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**Transcendentalism, Mysticism and Imagination
in the Poetic Discourse of
Jones Very, Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell**

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*A mis seres queridos,
siempre en mi pensamiento.
Para siempre en mi corazón.*

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ABSTRACT

The growth of self-consciousness throughout history takes place in a context of duality between a subjective and an objective awareness of the world. Rational thinking and speech, mind and words shape the individual's concern with the knowledge of his/her nature as a physical and a spiritual being. The search for self-fulfilment in the perception of affinity between the sensual and the spiritual that results from mystical experience is integrated within the poetic discourse that finds evidence of such continuity between world and thought by means of imagination.

This thesis aims to study how the influence of mysticism and imagination in the individual's intellectual advance and in the poetic discourse in America, especially when filtered through Romantic and Transcendentalist thought, significantly contributes to the construction of a path towards self-knowledge.

This dissertation examines the concepts of mysticism and imagination in 19th and 20th century American poetry and poetic discourse through an in-depth study of a selection of poetic and philosophical works by Jones Very (1813 – 1880), Wallace Stevens (1879 – 1955) and Stanley Cavell (1926 – 2018).

Jones Very, Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell see the uncommon within the common. Their poetry, their essays and their analysis of poetic discourse give a response to existential concerns related to identity and self-knowledge that are still key in 21st century America. Immersed in a mystical experience and as inheritors of romantic thought, they pierce the emblematic power of language and the spiritual condition of the sensual world out of an intuitive insight and imagination.

Through their creativity and imagination and as artists committed to the power of language, Very, Stevens and Cavell epitomize the process of transformation in the individual's intellectual growth into self-knowledge. We need the mystic's insight and the romantic's imagination, the poet's voice and the philosopher's thought to shape the state of intimacy between the world and thought.

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*The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms
It cares not for itself; asks not if it's seen.*
Angelus Silesius

INTRODUCTION: THE CONDITION OF BEING. THE NEED TO KNOW

If we should name two of the main features that define human beings, those would undoubtedly be rational thinking and speech. Both are innate to us and their evolution draws the map of our intellectual growth. Mind and words shape the individual's awareness of the necessary conditions to grow into the knowledge of his nature as a being. This intellectual growth must be understood as a progressive broadening of self-consciousness; and this broadening would be subsequent to the awareness of a change in the individual's perception of his existence not only as a physical being but as a spiritual one. Likewise, the experience of life and interaction with the world are part of the individual's growth into self-knowledge. There seems to be an innate desire in human being to go further into that ability of the mind that may bring the individual to wisdom. This innate desire to approach wisdom encourages the individual's intellectual growth as an act of matching sensual and spiritual experiences into world-shaping and imaginative thoughts, such as those Emerson subtly defines as "a gleam of light": "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within" (*Emerson Essays and Lectures: Self-Reliance* 259).

The growth of consciousness within the individual throughout history has often taken place in a context of duality between a subjective and an objective awareness of reality. Reality as the result of the individual's experience of the world could not only be understood as an objective experience beyond the senses, but also as a subjective approach as far as it is concerned with the individual's thought and inner interpretation of the world—an inner view encouraged by the contemplation of the outer. This inner comprehension of the outer becomes an experience which has eventually instilled in the individual's thought, in the mystic's meditative attitude and in the poet's words a feeling of continuity between matter and soul. The individual becomes aware and attains knowledge within this context of duality.

Consciousness stems from knowledge and knowledge is at the core of what makes human beings. And this duality evolved during Romanticism and in 19th century America into a need of continuity between the inner and the outer. The search for self-fulfilment in the perception of affinity between the sensual and the spiritual that resulted from mystical experience was thus integrated within a philosophical and poetic context that tried to find evidence of such continuity between world and thought, thus bridging the gap created by a dualistic vision.

Objectives

This thesis aims to examine the concepts of mysticism and imagination in 19th and 20th century American poetry and poetic discourse through an in-depth study of a selection of poetic and philosophical works by Jones Very (1813 – 1880), Wallace Stevens (1879 – 1955) and Stanley Cavell (1926 – 2018). Both terms, mysticism and imagination, have influenced the individual's intellectual advance and poetry's mystical discourse in America, especially when filtered through Romantic and Transcendentalist thought, has significantly contributed to the construction of a path towards self-knowledge. Mystical elements that have carved this path of the individual towards self-knowledge include meditation and reflection, revelation, intuition and the role of language and expression. These mystical tools can be traced in the writings of many American poets and philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries and most especially in the works of Very, Stevens and Cavell, as we will see throughout this dissertation, where I will demonstrate the relevance of the concepts of mysticism and imagination in the development and continuity of a line of philosophical thought –the individual's concern with the knowledge of the nature of his being– and its literary expression from its origins in the classical world to the present in the United States. This evolution has been present in the writer's capacity and need to adapt his creativity to the changing historical and socio-cultural conditions, which in America were first shaped by an evolving European tradition leading to Romanticism and by the context of the New World –conditions and factors which have in many cases led human being to introspection. These three authors Jones Very, Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell understand human condition by means of life experience and relation to the world, together with the role of the subsequent creative response, for the individual's intellectual growth –an insight and response which mysticism and imagination provide.

Very's poetic approach aligns with Transcendental sensibilities. The moral pragmatism posed by Transcendentalists features Very's argument on how poetry, and particularly epic poetry, has evolved over time jointly with the theology of time. His was a conciliatory view between Christian and Transcendental philosophies. Human conflicts represented by the hero's performance were no longer conflicts of action but of morality.

Very's common ground with Transcendentalism is present in his emphasis on moral principles, which must rule internal conflicts and must not be subjected to circumstances but to ". . . an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul" (Ridlen 111). He found in nature a metaphor of the spirit. For Transcendentalists the mind, the spirit and the soul speak the same language as nature. Very was a living example of the human inner desire to share the freedom of the natural world where God manifests. He merits serious consideration as the representative who pioneered the mystical sentiment within the 19th century American transcendentalist context. He was not only influenced by Emerson's thought, but Very himself had an impact on Emerson, such as Edwin Gittleman argues in his biography of Very:

That he had begun to "conceive hopes" for America at this time (less than two weeks after he had agreed to speak to the graduating class), was in part, Emerson admitted, due to the dramatic impact Very twice had made upon him. To hear a Harvard divinity student sounding so unlike a Harvard divinity student was reassuring. It was a hopeful sign, finding the moral sentiments of this enthusiastic nonconformist thriving in that center of higher conformity. Very's ability to live in "society" without being infected by what was worst and most characteristic of that "society" confirmed Emerson's decision to further stimulate the culture of such uncommon growths. (Davis 489)

Very became a key precursor of a line historical literary criticism that was grounded in the romantic and poetic tenet of the highly significant role of inner life in the individual's intellectual growth. His religious fervour made him focus on a Christian view of the world as the path towards the knowledge of that power within. This idea of harmony between external nature and the individual's inner nature is similarly traced by Wallace Stevens throughout his creative production. Very and Stevens share a rejection to the corruption of nature and humanity that comes as a result of business and politics. They understand the poet's discourse as a way to empathize with nature and to recover a correspondence and an existence in harmony with it. Regarding this sense of harmony between the inner and the outer, Transcendentalists agreed that ". . . man was more akin to the organisms of nature than to the mechanisms of the industrial world, so in abandoning the agendas of the modern infrastructure and giving themselves over to the natural spirit, they could feel, at last, free" (Ridlen 112).

Very's and Stevens's poetry, as a poetry of introspection, aims to express the individual's inner desire and will to return to such innate condition of freedom, a state which both poets find in the elements of ordinary life and in the natural world.

In the case of Very, a religious sentiment underlies his pragmatic view of moral values and his interpretation of the symbols in nature. For the purpose of this study, the selection of his essay on epic poetry and of three of his poems among so many others of his literary production is due to the fact that these works perfectly match the transcendentalist claim of a change of mind and perception as key steps in order to grow into knowledge, and in our case, into self-knowledge. Very focuses on the epic performance of a hero who is much more concerned with inner values and morality, with the common sentiment of an existence in harmony with nature instilled in the poet's mind by a stranger's gift. Very's spiritual approach to the natural world in a dream-like vision of reality shared by the poet and the Soul, and the feeling of love as a human and a divine source of inspiration in the poet's experience of beauty effectively show how much Jones Very deserves to be praised as a representative American mystic.

In the case of Wallace Stevens, the feeling underlying his vision of ordinary life and the poet's inner debate conceals Stevens's conception of poetry as a means to search and approach the good, as synonym with God, in what is harmonious and orderly. Through an introspective view of the ordinary elements of the world, Stevens finds this sense of order and the possibility of a coexistence in harmony, as we will see in "The Idea of Order at Key West" and in his analysis on the value of nobility in the rider's performance. The contemplation of the outer instils in the poet a sense of continuity between mind and matter, as he expresses in his insight of a jar in Tennessee or in his interpretative exercise of meditation on the different ways of looking at a blackbird's movement. In the selected poems, "Anecdote of the Jar" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", the poet's vision of the elements of the world causes uncertainty and prompts the reader to self-question by means of nature. As posed in "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself", the look beyond the physicality of the world which the creative power of imagination confers counteracts the sense of detachment of the poet before the world. For Stevens, an act of imagination, the constructive faculty through which the artist, whether a poet or a painter, makes his constructions, permits to lump thought and feeling.

