10. Wallace Stevens, "This Solitude of Cataracts"

In his discussion of the philosophical aspects of Wallace Stevens' poetry, Bart Eeckhout (2007, 107) observes that:

> Stevens' poetry does not parade philosophers' names, nor does it include direct quotations from them. Unlike his contemporaries Ezra Pound and Eliot, Stevens is not the kind of writer who will tell us where he got his ideas or will start dropping names.

Nevertheless, Eeckhout acknowledges:

> [Stevens] is the kind of writer who would have been quite aware of the affinity between much of his own worldview and the ideas of somebody such as Heraclitus (who held that the world is in constant flux) or who was likely to ponder his conflicting personal affinities with philosophical movements from antiquity such as Skepticism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism.[1]

Before we explore affinities between Stevens' "This Solitude of Cataracts"[2] and ideas associated with Heraclitus we need first to develop a plausible understanding of Stevens' challenging poem.

In "This Solitude of Cataracts" the experience of a flowing river evokes the desire for a more permanent reality:

> He never felt twice the same about the flecked river,
> Which kept flowing and never the same way twice, flowing
>
> Through many places, as if it stood still in one,
> Fixed like a lake on which the wild ducks fluttered,
>
> Ruffling its common reflections, thought-like Monadnocks.
> There seemed to be an apostrophe that was not spoken.
>
> There was so much that was real that was not real at all.
> He wanted to feel the same way over and over.

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[1] Eeckhout does not explore the possibility of other Heraclitean connections, focusing his discussion (with the exception of Plato) on affinities between Stevens' poetry and views of modern philosophers.

[2] Stevens 1997, 366.

> He wanted the river to go on flowing the same way
> To keep on flowing…

The "he" on this occasion, as often in Stevens' poems[3], is the poet himself. The "solitude" mentioned in the title is the isolated location Stevens imagines (or perhaps remembers) himself occupying during a period of reflection.[4] "Cataracts" in Stevens' poems are falling waters—here a river flowing near a mountain.[5] The "apostrophe that was not spoken" would appear to be an address that was not made, perhaps an unspoken affirmation of nature's beauty.[6] And the river that "is never the same twice" can only be the flowing river Plato claimed Heraclitus used as a simile for "existing things":

> Heraclitus says somewhere that everything gives way and nothing remains, and likening existing things to the flow of a river, he says that you cannot step twice into the same river. (*Cratylus*, 402a)[7]

Three contrasts pervade and structure the poem. The first lies between two rivers, one experienced as ever changing, the other hidden and unchanging ("as if it stood still in one,/ Fixed like a lake"), yet still the object of desire (the one he wanted "to go on

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[3] Cf. Vendler 2007, 135: "To refer to oneself persistently in the third person has not been common in lyric; Stevens is the first poet who has made this practice a characteristic of his work."

[4] In his journal for October 13, 1902 (H. Stevens 1996, 67) Stevens writes: "I crossed my hill into a favorite solitude. The rains had swollen my tinkling stream into a thundering cascade that filled the trees with a sweet sound. Overhead the moon shone from a strange azure of its own creating."

[5] In "The Doctor of Geneva" (Stevens 1997, 19) Stevens speaks of "long-rolling opulent cataracts" and associates them with "the Pacific swell" and "these visible voluble delugings"; the phrase "first black cataracts" occurs in "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" (Stevens 1997, 451); and "Montrachet-Le-Jardin" (Stevens 1997, 234) includes the phrase "The cataracts/ As facts fall like rejuvenating rain." "Cataracts" in the sense of occluded eye lenses (Tompsett 2012, 87) seems less likely.

[6] By contrast, in "Country Words" (Stevens 1997, 188-89) the poet recalls how he "sang a canto" to "Belshazzar, putrid rock": "I stood and sang and filled the air." Here in "Solitude" a sense of estrangement from permanent reality prevents a similar address.

