagination, who contrives "balance to contrive a whole" and

> In these unhappy he meditates a whole,
> The full of fortune and the full of fate,
> As if he lived all lives, that he might know.
>
> In hall harridon, not hushful paradise,
> To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
> Like a blaze of summer straw in winter's nick.
> (CP, 420-421)

The scholar with one candle contrives a balance as he confronts these lights, and in the light of that one candle which is as omniscient as the "spectre of the spheres" he meditates "a whole," the "full of fate" of which the lights are only a part, and therefore seen not as a symbol of "winter" "in the midst of summer" (CP, 417), but as a gentler burning of "summer straw in winter's nick." The function of the imagination is to create, and then to meditate on, the "idiom of an innocent earth" (CP, 419) and in that "whole" to experience its disaster as its true part.

With its ingenious architectonic structure "Auroras of Autumn" is perhaps one of Stevens' greatest achievements. In its description of auroras as frightening yet awe-inspiring phenomenon the poem creates an experience or vision of the sublime. The auroras do not represent "the universe of death" or the "ultimately menacing First Idea"[1] as Bloom maintains. Nor is the poem Stevens' "reflections on middle age" expressing his "fear and fascination of ongoing process"[2] as Vendler seems to suggest. The poem is Stevens' most powerful affirmation of the imagination's power to discover and recognize the terrible like the beautiful and the pleasant, as the manifestation of the being, the mystery of the earth.

There are many poems in Aurora of Autumn which are meditations on the "poem of life" (CP, 423) or "the essential poem at

the centre of things" (CP, 440). The "Large Red Man Reading" (CP, 423-424) reads "from the poem of life, / Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them," of things familiar and around him, of things of this earth. Even the disembodied ghosts- "the non-physical people" of "Esthétique du Mal" (CP, 325) - if there are any, envy him of his joy and "would have wept to step barefoot into reality, ... to feel it again." In what seems to be a complete reversal of situation, in which instead of the men of the earth longing for transcendent atemporal paradisal joy, the disembodied angels long for a direct and immediate experience of the physical, temporal things, the poem defines the function of the poetic act as an experience of dis-covering "things as they are," that is, as "The outlines of being and its expressings":

> Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines,
>
> Which . . . . . .
>
> ..... took on shape and the size of things as they are
> And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked. (CP, 424)

The "poem of life" is the poem of things as they are, an imaginative experience of the revelation of being in things temporal and familiar.

For the lecturer in "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" (CP, 429-430) who "goes on asking questions," however, the day makes no "revelations" because his is "an intellect / Of windings

round and dodges to and fro, / Writhing in wrong obliques and distances," an eluding and distancing intellect which wills to fix things in its measured and conceptualized answers. The revelation of things, on the other hand, is an act of perception or immediate embodied experience of the "middle," the centre of things; it is "present / Everywhere in space at once." The poem says, instead of asking questions,

> It would be enough
> If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
> In This Beautiful World of Ours and not as now,
>
> Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
> Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
> And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy. (CP, 430)

"Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight" (CP, 430-431) describes more precisely what the poetic act involves. Creative transformation is not, the poem says, changing things into something else, not a metaphoric act that changes actual, temporal things into atemporal images and symbols of the mind, but it is our sense of things, "the way we feel," experience things themselves so that we participate in their being. The roses in the sunlight are

> too much as they are
> To be anything else in the sunlight of the room,
>
> Too much as they are to be changed by metaphor,
> Too actual, things that in being real
> Make any imaginings of them lesser things.
>
> And yet this effect is a consequence of the way
> We feel and, therefore, is not real, except
> In our sense of it, our sense of the fertilest red.
> (CP, 430)

It is only in our experience or perception of them, that things come into being, are real. Thus the creative act coincides with the manifestation of things in their being. It is an experience of the "presence" of things which lies "So far beyond the rhetorician's touch" or, as "Saint John and the Back-Ache" (CP, 436-437) puts it, "beyond the mind's / Extremest pinch":

> The world is presence and not force.
> Presence is not mind.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It fills the being before the mind can think. (CP, 436)

"the dumbfoundering abyss / Between us and the object" (CP, 437) is bridged not by the mind's "force," its willful representations of the objects into concepts and images, but in its ability to discover and experience the objects present in their presence.

