

# Our First Ideas and The Modern Temper

Between the *ME* and the *NOT ME*: A Balance Sheet

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Nature is the gospel of the new faith rather than, like Thoreau's *Walden*, a record of the experience of earth. The primary assumption of this talk is that man, whether regarded individually or generically is the starting point of all philosophic speculations. His functions, his relations and his destiny are his only concerns. The self-reliance resulting from this assumption is essential to vital experience. Whatever truth lies beyond or outside man can be reached only through him and by him.

The "Me" according to Emerson, is consciousness – that part of man that partakes of divinity. The "Not Me" is the objective of consciousness that with which the "Me" is in relation. But Nature or the "Not Me" also partakes of divinity in that "outward circumstances is a dream and a shade". Its reality lies in its being "a projection of God in the unconscious". A second identity is thus established between Nature and God, and third, between God and Man. Here is a triangle of relationship, the value of which lies not in the absolute identity of Man, God and Nature, but in the common relationship between any of the factors.

Nature to Emerson, as the *commonsense* refers to it, is the essence unchanged by man, and the ideal sense is "the phenomenal expression of the soul". The possible ambiguity "is not material, no confusion of thought will occur". It is necessary to set up a provisional dualism in order to expose the ultimate unity.

Nature furnishes man with desire, but it also furnishes him with power of speech or means of satisfying desire in such a way as to threaten it constantly with extinction. Man is a paradoxical being, unique who strives for a perfection, which if attained, would altogether deprive him of his nature. If there is dignity in the human condition, it lies in the recognition that to exist is already to be in danger nor simply of death, but of consciousness as boredom. We preserve our dignity by pursuing the implication this shock of recognition, both helped and hindered by nature, and so preserve ourselves as we seek to overcome ourselves. Discursive thought is like fire. It purifies, but it also destroys. "History" is a process of re-emergence: Literally, an inquiry into human acts and speeches. Whenever, man becomes detached from things, or lost in speech, he comes to think of himself as a radically or exclusively historical being, a being, who is nothing but self-inquiring or more accurately self-interpretation.

History in the sense (the post-Hegelian concept of historicity) is, then, not simply a change, not merely a process, not even most essentially actions, but is a speech in the sense of self-interpretation. History begins from a memory of the past, or self-interpretation—known as "tradition". "Tradition", in itself, however, is only potentially history actualized by the critique or interpretation of "tradition".

The modern quest for freedom leads to the redefinition of man in terms of work, or its more recent name, creativity. But this, in turn, leads to the identification of man as a radically historical individual. And, this historicist tendency in our criticism is by no means a unique or isolated phenomenon, not just another specialized product of the scholar critic's specialism. The problem of history, to be sure, has been central to the formalist criticism, which gives our age one of its genres. There is, for instance, the great example of "Tradition and the Individual Talent", with its emphasis that the poet is he for whom history, or at least, the history of literature, is totally and immediately available.

If the tendency of that notable essay was to imply somehow that the poet was a prophet through whom history spoke, Eliot corrected it in his other brilliant essays of formal explanatory analysis, essays, in which his focus was the way a poet 'uses' the history, which he is given to "know" better than the common run of men. In "The Social Function of Poetry", Eliot writes that "the duty of the poet, as poet, is only indirectly to his people; his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve...". That is, it is on the consideration of the poet's relation to his language that there must be centred any examination of his relation to his language and the tendency of a particular time and place. Through language, history and philosophy get into literature. For language is the principal vehicle for history and philosophy.

'Nihilism' is fundamentally an attempt to overcome or repudiate the past on behalf of an unknown and unknowable yet hoped for the future. The mood of boredom or hopelessness that is the most visible negative manifestation of nihilism testifies to the incoherence of the hidden essence of 'nihilism'. The nihilist invokes us to destroy the past on behalf of a wish which he cannot articulate. The classless society, the superman, the next epoch of Seinsgeschichte, so far as we in the present are concerned, are extreme revision of the kind of wish described by Socrates in the *Republic*. Plato, like every philosopher, whatever his politics, is a revolutionary: he wishes to "turn man around" to make them face in a direction different from that of tradition.

The difference between Plato and the nihilist, however, is this: whereas nihilism points us toward the historical future, Plato turns us neither backward nor forward in a historical sense. Plato wishes us to take our bearing in time by a vision that remains free of the transience of temporality. The 'nihilist' is forced by the instability of the world to find stability in his own despair. He comprehends the worthlessness of all reasons as understood by him is "freedom" and as such he preserves it in the face of despair. In terms of modern mathematical epistemology, the nihilist is value-free.