[7] As noted in Cook 2007, 245. Scholars disagree on whether Plato accurately represented Heraclitus' message (see the discussion in chapter 1).

flowing the same way"). A second, related contrast lies between two worlds, one that shares in the inconstancy of the perceptible river—the reflections of the mountain that ruffle the lake's surface, fluttering wild ducks, and "so much that was real that was not real at all"), and a second world, stable and permanent ("Under the buttonwoods, beneath a moon nailed fast"). The third and most important contrast lies between that stable and permanent reality and the poet who desires for his "mind to rest/ In a permanent realization" and to become, in some sense, a thing of bronze:

> He wanted to walk beside it,
>
> Under the buttonwoods, beneath a moon nailed fast.
> He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest
>
> In a permanent realization, without any wild ducks
> Or mountains that were not mountains, just to know how it would be,
>
> Just to know how it would feel, released from destruction,
> To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis,
>
> Without the oscillations of planetary pass-pass,[8]
> Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury center of time.

The poet desires to know how it would feel to be "released from destruction," i.e. to exist in a realm beyond change.[9] But why he should want to know, feel, and "breathe" in this way, Stevens does not tell us, at least not directly.

We are, however, given several clues. The first is the reference to the "thought-like Monadanocks", the images of the mountain reflected on the water's surface.[10] New

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[8] As Stevens explained in a letter to Professor Renato Poggioli, who was then translating Stevens' poems into Italian: "["Pass-pass] means the seeming-to-go-round of the planets by day and night" (H. Stevens 1996, 823). As Cook (2007, 245) notes, "pass-pass" also plays on the French "*passe-passe*": "sleight of hand." Cook understands "ancient lapis" to mean "a blue heaven, as in old cosmography and theology" but it may also represent stone (as in lapis lazuli).

[9] Even in his early (1918) "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (Stevens 1997, 10) Stevens wrote "I wish that I might be a thinking stone."

Hampshire's picturesque Mount Monadnock, elevation 3,165 feet, has given its name to any rock formation that rises sharply above its surrounding plain. Here, the mountain is the solid but distant reality that contrasts with the "mountains that were not mountains"—the images of the mountain visible on the water's surface.

Mount Monadnack is also, as Stevens would have known, a perennial object of poetic interest.[11] In his journal entry for June 2, 1858, Henry David Thoreau (who climbed the mountain four times) spoke of its "gray color of antiquity…the color of things that endure":

> Almost without interruption we had the mountain in sight before us—its sublime gray mass—that antique, brownish-gray, Ararat color. Probably these crests of the earth are for the most part of one color in all lands, that gray color of antiquity, which nature loves; color of unpainted wood, weather-stain, time-stain; not glaring nor gaudy; the color of all roofs, the color of things that endure…[12]

Similarly, in his "Monadnock" (1846) Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that:

> Ere yet the summoning voice was still,
> I turned to Cheshire's haughty hill.
> From the fixed cone the cloud-rack flowed
> Like ample banner flung abroad
> Round about, a hundred miles,
> With invitation to the sea, and to the bordering isles.[13]

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[10] Stevens (H. Stevens 1996, 823) also wrote to Poggioli: "The expression 'thought-like Monadnocks' can best be explained by changing it into 'Monadnock-like thoughts'." The image of a mountain deep in the surface of a lake acquires a secondary character. From the sheen of the surface it becomes slightly unreal: thought like." "Monadnocks" may also call to mind Leibniz's monads (elementary particles that possess blurred perceptions of one another). The fact that the Monadnocks are reflective entities supports this conjecture, as does Stevens' discussion of Leibniz's monadology in his 1951 essay "A Collect of Philosophy" (see Stevens 1997, 850-67).

[11] See the discussion of Stevens' connections with his predecessors in Bloom (1997).

[12] Thoreau (2009, 498). For Stevens' connection with Thoreau, see McQuire (1981).

[13] Among other writers inspired by Mount Monadnock were Rudyard Kipling, John White Chadwick, George Alexander Wheelock, H. P. Lovecraft, John Greenleaf Whittier, Amy Lowell, Amos Parker, and Edna Dean Proctor. The mountain has also been the subject of numerous paintings in the "Luminist" tradition of the Hudson Valley School, reminiscent of Cézanne's multiple paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire.

In “How To Live. What To Do” (Stevens 1997, 102), written approximately two decades before “This Solitude of Cataracts,” Stevens had contrasted a Monadnock-like “rock of heroic height” with the surrounding “muck of the land”:

> Last evening the moon rose above this rock
> Impure upon a world unpurged.
> The man and his companion stopped
> To rest before the heroic height…
>
> Instead there was this tufted rock
> Massively rising high and bare
> Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown
> Like giant arms among the clouds.
>
> There was neither voice nor crested image,
> No chorister, nor priest. There was
> Only the great height of rock
> And the two of them standing still to rest.
>
> There was the cold wind and the sound
> It made, away from the muck of the land
> That they had left, heroic sound
> Joyous and jubilant and sure.