"A Primitive Like an Orb" (CP, 440-443) is perhaps Stevens' most profound meditation on being, on "the essential poem at the centre of things" (CP, 440). A creative act, and this includes an act of loving or one of believing as much as an act of writing poetry, for "The lover, the believer and the poet" (CP, 441) are one, involves the discovering of things in their central, essential being. And this act of revelation is a poem. This disclosing of being in be-ings is a "difficult appreciation" (CP, 440). One cannot prove the "existence of the poem," of being. It is "something seen and known in lesser poems" (CP, 440), in things of this world. "It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is." It is present in things and yet it is not something which

can be conceived or seen in itself apart from the things. The paradox of being is that it is "nothing" in itself, but manifests itself in what appears and is. It is not an entity in itself. The essential, the invisible does not exist apart from the actual but can be dis-covered and known only as embodied in the visible. The imaginative apperception "captives the being" (CP, 440) though it is "always too heavy for the sense / To seize" (CP, 441). The experience of this captivity, this seizure of being, is one of sustenance, celebration, as we feel enlarged in the presence of this essential poem.

Men of imagination, and they include "the lover, the believer and the poet," "celebrate the central poem" as their words "chosen out of their desire" (CP, 441) bring it into existence so that the earth and the sky and the tree and the cloud are seen afresh, anew, as they are and not as they "used-to" (CP, 441) be seen by the mind. These men of imagination respond to the world, to things, to the "earth and sky" as in their imaginative perception they discover the mutual belonging together of being and be-ings:

> the central poem became the world,
> And the world the central poem, each one the mate
> Of the other
> . . . . . .
> denouncing separate selves, both one. (CP, 441)

This experience of the indistinguishability of being and be-ings is the central creative experience.

The poem further defines "the central poem" not as the sum of its parts, not a composition of "the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems" "into a whole" (CP, 442), but "a poem of / The whole, the essential compact of the parts" (CP, 442), the whole that is not a sum of parts but is seen in its parts. As the poem is seen in lesser poems, being is seen in actual, tangible things. "The central poem" is then celebrated in an elevated speech. It is

> A vis, a principle or, it may be,
> The meditation of a principle,
> Or else an inherent order active to be
> Itself, a nature to its natives all
> Beneficence, a repose, ut most repose,
> The muscles of a magnet aptly felt,
> A giant on the horizon, glistening... (CP, 442)

The analogy of "the poem of the whole" to the "giant on the horizon," "the skeleton of the ether" (CP, 442) is given as "an illustration" of the definition, "an abstraction given head" so that being is seen as something "angelic" and "plenteous" (CP, 443), a huge and enormous presence, "the prodigal, familiar fire" (CP, 442) (the sun?) whose "size and solitude" cannot be snipped and enframed into petty images of the mind like "a signed photograph on a mantlepiece" (CP, 443). The being as giant is

> a large among the smalls
> Of it, a close, parental magnitude,
> At the centre on the horizon, concentrum, grave
> And prodigious person, patron of origins. (CP, 443)

It is the "whole," the "total" of which the lover, the believer,

the poet and the painter are parts as their imaginative acts discover it. It is "the giant of nothingness," nothing in himself, not a separate entity. It is "ever changing, living in change," seen and known in "the smalls of it," in "lesser poems" (CP, 442), in the real and familiar things of the world.

The poems of Auroras of Autumn are an unending meditation on being that resides in the things of the world. "This Solitude of Cataracts" (CP, 424-425) describes a man walking beside the "flecked river, / Which kept flowing and never the same way twice" who / experiences amidst the perpetual motion a moment of stillness "as if (the river) stood still." It is "a permanent realization" of its being, himself "Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury centre of time." "Countryman" (CP, 428-429), another poem on the river, this time "Swatara, black river" moving "blackly and without crystal" has a countryman walking beside it. For him Swatara is "The name," "The place," the actual manifestation, a coming into appearance of "a swarthy presence," / of the being of the river:

> Being there is being in a place,
> As of a character everywhere,
> The place of a swarthy presence moving,
> Slowly, to the look of a swarthy name.

If Swatara becomes the place of the swarthy presence, the particular and the actual be-ing of the essential swarthiness, how can such a creative experience be a degeneration? - is the question raised by the poem "Metaphor as Degeneration" (CP, 444-445).