According to Hegel, modern philosophy is decisively characterized by giving primacy to the freedom of subjectivity. And, nihilism in its full or positive version shares that characteristics, and may perhaps be its last necessary consequence.

As Marlowe implingly contends, 'to be human is damnable', Socrates is accused of having veiled the self-manifestation of Being with a representation of how Being appears to man. In Heidegger's version of this accusation, the moral objections raised by Nietzsche are transformed into ontological distortions. For Nietzsche, we recall, the projection of (superman) an ideal, supersensible world, as the locus of value serves to drain the physical or physiological world of its creativity. Recognition of the worthlessness of the world in an ontological sense is the necessary condition for the creation of vital human values. Heidegger, accusing Nietzsche of Platonism or Humanism, reverses the term of the issue. The creation of the human value is itself a nihilistic interference with the "values" presented to man as a gift of Being. As such recognition of the worthlessness of human values is an essential part of the necessary condition for revelation of the world as the horizon of ontological value.

## II

Despite this radical difference between Nietzsche and Heidegger, they share the view that Socrates or Plato is responsible for the emergence of 'nihilism' in the western world. They also agree that this responsibility emerges from a misunderstanding of man.

Heidegger's Being resembles a god-Socrates' "humanized" philosophy, by having brought it down from the heavens to the cities of man. According to Stanley Rosen<sup>1</sup>, the positive nihilist's "response to a transient, worthless, and silent world is courage or resolution", and for the negative nihilist, "it is dread or nausea". Since courage or resolution is itself rooted in dread or nausea, it is easy to see that the mediating term is not reason, but "hope". According to Heidegger, "Being" implies the priority of motion and development to rest and completion. The "appearance" or presentation of beings within the openness of "Being" is a process, happening, eventually or eventuation, and belongs to the "common bonds of sight and hearing".<sup>2</sup>

Previously "truth" or "uncoveredness" was the same as "Being" or the process of sprouting forth and gathering together in the openness of presence, now conceived as a property of statements about "beings". Truth is definable in terms of similarity or correspondence between propositional speech and the separate Ideas.

When Wallace Stevens<sup>3</sup> says, "poetry shuttles between ideas and actuality", he means that the poetry discovers the hidden nexuses between seemingly incongruous things. Truth visits us when we are least prone to the arrogant logic of the academics, and the privileged moment cannot be foreseen. It can only be recognized and accepted.

Reality as essence is not simple. It is unseizably complex, and if the poets, or even the philosophers succeed in approaching it, the verbal creation of the former will partake of that mystery: "The poem must resist the intelligence/Almost successfully", as Stevens had said in "Man Carrying Things", man's mistake has been to impoverish the "real" by

inventions of anthropomorphic deities, all of them transitory and inadequate to the inspiring source—the impersonal "first ideas". Both *dianoia* and *noesis* come under the generic head of *episteme* (knowledge), which Socrates found lacking in Homer and *Ion*. Both *eikesis* (the awareness of images, eikones) and *pistis* fell under the generic head of *doxa* (mere opinion) and both refer to the world of becoming *ta gignomena* (Cf. *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (ed.) William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, 1967:13)

Plato reinterprets Being as the paradigm, which defines beings in terms of their calculative categorizable attributes. The Modern age begins with the definition of 'knowledge as Power'. It terminates with Nietzsche's conception of the *will* to power. Existentialism, strengthened by Husserl's phenomenology as a method of subjective exploration of consciousness, comprises Christian existentialism. Phenomenology leaves the question of transcendence and true being in parenthesis, and concentration upon the importance of the phenomenal world as apprehended by consciousness, and so rejoins existentialism and Marxism. What Plato's doctrine of ideas is perhaps most known in its rather vague relation to the "beautiful" (to *Kalon*) and to love (*eros*) through his three dialogues, the *Phaedo*, *The Symposium* and *The Phaedrus*. In the first of these in his conversation on "immortality" held by Socrates with his friends on the day he was to drink the hemlock, we find the doctrine of "anamnesis".

What Nietzsche means by "the death of God" is then not merely the decadence of Western Christian civilization, but the opening of an abyss: the self-presentation of chaos as a disjunction in history, within which man is given the opportunity to renew his creative strength by a rebirth, which is also a destruction of his past. To be reborn means to recur to the level of the beasts through the loss of one's memory. (Stanley Rosen, 1969: 108).

