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INTERROGATING THE VISIBLE AND ENCOUNTERING THE SELF: A READING OF THE POEMS OF WALLACE STEVENS

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Abstract

This paper explores in detail how the abstraction in language can question the givenness of human experience. Experience is the contextualized comprehension of sensations as meaning, and the interrogation of meaning de-contextualises experience and dissolves it into meaningless sonic utterances. The epistemological pretexts of the experience disappear as the abstraction disintegrates the meaning and approximates the language to a nonhuman world of pure sensations. The poems of Wallace Stevens unfold a world of Deleuzian percepts and affects prior to the human perception and affection. The poem is not a representation of lived experiences but an interrogation of the semantic and the syntactic structures that construct meaningful experiences. The interrogation opens up the proximate of primal sensations that are to converge on a particular linguistic self. There is no given being for the self apart from its becoming in language, and so, abstraction in poetry enables the self to listen to the 'cry' of its own elemental selves in becoming.

Keywords: abstraction, affects, percepts, self, sensation.

The poems of Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), a poet of the American Modernist era, are highly self-conscious of constructing a self in terms of the things outside. It is a self of sensations, and all is naïve and abstract in that monistic realm of body and mind. What comes out of that surface of sense and sensations is an all-encompassing sound, a cry that marks the becoming of a particular being: "The poem is the cry of its occasion" (*Collected Poems* 473, abbreviated as *CP* throughout this paper). A baby is born with that cry. It is the pure sensation prior to the formation of the linguistic consciousness/ego. As the baby grows up the sounds of the particular distinct being become indistinct as they get lost in the already existing sounds of language. The sounds of language are prompted by meaning and understanding while the neonatal sounds of becoming are the sounds of sensation. It is the undifferentiated sound of mind and body, not a sensation mediated by mind and language. The only way to come closer to the eternally deferred, pre-linguistic, and indeterminate particular individual self is to go beyond the sounds of language and be proximate to the neonatal cry. Instead of treading deep into the unknown depths of one's own mind, the poems of Stevens focus on the things of the world in order to encounter the mere becoming of the self.

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Abstraction is a process whereby the poet engages in an interrogation of the objects of perception in order to clear them of epistemological and utilitarian accretions. The process inevitably results in internecine defiguration of both the perceiving self and the object of perception. Nostalgia of a pre-linguistic world of body sensations culminates in the composition of certain sensations within the perceiving self which are conscious of the frame of semantics and the resultant evolution of history. Free from any addiction to meaning, these pure and primal sensations are devoid of all references except the null reference of self-reference. It is an interactive encounter in playful accidents sensed by primal sensations and conceived of by the "essential imagination" (*Letters of Wallace Stevens* 369, abbreviated as *L* throughout this paper). According to Stevens "essential imagination" or "pure poetry" is "the highest objective of the poet" (*L* 369).

In a letter to Hi Simons, Stevens speaks of the imagination that "partakes of consciousness" in contrast to the imagination which "was the simple thing that it is commonly regarded as being" (*L* 369). Stevens's 'imagination that partakes of consciousness' is not a mere spontaneity. It is a process of interrogation and abstraction leading to an approximation to the mere becoming of the selves of sensations. The interrogation of the meaningful human experiences emerges from the self's desire for the "giant" of its own nonhuman other:

> The eye's plain version is a thing apart,
> The vulgate of experience. Of this,
> A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—
>
> As part of the never-ending meditation,
> Part of the question that is a giant himself. . . . (*CP* 465)

In "Questions are Remarks" Stevens says: "His question is complete because it contains / His utmost statement. It is his own array, / His own pageant and procession and display. . ." (*CP* 462). Roger B. Salomon takes interrogation as one of the basic characteristics of the poetry of Stevens: "Questioning is questioning in Stevens's work, with no end beyond the desire, freedom, and imagination manifest in or released by the question/quest itself and the aesthetic forms that are its momentary shape" (176).