The poem juxtaposes two kinds of "brooding" or imagining - a man white as marble, sitting in a wood, "brooding sounds of images of death" and "a man in black space" (CP, 444), near "Swatara, black river" (CP, 428), "Brooding sounds of river noises" (CP, 444). The marble man's brooding is perhaps an example of metaphor as degeneration, for he "remains himself in space," static and fixed, unmoved by the things around him, himself an image of death. Whereas the man in the black wood, himself an example of what "the imagination" experiences, "descends" with the motion of the river, moves with its swarthy water flowing and perceives the actual, flowing river grow into a large, all encompassing being:

> The swarthy water
> That flows round the earth and through the skies,
> Twisting among the universal spaces,
>
> Is not Swatara. It is being.
> That is the flock-flecked river, the water,
> The blown sheen - or is it air? (CP, 444)

The flecked river, its water, the sheen blowing in its undulant motion, in other words, the visible, suddenly appears like the invisible air and is experienced as "Twisting among the universal spaces":

> How, then, is metaphor degeneration,
> When Swatara becomes this undulant river
> And the river becomes the landless, waterless ocean?

The act of the imagination is to discover the "being" of the river which is the actualization of that being in time and place.

Having discovered and described the being, the poem returns, in the end, to the actual river which is the habitation of being: "Here the black violets grow down to its banks / And the memorial mosses hang their green / Upon it, as it flows ahead" (CP, 445).

"The Bouquet" (CP, 448-453), a longer poem, elaborates on the "difficult apperception" (CP, 440) of the essential poem at the centre of things, of perceiving things in their essential being, or as the poem puts it, beholding "the idea as part / Of the image" (CP, 449). The perception is a sudden revelation, like a lightning:

> The bouquet stands in a jar, as metaphor,
> As lightning itself is, likewise, metaphor
> Crowded with apparitions suddenly gone
>
> And no less suddenly here again, a growth
> Of the reality of the eye, an artifice,
> Nothing much, a flitter that reflects itself. (CP, 448)

Regarded by the "meta-men," potent and "clear, transparent" men of imagination, the flowers appear not as "choses of Provence, growing / In glue, but things transfixed, transpierced and well / Perceived" (CP, 449). They are "Embellished by the quickness of sight, / When in a way of seeing seen, an extreme, / A sovereign, a souvenir, a sign, / Of today, of this morning, of this afternoon, / Not yesterday, nor tomorrow" (CP, 451). The perception of the bouquet is finally described as

> The doubling second things, not mystical,
>
> The infinite of the actual perceived,
> A freedom revealed, a realization touched,
> The real made more acute by an unreal. (CP, 451)

The revelation of the unreal in the real gives us the real as wholly and truly real, things as they essentially are. The real is not real without the unreal of it. The imaginative act involves finally the apperception of "The doubling second things," of the mutual belonging together of being and be-ings, of the mystery of concrete existents. As "Study of Images I" (CP, 463-464) puts it,

> in images we awake,
> Within the very object that we seek,
> Participants of its being. It is, we are.

The poetic act fulfils itself in discovering and participating in the being of the object. The ultimate experience toward which poetry directs its search is to create the ultimate "poem of fact ... not realized before" (CP, 164), to find the essential in the actual, ordinary, the unfamiliar in the familiar, the spiritual in the temporal, or "God in the object itself" (CP, 475), not beyond it. That search finds its fullest expression in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (CP, 465-489), the "endlessly elaborating poem" (CP, 486) which "Displays the theory of poetry" as "the theory of life" (CP, 486).

The poem's avowed aim is to seek "the poem of pure reality," to get at "the object / At the exactest point at which it is itself" through "the eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight / Of simple seeing, without reflection," to "seek /

Nothing beyond reality. Within it/Everything" (CP, 471). In its thirty-one cantos the poem comes to grapple with the "difficulty of the visible" (CP, 474) as it concentrates its attention on the ordinary, the commonplace, the near and the familiar. Stevens gives some indication of the difficult problem he is dealing with in his letters. Writing to Thomas McGreevy, an Irish poet, in March 1949, when the poem was in the making, Stevens showed his dissatisfaction with the kind of poetry Baudelaire wrote as it seemed "unrelated to anything actual," and then commented: "The demand for reality in poetry brings one sooner or later to a point where it becomes almost impossible since a real poetry, that is to say, a poetry that is not poetical or that is not merely the notation of objects in themselves poetic is a poetry divested of poetry. That is what I am trying to get at at the moment... The bare idea makes everything else seem false and verbose and even ugly" (L, 631). Later, writing to Barbara Church in July 1949, he said: "At least what one ought to find is normal life, insight into the commonplace, reconciliation with every-day reality.... things which mean a good deal more than they sound like meaning: for instance, airing the house in the morning; the colors of sunlight on the side of the house; people in their familiar aspects. All this is difficult for me.... To describe a cup of tea without changing it and without concerning oneself with some extreme aspect of it is not at all the easy thing that it seems to be" (L, 643). To Bernard Heringman he put the problem more precisely: "here (In "An Ordinary Evening") my interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace

and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of 'grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false" (L, 636).