In “Chocorua to Its Neighbor” (Stevens 1997, 263) Stevens describes another New England mountain, Mount Chocorua, as a realm in which time stands still:

> He was more than an external majesty,
> Beyond the sleep of those that did not know,
> More than a spokesman of the night to say
> Now, time stands still… (XIV)

In “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain” (Stevens 1997, 435) Stevens imagines a poem that *per impossibile* fully describes a mountain:

> The exact rock where his inexactednesses
> Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged…

And in stanza VI of “Credences of Summer” (Stevens 1997, 322) Stevens declares the mountain (“the rock”) to be “the truth” “a sure repose,” and a certain thing “sustaining us in certainty”:

> The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.
> It rises from land and sea and covers them.
> It is a mountain half way green and then,
> The other immeasurable half, such rock
> As placid air becomes, But it is not
>
> A hermit’s truth nor symbol in hermitage.
> It is the visible rock, the audible,
> The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
> On this present ground, the vividest repose,
> Things certain sustaining us in certainty.

These interlocking sentiments confirm[14] that Mount Monadnock, like the other mountains which appear in Stevens’ poetry, represents the permanent reality whose beauty[15] the poet desires to discover and “breathe”, i.e. express in words.[16]

A second theme developed in “This Solitude of Cataracts” is the contrast between rock-solid mountains and flowing rivers. Rivers appear in poems created in various periods of Stevens’ life as tokens of the flux inherent in human experience, as in this passage from “The River of Rivers in Connecticut” (Stevens 1997, 451):

> It is this third commonness with light and air,

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[14] In “A Primitive Like an Orb” (Stevens 1997, 377) Stevens admits the interrelated character of his work: “One poem proves another and the whole…”

[15] As suggested by the use of “azure” and its cognate “lapis lazuli.” In an early letter to his wife (H. Stevens 1996, 174) Stevens explained the meaning of the phrase “j’ai le gout de l’azure” he had encountered in a work by the French poet Comtesse Mathieu de Noailles: “Well this taste for the azure, or of the azure, is just the desire to savour the charm of the many beautiful things around us. The charm!”

[16] Cf. the phrase Stevens uses in “The Countryman”: “the breathing,/ The name.” The view of words as formed from breath is an ancient one. Compare Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* (Act III, scene 1): “So shall my lungs coin words.”

> A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction…
> Call it, once more, a river, and unnamed flowing,
> Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore
> Of each of the senses; call it, again and again,
> The river that flows nowhere, like a sea.

In "The Countryman" (Stevens 1997, 368) Stevens imagines a man standing beside a flowing river named Swatara.[17] He thinks neither of its source nor of its destination but only of its "swarthy presence" in so far as "Being there is being in a place, as of a character everywhere":

> Swatara, Swatara, black river,
> Descending, out of the cap of midnight,
> Toward the cape at which
> You enter the swarthy sea.
>
> Swatara, Swatara, heavy the hills
> Are, hanging above you, as you move,
> More blackly and without crystal.
> A countryman walks beside you…
>
> 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.

And in "The Place of the Solitaires" (Stevens 1997, 47) Stevens links another scene of "perpetual undulation" with "the motion of thought/ And its restless iteration":

> Whether it be in mid-sea
> On the dark, green water wheel,
> Or on the beaches,
> There must be no cessation
> Of motion, or of the noise of motion…
>
> And, most, of the motion of thought
> And its restless iteration,

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[17] A river in southeastern Pennsylvania. The *topos* of the person standing beside a body of water appears also in "The Doctor of Geneva" (Stevens 1997, 19), which includes a reference to "long-rolling opulent cataracts", "The Idea of Order at Key West" (Stevens 1997, 105), and "Somnambulisma" (Stevens 1997, 269).

> In the place of the solitaires,
> Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation.