In their attempts for a primal encounter with the things of the world, artists, in fact, compose the supreme fictions of the ultimate sensations that they can have of themselves, not the things as they are. In a letter to Barbara Church, on 22 June 1948, Stevens states that poets are more to these abstract configurations of themselves than the painters:

> While one thinks about poetry as one thinks about painting, the momentum toward abstraction exerts a greater force on the poet than on the painter. I imagine that the tendency of all thinking is toward the abstract and perhaps I am merely saying that the abstractions of the poet are abstracter than the abstractions of the painter. (*L* 601-602)

Abstraction in poetry can make words fertile of pure sensations as it takes them away from the real or figural associations with the phenomenal reality. The imagination that involves itself in

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consciousness functions through the practices of abstraction and the composition of supreme fiction in contrast to the absolute truths of/in history.

The poem "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" (1947) can be seen as an exploration in verse of the two pivotal points of Stevens's poetic experiences: it is abstraction that gives us a glimpse of the nonhuman world of the body sensations, and that world is essentially poetic or it is the prime or supreme fiction. Before proceeding further with the reading of the poem the term 'nonhuman' needs to be explicated. Stevens never uses the word in his poetry; instead he uses the word "inhuman." The word 'inhuman' comes twenty times in his poetry. In the general modernist context, the word points to, in the words of Steve Giles, the "rationally constructed system" that is "running out of control" of man, "treating people as though they were animals or reducing them to dead primal matter, and threatening to destroy both its creators and itself as it does so" (10). This sense of the mechanical other is there very much in Stevens's use of 'inhuman,' but at the same time in certain occasions the word contextualises itself in differing connotations. In "The Idea of Order at Key West" (1934), for example, the word comes in association with the ocean: "Inhuman, of the veritable ocean" (*CP* 128). In the nomenclature of the poem the 'ocean' or the 'sea' is the indeterminate expanse of the sensations that lies beyond human experience (the world of 'the real'), the "dark voice" of whom "[m]ade constant cry, caused constantly a cry. . ." (*CP* 128). The word 'inhuman' here is not the mechanical other but "of the" the pre-linguistic or semiotic world of sensations (*CP* 128). The sea of the poem is juxtaposed with the "she" of the human imagination (*CP* 128).

In the poem "Parochial Theme" (1938), we can see that at the moments of life when the rational comprehension of reality dwindles to its nadir, the trapdoor of the "inhuman" gets opened to life: "The nocturnal, the antique, the blue-green pines / Deepen the feelings to inhuman depths" (*CP* 191). In language 'the trapdoors' are the weakest links in meaning: "The faculty of ellipses and deviations, / In which he exists but never as himself" (*CP* 493). The expression "he exits but never as himself" points to an ever-deferring ultimate presence or a becoming. The close reading of the poems of Stevens often surfaces 'a becoming inhuman' and I call it the 'nonhuman,' taking the term from Deleuze and Guattari in *What Is Philosphy?* They use the term in association with 'percepts' and 'affects.' The 'the nonhuman' signifies the semiotic world of pure sensations, while 'the human' stands for the 'meaningful' world of language and experience: "The mass of meaning and / The mass of men are one" (*CP* 255).

The poem, "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract," begins with a question: "This day writhes with what?" (*CP* 429). The word 'writhe' is different from 'write' only in the difference of one consonant sound: the voiced dental fricative is replaced by the voiceless alveolar plosive. While plosives are the result of complete closure and sudden release, fricatives are articulated with a stricture of close approximation. Language functions in human lives as a complete closure and sudden release: it shuts out the world of the nonhuman and opens the human avenues of meaningful sensations. The ultimate poem is abstract or an approximation because it is sensation unscripted. Prior to naming sensations are pure body dispositions that are indeterminate and indiscernible.

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These sensual writhings are pre-human approximations and cannot be written down. “The lecturer” on the other hand, like the “the theorist of life” in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” who is “[t]he total excellence of its total book” (*CP* 485), strives to make himself complete within the “words of the world” (*CP* 474): “The lecturer / On This Beautiful World Of (sic) Ours composes himself / And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe, // And red, and right” (*CP* 429).