As we will tackle in “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting”, the aesthetic power in poetry and painting transfers the perception of an existence in harmony into a creative answer, as a result of the artist’s search for perfection and as a reflection of the artistic spirit.

Unlike Very and Stevens, Stanley Cavell was not a poet, but his acute analyses of literary texts and poetical discourse fall into line with the romantic and transcendentalist tenet shared by the three authors: the individual’s need of recovery from a loss of identity, that is, from a drive into the inhuman. Cavell is concerned with the fact of how negatively the values which rule everyday life were affected by the anonymity of urban industrial life in the mid 20th century and how these events have led to an identity crisis and to skepticism in contemporary United States. For Very and Stevens the role of language, the power of the sound of words, favours the transmission of the necessary moral values which confer intellectual strength and self-trust on the individual. In the specific case of Cavell, he defends the idea that the individual acknowledges his humanity, that is, he asserts his identity through literary discourse. For Cavell, literary discourse transmits a set of values present in ordinariness through words, similarly to how Very sees the hero’s will to share the moral values with his people reflected in the change into introspection of the epic discourse. In the same way, Stevens believes that the aesthetic power of words is key to the mode in which language shapes thought and a deeper comprehension of ordinary life.

In Cavell’s “Texts of Recovery”, a philosophical and literary rereading of the world is possible, he invites us to look for the meaning of words imaginatively. For Cavell, this implies to understand their ordinary meaning first and, then, by paraphrasing their metaphorical sense, words can allegorically rebuild a new relation of nearness and intimacy between the individual and the world, drawing in this way the moral which human being needs in order to recover from the loss of criteria, or true statements, in which the knowledge of his condition is grounded. By means of self-questioning Cavell’s genuine approach to the texts of Coleridge, Heidegger, Wisdom and Wordsworth reveals the significance of poetic and philosophical discourse for the comprehension of the interaction between human and natural conditions.

Jones Very, Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell were able to see the uncommon within the common. Their poetry, their essays and their analysis of poetic discourse give a response to existential concerns related to identity and self-knowledge that are still key in 21st century America. For them, in language resides the spontaneous flow of a state of intimacy between world and thought. Just as if they were immersed in a mystical experience and as inheritors of romantic thought, they pursued to pierce the emblematic power of language and the spiritual condition of the sensual world out of an intuitive insight and imagination. Mysticism and imagination thus became key intellectual tools in a discourse towards self-knowledge that kept renewing itself through the centuries; and they still are key intellectual resources in our current state of thought, in which the excesses of current political and social life once more claim for self-reflection as a means to react against social processes wherein the outward is seriously affecting the inward. Self-evaluation, along with the shift in aesthetic orientation, refocuses the poet's look into the daily world and emphasizes subjectivity.¹ The claim of poetry, the use of the poet's voice in American poetry today as a window towards self-consciousness and a renewed national identity could be much better understood if we examine the reminiscences of those mystical and imaginative elements in poetry as creative resources which artistically contribute to instill the necessary moral values for the individual's existence in harmony with the world. Poetic discourse becomes the means which may help human being restore this lost connection: in Stanley Cavell's words, ". . . an intimacy with existence, . . . an intimacy lost" (Cavell 1994: 4). The authors selected in this study combine mystical, transcendentalist and romantic discourse to recover a powerful set of lost values (the epic, nobility, self-reflection) as an answer to the crises of identity and knowledge that occurred in the middle of the 19th century (Jones Very), in the early 20th century (Wallace Stevens) and within the postmodern context after WWII (Stanley Cavell).

¹Cavell alludes to skepticism as a way to question ourselves and to keep us doubting, a potential way to cultivate self-reflection and subjectivity. We could also understand this sort of skeptical attitude as a resistance, as in Josep María Esquirol's observations, which vindicate the relevance of the subject in 21st century society: "Resistir no solo es propio de anacoretas y ermitaños. Existir es, en parte, resistir. Entonces la resistencia expresa no un mero hecho circunstancial, sino una manera de ser, un movimiento de la existencia humana. Entenderlo así implica una variación importante respecto al modo habitual de hacerlo" (Esquirol 9). Skepticism and resistance favour a change in the subject's view of the world: these attitudes can form the individual's inner response to his loss of identity. Cavell's rereading of poetic texts entails the comprehension and approach to their contents as the means for self-recovery.

Methodology and a Brief Overview of the Concepts

The role of self-consciousness within the context of a mystical experience as well as the imaginative elements present in the expression of such an experience make mysticism and imagination intellectual assets for the individual's definition and expression of his identity in relation to the world. The expression of his identity means the expression of an experience which pursues self-development, for "[t]ypically, mystics, theistic or not, see their mystical experience as part of a larger undertaking aimed at human transformation" (Gellman par. 1). Mystical writings and teaching progressively insisted on personal experience as the path of the soul towards this change. This personal experience of an inner interpretation of the sensual world was mainly grounded in intuition. Insofar as the faculty of intuition was linked to an experience beyond the senses it could not be related to the intellect and to reason; it could not be considered as an evidence of truth, at least as long as truth was linked to the concept of reason as understanding, that is to say, to "the empirical, rational faculty, that allows us to make sense of the world in Lockean terms" (Elliott 370). But intuition would eventually be understood, paraphrasing Emerson, as a moral sense of a deeper truth, as we appreciate in Alan Levine's comments on Emerson's politics and philosophy of self-reliance:

Like others of his generation, Emerson rejected the established Lockean view of the mind as a tabula rasa. Instead, drawing on the Scottish Enlightenment, German Romanticism, neo-Platonism, and radical Protestantism, he developed an intuitional philosophy of how we know the world. Emerson called our power of intuition "Reason." And because he deemed this faculty granted to us by and as partaking of the divine, he also variously called it "the Soul" or "our moral sense" or "Intuition" . . . To know what it is true, but also to do what is right, we must rely upon our divine Reason, and not upon what he called our "Understanding," his name for our merely worldly, calculating abilities that are divorced from deeper truth. (Levine *The New History* par. 4)

Philosophical postulates like those posed by Platonism throughout history (see section I) contributed to the interpretation of this evolution in mind.² And, subsequently, the possibility of an evidence of truth in the knowledge derived from a mystical experience would be debated in philosophical discussions:

Philosophers have focused on such topics as the classification of mystical experiences, their nature in different religions and mystical traditions, to what extent mystical experiences are conditioned by a mystic's language and culture, and whether mystical experiences furnish evidence for the truth of their contents. (Gellman par. 1)

Mysticism in Greek and Roman society and in the Christian world not only enriched the intellect, but also increased the interest in the knowledge of the soul. This sort of duality in the treatment of mysticism raised opposite views on its acceptance as a source of knowledge, as we can see in John Rist's words: "Within the history of Christianity one can trace the tension and antagonism between those Christians who welcomed the Platonic theory of self-perfection as some kind of adumbration of Christianity and those who thought it a curiously misleading, if not blasphemous, parody of Christian truth" (393). In the 19th century Transcendentalists in the United States, as direct inheritors of this Neoplatonic doctrine, succeeded in combining religious and moral issues by defending their belief in God as an immanent Being, ". . . [the Transcendentalists] held up a model of human nature as inherently divine, and a model of divinity as accessible to and immanent within human nature itself" (Elliott 368). The mystic becomes an interpreter in this view of the world. He perceives the immanent divine and spiritual presence through an intuitive contemplation and interpretation of the sensual world, which became the symbol of spiritual identity. Accepting a coexistence of matter and soul meant the unity between reality, the sensual perception of the world, and the awareness of a spiritual existence beyond the senses.

²During the Middle Ages and till the 15th century the tradition of Platonism was maintained by the University. The teachings of Platonism incorporated to the Christian doctrine by Neoplatonism became the philosophical and cultural inheritance that would find continuity in the New World. The need to find compatibility between faith and reason would be one of its main postulates. The Renaissance introduced Neoplatonism into Christian doctrine and in England, during the 17th century, the so-called Cambridge Platonists contributed to the expansion of the current of Neoplatonism together with their belief in "the compatibility of reason and faith" (Hutton par. 2); [the Cambridge Platonists] "regarded philosophy as the legitimate concern of theologians and are distinguished by the high value they accorded human reason" (Hutton par. 2)

The difficulty lies in the fact that the individual's growth into knowledge should imply a process of learning how to transgress the limits between faith and reason and make this act an attainment of spiritual truth by means of the mind. Philosophy provided this intellectual process with a sense of attainment of truth. Along with philosophical and religious principles in the classical period and during the Middle Ages, mysticism contributed to the understanding of the individual's innate desire for spiritual identity. The mystic, guided by intuition, followed his innate impulse to know more about that mystery which represented the possibility of a spiritual existence. With the Renaissance and during the expansion of Romanticism in Europe and in America, the individual's innate need to know about the spiritual and physical condition of his nature progressively becomes more attached to the intellectual context in which such concepts as mysticism and imagination develop. Together with the concept of mysticism, which progressively becomes more relevant for the individual's knowledge of his nature, imagination, as a subjective source of creative potential, has eventually been understood as a vehicle of knowledge and attained a central role in the individual's intellectual development throughout history. The relevance of the concept of imagination lies in its prevailing role as that innate ability which may also become a technical resource for the knowledge of human nature.