In the same letter Stevens states categorically that he was not doing "a seasonal sequence" nor was there "anything autobiographical" (L, 636) about his poem and he adds, "this is not in any sense a turning away from the ideas of "Credences of Summer": it is a development of those ideas" and has "nothing to do with the weather" but "with the drift of one's ideas" (L, 437). "An Ordinary Evening" is not an "Il Penseroso" to the "L'Allergo" of "Credence of Summer." It also, like the earlier poem, concentrates its effort to discover the actual in its full potential. If "Credences of Summer" dealt with the things in their fullness, in their rich fecundity, radiant presence, "that can attain no more" (CP, 373), "An Ordinary Evening" deals with things in their barrenness beyond which they cannot be bared, purged of everything false, so that one may get at their "essential integrity" (CP, 475).

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" describes a man seated at the window of his hotel roomm in New Haven, watching the monotonous rain fall and make a tink-tank sound as it falls in the ramshackle spout on an ordinary autumn evening. He fixes his gaze on the objects close to him and insists on seeking God in objects themselves and not beyond them. What was termed as "presence"

or "being" in other poems of Auroras of Autumn is here more specifically called "god" (CP, 475) or the "spiritual" (CP, 474) or "celestial" (CP, 480), and the man of imagination is equated with "the Ecclesiast" (CP, 479). From the initial echoing of the Nietzschean death of god in Harmonium and the need for a substitute for it, Stevens seems to have arrived, having defined the poetic act as the revelation of being or presence in be-ings or things present, finally to speak of such a poetic act as essentially spiritual or religious, without fear of being misunderstood. There is a growing reference to presence, or god, or being in his later poetry as he recognizes the true creative act as one that makes it possible for us to get at the "essential integrity" (CP, 475) of things of the world. The ephebe has come a long way from his initiation in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Now he is "a strong mind in a weak neighbourhood," "neither priest nor proctor... among the perilous owls," and "It is a fresh spiritual that he defines. / ... A thing on the side of a house, not deep in a cloud" (CP, 474). Similarly, for Professor Eucalyptus "The search / For reality is as momentous as / The search for god" (CP, 481) and he seeks heaven in New Haven (with a possible pun on the word): His "instinct for heaven had its counterpoint: / The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room" (CP, 476). And from earth to New Haven to his room, his eyes finally settle on things common and ordinary, close to him.

The central experience of the poem involves a consistent

insistence on objects being perceived in their most ordinary, "commonplace" aspect, their poverty, emptiness, nearness, barrenness and nakedness. The barrenness and poverty in which they are seen, are not, however symbolic of physical or spiritual destitution.[3] The commonplace is seen neither with "comic nor tragic" but with "serious reflection" (CP, 478). It is "not grim / Reality .. / And in any case never grim, the human grim / That is part of the indifference of the eye / Indifferent to what it sees" (CP, 475). The grimness of things, "the tink-tonk / Of the rain in the spout" for instance, is not "a substitute," an image or a symbol of the "human grim" (CP, 475) of subjective, private pathos. To see things in grimness or plainness is to see them in their essential barrenness, divested of all false encrustations so that we may perceive "god" or "essence" (CP, 475) in them. It is a completely decreated state in which we see "nothing that is not there" so that we can see "the nothing that is" (CP, 10). Canto XX illustrates this. New Haven is seen as a naked being, in its essential emptiness and desolateness:

> The imaginative transcripts were like clouds,
> Today; and the transcripts of feeling, impossible
> To distinguish. The town was a residuum,
>
> A neuter shedding shapes in an absolute. (CP, 479)

The transcripts of blue phenomena, the images and shapes the town was given by the mind, the feelings associated with it, "the personas that / It became" (CP, 479), all this "impure" (CP, 480) the thinker sitting in the room escapes as he sees the town as an "absolute," "pure sphere":

> And yet
> To have evaded clouds and men leaves him
> A naked being with a naked will
>
> And everything to make. (CP, 480)

He avoids the danger of self-annihilation into that desolate emptiness by his will, as the next poem says, to create a romanza, a song out of "this place, / The things around ... / Out of surfaces, the windows, the walls, / The bricks grown brittle in time's poverty / The clear" (CP, 480), so that like the distant, mythical, orphic romanza, "Romanza out of the black shepherd's isle," he creates and in creating discovers the things around him and finds "A celestial mode... / If only in the branches sweeping in the rain" (CP, 480-481).