He constructs himself a text— “This Beautiful World Of (sic) Ours”—and all his experience of the world is bound up in it. But the instability of meaning points to the insufficiency of the answers given by words / language. The words “hems the planet rose and haws it ripe, / And red, and right” show how meaning defiles sensations. In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1949), the “Ruler of Reality” has the sunrise as “his garment’s hem” (*CP* 485), and here the “lecturer” caught in the “words of the world” (*CP* 474), hems and haws at the flash of alpenglow. The word ‘haw’ is a noun, and it means ‘a fence or hedge that encloses’ or ‘an enclosure’ while the verb ‘hem’ means ‘edge or border a cloth or garment; but, the expression ‘hem and haw’ means ‘to be hesitant and indecisive’. The sparks of sensation stem from the infinite suffusion of the alpenglow cool down and disappear when the words of verbal expression try to exteriorize the experience and state it in images. The image—a small fruit, ripe and red—is an aesthetic reflection on the part of Stevens to demonstrate the process of the conversion of pure sensations into an image. The alliteration of the approximant /r/ is a sufficient proof of the gap between the dual worlds of sensations and their verbal images.

The question at the beginning of the poem is not aimed at an answer: “The particular question—here / The particular answer to the particular question / Is not in point—the question is in point” (*CP* 429). Interrogation, in opposition to representation which re-presents the visible from the human interior, is an attempt to question the visible in order to open up the proximate of nonhuman sensations like light, shadows and colours. Merleau-Ponty in his essay “Eye and Mind” says:

> What exactly does he [the painter] ask of it [a mountain]? To unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself a mountain before our eyes. Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color, all these objects of his quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence. In fact they exist only at the threshold of profane vision; they are not ordinarily seen. The painter's gaze asks them what they do to suddenly cause something to be and to be *this* thing, what they do to compose this talisman of a world, to make us see the visible. (128; italics as in the original)

In *The Visible and the Invisible* he proposes interrogation as the new method of philosophy: “philosophy interrogates the perceptual faith—but neither expects nor receives an answer in the ordinary sense . . . the existing world exists in the interrogative mode. Philosophy is the perceptual faith questioning itself about itself” (103). In Stevens interrogation is a creative innovation intended to feel the rays of light, shadows, and colours before they were scattered off the constituents of mind: “It is not so blue as we thought” (*CP* 429). Rayleigh scattering, the late

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nineteenth century principle in physics, questions the absoluteness of human perception and proves that human perception is prey to a number of conditions extraneous to it. The blue sky is caused by the scattering of sunlight off the molecules of the atmosphere. The sky is nothing but a dark emptiness beyond the reach of Rayleigh scattering. Stevens continues in the same poem: "To be blue, / There must be no questions" (*CP* 429). But there *are* questions; and it cannot be an all-blue-world. In "A Thought Revolved", an earlier poem which was written in 1936, the exegesis of the familiar marks a happy death that invites all the joys of a birth:

> It seemed serener just to die,
> To float off in the floweriest barge,
> Accompanied by the exegesis
> Of familiar things in a cheerful voice,
> Like the night before Christmas and all the carols.
> Dying lady, rejoice, rejoice! (*CP* 184-185)

The critical interpretation makes the familiar unfamiliar and it ever remains unfamiliar as the new is always in its pangs of arrival.

Revelations or finite disclosures lead to 'writing,' but the unrevealed or the undisclosed leaves one ever in 'writhing' with never-ending questions: "If the day writhes, it is not with revelations. / One goes on asking questions" (*CP* 429). In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty says: "if we ask ourselves what is this *we*, what *seeing* is, and what *thing* or *world* is, we enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions" (3; author's emphases). Interrogation is so fundamental to having the primal sensations of the self that Stevens makes it one of the twelve Kantian categories: "That, then, is one / Of the categories" (*CP* 429). Paul Guyer and Allen Wood observe in their "Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*" that "[t]hese twelve basic concepts, which Kant calls the *categories*, are *fundamental concepts of an object in general*, or the forms for any particular concepts of objects, and in conjunction with the *a priori* forms of intuition are the basis of all synthetic *a priori* cognition" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 8; authors' emphases). Stevens does not add interrogation as the thirteenth category, or place it in lieu of any particular one of the twelve categories, and therefore, he is putting into question the existence of all the twelve categories of Kant by stating that interrogation, a non-Kantian category, is also one of the twelve categories. Kant says in *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Now I assert that the **categories** that have just been adduced are nothing other than the **conditions of thinking in a possible experience**, just as **space** and **time** contain the **conditions of the intuition** for the very same thing" (234; emphases as in the original). As one of the twelve categories, interrogation reformulates the already existing conditions of both thinking and sensation in a possible experience. The change of categories, therefore, ultimately results in the change of possible experiences.