Pascal offers the joy of grace as a more secure alternative to the pride of the philosopher (and scientist), which he rightly anticipates will not endure. From Pascal to Kierkegaard, one finds a more or less Christian insistence upon the sadness of natural life in which normal (Christian) motives are stimulated by the extraordinary threat of modern scientific but cold rationalism. The modern vision rejects or implicitly rejects popular religion as a political force and aspires to godhood or mastery of nature for man.

Nietzsche and Heidegger, in effect, accuse the Platonic Socrates of a lack of existential courage and a consequent failure to attempt a direct encounter with Being.<sup>4</sup> Whether this failure is one of human morality or ontological destiny, it leads to the effort to domesticate Being, to make it useful and so (as it becomes especially clear with Descartes) secure.

## III

However, Socrates himself touches upon the danger of a direct encounter with things in the *Phaedo*. Physics and ontology are both speeches or icons of things as manifested in the human psyche<sup>5</sup> (ontology, in the first and simplest approximation is "speech about being" (Stanley Rosen, 1969: 31). "I am", infinitive stands normally for

“being” in the sense of “thing” or individual of any kind. A thing is identifiable by a shape or form which holds it together by holding it apart from things of other shape.

If we do not understand what “being” means or if we are right in supposing that it means nothing, philosophical interpretative of ordinary language with the use of ordinary language: “in my beginning is my end”. That is, “Thing” would then seem to mean “anything at all”. The ontologists suggest a pretechnical or pre-ontological awareness of the meaning of “thing”. Thus, a “being” is a thing, and a “thing” is anything at all, of which all of us have pre-ontological awareness. “Ontology” then is the speech that discusses the properties common to things. Speech about man is called anthropology (Stanley Rosen, 1969: 32); about god “theology”; about star “astronomy”.

Now, the problem arises in the mind is: “Things have being”. As it stands, it is unacceptable since “being” has been defined as thing. It surely makes no sense to be told that “things have thing”. Ontology then would be (if A=A), a kind of Dadaism and, the deepest or most systematic speech would be “an assertion of ‘nihilism’”. Husserl fails to combine a Platonic or mathematical conception of the visible noetic or noetic form of things with a Cartesian or Kantian doctrine of the transcendental ego or subjectivity. Husserl defined noetic form an *appearance* or presence before and so as presence within subjectivity. In a way reminiscent of the historical fate of the Cartesian conception of the clear and distinct ideas, Husserl’s phenomenon very soon became permeated by the temporality of the subjectivity in and to which it is present.

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* contains crucial passage from eternity to temporality. In ostensibly transcending both the Platonic (objective) Cartesian (subjectivity) dimensions of Husserl’s thought, Heidegger excluded eternity from the horizon of human existence. Consequently the identification of the phenomenon with Being was for Heidegger simply the assertion of a more radical version of historicism than had hitherto been formulated. The phenomenon is not the factually apparent thing of every day temporal life, but the hidden being, the sense or ground of the thing. This hidden ground is accessible to man only within, indeed if not as the horizon of temporality. *Being and Time* takes up the discussions of existential structure on the basis of our pre-ontological awareness, for the final ontological speech. But in this final ontological speech never transpired, and in the context of Heidegger’s thought it could never transpire.

The second half of *Being and Time*—the discussion of temporality is radically less satisfactory, than the existential analytic of the first half. Heidegger seems to have lost in the maze of the goal be set for himself. He cannot and will not achieve it.

Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* is merely a vulgarization of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, and makes certain theme more visible than the original. The only knowledge is intuitive. Deduction, and discourse, improperly called kinds of knowledge (*connaissance*) are merely instruments that lead to intuition.<sup>6</sup>

#### IV

*Being* for Heidegger is the silent process by which the world differentiates itself into the four dimensions or regions, Earth and Heaven, God and Man. It is a process of emergence of things, the process which as the source of thing, is also the origin of their essence. However, as process, Being gives to things not essence in the sense of traditional metaphysics. The essence is not a motionless form of nature, but a moving way—a way of emergence.

Socrates’ *Phaedo* discusses his own transition from looking directly at things to taking refuge with speeches, so as to see in them the truth of things.<sup>7</sup> Heidegger shares the conviction that the significance of a thing is inseparable and unintelligible apart from our intentional consciousness of that thing. This is perhaps more obvious in Husserl than in Heidegger. For both Heidegger and Husserl, the essence of the unity of thought and sense (or being of the thing) is Historicity. The problem of “Historicity” is displaced in Husserl from the noetic eidōs to the nature of subjectivity. Heidegger avoids subjectivity and objectivity. Both thing and thinker, both collector and collector, are subordinated to the “and” or “col”—by virtue of the ontological difference.