The need for the destruction or the decreation of the impure, the false, the "metaphysical" (CP, 472) and the opening up or clearing of "The brilliancy at the central of the earth" (CP, 473) is reiterated in "An Ordinary Evening." Canto XI, for instance, speaks of the impotency of the metaphysical symbols that exist only in the mind, shine "with a nocturnal shine alone," having no existence in reality, unable to "stand potent in the sun" (CP, 473).

> The phrase grows weak. The fact takes up the strength
> Of the phrase. It contrives the self-same evocations
> And Juda becomes New Haven or else must. (CP, 473)

The man in New Haven, in a physical, actual town, "destroys" the profoundest forms," the metaphysical images, "with wafts of wakening,"

Free from their majesty and yet in need
Of majesty, of an invincible clou,
A minimum of making in the mind,

A verity of the most veracious men,
The propounding of four seasons and twelve months.
The brilliancy at the central of the earth. (CP, 473)

His "making," his imaginative perception is not an evading of the physical or the real, not an image of the mind, but a revelation of a "verity," of truth of the existing things, "the brilliancy at the central of the earth." His "making" is "minimum" for it does not transform the things into something else, but into their true being and is thus almost indistinguishable from them.

Canto XXIV similarly describes the destruction of old forms for a "clearing" in which the perception or experience of the essential or celestial is possible:

It was
In the genius of summer that they blew up

The statue of Jove among the bloomy clouds.
It took all day to quieten the sky
And then to refill its emptiness again,

So that . . .
. . . . . .
There was a clearing, a readiness for first bells,
An opening for outpouring, the hand was raised:
There was a willingness not yet composed,

A knowing that something certain had been proposed,
Which, without the statue, would be new,
An escape from repetition, a happening

In space and the self. (CP, 482-483)

In the emptiness that ensues the destruction there is a

"clearing" of things, of all false encrustations and hence a "readiness" and a "willingness" for an experience, "a happening" or an occurring of being that touches both the object and the self. The "desire" to create or imaginatively perceive the being of things always locates itself in emptiness in which being can be revealed. In canto III,

> It is desire, set deep in the eye,
> Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene,
> In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall,
>
> Always in emptiness that would be filled,
> In denial that cannot contain its blood,
> A porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof. (CP, 467)

As the canto states "The point of vision and desire are the same" (CP, 466), that is, the desire for creation is an act of perception, but an act of perception in which the porcelain which is in its fragments is perceived in its whole, integral essence.

Poverty is another image of the essential purity or nakedness of the self as well as of the objects. While dwelling in the proximity of the most ordinary and commonplace things the self experiences in their intimacy a presence that brings repose. Poverty is another form of decreation of the self which is usually regarded as the absolute subjectivity, the exotic, the rare, the exciting. Canto XXVI builds on the contrast between the romantic experience of transcendence felt in the presence of an exotic, picturesque landscape and one of "human repose" felt in

the proximity of New Haven:

> here, the inamorata, without distance
> And thereby lost, and naked or in rags,
> Shrunk in the poverty of being close,
>
> Touches, as one hand touches another hand,
> Or, as a voice that, speaking without form,
> Gritting the ear, whispers humane repose. (CP, 484)

The most moving picture of the barrenness, "The dilapidation of dilapidations" (CP, 476) that resembles almost "death's poverty" (CP, 477) occurs in canto XVI. The day and night are seen, perhaps as in one of time's images as eternally young in their recurrence, meeting at the horizon, "Their eyes closed, in a young palaver of lips" (CP, 477). But the wind whimpering in the western night betrays this perfect image of night in its perpetual youthful vigour. The night is seen, not in the romantic moonlight, but in the electric light, and not heaving "its youthful sleep from the sea" but in the "exhalation in the eaves":

> It is a bough in the electric light
> And the exhalations in the eaves, so little
> To indicate the total leaflessness. (CP, 477)

A bare bough and a rustle of leaves is an image of things in their essential nakedness, their ultimate decreated state in which their barrenness resembles death.

Canto XXX is the most powerful description of the barrenness which is not a negative state, a tragic experience of annihilation, but an essential condition for the apperception of the being of things.