. . . medieval philosophy invested imagination with a new authority, one drawn from the Aristotelian philosophy of the soul made available to the Latin West only in the late twelfth century. In Aristotle's philosophy, and all the more in Arabic commentaries on it, imagination occupied a privileged position because it was involved centrally in every act of knowledge acquisition. As Aristotle famously said: "The soul never thinks without an image", an image provided by imagination. Any good Aristotelian held that knowledge originates with the senses and becomes available to the intellect in normal circumstances only through the imagination. The last of the sense faculties, imagination made a unique contribution to the process by which sensory knowledge became intellectual apprehension. . . . In tandem with the agent intellect, imagination formed the crucial bridge between sense and reason. (Karnes 3-4)

The reminiscence of classical and neoclassical influences of the intellectual relevance progressively acquired by mysticism and imagination would eventually be taken up by romantic and transcendentalist philosophical thought and writing.

Examples of this thought are the mystic and the poet: the mystic, as a seer who needs to transmit his inner perception and thought of the world as an experience of knowledge drawn from intuition, shares the poet's will, as a sayer who shapes into words such an inner view of the outer by means of imagination:

Mystical experience seemed incommunicable beyond human speech. And yet, Emerson did insist on the need to communicate mystical experience and give it adequate external expression. Only by communicating his experience does the mystic assert his own self. The illuminated mystic poet, the "seer" is therefore always a "sayer" who feels "a desire to impart others the same knowledge and love". As both "seer" and "sayer", the mystic poet, Emerson insisted, had to subject his pristine experience to a "controlled" "conversion" into precise, comprehensible form. (Hurth 164)

The concepts of mysticism and imagination and the philosophical and literary context in which they develop will provide the individual with clues for the comprehension of his nature and for the assertion of his identity within this process of gaining self-awareness. How could the mystic shape knowledge out of intuition? How could he make the result of his spiritual experience inspired by a sensual perception compatible with philosophical principles? Is the expression of the perception of continuity between soul and matter within a literary discourse adapted to such a philosophical premise possible?

Literary discourse and philosophical thought would be shaped into an adequate intellectual framework for the expression of the intimate condition of the relation world-thought within the romantic and transcendentalist context. In this context the concepts of mysticism and imagination become literary and philosophical assets for the attainment of knowledge out of intuition. In *Nature* Emerson writes: "The Imagination may be defined to be, the use which the Reason makes of the material world" (34). If the mystic was guided by an intuitive comprehension of reality, imagination would provide such an experience of awareness with a creative answer by shaping the interaction between feeling and thought into an artistic expression.

Ultimately, the aim of this thesis will be to trace this process of self-awareness through the development of the concepts of mysticism and imagination in 19th and 20th century United States: mysticism as an attitude which looks for an insight into the human condition grounded on the individual's experience of life and on his relationship to the world, and imagination as the capacity of response of a creative mind to this experience.

The basis of my theoretical framework has been American Transcendentalism as a school of thought. This theoretical pillar has been complemented with more recent philosophical historical and critical works that shed new light on these key concepts: mysticism, imagination and self-knowledge. The methodology followed in my analysis has thus been a close reading of selected writings of representative thinkers and poets of the transcendentalist school, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Jones Very, Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell, whose creative production shows the continuity of the romantic tradition of thought on the spiritual condition of human being within a successively renewed literary and philosophical discourse. Although these are my key sources, I have also grounded my ideas on the evolution and transmission of mysticism and imagination as philosophical and artistic concepts throughout the ages, from the classical Greek and Roman world to the Christian tradition, as we will see in the contextual and analytical sections.

This study is divided into seven sections in which philosophical argumentation and the in-depth analysis of selected literary works provides evidence of such a condition of evolving self-awareness.

Sections I and II function as a detailed literary review. They deal with the evolution of the term mysticism from its origins, when it was not entirely accepted as an intellectual activity in the West, to its modern conception as an attitude toward life grounded in individual intuition and set within the American intellectual context. Section I collects relevant etymological and historical data to comprehend the broad and evolving meanings of the term mysticism. Mysticism stemmed from European classical philosophical and religious principles and progressively expanded as part of the cultural inheritance of New World settlers, being part of their daily experience of life.

Eventually understood as a means to deal with existential concerns, mystical experience would evolve into a view of life. Mystical experience was originally attached, in classic European culture, to philosophical and religious contents and this fact made the notions of reason and faith, on which such contents were respectively grounded, interact with each other. The evidence of truth in the knowledge which might be attained in a mystical experience should thus be found in the interaction between both empirical reasoning and spiritual perception. This intellectual background found continuity with a renewed and genuine interpretation in the New World. Section II introduces the concept of mysticism and the figure of the mystic into the more modern context that American thought furnishes. In North America the mystical experience benefitted from a wider literary transmission influenced by the deep religious convictions of the Puritans, together with a Unitarian tendency to read experience by means of symbolism. Furthermore, the new American interpretations of faith became concerned with intellectual contents which add a more pragmatic comprehension of it. As the Transcendentalist movement began to take shape, a new approach to the individual's concern with the condition of his being was made possible – one which searched for a moral answer to “a philosophical question about the nature and grounds of human knowledge that native theological models did not instigate and could not resolve” (Elliott 369). This task was mainly carried out by Transcendentalists and their most important representative, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Transcendentalists thus became a crucial reference point, as their thought was widely shared and influenced creative production from then on. Their philosophy of life defended philosophical interpretations of religious issues and individual intuition, reason and imagination as necessary premises to define an American identity and as a way of knowing the world. By adapting most of their inherited beliefs, they encouraged a new consciousness which challenged the Enlightenment view of the world. In their view, “the mind had become aware of itself” and this “view of self-consciousness . . . was transformative” (Gura par. 2). The individual's experience in nature along with the centrality of self-consciousness as a source of knowledge were encouraged within American romantic thought through the influence of German idealism and English authors like Wordsworth and Coleridge.

As important sources for the transcendentalists' knowledge of German philosophy and English writings we could quote many representative names: Frederic Henry Hedge, Germaine de Staël, James Marsh and Thomas Carlyle among others.³ The American transcendentalist period meant a transition to a pragmatic and moral view of faith that would derive into a renewed concept of mysticism. Those mystical features focused on by Transcendentalists, particularly their spiritual and mystical view of the poet, find their literary expression in the work of one of their members, Jones Very, as we will see in section IV. With a religious and philosophical orientation, his work in prose and poetry is a testimony and an example of the transcendental trust in the individual's intuitive power and in imagination as a source of knowledge. Section III appraises how the mystical heritage in American literature furnished this new understanding of human nature whose limits lay within the overlapping spaces between imagination and reality. The concept of imagination, as the faculty that interprets the symbols in nature by means of reason and intuition, and as a relevant source of values, greatly favours the individual's intellectual growth. The intuitive use of reason and imagination, together with the tendency to introspection in human behaviour to which the mystical heritage greatly contributed, would be highly influential in the transcendentalist's comprehension of his experience of the world. Imagination involves creative power and shapes the individual's thought of natural elements into creative interpretation and artistic expression. Through art human beings can transmit their intuition of the affinity between the sensual and the spiritual and their consciousness of continuity between world and thought. Reality as the result of the interdependence between the individual's experience of the world and thought is represented by the artist's insight. Thus, imagination encourages thinking in the mystic while it inspires religious, moral or artistic values in the philosopher and in the artist. A good example of this would be the frame of reference which American Transcendentalism set:

The combination of profound religious faith with artistic sensibility, of theological enlightenment with verbal perfectionism, of philosophical awareness with aesthetic daring constitutes the very essence of American Transcendentalism.

³For more information on these sources see also Goodman par. 4-7

. . . It seems, therefore, best to examine the American Transcendentalists not as adherents to an intellectual or aesthetic movement, but through the personified categories they themselves invented, namely, the universalized figures of the “poet”, the “thinker” and the “prophet”. (Bakratcheva par. 2)

In this case, words convey the poet’s feeling of beauty in his perception of harmony between thought and world. Imagination furnishes creativity in this difficult task, as it is the expression of the individual’s attainment of consciousness of his nature as a spiritual being, and the means for the interpretation of intellectual values. The imprint that mysticism and imagination left on the individual’s process of self-knowledge is present in Jones Very’s, Wallace Stevens’ and Stanley Cavell’s creative discourse, a discourse which would collect most of the main values claimed by Romantic thought.

Through the study of their respective literary and philosophical works in the following sections I will analyse the influential role of language in the discourse on self-consciousness. Jones Very, Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell are concerned with the power of language within the individual’s condition of self-awareness. In Section IV an analysis of Very’s prose highlights the importance of the figure of the epic poet and the epic hero in connection with the mystical experience of self-consciousness. We can find in Jones Very an example of mystical literary creativity resulting from an experience of life partly grounded in this renewed concept of mysticism in connection with transcendentalist and romantic thought. As Eric L. Haralson states,

Historically speaking, it is clear that Very was a transcendentalist, at least in the sense that for a period of some two years he was closely associated with the transcendental circle. . . . For a time, Very was part of that association, and he undeniably placed great faith in the voice within. For Very, however, the voice within was in a certain sense not the voice of his own self, for that self had been effaced to make place for the divine. Very’s Unitarians connections were also strong. . . . The Unitarians treated Very (for a few years before and for decades after his mystical period) as a Unitarian, and the transcendentalists treated him for a few years during the height of the movement as a transcendentalist. (449)

If mysticism allowed human being an experience of unity between the sensual and the spiritual, the epic search of the hero became an experience of affinity with the spirit represented in his outward actions and inward conflicts. Jones Very's interpretation of the evolution in the treatment of the epic expressed his conviction of a change in the individual's consciousness. The epic hero's behaviour, as well as the poet's, was determined by a need of spiritual involvement. The hero of actions conceals a hero of inner thoughts. In his essay on Epic Poetry Very studies how the evolution in human mind reflected an evolution of its perception of the world. Very saw the need to preserve the greatness of the epic hero's spirit and the epic poet's as a way to preserve the greatness of a universal sentiment, which he relates to the existence of a universal spirit.