Socrates, to avoid the twin dangers of Historicity and silence, to speech as the icon of things (in his example, the sun) to the sense or truth of the things as independent of thought revealed by, the activity of looking. He is led through speech beyond thought to the “safest” or steadfast hypothesis of the Ideas—“the beautiful in itself, good, great, and all the others”. In *Phaedo* the “safety” of the ideas lies in their steadfast endurance against the modification of bodies (physics) and the glare of the sun (ontology).

As for the “beautiful” things, they are indeed beautiful “by reason of beauty”—that is, by participating in the beautiful—and beauty, what John Keats calls “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” that is all named only as one among other kinds of perfection (750-d; 100 C-e). Stevens’ sun is a recurrent symbol of the “unthinking source”, or irrational spring of existence:

It is never the thing but the version of the thing  
The fragrance of the woman not herself.  
Herself in the manner not the solid block,  
The day in its color not perpending time,  
Time in its weather, our most sovereign lord  
The weather in words and words in sounds of sound  
(“The Pure Good of Theory”, Part IV)

By way of comment, we may say thus that poetry is the daughter of loss, the consequence of the Paradise lost rather than the boundlessly creative original power many Romantics made it out to be. Our destiny is that of imitating reality, platonically, under a lashing irony that unmasks the puniness of our achievement.

The *Republic* is a dialogue devoted to the modern aspect of philosophy. Evil is associated with “darkness” of the icon. *Words and Numbers* share the deception of

genesis because they are the most characteristic product of the continuous motion of the psyche. The Ideas are not speeches. On the other hand, with Socrates, they are “hypothesis” and hypotheses are not projections or a “project” of the human will. The Ideas stand beneath the corporal motion to make them stand forth or to acquire and maintain visibility. In this sense, perceptible bodies are “projects” of the Ideas. The Ideas are not as Nietzsche thought, a moral hypothesis. Plato’s moral teaching is a consequence rather than the condition of the goodness of the Ideas.

In everyday discourse goodness means useful, helpful or beneficial. To Socrates, the ‘good’ is a manifestation of Being in its openness or uncoveredness, in a similar way, Heidegger thinks of “the onething needful”.

Throughout the early books of the *Republic*, the ‘good’ is identified with or in terms of the “useful”. But in everyday life, some useful things cannot be called good in the ordinary sense of the term. This difficulty arose in regard to the noble or beautiful or just. That is “good” is measured by some standard, which divides it into “higher” and “lower”. The “utility” in ordinary sense of the term became criterion, and as such in moral terms we call the “good” and the “evil” as a derivative consequence of the intelligibility of the world.

There are many beautiful things and many good things. Socrates distinguishes the two kinds in asking us to define one shape underlying each manifold, which designates the “what it is” of the units in the manifold.<sup>8</sup> This identification is possible because predialectical perception distinguishes between individuals and the kinds of individuals, or between the one and the many. The “whatness” of unity is the measure of the “thatness” of many. This “whatness” is called by Socrates an Idea. Etymologically, this word both revealing and ambiguous, means literally “look”, and thus refers to the primary appearance of heterogeneity in bodies. On the other hand, we cannot literally see a “what”, and many “thats” are neither bodies nor modifications of bodies, for example, numbers, geometrical forms, the virtues, theoretical definitions. The word “Ideas”, as a term, designating “whatness” cannot be reduced to the look of a corporeal that. It calls our attention to a third distinction, between two kinds of perception or what we call seeing and thinking.

Each of the three distinctions we have just noted arises from thinking about seeing, which, by and large, has priority among the sense in Plato and Aristotle.<sup>9</sup> One might paraphrase this reason as follows:

Our vision, combines discrimination of former with detachment from body. Touch is an excellent discriminator of shapes, but only through immediate contact. On the other hand, hearing is restricted in its kind of discrimination because it is too detached from the corporeal. We can see both silent and speaking shapes, and the vision of tactile forms does not depend upon a distorting continuity with the shaped body. Moreover, to variety and presence, our vision gives us detachment or perspective. One may, of course, interpret the visual perspective as subjective distortion of the thing in itself. But Socrates’ point is that the thing in itself is not and cannot be the same as the object of sense-

perception. A visual perception of X perspectival or partial in a sense includes the possibility of distortion.