Thus for Stevens, as for other poets before him[18], mountains exemplified the stable and permanent world whose beauty the poet seeks to know and express in words, while rivers called to mind the transitory character of human experience.[19]

The contrast between things as they are in themselves[20] and as they are in our experience of them is the subject of Stevens' poems even when no mountains and rivers are present. In "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" (Stevens 1997, 369) the search for "the blue"—the beauty the poet seeks to describe—is dogged by questions, "windings round and dodges to and fro", advancing only by oblique angles and directions. Using language reminiscent of the desire for permanence expressed in "This Solitude of Cataracts", the poet here expresses the desire to be "present everywhere in space at once, at the middle, fixed/ In this Beautiful World of Ours and not as now,/ Helplessly at the edge":

> If the day writhes, it is not with revelations.
> One goes on asking questions. That, then, is one
> Of the categories. So said, this placid space
>
> Is Changed. It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,
> There must be no questions. It is an intellect

[18] Bloom (1997, 254) compares Stevens' mountain with Shelley's " Mont Blanc" (1816), a comparison warranted by "In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,/ Where waterfalls around it leap forever,/Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river/ Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves."

[19] For a discussion of the poetic appeal of the river as symbolic of all that is changeable see the recent *TLS* Commentary by Hugh Haughton (2013, 13-15).

[20] It is difficult not to read Stevens' contrast between the flux of personal experience and solid reality in the light of the Kantian contrast between sense experience and the world we know only when the testimony of our sense faculties is organized by the understanding (cf. Stevens' use of the important Kantian word "categories" in the first stanza). The Kantian phrase "ding an sich" appears in Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C" (Stevens 1997, 22). The importance of Kant's philosophy for Stevens' poetry is discussed in Eeckhout (2007) Section IV.

> Of windings round and dodges to and fro,
>
> Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,
> Not an intellect in which we are fleet: present
> Everywhere in space at 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. (3-7)

Stevens returns often to this theme: the challenge facing the poet is to know "pure reality" and to express its beauty in words.[21]

These broad reflections provide the framework within which to understand "This Solitude of Cataracts." "This solitude", the place in which the poet exercises his imagination, is a world of constant change. As a consequence, he is unable to feel "the same way twice about the flecked river," "to walk beside it," to have "a permanent realization," and "to know how it would feel" to be as solid and unchanging as metal or stone. Permanent reality is present as a distant mountain perceived only in its half-real reflections. The contrast between the changing river and the solid but distant mountain exemplifies the gulf that lies between our experience of the world and how things really are. The poet desires to gain access to permanent reality and to speak the truth in words impervious to the passage of time.

Which if any of these ideas can be plausibly linked with the teachings of Heraclitus? We know from Stevens' 1951 essay "A Collect of Philosophy" (Stevens 1997, 850-67) that he was familiar with A. K. Rogers' *A Student's History of Philosophy*,

[21] See, among others: "A Primitive Like an Orb XII" (Stevens 1997, 377), "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (Stevens 1997, 397), and the final poem of *The Auroras of Autumn*, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans IX" (Stevens 1997, 23).

a work in which Heraclitus' chief doctrines appear in summary form.[22] More importantly, we know that by 1944 Stevens had obtained a copy of the text from which Rogers had derived his summaries[23], John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy* (H. Stevens 1996, 461), and that he had read at least some portions of Burnet's book by April of the following year (H. Stevens 1996, 495). Rogers provided only a brief summary of Heraclitus' teachings, touching only on the doctrine of flux, the conversion of other substances into fire, rhythmical change, the unity of opposites, reservations about how much human beings can know, a kind of moral relativism, and on Heraclitus and Parmenides as "bookend thinkers" (one affirming the universality of change, the other rejecting all change). Burnet, on the other hand, offered a richly detailed account of the ancient sources on which our knowledge of these early thinkers is based. Anyone who had read Burnet's fifty-page chapter on Heraclitus would be in a position to know virtually all that can be known about Heraclitus' life and personal circumstances, his distinctive aphoristic style, his disparaging attitude toward others, and all one hundred and thirty fragments previously published by Bywater in his *Heracliti Ephesii reliquiae*.