Very's poetry was mainly concerned with nature, religion and his life. Three of his poems have been selected in order to reflect accurately these concerns, which reveal the sentiment that pervaded his personal and poetic development, as the core tenets of most of his poetic production. A spiritual approach to the sensual world is present in his poetry, particularly in the use of natural elements as symbols of his intuition of a spiritual existence. The study of these three poems is a good example of the vision of an intuitive perception of reality which made him an interpreter of his time and a representative of the mystical sentiment within Transcendentalism. The importance of mystical thought became progressively more evident in its literary influence. The relevance of the individual's interpretation of his existence as a spiritual being subsequent to the introspective view of sensual experiences was being encouraged by this mystical drive. The mystical literary response to this introspective view progressively became part of the creative expression of the individual's experience of self-awareness. In America the debate on the individual's consciousness of his nature as a being found a literary response in mystical writings:

Should Transcendentalism be considered a philosophy or a religion? And was Transcendentalism essentially native or imported in its character? The answer to each question is "both". . . . Actually, Kant and his continental successors were less directly influential for most transcendentalists than their literary refractions in Goethe and in the semipopularized British interpretations of German idealism by Thomas Carlyle and especially by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

. . . The “discovery” of the Reason was the great intellectual breakthrough that allowed the transcendentalist to reinvent the domain of higher spiritual consciousness and escape from the trap of empiricism that Unitarian epistemology seemed to have set. (Elliott 370)

This possibility to “escape from the trap of empiricism” set by Unitarian epistemology which Transcendentalist concern with self-consciousness introduced opened the way for a period of intellectual growth in America in the 19th and 20th centuries. There have been a wide range of European and American thinkers and artists, men and women, whose work has drawn necessary values for the continuity of such an intellectual growth.⁴ They needed to demonstrate their potential and their active and necessary role within a time of change and search of an American identity. The recovery of such an identity depended on a vision and comprehension of the experience of life which would be necessarily attached to the interaction between social status and moral values. Within such a rich spectrum of philosophical male and female poets and writers, deeply personal concerns and a genuine and particular dealing with the evolution of romantic thought in this case have made me select the work of Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell, as representative examples of the romantic and mystical legacy in the 20th century. Sections V and VI focus on their literary and philosophical contribution which has supposed the continuity of this attitude to life: their thought and creativity adhere to this intellectual position and aim at the comprehension of life and the individual’s condition of existence from an inner, sensual and spiritual approach. One of the writers whose thinking is most concerned with the affinity between the sensual and the spiritual would be Wallace Stevens. In the literary expression of his philosophy of life (Section V), we can find important clues that give continuity to this genuine thought which comprehends self-knowledge in the interdependence between thinking and the elements which compound the individual’s existence.

⁴“American women’s literary contributions at the time, particularly those of Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Catharine Sedgwick, Eliza Thayer Clapp, Sophia Ripley, Caroline Dall, or Ellen Sturgis Hooper, among many others, was a testimony to self-reliance. Women [in the 19th century] who were responsible for the ordinary events of the household and whose lives were centered in the family circle . . . were quite good at using such material in their fiction. And they did so, almost immediately. American women writers early concentrated on describing the social context that shapes the individual self, and thus they created a literature concerned with the connection between manners, morals, social class, and social value” (Fetterley 9)

For Stevens the power of thought is released through the multiple possibilities that words and the moral values that they symbolize may offer. The power of the sound of words is related to the values which they are conferred with. He discovers the power of sound in the practice of poetry: “Stevens’ poetry displays new patterns of sound emerging in the very effort to make things more clearly visible” (Rosu 109). Stevens’ work deals with the possibilities to find these values by means of the dialogue with nature and with the elements of ordinary life. He analyzes how the knowledge of these values can help the individual to know more about the condition of his being. As the Transcendentalists did, he adapted the intellectual values inherited from the past, such as the value of nobility and imagination, to the contemporary context. Through the analysis of one of his essays “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”, and five selected poems we can appreciate how his philosophical and literary concerns are much better understood within the context of art and nature, which are the main sources of inspiration for his creative work. Moreover, the study of some of Stevens’ most representative essays shows his philosophical and literary view on the concepts of reality and imagination. He was attracted by the alternatives which the power of imagination may offer to the individual’s comprehension of reality.

Stevens understood the concept of reality as a kind of duplicity between the material or physical world and the world of mind and imagination. His poetry became the instrument which allowed an access to the world by means of moral and aesthetic values together, a tool to set order in the world. As Charles Doyle indicates: “One of his dominant and persistent ideas was that poetry is an activity of very high order, essential to a true ordering of the world” (6). Stevens’ poetry is a dialectical poetry in which the abstract use of metaphors leads to a philosophical comprehension of the connection between words and world. His was a modernist view with an aesthetic purpose and intellectual commitment. For him, the importance of the aesthetic had much to do with the relevance of thought. With his creative work he sought the dialectic between matter and mind. And this dialectic meant the integration of world and thought in the artistic composition:

Apart from pursuing his concern for poetry as theme, Stevens continued coaxing the epistemological imagination, or, as Martz expresses it:

The 'transport to summer' consists in seizing with the imagination some pleasurable physical object, and then, by metaphor, clarifying it and relating it to other objects, until one has formed an integrated composition of the 'ideal' and the 'real'. By such man-made 'credences' we dominate and enjoy our environment, though such domination cannot be sustained for long, and must be vigilantly re-established from moment to moment. (Doyle 13)

Through artistic creativity Stevens focused on the experience of identity, of the self, in relation to those elements of the world present in the ordinariness of life. For Stevens the emptiness of identity and the loss of self-trust due to contemporary circumstances, which may awaken some kind of skepticism in the individual, find in art a referential value and a constant resource for self-recovery. This sort of skepticism has much to do with the individual's lack of identity due to a sense of loss of necessary values for his existence in harmony with the world. The pragmatic and moral basis grounded in the experience of life introduced in the classical and mystical heritage by Emerson's transcendentalist thought moved into the more interactive role of the individual with the world in Stevens' interpretation of artistic work. The individual's creative activity in which he interacts with the elements of the world makes his experience of the world an experience of intimacy and proximity.

Both Emerson and Stevens coincided in their identification of nature as key to the poet's reflection and self-recovery. As David Michael Hertz has argued: ". . . Stevens gradually reworks his religious values until they are sublimated into his admiration of nature, and he expresses in much of his writing the Emersonian vision of the direct connection between language and nature" (191). The mystic's search for balance and continuity between the inner interpretation of the outer experience of the world is present in Stevens' attempt to integrate reality and imagination by means of ordinary words. For him, ". . . the experience of the poet is of no less a degree than the experience of the mystic and we may be certain that in the case of poets, the peers of saints, those experiences are of no less a degree than the experiences of the saints themselves" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 50-51).

The need to recover from skeptical attitudes as a way to strengthen the individual's identity opens the need for a reinterpretation of that essential thought and romantic vision on life in which philosophical matters and their expression necessarily interact in order to preserve human being's identity. This need of reinterpretation of such a romantic view of life finds its expression in the works of one of the most influential of contemporary philosophers, Stanley Cavell. Cavell tackles the American tradition of thought represented by Emerson and his approach to it provides continuity to a philosophy of life which focuses on the relevance of the individual's expression of his relationship to the world as a resource for self-recovery. He rereads literary discourse through a genuine view of proximity and makes us wonder about our existence and reaffirm our selves through creativity and imagination:

Cavell prefers that literature itself teach us how to approach it and, indeed, whether any closer proximity to it – so often a wistful fantasy of intimacy – is necessary or even desirable. Perhaps this is a roundabout way of saying that instead of needing a set of theoretical terms with which to approach literature, we must learn to read it on its own terms. (Rudrum 7)

Section VI introduces Stanley Cavell's revealing way of dealing with ordinariness and skepticism. Imagination has much to do in the application of Cavell's philosophical arguments. As a philosopher, his is a challenging view on Romanticism: he shows us in his philosophical interpretation of literary texts, that there is a possibility of recovery within the challenge that skepticism poses to us. As Russell B. Goodman states, "skepticism becomes for Cavell a name for something that *we live*: an existential condition of alienation and strangeness, from which (and from the philosophical responses to which) romanticism seeks a recovery" (6). Through his treatment of philosophy and language Cavell values what the individual ordinarily does as a means to further knowledge into a process of self-reaffirmation. Cavell reconsiders the idea of skepticism as a relevant attitude which may encourage the individual to keep on thinking about the condition of his nature in relationship to the ordinary elements of the world. For him, the tasks of philosophy and the tasks of language interact with each other. He finds the response to the bonding of philosophy and poetry in ordinary language.