## V

With the psyche, “whatever it fixes its eyes upon what the unity of “truth” and “being” lights up, it grasps noetically and knows it, and is manifestly in possession of reason. Truth plus being replaces the sun as the source of illumination, one of the many passage that makes it impossible to identify “truth” as the correspondence between proposition and Idea.

‘Knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are both beautiful to Socrates. “Beauty” is a union of body and psyche. The connection between beauty and intelligibility is rooted in the unity of body and psyche. The beauty of eikasia, as linked to the body, is essentially pleasant. What Socrates claims is that by reflecting upon *dianoia*, hence inescapably by employing *dianoia* itself, we can divine or surmise.

And, “the death of one God is the death of all”. Reality as essence is not simple, and is unseizably complex. Since “life’s nonsense pierces us with strange relation”, the “first idea” was not our own. Adam in Eden was the father of Descartes.<sup>10</sup> And Eve made air the mirror of herself. Primitive man is a harboured nasty germ of geometrically analytical and Narcissistic intellect. He should see through the enveloping air, not just mirror himself in it like Eve here in intellectual narcissism. Nature always has a primacy on art, on human imitations:

But the first idea was not to shape the clouds  
In imitation. The cloud preceded us....  
There was a myth before myth began  
Venerable and articulate and complete.

Truth visits us when we are least prone to the arrogant logic of academics. And if revelation comes, it is extreme, fortuitous, personal, and our consciousness will experience an “awakening”, but “on the edge of sleep”, an utter heightening that sharpens our every day perception and enables us to look down from “an elevation” on the “academics” lost “in a mist”.

Every love is a new beginning, and love is nature in the finest sense. To Stevens, “Beauty” is “momentary in the mind”. But “in the flesh”, it is “immortal”. (Cf. “Peter Quince at the Clavier”, Part IV)<sup>11</sup> Thus, “Poetry”, to him, “is the supreme fiction” (Cf. “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman”)<sup>12</sup> and, as evident from his poem no.3, poetry is the highest form of human activity. It is as if he were saying that poetry is the poor relation of reality, and poverty our permanent lot.

History, in T.S. Eliot’s terms, is a pattern “half guessed”, “half understood” and the “point of intersection of the timeless with time” is the occupation of the saint (“The Dry Salvages”, Part V).

The most celebrated metaphor of our time is probably John Donne's comparison of the souls of the lovers to the legs of a pair of compasses.

Such with thou be to me who must  
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;  
Thy firmness makes my circle just  
And makes me end, where I began.

(Cononization)

It has become a touchstone of metaphysical poetry. John Milton employs the compass in a very different fashion:

He took the golden compass prepar'd  
In God's Eternal store, to circumscribe  
This universe, and all created things:  
One foot he centr'd and the other turn'd  
Round through the vast profundity obscure,  
And said, thus farr extend, thus farr thy bounds,  
Thus be thy circumference, O World.

(PL., VII, 225-31)

We may say: How like Milton! His compassion would be golden, and he would be intent upon, and contented with, the grandiose pictorial effect. The modern age rejoices in having recovered Donne in doing so, we have recovered not just Donne's poetry, but poetry.

To Milton, the fallen Satan is a figure of diminished light—a disparity between the normal sun and the (an) altered sun. Here Satan is not a sun high in the heavens, but a sun that seems level with earth, a dawning sun, whose light must struggle through the thicker air near the horizon, and through misty air, at that. In struggle his beams are shorn away. The beams are the "excess of Glory", overflowing from the fountain of light:

Less then Arch Angel ruined, and the excess  
Of Glory obscured: as when the Sun new-risen  
Looks through the Horizontal misty air  
Shorn of his beams or from behind the moon  
In dim eclips disastrous twilight sheds  
On half the Nations,...

(PL. I, 593-8)

And it's not the infinite variety of Cleopatra like quality in Eve but her grace of virginal innocence—an incitement in itself to the Prince of Evil. If it enchants him for a moment, out of his bitterness, and thus, releases him into Paradise, its final effect will be to inflame him the more—to thrust him back into "the hot Hell that always in him burnes". He will repay her bereavement of his fierceness with the bereavement of her innocence.

Satan is a "pent" spirit—now literally pent up in the serpent but most of all pent up in himself and in the "Hell that always in him burnes". The sight of Eve does draw him out of himself:

That space the Evil one abstracted stood  
From his own evil...