> The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen.
> The robins are la-bas, the squirrels, in tree-caves,
> Huddle together in the knowledge of squirrels. (CP, 487)

It is then, with the total leaflessness that the canto begins. The barrenness is complete. The birds, and the sounds of the birds of summer are absent. Instead, the wind buzzes, not in the clear water of summer which would "reflect" the sky, but in the mud of autumn. The barrenness, however, is not a sad remembering of summer, the weather not a symbol of absence or death as opposed to the youthfulness of summer:

> It it not part of what is absent, a halt
> For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances. (CP, 487)

It is rather "an exposing,"

> It is a coming on and a coming forth.
> . . . . . .
> It was something imagined that has been washed away.
> A <u>clearness</u> has returned. It stands restored. (CP, 487-488. Emphasis added)

It is a positive, clear experience of revelation, a "coming forth" of the essence when things are finally shorn of "imagined" ideas about them. The pines that were "fans and fragrances" finally "emerge / Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks," that is, divested of all their external forms, they are seen as an essential part of the rock, of earth. "The glass of the air becomes an element." The barrenness is then a return to or a recovery of things in their original essence.

This clearness is not a negative state, but an essential precondition that makes the apperception of being possible:

> It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
> It is a visibility of thought,
> In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.
> (CP, 488)

It is the "visibility of thought," that is the central concern of "An Ordinary Evening." The poem grapples with the "difficulty of the visible / To the nations of the clear invisible / The actual landscape with its actual horns / Of baker and butcher blowing, as if to hear, / Hear hard, gets at an essential integrity" (CP, 474-475). The difficulty that the poem predicates is the difficulty of perception of the actual things without any evading of them in our imaginings, so that the creative perception, a poetic act, may 'get at' the essential integrity, the invisible that resides in the visible.

The poem is a long elaboration of its initial proposition. "The eye's plain version is a thing apart" (CP, 465). Perception involves perception of actual, physical reality, "and yet" it is not merely naturalistic seeing of the external objects, nor a transmuting of the actual objects into the impalpable, abstract images of the mind. In neither case we perceive the object as it really is, the actual, visible object in its essential, invisible being. The poem considers and criticises various

possibilities of perception in which the object is thus evaded. Canto II suggests a hypothetical proposition that things have existence only in the mind and have no roots in the external world. The entire canto describes this proposition only as a supposition: "Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves, / So that they become an impalpable town... / Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self, / ... In the movement of the colors of the mind, / ... Without regard to time or where we are" (CP, 466). Such a creation of things in the mind without any palpable reality of their own gives us things "obscure," "uncertain," "indefinite" and "confused":

> Obscure, in colors whether of the sun
> Or mind, uncertain in the clearest bells
> The spirit's speeches, the indefinite,
>
> Confused illuminations and sonorities,
> So much ourselves, we cannot tell apart
> The idea and the bearer-being of the idea. (CP, 466)

Things become obscure and uncertain because the mind gives its own colours and speeches to them. They are so much the product of the mind that they lose their palpable, actual existence. The genuine perception, on the other hand, involves the seeing of "The eye made clear of its uncertainty, with the sight / Of simple seeing, without reflection" (CP, 471).

The creative perception that is not rooted in the external, temporal world is regarded as "fatal" in canto X:

> It is fatal in the moon and empty there.
> . . . . . .

> We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man
>
> Of bronze whose mind was made up and who,
> therefore, died.
> We are not men of bronze and we are not dead.
> His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.
>
> But ours is not imprisoned. It resides
> In a permanence composed of impermanence,
> In a faithfulness as against the lunar light. (CP, 472)

The lunar vision is fatal because it implies a creative act that achieves a static permanence by distancing and detaching itself from the constant change, the impermanence. It is thus unfaithful to the temporal reality. It thus transforms the actual and the temporal into an unreal, atemporal abstraction. As canto XIX puts it, "The moon rose in the mind and ... / That which was public green turned private gray" (CP, 478-479). "The lion of the spirit" in canto XI, the imagination that transforms the physical town into a metaphysical concept or a symbol, that turns "a cat.../ That shines with a nocturnal shine alone" (CP, 473) is considered impotent and weak. The great cat must stand potent in the sun" (CP, 473). "The moonlight fiction" (CP, 36) is always discarded in favor of the "faithfulness" to reality and the creative imagination that discovers permanence within impermanence, the invisible in the visible, where each thing "Becomes <u>amassed</u> in a total double-thing" (CP, 472, emphasis added). It is this "amassing harmony" (CP, 403) of the real and the unreal, be-ing and being that the creative act sets itself to discover.