His quest of the ordinary is his call for philosophy. Ordinariness keeps us close to our existence. His thinking binds the conception of the American philosopher's task to the idea of continuity between thought and world. "Cavell speaks of 'inheriting' Emerson and Thoreau, and of their founding a distinctive American way of doing philosophy" (Goodman 7). He sees in the individual's lack of certainty about the nature of his being, and in the subsequent skeptical sentiment, the philosophical attitude that makes us keep on doubting. Thus, for Cavell feeling and thought provide the individual's identity with existential meaning. In his "Texts of Recovery" Cavell sees the literary and philosophical discourse in a new light.

As Stephen Mulhall has emphasized, there is thus an importantly therapeutic aspect to how Cavell reads reading. . . . For Cavell, as Mulhall points out, reading these texts of recovery in this way is not only about connecting ideas or concepts, thoughts or feelings: it is also a matter of attending to the words themselves so that they may interpret us. (Rudrum 35)

In words and in our way of interpreting them Cavell suggests that the individual may learn how to recover his self. Just as the mystic initiates a different approach and learns how to better understand the outer world through an inner experience of it, Cavell shows us how to read and find by mediation of words the lost intimacy between the individual and the ordinary elements which confer existential meaning and identity.

Cavell's thought emerges from encounters with thinkers whom one often sees described as mystical: Wittgenstein and Heidegger, and especially Emerson and Thoreau (whom Cavell describes as a mystic). One way of placing Cavell as a philosopher is through his contributions to the romantic response to Kant and the problem of scepticism. . . . Cavell's most important contribution to this confrontation is the concept of *acknowledgment*, a concept with which he articulates a relation to the world which is more "primary" than Kantian knowledge. . . . Cavell argues that in Emerson and Thoreau we find resources for conceptualizing a kind of intuitive intimacy with the world which is neither Kantian "immediacy" nor knowledge. . . . Cavell helps us think of mysticism as a practice of placing oneself in the life of the world by encountering it in the reality of its otherness, which is a precondition for acknowledging it in its relation to us. (Roberts 118 – 121)

If the mystic learned to “read” his perception of the world from an insight, Cavell proposes to learn how we relate to the world in order to know more about ourselves through that immediacy to it which ordinariness and language may offer. Our ability to imagine provides us with a new reading of words which leads us into that state of intimacy with the world and its possible answers to our existential condition. Imagination can help us to cope with that sense of skepticism which may arise in the individual’s experience of the world. It can help us share and get that state of intimacy which has been lost in losing the individual’s feeling of identity.

This conception of sense, finitude, and projection bears similarities both to Kant’s conception of the transcendental imagination and Heidegger’s conception of the projective sense. In particular, Cavell’s characterization of the capacity to project concepts into new particular cases as a species of the imagination parallels Kant’s own claims about the imagination as the mysterious “common root” of the intuition and the understanding. And his specification of this appeal to the imagination as an invocation of the ability to project routes and dimensions of significance, on the basis on which aspects and entities of the world are disclosed. . . . Still, Cavell’s conception differs from both of these by its specific referenced to the structure of language, . . . our “human” possibilities of meaning are everywhere regulated and structured . . . by the complex form of the language we learn and speak. (Stalmaszczyk par. 10)

In every attempt to shape existential concerns into their expression human being gains access to a wider knowledge. The response to the individual’s need to know his condition is both in a renewed discourse and its reading, as the creative answer in any of its artistic manifestations which adapts to the demands of change that may stem from this process of self-awareness.

The thread running through the different authors and texts in this study is the evolution of a concept of life shared by them and motivated by a common willingness to find the paths towards “a holy place”, paraphrasing Emerson’s words, where “we should go very warily and reverently”.

Their vision of life is grounded in their belief in the possibility of an identity between the individual's and the world's condition: "We stand before the secret of the world, there where Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Poet* 453). From its origins in the classical philosophical and literary tradition to its expansion by influence of the romantic European tradition into America, this attitude to life, which feeds deeply from mystic and imaginative expression, has progressed and spread through American literary and philosophical discourse. My analysis of selected poetic and philosophical writings in the chapters that follow shows the enriching intellectual implications of this ever-changing discourse that still has much to say in today's world.

I – MYSTICISM AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

The creative spaces that opened up in 19th century America when literary and philosophical thoughts crossed paths around the mystical, imaginative experience of the self would contribute to a new understanding of individual existence. In this section we will appraise the meaning and foundational elements of such mystical experience and briefly trace its evolution throughout the history of Western thought.

I.1- Defining the Term

A mystical attitude induces the mind to that intuitive state which instills intellectual interest with a desire for spiritual knowledge; and this concept of intuition would eventually refer to an innate and higher knowledge than that which comes through the senses, Emerson's "gleam of light" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Self-Reliance* 259). In this way, mysticism permits a more introspective view of sensual experiences, a vision based on an intuitive perception of reality which enhances the possibility of continuity between the physical and the spiritual within the mind. The use of the noun "mystic" as a visionary, particularly during Romanticism in Europe, when the concept of reason would be understood as intuition,⁵ acquires connotations that would no longer associate mystical experiences with superstition, but with an innate, intuitive ability of the individual to connect material and spiritual reality. Throughout the ages mysticism has always dealt with existential concerns which question the spiritual condition of being.

With respect to etymology, the term is of Greek origin. Initially, *mystikos*, derived from the verb *muo* (to close) lacked any direct reference to the transcendent, referring only to the hidden or secret dimensions of ritualistic activities. As Louis Bouyer (1980) notes, the link of mysticism and the vision of the Divine was introduced by the early church fathers, who used the term as an adjective (mystical theology, mystical contemplation) . . . It was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that one finds the term (*la mystique*) used as a substantive.

⁵For further information on how the concepts of reason and intuition would be understood during the Romantic period see sections II.1.3 "The Influence of German Idealism" and also Phillips pp. 9-10

Michel de Certeau (1992) reminds us that this shift was linked to a new discourse that framed contemplative figures as social types (“the mystics”) and the emergence of a new understanding of the Divine as existing within human beings, a universal dimension of the deepest recesses of the mind hidden beneath the variety of religious traditions and their doctrines. These shifts paved the way for mysticism to be investigated comparatively and with respect to secular social spaces, which is to say both academically and scientifically. (Parsons Introduction par. 1)

The word “mysticism” often referred to visionary aspects in religion, or “what is most obscure in speculation” (Vaughan xxvii-xxix), which created an unclear idea of the term, leading to pejorative connotations. Those so-called “mystics” who devoted their lives to following the impulses of their souls were only trying to escape from the human to the divine through a spiritual search, a path that was rarely understood by those who did not share their passion. In this way, mysticism would often be described as an excessive devotion of the spirit that had nothing to do with the intellect. But, on the contrary, the truth revealed by that spiritual search would serve the intellect to a great extent. The knowledge attained as a result of a mystical experience has encouraged the individual’s development of self-consciousness in Western and Eastern civilizations throughout history. No single definition can provide the term with the complexity and necessary connection between the philosophical arguments and divine revelation implicit in its meaning. However, the mystical experiences of many mystics from different cultural contexts and traditions have contributed to the far-reaching significance of the term and helped to fill the gaps in the knowledge of matters which other disciplines failed to complete.⁶ Mysticism has proved to be an innate ability in man to attain a deeper level of comprehension through contemplation. “If Mysticism be often a dream, it is commonly a dream in the right direction. Its history presents one of the most interesting chapters in the story of humanity” (Vaughan xxxiii).

⁶“For example, the roots of Jewish mysticism may be traced to prophetic experiences of being overwhelmed by God” (Thiselton *Jewish Mysticism* par. 1). On the other hand, “Christian mysticism, greatly influenced by the Christian version of Platonism developed by Pseudo-Dionysius . . . retains notions of hierarchy and order” (Thiselton *Christian Mysticism* par. 3). “Islamic mysticism, with Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina urged the superior value of philosophical thought, but retained the religious conviction that reason cohered with the revelation of Qu’ran” (Thiselton *Mysticism* par. 2), while “[H]indu mysticism . . . aims at liberation from individual identity or from all that entails bodily life, rebirth or reincarnation, in order to become One undifferentiated consciousness as Ultimate Reality/Self” (Thiselton *Hindu and Buddhist Mysticism* par. 1)

Robert Alfred Vaughan's words highlight mysticism's influence in many currents of thought as well as his endeavour to pursue his favourite subject of study:

Mysticism is almost everywhere synonymous with what is most visionary in religion and most obscure in speculation. . . . First of all, Mysticism, though an error, has been associated, for the most part, with a measure of truth so considerable, that its good has greatly outweighed its evil. On this ground alone, its history should be judged of interest. For we grow more hopeful and more charitable as we mark how small a leaven of truth may prove an antidote to error, and how often the genuine fervour of the spirit has all but made good the failures of the intellect. . . . Through all the changes of doctrine and the long conflict of creeds, it is interesting to trace the unconscious unity of mystical temperaments in every communion. . . . But the interest attached to Mysticism is by no means merely historic. It is active under various forms in our own time. It will certainly play its part in the future. (xxvii-xxix)

This quotation in Vaughan's Preface to the First Edition (1856) of *Hours with the Mystics* partly portrays the importance of mystical thought in the 19th century from a religious perspective and historical inquiry. This innate ability in man which has led him to wonder about the condition of his nature is commonly shared as an experience of unity everywhere throughout the ages.