For Satan, transported out of himself, for a moment, is a relief. To breathe the air of Paradise for a moment gives the sense of relief and enlargement. Surely Satan is not a young Keats, oppressed with the noisy city. In Satan, we see "th' excess/ Of glory obscur'd". And, though Paradise Lost is not just a superb organ music throbbing in an intellectual void—still our concern for his theological and philosophical consistency can push us into ruinous distortions of his poetry.

In Book IV, Eve gives her account of her first moments of consciousness and her first meeting with Adam. The sense in which Man is made in God's image—and the sense in which Eve is made in Adam's image comes in for our attention in Book VIII: It is the quality that distinguishes man from the brutish state, the possession of reason, exemplified in Eve's first conscious response to the state of affairs in which she finds herself. For Eve, it is not a matter of love at first sight, but for Adam, it is. Milton has been careful to give not only the first conscious thoughts of Eve, but also first conscious thought of Adam, of Lucifer, and of Sin and Death. 'Sin' is born from Lucifer, as Eve is born of Adam. 'Sin', like Athena, bursts fully armed from Lucifer's head. But with Lucifer, it is not love at first sight. He recoils from her, and she comes to please him—only later that he finds himself as Sin says, "full opt/ Myself in thy perfect image viewing...." But the Narcissism of Lucifer soon leads to incest, and of this union Death is born.

Milton then doubles the theme once more. For Sin tells that when she had borne Death, she fled from him, but that Death immediately pursued her and raped her begetting the host of yelling monsters that now surround her and feed upon her. Listen to Sin's speech to Lucifer:

Thou art my Father, thou my author, thou  
My being gav'st me; whom should I obey  
But thee, whom follow?

This passage reminds us of a parallelism between Eve's relation to Adam and 'Sin's' to Lucifer. And, compare it with Eve's speech to Adam in Book IV:

My author and Disposer, what thou bidst  
Unargu'd I obey;...

Looking up "strait toward Heav'n", he contemplates the sky, but not the sky reflected in a pool. He observes the created world, and infers at once. Adam calls the creation and creature implying a creator, and to the "fair creature", he appeals:

Tell me, how may I know him, how adore,  
From whom I have that thus I move and I live,

And feel that I am happier than I know.  
 He asks his maker:  
 In solitude,  
 What happiness, who can enjoy above,  
 Or all enjoying, what contentment find?

The fervent angel Abdiel addresses Lucifer as one “alienate from God... Spirit accurst...” (P.L. Book IV) This is the sin into which Adam and Eve are to fall: that of alienation from God.

In Book XI, God is regarded no longer as father but as tyrant. As Michael retorts: “This Makers Image...then/ Forsook them, when themselves they vilified....” What knowledge, then, does the forbidden Fruit Confer? In earlier section, prior to Book XI, Eve’s speech can set us on the right track. As she exclaims:

For good unknown, sure is not had or had  
 And yet unknown, is as not had at all.

The forbidden Fruit gives Adam knowledge of good, and evil as we know them.

“The good that Adam possesses, he does not “know” he possesses. He will know that he had it only after he has lost it. Adam states this after the Fall:

Both Good and Evil, we know, Good we know lost and Evil got,  
 Bad Fruit of knowledge, if this be to know....

The predicament of “the unfallen Adam is really very much like the child described in Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode: He describes Adam in the Epithets he bestows upon the child: “Nature’s Priest”, “Best Philosopher”, “Seer Blest”, “Thou, over whom thy Immortality? Broods like Day, a master O’er a slave”. Yet the child cannot impart his philosophy and does not “know” that he possesses it. He is an “Eye among the blind”. He is also “deaf and silent”. The poet was himself once such a child, and having lost the child’s knowledge, knows at last what it was that he once possessed.

But he can’t know it and possess it. Wordsworth at the end of the Ode speaks very much like the fallen but penitent Adam at the end of the *Paradise Lost*. Both attain a wisdom out of suffering, and the “faith that looks through death”. According to Dorothy Sayers, St. Augustine suggests Fall as a lapse into self-consciousness in the senses that associate it with shame, with isolation, with alienation and with the loss of the innocent rapport with the world about one. This is the knowledge that act of eating the apple brings the human pair.