Going beyond the notion of the givenness of space, interrogation confronts the blank emptiness or the unformed or unmediated space: "So said, this placid space / Is changed" (*CP* 429). Space is no longer an already-existing human spread— instead, it is the individual-specific faculty of knowing and having the knowledge through sensations: "It is an intellect / Of windings

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round and dodges to and fro, / Writhings in wrong obliques and distances. . ." (*CP* 429-430). Stevens tries to distinguish an intellect that forms out of the human knowledge, based on human meaning, from an intellect that evolves out of naïve individual experiences based on bodily sensations. Knowing does not happen in right angles or in straight lines, but moves in sinuous rounds, changing positions all the time. It lacks the finality of 'writing,' but 'writhes' in "wrong obliques and distances" (*CP* 430). Here things are not in "ripe, / And red, and *right*" (*CP* 429; italics mine) as it is the case at the beginning of the poem. The poem argues not for an intellect that is unique and ubiquitous, immediately shared by one and all: "Not an intellect in which we are fleet: present / Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole / Of communication" (*CP* 430). The intellect here is not a window open to intrapersonal understanding or a radio communication pole on cloud blue sky disseminating waves of anthropocentric sound and sense, but it is an intellect of sensations.

Stevens would like to keep us still at the middle of this space of senses where senses are not yet bifurcated into sensations and their semantic sense. Krzysztof Ziarek rightly observes: "The middle is understood here by Stevens in a very specific way: it refers to remaining 'only in sense' as opposed to having, producing or understanding meaning" (84). The inevitable infiltration of language into the bodily terrain of sensations would force one out of the mere enjoyment of sensations and place him/her helpless at the extreme edges of that terrain where sensations become complete and meaningful:

> It would be enough
> If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
> In This Beautiful World Of (sic) 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)

The ultimate poem should be abstract and it should create sensations and leave them in their own "enormous sense, merely enjoy" (*CP* 430). Abstraction can make language capable of saying nonhuman sense. This nonhuman sense is not non-sense as it is neither an absence nor a presence of meaning. It is sensation prior to understanding or meaning. In *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari say: "The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself" (164). No one can undo the frames of language and capture the sensations as they are but art or poetry can bring one to the sparks of pure sensations with the play of imagination. It is fiction to the core, but it is proximate to the primary being of the self, untouched by language or meaning and is called the supreme fiction.

A mere enjoyment at the mere being of oneself is the most concrete experience that one can ever envisage or one can only ever envisage but can never attain. "Of Mere Being" (1955), the swan song of Stevens in terms of the chronology of his poems given by Holly Stevens, sums up the outcome of the entire poetic endeavour of the poet. What ends in ellipsis in *Harmonium* (1923),

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Stevens's first collection of poems, ends in full stop here. There are no ellipses of the unknown in the poem "Of Mere Being" because the consciousness has already reached beyond the bounds of human feeling and meaning. In *The Life of Reason* ((1906) George Santayana says:

> Consciousness is a born hermit. Though subject, by divine dispensation, to spells of fervour and apathy, like a singing bird, it is at first quite unconcerned about its own conditions or maintenance. To acquire a notion of such matters, or an interest in them, it would have to lose its hearty simplicity and begin to reflect; it would have to forget the present with its instant joys in order laboriously to conceive the absent and hypothetical. (19)