So which aspects of Heraclitus' thought as presented in Bywater, Rogers, and Burnet bear a sufficiently close resemblance to Stevens' poetry to warrant the claim of a connection? The contenders fall into three categories: (1) points on which there is a striking resemblance and a virtually certain connection; (2) points on which there is a striking resemblance but virtually no chance of a direct connection; and (3) points on

[22] Stevens comments: "I shall make use of [Rogers'] summary of Schopenhauer, as I have made use, elsewhere in this paper, of others of his summaries" (Stevens 1997, 858).
[23] Rodgers states: "This, and succeeding quotations from the earlier philosophers, are taken from Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophers* [*sic*]" (1901, 17n).

which there is a striking resemblance and some chance of a direct connection. In the first category there is only one candidate, the reference to the river in which one cannot step twice. Even if Heraclitus did not speak of rivers in order to assert the doctrine of flux attributed to him by Plato, and subsequently by many others, he clearly was seeking to draw his audience's attention to the way in which those stepping into the same rivers were also encountering different waters.[24] Into the second category falls Stevens' fondness for aphorisms, especially in his "Adagia" collection (Stevens 1997, 900-915). It is tempting to think that Stevens must have known of Heraclitus' preference for pithy sayings such as "Nature loves to hide", "The road up and down are one and the same", "It is better to hide one's ignorance", to mention just a few. In particular, Stevens' "And yet this end and this beginning are one" ("The Hermitage at the Center", Stevens 1997, 430) invites comparison with Heraclitus B 103 "The beginning and the end on a circle are common". But here a connection is most unlikely in light of the fact that when Stevens' identified his literary models (H. Stevens 1996, 88), he made no mention of Heraclitus:

> Have just finished Leopardi's "Pensieri…They are paragraphs on human nature, like Schopenhauer's psychological observations, Paschals [*sic*] "Pensées," [de la] Rouchefoucauld's "Maximes" etc. How true they all are! I should like to have a library of such things.[25]

In the third category of "striking resemblance and some chance of a direct connection", there are four candidates. First, like Heraclitus, Stevens expresses his desire to identify and make known to others the essential nature of things. In "This Solitude of Cataracts" the poet expresses a desire to speak permanent truths that go to the heart of the

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[24] Bywater fragment XLII and fragment B 12 in the edition of Diels and Kranz, from Arius Didymus in Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*: "On those stepping into the same rivers, ever different waters flow."

[25] As the title "Adagia" suggests, Stevens would also have had the Erasmian collection in mind. Stevens' use of this genre is discussed in Coyle (1974).

reality. Similarly, in B1, a passage that stood at the very outset of his treatise, Heraclitus announces that he is presenting a *logos* or account "that holds forever (*aei*)" and promises "to distinguish each thing according to its constitution (*phusis*), making known how it is (*phradzôn hokôs echei*)." It is unlikely that an intelligent and interested reader of Heraclitus would have failed to notice this striking opening remark.

Second, as we have seen in "This Solitude of Cataracts," Stevens viewed mountains and rivers as polar opposites, one exemplifying stable and permanent reality, the other, the fluidity of human experience. And there are other opposites Stevens identifies as drivers of change:

> Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
> On one another, as a man depends
> On a woman, day on night, the imagined
>
> On the real. This is the origin of change.
> Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
> And forth the particulars of rapture come. ("It Must Change", Stevens 1997, 339)

In a comment on Section XI of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens explained:

> The chord destroys its elements by uniting them in the chord. They cease to exist separately. On the other hand, discord exaggerates the separation between its elements. These propositions are stated in a variety of terms: ivy on stone, people in cities, men in masses. (H. Stevens 1996, 363)

Stevens also commented on the importance of this way of viewing the world in a 1952 letter to the poet Richard Wilbur (H. Stevens 1996, 740):

> The greater part of the imaginative life of people is both created and enjoyed in polar circumstances. However, I suppose that without being contrary, one can say that the right spot is the middle spot between the polar and the anti-polar. It is the true center always that is unapproachable or, rather, extremely difficult to approach.

In strikingly similar language, Heraclitus conceived of the world as organized around opposites such as male and female, night, and day, winter and summer—and insisted that opposition is essential to harmony:

> Attunement would not exist unless there were a low note and a high note, nor living things without female and male—which are opposites.[26]
>
> What opposes unites and the finest harmony comes from things differing among themselves and all things happen in accordance with strife. (B 8)
>
> They do not understand how things that disagree with each other agree with each other; there is a backward-turning connection, as in the bow and the lyre. (B 51)
>
> God is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety famine, and undergoes change in the that <fire> when it is mixed with spices gets called by the name that accords with the bouquet of each. (B 67)

As Burnet and others have argued, the doctrine of the unity of the opposites has a fair claim to being the fundamental tenet in Heraclitus' philosophy. It would be difficult for anyone to read Burnet's chapter and not be struck by at least some of the more than two-dozen examples of unity in opposition.[27]