One of the most valued but ineffable mystical experiences in both the East and the West is the experience of unity. So profound is it that the mystics thereafter remain silent concerning it. . . . It is an event in which all experience is somehow seen together. The outer world and the inner merge into one; no distinction is made between subject and object. All knowledge is interwoven; everything is in the light of everything else, as though every fragment of knowledge and understanding illuminated every other fragment of knowledge and understanding. . . . all the contents of the mind become unified. It is all One, and this One may be felt as in some way merging with the cosmos itself. (Christian 226)

Mysticism has always been part of significant chapters in the history of civilizations. As Ursula King states a mystic is someone,

...who experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life. . . . There are many different kinds of mystics in all religions. . . . Many people today are drawn to mystics for inspiration and transformation. . . . Mystics travelled along the margins of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the world of the mundane and the world of the spirit, where all things are made whole. (King 3-4)

In studying the word “mysticism” etymologically first, we can appreciate how it can be applied to a variety of disciplines (apart from religion) such as philosophy, history or psychology. Whether from East or West the different ways of thinking or methods of thought attached to mysticism are related to the individual’s spiritual nature or man’s search for immediacy with the divine and share their encouragement to find an intellectual expression of their concerns. Rudolf Otto’s comparison of the principal types of Eastern and Western mystical experience accurately describes their link,

. . . in mysticism there are indeed strong primal impulses working in the human soul which as such are completely unaffected by differences of climate, of geographical position or of race. These show in their similarity an inner relationship of types of human experience and spiritual life which is truly astonishing. . . . there are within mysticism many varieties of expression which are just as great as the variations in any other sphere of spiritual life, be it in religion generally, or in ethics, or in art. (xvi)

Regarding our subject matter and in order to give a clearer definition of the word, it would be necessary as well to know how this concept has been studied by Western philosophy and religion throughout history; in both fields we find the marks of devotion and reason. Moreover, it is necessary to trace the roots of the term back to Platonism, as we can see in Andrew Louth’s study on the origins of the Christian mystical tradition:

. . . it was in terms of such methods of thought (Patristic theology, contemporary Hellenistic culture and Platonism) that Christian theology found its first intellectual expression.

To quote Endre von Ivánka ‘The phenomenon which characterizes the whole of the first millennium of the Christian theological thought is the use of Platonism as the form for [its] philosophical expression and the framework of the world-picture in terms of which the proclamation of revealed truths was made – in other words, Christian Platonism’. (Louth Introduction)

As we have seen, the etymological roots of the word mysticism derive from the Greek, *muo*, which means ‘to close mouth, lips and eyes, remain silent and be initiated into a mystery’, the adjectives mystic and mystical and the adverb mystically were used to modify an array of practices within the ancient Greek mystery religions, Greek Neoplatonic philosophy, and, most lastingly, Christianity. They then moved seamlessly from Greek into Latin and from thence into the Western European vernaculars. In their earliest Greek and Latin uses, mystic and mystical simply meant hidden (Hollywood 5). *Mystikos*, thus mystic, is frequently used to denote a secret doctrine related to mysteries, an esoteric personal knowledge and an experience elusive of reason. In the practice of ancient Greek mystery rites, the person initiated therein remained silent, and silence induced reflection and contemplation. The initiation was a personal and unique experience, which was mental but also emotional, and induced an ecstatic state of being. *Mysticism* and *mystery* –as silence, secrecy, contemplation and inexplicable but real experience– are present in Byzantine mystical life. Byzantine mysticism was the product of interactions between Greek philosophical premises and religious survivals and the new faith, Christianity (Constantelos 176-177). The term would later come to refer to hidden allegorical interpretations of Scriptures in early Christianity and would eventually be linked to mystical theology, implying a direct experience of the divine. Within these changes and theological adscriptions, it is important to highlight that mystical experience was ultimately aimed at human transformation. This process was undertaken by mystics, theistic or not, through different practices and traditions. While a religious approach to these mystical experiences emphasized experience in the strict sense, philosophical interest focused on the evidence for the truth of their contents (Gellman *Mysticism* par. 1).

I.2- Mysticism: From Classical Philosophies to the 19th Century

In studying the evolution of the concept and its implications, we find that the first attempt to reconcile Christian doctrine with the classical philosophies of Greek and Roman society appears with Neoplatonism (3rd c. A.D.). A school of religious and mystical philosophy founded by Plotinus (ca. 205-270), this pagan philosophy had a strong influence on Christianity. Plotinus incorporated the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and other Greek philosophers (Wilson 500). The teachings of Platonism conceived a system formed by the Invisible world and the phenomenal world. “Plotinus states that matter needs a light, Being, in order to be visible at all, metaphorically implying that Being –which in turn needs a higher light, the Good– is in some sense the cause of the visible realm” (Yount 19). “Plotinus also believes that the Good (or One) is beyond Being and is the cause or source of the Forms” (Yount 8). He “. . . states that the Good is above all realities (the Forms), above all things and the cause of all things. . . . the Good is the source of the Forms’ existence” (Yount 9). “All things have a double relation to the One; they come from it (One) and are oriented back towards it to receive their completion (Good). In the One all things have being and are divine. From the One all other divine attributes derive” (Allen 336). As John Rist explains in his study on Plotinus and Christian philosophy: “From the One comes the Divine Mind and from the Divine Mind comes Soul.” (qtd. in Gerson 390). The concept of the transcendent One, the Platonic form of the Good, would eventually change its characteristics into those attributable to God, the transcendent God, altering the definition to fit the God determined by scripture and in a search for points of support in religious philosophy and worship.

The theological traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism all, in their formative periods, looked to ancient Greek philosophy for the language and arguments with which to articulate their religious visions. For all of these, Platonism expressed the philosophy that seemed closest to their own theologies. Plotinus was the principal source for their understanding of Platonism. (Gerson *Influence* par. 2)

Plotinus believed in the return of the Soul from the world below to the heavenly world above. This doctrine would be an incentive for Christians to follow him as he considered the possibility for the soul to ascend to God. This return of the soul would occur within the religious context of the mystical experience as an experience of union and identity with God. Christians would maintain the concept of the essence of man as just a soul, but Plotinus' notion of the self-perfection of the soul (that cannot sin) would appear contradictory for the most orthodox Christians, who saw in it a threat to their notion of the need for redemption. Thus, and paraphrasing John Rist's words in his analysis on Christian philosophy mentioned above, both Platonism and Neoplatonism aided the development of Christianity, while at the same time introducing theological problems for the development of true Christianity (qtd. in Gerson 393).

Plotinus' metaphysical writings and works, the *Enneads*, a collection of six groups of treatises, each one of which is divided into nine parts (from Greek, *ennead* 'nine'), collected and edited by Porphyry, his disciple, would inspire many metaphysicians and mystics over the centuries. Later on, the doctrines of Neoplatonism would be more fully developed by Proclus (412- 485 A.D.).

With Plotinus, Proclus recognizes three fundamental levels of reality called 'hypostases' (or self-subsistent entities): One, Intellect, and Soul. . . . Proclus distinguishes between the intelligible Being (*to noêton*—what is the object of intellectual intuition) and the intellective (*to noeron*—what is intelligizing), and introduces between both, as an intermediary level, the *noêton-noeron* (what is being intelligized and intelligizing). These three ontological levels thus correspond to the triad of Being, Life, and Intellect. (Helmig par. 27)

Proclus defended the notion of a level of individual *ones* (*henads*, identified with the traditional Greek gods), which exists between the One itself and the divine Intellect and becomes a connecting stage between absolute unity and multiplicity (Samaranch 1975: 28) The intimate relation between Being, Life, and Intellect is the origin of the basic structure uniting all causes to their effects, namely the relation of immanence, procession and reversion. Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it (Helmig par. 29).

The doctrine of the henads can thus be seen as a way of integrating the traditional gods of Greek polytheistic religion into the Neoplatonic metaphysics of the One (Helmig par. 31). Proclus' thought transformed Plato's philosophy into a type of religion and all his concepts would have a great influence on the history of Western philosophy. Plotinus' principles and Proclus' works and ideas were the source for Dionysius the Areopagite (late 5th - early 6th), an Athenian convert of St. Paul, whose writings and mystical teaching would be universally accepted and would have a great influence on all of medieval theology. A theologian from the sixth century, he intended to reconcile Greek philosophical tradition with the Gospel. He transformed Proclus' polytheistic universe into a cosmos created by God, where a great harmony exists. He could be considered the first great mystical theologian; with him, the word "mystic" acquires a new meaning. Until then, this word had been equivalent for Christians to "sacramental", something that belonged to the *mysterion*, a sacrament, the act of having a religious experience for a certain amount of time. Dionysius made of mysticism a more precise concept: it became the path of the soul towards God, the way through which we can understand the most elevated concepts of God, hidden beneath him. For Dionysius, the universe was a cosmos created by God. God was the ground of the soul. The knowledge of the universe was related to the knowledge of God. He insisted on personal experience as the most important thing in religion. His reading of sources of symbols leads to the useful interpretation of religious metaphors, as he does in his reading a verse from the 78th psalm –God is awakening from drunkenness– in which Dionysius, ". . . finds a meaning common to both intelligible and visible things: withdrawal from the world" (Corrigan par. 16). His knowledge of Platonism and the Christian tradition enabled him to transform them both, and the use of liturgical references in his writings confer on his work philosophical and religious contents that had not been combined until this period.⁷ Among the most relevant mystics in the West, along with Pseudo-Dionysius (c.500), we should also mention Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-74), Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1413), the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c.1350-95); Teresa of Avila (1515-82); John of the Cross (1542-91) and Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) (Thiselton Chronology).