The nonhuman consciousness is a "gold-feathered bird" in Stevens just like the "singing bird" in Santayana. The particular individual consciousness with specific sensations of the moment is polemically opposite to the human world with all its machinations and power: "A gold-feathered bird / Sings in the palm, without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song" (*OP* 117). The terms "gold-feathered bird" and "foreign song" have led a number of critics to connect the poem with W. B. Yeats. Leggett calls it, "Yeats-like golden bird" ("Stevens' Late Poetry" 74). Schwarz makes a detailed connection: "Stevens evokes Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1927), where the golden bird, one of the forms created – or rather conjured – 'to keep a drowsy Emperor awake' is 'set upon a golden bough to sing / To lord and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come" (227). Rehder is more categorical in his assertion, "This is Yeats' golden bird that sang in Byzantium . . ." (294). All these attempts to give a 'human meaning' to the "gold-feathered bird" go against the basic argument of the poem which is nothing but a celebration of mere being.

A glance at the titles given by Stevens to his poems and collections of the poems shows how fondly familiar he was with the change of seasons. In a letter to Barbara Church dated 18 February 1955, just a few months before his death, this is how Stevens welcomes the spring which turns to be his last spring on earth: "The great event of this present week has been the appearance of spring. In another month, winter will be on its way to South America and down there the birds will be on their way to North America" (*L* 874). On 1 April, the same year, he writes to Peter H. Lee:

> rabbits are definitely out of their holes for the season; the robins are back; the doves have returned from Korea and some of them sit on our chimney before sunrise and tell each other how happy they are in the most melancholy tones. Robins and doves are both early risers and are connoisseurs of daylight before the actual presence of the sun coarsens it. (*L* 879)

When such a close observer of seasons and birds talks about a bird it must be a bird of flesh and blood which can be seen and heard live. Stevens must have a number of familiar Connecticut birds in mind when he writes about the gold-feathered bird singing in the palm in the above quoted lines, but what strikes our attention is the absolute foreignness of their song.

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One of the birds in his mind might be the palm warbler or eastern palm warbler. It is one of the first warblers to arrive these parts of United States in the spring. The name is actually a misnomer because these birds have nothing to do with palms. Palm warblers can be seen as "gold-feathered" because they have got bright yellow under tail, and the constant bobbing of their tail shows it clearly. It is interesting to note that a group of palm warblers are collectively known as a 'reading' of warblers and Reading, as we know, is the birth place of Stevens. These avian accounts of mine are not aimed at making any definite point of reference; instead they cast doubt on all arguments for a particular referent for the "gold-feathered bird" in the poem. Further, gold, the yellow metal, has some association with morning both by its colour and name. The chemical symbol of gold—Au –is from the Latin word 'aurum' which means "shining dawn" (Krebs 165). The gold-feathered bird then can just be a bird of dawn or morning.

The first two stanzas of the poem constitute a single sentence. The grammatical subject ("The palm") and the intransitive verb ("rises") of the first stanza together with the adverbials of place ("Beyond the last thought", "In the bronze distance") are capable of forming a single sentence, but it is denied a full stop:

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze distance,
>
> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song. (*OP* 117)

The comma at the end of the last line of the first stanza makes the rising of the palm undifferentiated from the singing of the gold-feathered bird in the second stanza. There is a sunrise-like experience. The bronze of the horizon in the east and the golden rays of the rising sun cover everything on earth and sky with an ethereal mix of bronze and gold. But here in the poem it is not the sun which is rising but a palm, and it is rising with a bird singing in it. The needle-like leaf edges of certain types of palms (needle palms, for example) look like the common pictorial depiction of the rising sun with a semicircle of short visual rays above it.