Third, both Stevens and Heraclitus repeatedly exploit ambiguities in an attempt to alert their audiences to the true but unappreciated nature of the reality. In fragment B 1 Heraclitus urges his followers to "listen to the *logos*" which is both his "word" and the larger "rational plan" at work in the cosmos. In positioning "always" (*aei*) in between "the *logos* holds" and "men prove uncomprehending" Heraclitus makes it possible to take "always" with either phrase, and almost certainly intends that it be taken with both. In B 48 he plays on the dual meaning of *bios* (which means, depending on the placement of the accent, either "bow" or "life"): "The name of the bow is life, but its work is death."

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[26] The remark survives only as a summary in Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, H1, 1235a25.
[27] In Diels and Kranz: fragments B 1, 2, 8, 10, 12, 17, 18, 22, 23, 32, 34, 48, 49a, 51-53, 57-62, 67, 72, 84a, 88, 91, 103, 111, 124, 125, and 126

And in B 2 he puns on the similarity between "common" (*xunos*) and "with intelligence" (*xun noos*).[28] Similarly, in "This Solitude of Cataracts" Stevens trades on the "buttoned-down" connotation of "buttonwoods" [29], on the ambiguity of "pass-pass" (meaning both "passing by" and "sleight of hand"), and perhaps even on the "solid-tude" in "solitude."

Lastly, both Heraclitus and Stevens undertake to inform their audiences through the use of concrete instances that reveal, because they embody, universal truths. In "This Solitude of Cataracts" we find cataracts, a flecked river, a mountain, reflections on water, wild ducks, buttonwoods, and the moon—all sensible particulars with a broader significance. As Stevens (Stevens 1997, 838) explained, in the choice between the imagination and "the particulars of the world", the poet comes down strongly on the side of the latter:

> The poet finds as between these two sources: the imagination and the reality, the imagination is false, whatever else may be said about it, and reality is true; and being concerned that poetry should be a thing of vital and virile importance, he commits himself to reality; which then becomes his inescapable and ever-present difficulty and inamorata. In any event, he has lost nothing; for the imagination, while it might have led him to purities beyond definition, never yet progressed except by particulars. Having gained the world, the imagination remains available to him in respect to all the particulars of the world.

In a similar manner, Heraclitus utilized various "particulars of the world" in an attempt to instruct and enlighten those in his audience about the hidden unity of the opposites: a river that is both different and the same, an up and down roadway that is one and the same, the barley drink that remains what it is only when it is stirred, doctors who demand pay for cutting and burning their patients, handwriting that is both crooked and straight, asses who prefer garbage to gold, refuse poured out at random, the bow, lyre, sun,

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[28] For a survey of Heraclitus' poetic techniques, see chapter 1.

[29] Noted in Sukenick (1967, 165).

thunderbolt, sea-lightning, seawater, pigs, apes, farmyard birds, and so on. As one student of Heraclitus' thought has explained, for Heraclitus:

> The concrete case becomes a stand-in for a general truth. Life, or experience in general, is like a river, or like a road. Heraclitus fashions concrete descriptions of the world to function as emblems of general patterns.[30]

There are, then, no fewer than five respects in which "This Solitude of Cataracts" displays affinities with Heraclitean ideas: its use of a river as a simile for human experience, the poet's desire to express the real nature of things, the representation of rivers and mountains as polar opposites, the exploitation of ambiguities, and the use of particulars as emblematic of general truths. Stevens did not consider himself a philosopher (Stevens 1997, 860), and acknowledged that poets and philosophers conduct different sorts of inquiries (Stevens 1997, 861-67). But he did think that both poets and philosophers could fashion what he called "cosmic ideas," concepts (such as the infinity of the world) that were "inherently poetic" (Stevens 1997, 851-53). The evidence of "This Solitude of Cataracts" is that Stevens found a number of those inherently poetic ideas in the surviving fragments of Heraclitus' teachings.

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[30] Graham (2008, 182). Randall Jarrell (1985, 334): noted this feature of Stevens' poetry, and deplored it: "But Stevens has the weakness—a terrible one for a poet, a steadily increasing one in Stevens of thinking of particulars as primarily illustrations of general truths, or else as aesthetic, abstracted objects, simply there to be contemplated… But surely a poet has to treat the concrete as primary…"