⁷To further explore his works, see Colm Luibhéid, Paul Rorem. 1987. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press.

Their lives were an example of the growth of their spirituality. In the literary images of their writings we find the language of the soul as the language of a universal spirit. Their thought helped to expand the significance of mysticism as a source of self-knowledge, as we can clearly see in the case of Spanish mysticism:

The mysticism of Spain, then, is of the purest type: in it both idealism and realism are carried to the highest possible degree. It is also . . . intensely personal and idealistic. . . .What has to be annihilated in the soul, as St. John of the Cross never tires of saying, is ‘affections for pleasures with respect to all that is not God’. A knowledge of oneself is an indispensable preliminary to a knowledge of God. (Peers 34)

The figure and the work of the Majorcan Ramón Lull (c.1235-1315), the “Apostle of Africa”, deserve a special mention since his literary contribution enhances and praises the relevance of a mystical attitude and its goal:

Throughout the Middle Ages, which gave such notable mystics to Italy, Germany, the Low Countries and England, religious fervor in Spain was directed mainly to the task of expelling the Moslems and thus winning back the whole of the country for the Cross. But in the thirteenth century one figure stands out – a Majorcan, Ramón Lull. . . . the opusculum which gives Lull’s mysticism immortality is the unforgettable little *Book of the Lover and the Beloved*. . . . Under the essentially mystical figure of the Beloved –God –and His Lover –the contemplative Soul– Lull not only uses picturesque and appealing language to describe the Incarnation, the Passion and the Crucifixion of Christ, but points those who have fallen in love with God to the renunciations, the perils and the glories of the mystical life and to the sublimity of its goal. (Peers 15-16)

Mystical literature in Spain enhanced the relevance of the contemplative life. During the sixteenth century, the works of St. Ignatius of Loyola, Bernardino de Laredo and Francisco de Osuna were influential and contributed to the growth of spiritual life, while the writings of a much greater mystic, St. Teresa of Jesus, who devoted her life to meditation, were concerned with the search for God’s presence within the framework of a life within spirituality (Peers 18):

It is also well to keep in mind when reading the Spanish mystics –and Teresa in particular– that mysticism was an actual, vital reality in sixteenth-century Spain. It was not merely a theory or a doctrine experienced only by a few individuals on numerous occasions. For the special mystics, it meant a contemplative yearning toward and the achievement of a unique and ineffable union with God himself. (Houston 31)

In a similar way as in the Spanish tradition, mystical speech in the 16th and 17th centuries becomes the literary expression and response to a need of repair present in the search of spiritual union with God, or in Michel de Certeau's words, a "locus of speech" and a "historical trope" for the sentiment of loss (De Certeau 80). In his "Mystic Speech" in *Heterologies*, De Certeau explains:

The mysticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries proliferated in proximity to a loss. It is a historical trope for that loss. It renders the absence that multiplies the production of desire readable. At the dawn of modernity, an end and a beginning – a departure – are thus marked. The literature of mysticism provides thus a path for those who ask "the way to get lost. No one knows." It teaches "how not to return". But the mysticism of that age is connected as much to the collective history of a transition as it is to inaugural "wanderings." It is the story of the Christian "Occident." . . . "the retreat of mystics" coincides with the dawning of the century of the Enlightenment. The project of a radical Christianity was formed against a backdrop of decadence and "corruption" in a world that was falling apart and in need of repair. (80)

On the threshold of this age of transition in Europe in the 17th century, the mysticism within the English poetic tradition would also have a key role. The metaphysical poets like John Donne and George Herbert, began to mix strong feelings with reason. In an attempt to repair this separation between the physical and the spiritual, John Donne tried to find in poetry the way of relating them:

Donne's poetry, as well as that of the other metaphysical poets, sought to establish a way of inseparably uniting the body and the soul in this world; it strenuously affirmed human sexuality as a way of to achieve spirituality.

. . . Donne broke away from the past and offered new brilliant ways to perceive reality and the spiritual nature of our secular existence. (Bloom 13)

George Herbert likewise rooted emotions in thoughts: “Herbert’s imagery, like Donne’s, works through the mind rather than the senses and the structure of his poems is logical” (Bennett 49). The peculiarity of the metaphysical poets is not that they relate, but that the relations that they perceive are more often logical than sensuous or emotional, and that they constantly connect the abstract with the concrete, the remote with the near, and the sublime with the commonplace (Bennett 3). While the European Enlightenment “. . . was the cultural expression of an age of absolutism”, the English Enlightenment “. . . presents an interesting contrast; it expressed itself in the context of social, political and religious compromise” (Hoyles 149). The religious, philosophical and social background of the mystics and the poets in 17th century England showed the affinities between the mystic’s experience and the poet’s inspiration and meant continuity to the cross-currents of philosophical and religious thought in Europe, at a time in which religion was becoming the individual’s experience of God.

It is also worthy to note that European universities maintained an active philosophical tradition of Platonism during the Middle Ages and even till the 15th century. The Renaissance introduced Neoplatonism into Christian doctrine, following the steps of Dionysius the Areopagite in the 5th century; and in England, during the 17th century, the so-called Cambridge Platonists continued with the current of Neoplatonism and the translation of Plotinus’ works, thus contributing to its expansion. They were convinced of the compatibility of reason and faith and dedicated their philosophical learning to religious and moral issues, defending the existence of God and the immortality of the soul (Hutton *The Cambridge Platonists* par. 2). Finding a connection between those notions of faith and reason might have seemed a contradiction. Experiences related to faith, mystical experiences in our case, seemed to lack the evidence of truth present in those empirical experiences grounded on reason as far as they (mystical experiences) are not grounded in analytic proofs or logic procedures. At this point the Cambridge Platonists’ thought laid down the conditions to combine them: “They held the eternal existence of moral principles and of truth and that the human mind is equipped with the principles of reason and morality” (ibid.).

As men who believed in the existence of God, they defended the possibility of relating religion to philosophy and thought that philosophy was the theologians' concern. They believed that spirit and matter fill infinite space and that God's spirit was omnipresent throughout the universe (ibid.). Cambridge Platonists understood God as an immanent, all-pervasive Being and had a mystical understanding of reason; they believed that reason was not only the sense-making facility of the mind, but also an echo of the divine within the human soul and an imprint of God within man. Reason could lead beyond the sensory because it was semi-divine. For them, reason was of God, capable of approaching God (Cambridge Platonists *Religious Idealism and Tolerance* par. 2). Philosophical principles could become the means to demonstrate that part of truth that any religious doctrine, due to its inherent connection with faith, seemed to lack. Reason and faith, philosophy and religion became, in this way, less distant notions. This ideological context opened a path for mysticism (and its treatment of philosophical and religious matters) to be more precisely defined as a doctrine. The connotation of "visionary", mistakenly associated with the figure of the mystic, had evolved into a more rational view. But the fact that mystical thoughts were learned by the mystic through revelation implied concerns that had not been reached by the senses, but through divine revelation, beyond the senses. Thus, how can true (religious) faith be distinguished in a mystic, or how can mysticism be considered a result of reasoning based on true evidence? A controversial answer to this question could be found in the work of John Locke, who established a connection between empiricism and belief in biblical miracles. As Barbara Packer states, ". . . as a testimony of a power superior to nature, perceivable by the senses and verifiable by witnesses – a philosophy that would appeal to the liberal theologians of New England" (qtd. in Bercovitch 339). In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke mentions those men who have had ". . . an immediate intercourse with the Deity" (*Essay* 4, 19.5) and he says:

Reason is lost upon them, they are above it: they see the light infused into their understandings, and cannot be mistaken; it is clear and visible there, like the light of bright evidence: they feel the hand of God moving within, and the impulses of the Spirit, and cannot be mistaken in what they feel. (*Essay* 4, 19.8) (qtd. in Bercovitch 338-339)

These words could well describe a mystical attitude, in which things experienced beyond the reach of the senses are learned only through revelation. The fact of believing in something that violated the laws of nature (since everything that happens in nature is drawn from experience and then, true or believable) implied believing in false or doubtful evidence, in something that cannot be proved empirically, something that cannot be completely accepted as true, or that cannot be verified by the intellect, as Packer affirms (qtd. in Bercovitch 338-339). According to this, we would once more be thinking of the mystic as a visionary. But by claiming that they were “above” Reason and felt “the hand of God” within them, Locke was redefining the position of the mystic (if we place this excerpt into a mystical context) in conceiving Reason as the ability in man to perceive spiritual truth *intuitively* (Buell 4-5). For Locke, Reason was a faculty of the mind that, through the experience of the senses, could act as an intuitive power to arrive at that truth. This concept would be later adopted by the Transcendentalists, but they would differentiate between reason, as a higher mental faculty that enables man to perceive what is spiritual, and understanding, as the capacity for empirical reasoning. The intuition of a common spiritual existence could be interpreted as the possibility of spiritual continuity between the individual and the elements of the world. When the comprehension of reality is not limited to the senses, when there is not only a physical apprehension of the world, then the act of thinking of the world is set into both a rational and subjective context.