## VI

Milton furnishes Adam with the noblest motivation of sin. Adam’s ‘Sin’ is ultimately of the same kind as Eve’s: the first words that he addresses to her recount the story:

O fairest of creations, last and best  
 Of all Gods works

This is suggestive of the genuinely felt love for Eve. And, he calls her in his agony. Adam regards Eve with the eye of a sensual connoisseur. He has never known “true relish” until now that he has tasted the forbidden fruit, and he anticipates a special relish, now in the very act of love. Adam and Eve are each preparing to use the other for his/her own enjoyment. They are “knowing” and “self-conscious” about the sexual relations in a way in which they have not been prior to this, and in which, body, mind, and spirit participate intimately and in full. The sleep into which Adam and Eve fall is restless and full of troubled dreams, and when they wake, their eyes, as Adam complains, are opened, but opened only to see that they have been betrayed. The Serpent has cheated them with his promises:

### Since Our Eyes

Op’nd we find indeed, and find we know  
 Both Good and Evil, Good lost, and Evil got,  
 Bad Fruit of knowledge, if this be to know.

Thus, as T.S. Eliot contends: “one thing does not change”. “The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil” (Cf. Choruses from “The Rock”, Part I). Experience is one’s guide. Garden-state is not static nor the ultimate: Milton provides Adam’s growth in grace and knowledge until, at last, Adam’s body shall turn, “all to spirit” (Book V, 497). Adam’s ‘sin’ was not really ‘sin’ but “good” being an eye opener.

Lucifer in Book IX rejects all hypotheses of creation. The mirror is here demanding equality with the source of light which it reflects: “I am no mere reflector of light; I am a source of light”. To Milton (as he speaks in Book VIII), as Eve comes to see Adam as more amiable than “that smooth watry image”—sees:

How beauty is excelled by manly grace  
 And wisdom, which alone is truly fair.

That is, to Milton wisdom is superior to sensuous beauty. And, to Wallace Stevens, the first idea is the “Father-fire” of “Red Fern”, the inexpressibly intact heart of the real. And, as in the first lyric of “It Must Be Abstract”, it seems that the first “inconceivable idea of the sun”, which the “ephebe” must learn by “becoming an ignorant man again”. That is, he will “see the sun again with an ignorant eye/ And see it clearly in the idea of it”, and he must “Never suppose an inventing mind as source”.

For a poet, nature “becomes only words”, and poetry a “supreme fiction”. In America, as Malcoln Cowley states in “The Time of Rhetoricians” that the poet or creator has been superseded in modern America by the ‘rhetoricians’, i.e., by the refinedly competent critic by the Alexandrine man of letters. Wallace Steven’s poetry has been interpreted as a continuous variation on the theme of ever changing relation between appearance and being—“Description without Place” affirms the identity of appearance and reality:

It is possible that to seem—it is to be,  
 As the sun is something, seeming and it is...

### (Stanza 1)

Also in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, if we were momentarily to forget the miraculous lightness of this poem, wholly played on the magical interaction of ‘reality and appearance’, ‘fact and fantasy’, ‘nature and art’, a first answer could emerge from “The Motive for Metaphor”, where the poet desires

... The exhilaration of changes:  
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from  
The weight of primary noon,  
The ABC of being, ....

Here we have the dramatic confrontation of two opposite terms: ‘reality’ as a “thing in itself”, a provocative sphinx and the artifice of poetical metaphor, which here epitomize all of human knowledge. Human fiction is incommensurable with ‘reality’ and ‘reality’ is a never-to-be exhausted challenge to human intelligence. But since the human mind is lodged in ‘reality’, it will have to find a way to overcome this paradox, at least provisionally.

If metaphor (and, by implication, all of poetry, all of knowledge) is a mere evasion, a “shrinking from being”, it has no value. If it merely duplicates being, it likewise has no value.

Every mental act of any kind of intentionality is held together and so exhibited as what it is by a noetic shape which cannot be reduced to the mental act itself. This noetic shape (not to be confused with Husserl’s eidetic constitution within the flow of subjectivity) is the “thing in itself”, or the Idea. Let me emphasize: Socrates does not claim that thinking as a psychic activity is free from perspectives. Instead, he claims that thinking works because, in each of its perspectives, it apprehends the source of those perspective illuminations.<sup>13</sup> Thus thinking is a “looking at”.

According to Socrates, there are three “kinds” or elements involved in act of vision: The eye, colour, which makes the object visible and “a third kind, peculiar by its nature to this very function”—light. The light is thus distinguished from the sun is called an Idea which yokes together vision and the visible.<sup>14</sup> The sun, as the source or cause of the light is different from it. The term “Idea” is not applied to the sun as it was to the light. In other words, the sun as the good is not the same as the Idea of the good. In noetic terms, the Idea stands to the good as the light stands to the sun. The good or bad stands to the mind as the sun does to the eye. The sun when looked at directly blinds us, and the light considered apart from all visible bodies is itself invisible, or homogenous, (Ideas, sunlight) draws our attention away from its source.