At the other extreme is the experience of "plain men," men who lack imaginative power altogether, and live in a gross

and savage delight of dreaming or wishful thinking about reality, enjoying the real as a fairy tale:

> So lewd spring comes from winter's chastity.
> So, after summer, in the autumn air,
> Comes the cold volume of forgotten ghosts,
>
> But soothingly, with pleasant instruments,
> So that this cold, a children's tale of ice,
> Seems like a sheen of heat romanticized. (CP, 468)

Winter is dreamt away in the soothing, pleasant memories of summer and even the cold icy mist is wished away as it is mistaken for the sheen of summer heat. Comfort is found in childish, puerile indulgence. This romanticism of remembering summer in winter is ridiculed as "savagery" (CP, 467). The authentic perception involves seeing the barrenness, not as a remembering of summer, either sad or indulgent, but as "an exposing" (CP, 487) and clearness in which thought is visible.

In canto VIII the rationalist imagination which sees things as the representations of the self as opposed to the idealist moonlight fictions which interiorize the exterior is criticized. These are

> lesser things... things exteriorized
>
> Out of rigid realists. It is as if
> Men turning into things, as comedy,
> Stood, dressed in antic symbols, to display
>
> The truth about themselves, having lost, as things,
> The power to conceal they had as men. (CP, 470)

The ridiculous "display" or projection of the self into things

deprives the self of its most genuine and precious "height" and "depth," its "miraculous" perception of "the commonplace" in which what is "incredible becomes, / In misted contours, credible day again" (CP, 470).

In an interesting inversion of roles, reality is presented, in canto XXV, as watching the self and checking all its evasions;

> Life fixed him, wandering on the stair of glass,
> With its attentive eyes. And, as he stood,
> On his balcony, outsensing distances,
>
> There were looks that caught him out of empty air.
> C'est toujours la vie qui me regarde ... This was
> Who watched him, always, for unfaithful thought. (CP, 483)

This demanding reality that keeps a close watch and insists that its presence be felt, that one may be always faithful to it, is described as the presence of a hidalgo playing his guitar, with "The shawl across one shoulder and the hat," in a most ordinary and commonplace context, and yet by its sheer presence keeping one "from forgetting" it and constantly disclosing itself. All the transformations of this real into "something most unreal," of a "Bare begger-tree" into a tree "hung low for fruited red" (CP, 483), all the embellishments of the "commonplace" are seen as "a rumpling of blazons" (CP, 483) and "false" (CP, 484), as they are a forgetting of its demanding presence. Only

> The hidalgo was permanent, abstract,
> A hatching that stared and demanded an answering
> look. (CP, 484)

This is the "strength at the centre," "the unapproachable," "The dominant blank" (CP, 477), the permanent abstract, constantly occurring in its manifestations, "a hatching" (CP, 484) that demands a creative response that it be perceived. The haunting image of the real staring at the self, checking all its evasions is Stevens' most powerful way of insisting on the self's faithfulness to the real. This faithfulness requires that

> We keep coming back and coming back
> To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
> That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek
>
> The poem of pure reality, untouched
> By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
> Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
>
> At the exactest point at which it is itself,
> Transfixing by being purely what it is,
> A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,
>
> The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
> Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
> Nothing beyond reality. Within it,
>
> Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
> Included... (CP, 471)

The canto is the themetic centre of the poem. It describes what a search of "the poem of pure reality" involves. When the eye is finally made clear of all uncertainty, when it sees without deviation or reflection, it fixes its gaze on the object itself. And yet this creative perception, though it does not seek to transform the object into anything else, does not wish to turn away from it into anything beyond it, seeks to have the object "at the exactest point at which it is itself," as "purely what it

is." In other words, it seeks to dis-cover the being "within it," the invisible within the visible. The visible is not merely a solid object but it becomes more acute only when it is perceived in its essence. Such a poetic act in which "as and is are one" (CP, 476) is exhilarating, truly spiritual and magnifying; as one perceives the "real and unreal as one" (CP, 485) one experiences "The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints, / The patterns of the heavens and high, night air" (CP, 472).