The second stanza with its repeated emphasis on the song changes what is to be seen in the first stanza to something to be heard. Now it is more auditory than visual. The location is at the end of the mind or at the bottom of the mind, but not yet outside. It is in the primordial darkness or distance ("bronze distance") of the interior mind that the luminous sound or song rises: a palm with a bird singing in it rises slowly shedding a bronze and gold suffusion everywhere. Holly Stevens changed "bronze distance" to "bronze décor" when she edited *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, in accordance with the original typescript of Stevens. Though the change might not result in a conspicuous change in the reading of the poem, "bronze distance" is more apt as it would take the reader far beyond the human history of meaning to a primordial wilderness of sheer sensations. Donoghue is of the opinion that "[t]he textual change is regrettable, if only because 'bronze

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distance' sufficiently indicates the scene and 'bronze décor' prematurely makes a judgement upon it" ("Notes on a Late Poem" 167). J. Bates observes a Hegelian "interplay of experiencing subject and the object experienced" in the poem:

> It is an interplay that is constitutive of both subject and object, and one without which neither could exist. . . . Neither subject nor object admits of complete autonomy. Thus despite appearances to the contrary, there is no "view from nowhere" . . . and no ineffable beyond. . . . That is to say, neither Stevens nor Hegel stops at the (Kantian) view that the presence of the self is in part constitutive of an object of knowledge. For them there is no purely subjective perspective. Similarly, there is no object "in-itself" separate from our developing relationship to it. (153)

Stevens, as my reading of the poems argues, deigns to the inevitability of a linguistically assigned self of himself, but he self-consciously uses it as an Archimedean point in order to interrogate 'his own experiences in language,' using language not as a window but as a transparency, in an attempt to approximate the cry of the semiotic other: it is neither Hegelian, nor Kantian, but the way Stevensian poems unfold themselves.

What Stevens calls 'a foreign song without human meaning and human feeling' is 'a dream before thought' for Santayana. In *The Life of Reason*, calling consciousness "a born hermit," Santayana says:

> Natural history and psychology arrive at consciousness from the outside, and consequently give it an artificial articulation and rationality which are wholly alien to its essence. These sciences infer feeling from habit or expression; so that only the expressible and practical aspects of feeling figure in their calculation. But these aspects are really peripheral; the core is an irresponsible, ungoverned, irrevocable dream. (19)

Dreams are not the result of deliberate human endeavours. It is an unconscious visual sensation that takes its own course and is as foreign as the song that comes from the end of the mind in the poem. The dream or the song here is not the representation of a lived experience. It exceeds all lived experiences. Lived experiences come extraneous to the pure becoming of the self as they get reflected off the states of the mind that covers the mere being. According to Santayana in the beginning an experience is "free even from that honest selfishness; it looks straight out; it is interested in the movements it observes . . ." (19). Bloom, tracing the Latin root of the word 'foreign,' says: "The song is a doorway to what is beyond the mind, and so beyond even the later reason or rational irrational with which Stevens has learned to imagine his poems" (*The Poems of Our Climate* 372). But it should be noted that the song is a "doorway" precisely because it is a 'song 'and also it is 'foreign': the language that makes the song is 'different' to the language of the human but still it is language, or it is in language.

Interrogating perceptions in language the poet tries to distance the human from perceptions and form the *foreign* 'percepts;' interrogating the affections in language the poet distances the human from the affections and forms the *foreign* 'affects.' Deleuze and Guattari say that what is

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preserved in art is "*a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects*" (*Philosophy* 164; italics as in the original). Percepts are not human perceptions and affects are not human affections:

> Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself. (*Philosophy* 164; italics as in the original)

The mere being is a being whose validity lies in having the sensations of things as things, not as the sensations of the human being, and it can be so only in artistic compositions. Abstraction as an artistic practice problematizes the standard modes of artistic representation since sensations are transmitted not as meaningful experiences but as sensations of artistic compositions.