The “Truth” of a proposition is thus not the same as the “truth of being”, but an icon or reflection of it. Being as truth manifests itself as what it is. In Heidegger, “truth” means “uncoveredness” or “uncovering”. According to Heidegger, Plato is responsible for the division of nature into two realms of the Ideas, and the phenomenal (historical) world. Instead of recognizing the unity of truth and being as the manifestation of openness, Plato concealed that process of illumination by mistaking the “looks” of things for their “being” and the correspondence of propositions to those looks for truth. The destruction

or exclusion of ‘nature’ and ‘eternity’, intended to regain for human appreciation the value implicit in this world, and mistakenly alienated or projected into another, supersensible, trans-historical world has resulted in the dissolution of “value” in the world of concrete history. The destruction of the past, for a new stage of positive human or super human existence, seems rather to entail the destruction of the present as well.

Plato is said to be responsible or source of the dehumanizing, devaluing or reifying of human existence, thanks essentially to his concept of reason which treats man in terms of calculation, utilitarian manipulation, or things, rather than the locus of the manifestation of Being.

## VII

By implication, I accuse all those who follow Heidegger in their denunciation of “Platonism” of lacking an accurate grasp of the teaching they denounce. Plato actually furnishes us with a defence against the emergence of nihilism. “Nihilism” is a fundamental danger to human existence. Plato does not understand Being as a process, but if as anything then as the intelligibility of the world manifested in extra historical shape as whatness and as the intelligence, manifested as psyche, which grasps the world. The world of Ideas is not another, separate world, but the “whatness” of this world.

Stevens’ sun is a recurrent symbol of the “unthinking source”, or irrational spring of existence. “The super fiction” must indeed “abstract” from any historical superstructure, from any anthropomorphic assumption. It must go back to the sun of the “first idea” to the integrity of Being that man has obscured with his religious myths and by the very act of giving arbitrary names to things. The abstraction is not only an intellectual. It consists in a kind of Platonic contemplation that aims at seizing the primeval reality by going back to the upstream over the course of human history—the latter being only a progressive removal from innocent origins and, thus, something like a degeneration, the loss of Eden, where according to an Italian Poet Montale, “even a name, a garment, were a vice”.

In the last analysis, ‘reality’, as essence, is not simple, but unseizably complex, and if the poet succeeds in approaching it, his verbal creation partakes of that mystery. Man’s mistake has been the impersonal “first Idea”, which has to impoverish the real by invention of anthropomorphic deities, all transitory and inadequate to inspiring source (of the impersonal “first idea”).

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay*, New Haven and London, The Yale University Press, 1969, pp. 141-42.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- <sup>3</sup> Wallace Stevens. "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction", *The Inclusive Flame: Studies in Modern American Poetry*, Indian Edition, 1969, p. 89, Glauco Cambon, Bombay (Popular Prakashan), Indiana University Press, 1963.
- <sup>4</sup> Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay*, The Yale University Press, 1969, p. 149.
- <sup>5</sup> See *The Republic*, 596, c. 4ff. Socrates employs an icon of the psyche, as context makes it clear the numeric artist is compared to a mirror, in which one may reflect the whole.
- <sup>6</sup> *L'etre et le neant*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955. Org. Publication, 1943, p. 220. The idea is essentially Nietzschean.
- <sup>7</sup> *Phaedo*, 99 c. 5-6.
- <sup>8</sup> *Republic* 507 b. 2.ff. Quoted by Stanley in *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay*, 1969. p. 178.
- <sup>9</sup> cf. Stanley Rosen's article, "Thought on Touch" in *Phronesis*, 4(1961): pp. 127-37.
- <sup>10</sup> Stevens has here in mind Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum", the act by which the French Philosopher proceeded to derive certainty from the thinking self by a "geometric" method of logical deduction. Later the idealists were to discover reality itself, and not only certainty, from the conscious self, and Stevens, atleast, thus, does not possess this arrogance.
- <sup>11</sup> See *The American Tradition in Literature*, revised, vol. 2. (ed.) Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beaty and E. Hudson Long, Norton & Co., New York, 1962. p. 1465.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1462.
- <sup>13</sup> Socrates compares apprehension with prophecy which has something to do with the doctrine of recollection. See *Theaetetus*, 178.b 2.ff. esp. 179 a 2.
- <sup>14</sup> 507 d 8-508 a 3.