The poetic act is thus described as a disclosure of the thing itself in its true being. To put it in other words, it is only through an imaginative act that a thing truly comes into existence, to be what it essentially is. The poem lets things be, or, the poem is the thing. This identification between the poem and the thing, words and the world, poetry and reality is the highest consummation of a poetic experience:

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it.
> The poet speaks the poem as it is,
>
> Not as it was: part of the reverberation
> Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues
> Are like newspapers blown by the wind. He speaks
>
> By sight and insight as they are. (CP, 473)

The marble statues come into being, become present in their presence, and not just remain lifeless objects as they were,

when the "still speech ... touches them at the point of reverberation (CP, 475). They have their existence only in and through this imaginative act. They cease to be when the poem is over, and lapse back into the lifeless objects they were, into "things about" (CP, 473). The change from "was" into "is" (CP, 473), from the immobile statues into mobile presences, from non-existence to existence, is an experience of reverberation, felt alike in the self in its imaginative reverberation, in "the reverberation / Of a windy night," and in the town, in its casual objects, the statues that come to life and appear blowing in the windy night like the casual litter. The whirling of autumnal leaves in the gutter resembles the whirling of "the presence of thoughts" (CP, 474) in the self, which through its reverberation brings things into being, into life, so that one feels convinced finally that "words of the world are the life of the world" (CP, 474), that they are one and inseparable. Stevens, in being a "More harassing master" "extemporize(s) / Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life" (CP, 486) in canto XXVII, the canto that proves that things have their existence in the poem, that they come to <u>be</u> what they in essence are in the poem, that "Real and unreal are two in one" (CP, 485).

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" emphasises the search for "pure reality" (CP, 471) which is "as momentous as / The search for god" (CP, 481). As canto XXII defines it, it is a search for a possible experience in which "breathless things"

become "broodingly abreath / With the inhalation of original cold / And of original earliness" (CP, 481) an experience in which objects come alive with reverberation and are lived or experienced in their original essential being. The experience of the origin in the real is not the perception of the real as "the predicate of bright origin" (CP, 481), not as an image of some atemporal, ideal origin - "Creation is not renewed by images / Of lone wanderers" (CP, 481). It is a lived experience of actual things in their essential presence: "the sense / Of cold and earliness is a daily sense, / Not the predicate of bright origin" (CP, 481). The poet's task is then to discover the "interior" in its "exterior."

The search for reality then is what the final canto calls the search for the "force" (CP, 489) that reverberates in real things. The canto begins with the images of this "force," "the little," "the lighter," the evanescent, "the inner" that resides in the outer but is not often realized:

> The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds
> Not often realized, the lighter words
> In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men
>
> Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music
> In the strokes of thunder, dead candles at the window
> When day comes, fire-foams in the motions of
> the sea. (CP, 488)

These are the "flickings," the subtle and finer counterpoints of the crude, actual, real things. The "force" that one tries

"directly and indirectly getting at" is seen, then, as evoked in lived experiences,

> Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,
> A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,
> A woman writing a note and tearing it up. (CP, 488)

These are "the edgings and inchings of final form," as the colours of the evening expand into a whole spectrum, as in the music of the philosopher a whole symphony is struck, or, as in writing a note a woman realizes her love. The philosopher may go on practising, the woman may tear up her notes, they may never achieve the final, absolute end. In fact, it is only on the way to the end that they get at the flickering of the "force." In such realizations, the poem rightly concludes, reality ceases to be a mere collection of solid objects extended in space, but . . . is experienced as the force that reverberated in them:

> It is not in the premise that reality
> Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
> A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (CP, 489)

The possible gloss on the stanza is provided by "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words": "The subject matter of poetry is not that 'collection of solid, static objects extended in space' but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are"(NA, 25). Reality is not the Cartesian res extensa; "It is not in the premise

that reality / Is a solid" (CP, 489). It comes to appear so only, as Stevens explains quoting Dr. Joad, "because of the intellect which presents us with a false view of it" (NA, 25). It is not the particles of dust, but the "shade that traverses it," the vibration that one feels in seeing it. It is an experience of the reverberation of "force" in actual things, as in the marble statues on a windy night in canto XXII. It is an experience of things in their essential being, of things as they are. This is what the final "poem of fact" (OP, 164) aims to be. It is the poem in which the actual, the real is lived and realized in its reverberating force. It is in this sense Stevens affirms that "the poetic truth is a factual truth" (NA, 59).

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens' last major manifesto on the abiding identity of poetry and reality, defines reality as Heidegger does 'earth' in the original sense of Greek physis as being that comes into its own in its mutual belonging with beings. Reality in its ultimate sense is this belonging together of being and be-ing, invisible and visible. The poems of The Auroras of Autumn issue from a deep contemplation of this being which finds its habitation and name in the actual things of the world. It is this mystery of reality that is going to be the final focus of attention in Stevens' last poems.