The palm as a particular physical entity situated at a particular place stands just behind the context of the poem, or the poem stems from the mere being of the palm because only a thing denuded of all human privileges can tread on the nonhuman ends of the mind. Palms are of innumerable variety. Though essentially it is a tropical plant, it can be seen even in the far north of United States as a cultivated garden plant. Long back in 1916, Stevens wrote to his wife Elsie about the royal palms and coconut-palms of Miami: "You soon grow accustomed to the palms" (*L* 192). It is interesting to note that a particular variety of palms known as needle palms, which can be found along the East Coast of United States up to far north, makes excellent hedges to mark the private areas of one's property. They are also used as barriers from noise. These palms are as tough as nails and are the most cold-hardy palms in the world. I disagree with Donoghue who would like to see the palm as an emblem: "an emblem is posited rather than an object perceived, and it is posited as not being" ("Notes on a Late Poem" 169). For Donoghue the palm is there in the poem not by its mere privilege as a plant or tree of nature: "Nothing in nature gives the palm any special privilege; the privilege comes from Roman tournaments, the New Testament, Blake and Wordsworth and Stevens's earlier poems" ("Notes on a Late Poem" 169). Of course, the palm has all these implications, but as the title of the poem makes it very clear, here in the poem it enters the ends of human mind as a mere being, cleansed of all emblematic inferences.

The third stanza of the poem begins with a statement addressed to the second person: "You know then that it is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy" (*OP* 118). The nonhuman song of the bird on the palm necessarily leads one to a realm of sensations that lies beyond human reason. The happiness or unhappiness produced by human reason does not result from the vital impulse of sensations. Santayana in *The Life of Reason* connects the rise of reason with the cessation of the senses and sensations: "So soon as man ceases to be wholly immersed in sense, he looks before and after, he regrets and desires; and the moments in which prospect or retrospect

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takes place constitute the reflective or representative part of his life, in contrast to the unmitigated flux of sensations in which nothing ulterior is regarded" (5).The conscious shelving of reason brings things back to their plain sense: "The bird sings. Its feathers shine" (*OP* 118). This line that comes at the end of the third stanza marks the moment of total abstraction in the poem. The six lines of the first two stanzas are abstracted to two short and parallel sentences placed in a single line. Sensations of sound and light are left in themselves as there is no semantic combination of sensations apart from the subjective personal pronoun which makes a linguistic connection between the simultaneous sensations. The three lines of the last stanza are three independent sentences: "The palm stands on the edge of space. / The wind moves slowly in the branches. / The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down" (*OP* 118). The palm which is at the end of human mind in the first stanza now stands on the edge of space.

As we have already seen in "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" space is the individual-specific faculty of knowing and having the knowledge through sensations. It is beyond human meaning and human feeling. J. Bates, after exploring "epistemological" and "eschatological" significance for the "beyond" writes: "I want to suggest that the force of the 'beyond' is a return to—a necessary, developing, folding back on to—the relationship between meaning and word" (152-53). Differentiated from human reason and feeling, the individual-specific sense and sensations tend to form a self where it finds itself "more truly and more strange" (*CP* 65). Palms are monopodial as most of them have unbranched stem and so, the line "The wind moves slowly in the branches," need not be connected to the palm or its fronds of the previous lines. There is something special to these branches: they seem to be immobile while the wind moves slowly in them. It is more of an auditory sensation than a visual. The multiple alliteration, the nearly meaningless repetition of sounds, the long-stretched subject and the much-delayed verb make the last line of the poem rather a semiotic flourish of sensation: "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down" (*OP* 118). The bird here need not be the "gold-feathered bird" of the second stanza which is a bird of dawn perched at a sober distance. Just like the measured movement of wind in the branches of the previous line, this bird of fiery sensation also has no phenomenal or metaphoric referent. One need not stretch one's imagination to the phoenix here, but merely trust the sensation or leave it as it is.

Through the close reading these two poems we have seen how abstraction in Stevens's poetry interrogates the frames of meaning, and makes manifest the inviolable linguistic bounds of all modes of comprehension. Experience is the contextualized comprehension of sensations as meaning, and the interrogation of meaning de-contextualises experience and dissolves it into meaningless sonic utterances. Therefore abstraction as interrogation of experiences in Stevens's poetry is a process that continuously generates newer modes of sensations based on the semiotic possibilities of language. There is no given being for the self apart from its becoming in language, and so, abstraction in poetry enables the self to listen to the 'cry' of its own elemental selves in becoming.

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Bio-note

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