A new interpretation of the individual’s condition of existence is provided by this altered view of the world in a context where objectivity and subjectivity interact. As part of this context of interaction, the individual’s awareness of this spiritual continuity becomes a process of self-awareness, an attempt to understand the nature of the self, the notion of being. The nature of being is shaped as a universal, pervading and flowing essence reflected in the interaction between the individual and the world. His innate ability of language enables the individual to evoke the growth of this consciousness of the self within man’s thinking. In evoking this growth into self-consciousness, the meaningful role of mystical discourse becomes much more evident in America during and after the period of transition and change which meant the post-independence time in the 18th century and in the beginnings of American literature as national tradition.

To appraise the deep intellectual imprint left by mystical speech within this time of radical historical change in America we could also consider the sense implicit in De Certeau's words,

The end of a world was the experience sought by every spiritual poet. Their daring and luminous paths streaked a night from which they were later extracted by a piety greedy for mystic traces; they inscribed themselves on its black page, and it is there where we must relearn to read them. (De Certeau 80)

In relation to America, this idea would allude to the questioning of a world ruled by the inherited premises postulated by Enlightening and Reason. The path to an American identity was to be found in the very expression of self-questioning. Such discourse poses the means to transform American people individually and socially. The discourse on self-questioning with an implicit sense of the end of a world, much closer to that sense of the dark present in Spanish mysticism, would spread a sense of new wandering in the New World. Romantic and Transcendentalist rereadings of life experience would be like the optimistic view in the colorful dabs of a canvas. Furthermore, for De Certeau, “[t]he mystics’ reinterpretation of the tradition is characterized by a set of procedures allowing a new treatment of language – of all contemporary language. . . . It is ways of acting that guide the creation of a body of mystical writings” (De Certeau 81). Romantic and Transcendentalist thought would enable a new reading and learning of the individual’s “ways of acting” and experience of life. Within the American context these ways of acting lead to new experiences and creative proposals for a new nation in the making. In the early nineteenth century, the New England Transcendentalists, “[h]aving been emancipated by Unitarianism from New England’s original Calvinism, found a new religious expression in forms derived from romantic literature and from the philosophical idealism of Germany” (Miller 1981: Foreword). With the Transcendentalists as inheritors of this view of the world, the mystic becomes the interpreter and sayer of this subjective and objective experience in writing. Words as a reflection of thoughts may offer the possibility of rebuilding that notion of being and the possibility of self-recovery.

In America, mystical discourse offers a response to this sense of loss. Mysticism is understood as a new wandering and focuses on the transformative (and divine) power of the self. The individual's thought represents his sensual and spiritual awareness of reality. The transformative power of mystical discourse would be present in 19th and 20th American century. We only have to mention Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson to understand the complexity of the evolution of mystic discourse from Europe to America.⁸ The strong presence of mystical elements in their poetry makes them both, though contemporaries and very different from each other, representative of this change in the American view of discourse, the poetic discourse in this case. Their poetic voice is the revelation of the power of transformation within words.

At this point, the name of Thomas Merton deserves to be mentioned. An American Trappist monk, a mystic and a poet, he was not a theologian, but a creative writer in the 20th century. Interested in progressive politics and avant-garde literature, his is "... a radical response to the secular crisis of modernity and marked a significant transition from literary modernity to postmodern religious belief" (Inchausti 7). Merton's work *The Seven Storey Mountain* had a deep impact as it took archetypal and universal images into a contemporary context. Edward Rice, as a close friend and biographer of Thomas Merton, comments on this book:

There are dozens of books with similar themes, yet this is the only one that touched a vital nerve in modern man. What makes it different from the others is its great evocation of a young man in an age when the soul of mankind had been laid open as never before, during world depression and unrest and the rise of both Communism and Fascism... It was a confrontation of the basic alienation of man with society, with the natural and supernatural forces that had nurtured him over the centuries. But most of all it was a confrontation with Christianity, basically with Merton's own vision of Catholicism. It was a great work, and it touched almost everyone who read it. (Rice 87-88)

⁸For further information on these authors, see "The Theme of Mysticism in Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson" www.eajournals.org/.../The-Theme-of-Mysticism-in-Walt-Whitm... de S. Farzana - 2016.

Merton brought his existential significance into dialogue with contemporary culture. According to him Christianity “. . . [c]an not only throw light on the most typical and most urgent problems of the modern world but that there is a certain light which Christianity alone can provide. But this light does not shine all by itself. . . . it must be made evident *by the creative activity of Christians themselves as they participate in the solution of contemporary problems on which the very future of man depends.*” (qtd. in Inchausti 5) His life experience was an experience of someone “living out the faith in the world” (Inchausti 14). As Transcendentalists did, Merton’s search of God meant to live “in accord with the Christ within, . . . ,your own true Self” (Inchausti 11). This God was to be found in contact with nature; it was there where the individual could recover his true self. According to Fernando Beltrán Merton describes the experience of life as a process of self-recovery, a journey of transformation after a loss of identity, the loss of the true-self:

Porque, mantiene nuestro autor, el auténtico “viaje” para alcanzar la integración final es una *metanoia*, un camino de transformación, una auténtica “conversión de corazón”, que en su caso, y para seguir su propio juego de palabras, consistiría verdaderamente en una continua “conversación” de corazón, con el corazón y hacia el corazón; un viaje desde una identidad falsa, reducida al “yo” empírico, una máscara superficial ilusoria, y presa de las obsesiones de la cultura del momento (en nuestro caso, del dinero, del poder, del placer, del “tener” en definitiva), hasta un “yo” auténtico, una realidad incuestionable, una identidad profunda, “beyond the shadow and the disguise”, más allá incluso de la convención monástica. (Beltrán 19)

Spiritual life is a journey to discover and to meet again one’s identity between God and our selves. Merton searched for God through self-awareness and the search of his own true self can be compared to the epic hero’s quest: “Su búsqueda arquetípica iba a reproducir a la vez, en su interior, la de los héroes y las de Jonás y Moisés” (Beltrán 60). And in this search language is the means to mediate between the world within and the outer: “. . . para M, escribir significaba dar realidad a su doble identidad, de monje y de escritor, y establecer una conciliación entre su “yo” exterior compulsivo, . . . , y su “yo” interno, esa identidad nueva, redimida” (Beltrán 43).

In the same way as Thoreau and Emerson found the source of inspiration of that sense of continuity between the individual's and the world's existential condition in the act of being alone with nature, Merton “. . . encontró otra vez, en soledad dentro de la soledad, el corazón del mundo, y aunque vio que jamás lo había abandonado realmente, ahora quedaba, a sus ojos, trans-formado, o lo que es igual, conformado por la transcendencia” (Beltrán 56). John Howard Griffin wrote of Merton that he had “. . . the ability to see many facets of the same object and to combine within himself seeming opposites” (qtd. in Griffin ix). As a man who led a mystical life, Merton was the living expression of his deepest moral and religious convictions. His commitment to the defence of his faith and beliefs is comparable to Very's endeavor and determination to demonstrate the importance of moral values at a time in need of introspection and spiritual renewal.

The look into ordinary objects and people in the poetry and creative production of writers and artists over the centuries and, particularly in our case, in America is a song of their perception of a unique working spirit and identity, as a project of social change and as a means for self-recovery. Dickinson's individualism and concern with self-awareness stand out as her personal challenge to the underlying deepest religious beliefs in her words. Whitman's epic hero is a hero because of his commonness and of his will to find his self; any American can be a hero, and this is the greatness of Whitman's concept of epic intimacy. Merton's inner epic quest is present in his inner struggle to overcome the difficulties in correlating the state of creative contemplation and criticism: “Lentamente Merton va aceptando y reconciliándose con su vocación de escritor-poeta en sus dos facetas: contemplativa-creativa y crítica. . . . tras haber evolucionado hacia un humanismo comprometido en denunciar todo tipo de discursos alienados y alienantes” (Petisco 38). Merton's discourse, as the expression of his deepest religious and moral concerns and of his romantic sentiment of spiritual affinity, is an epic discourse in which the poet's claim, his social protest, is the hero's claim of a linguistic and spiritual revolution, a state of disobedience in order to recover the individual's identity. We find in the epic the expression of the hero's spiritual affinity with his people and a good example of this inner quest for spiritual recovery. As we shall see in Chapter IV, the epic poets' thinking represented this perception of continuity in the search for spiritual identity between the hero and his world.

In America, transcendentalism contributed to the reinterpretation of mysticism as a conduct in human being that encouraged its ability to think. All these philosophical principles and religious doctrines would become determining factors that would place the term mystic into a more modern context, closer to the conception of it that Transcendentalists, as direct inheritors of all those (neo)platonian ideas and Christian religious background, furnished us. The word “mysticism” became part of the intellectual background of many scholars who would help to shape American thought in their lifetime by making of this concept and its connotations *a concept of life*, as we will see in the next section.

II – MYSTICISM AND AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

In studying American Transcendentalism we find an opportunity to develop a cross-disciplinary criticism that takes into account complementary fields of knowledge such as literature, philosophy or religion, fields that greatly influenced one another at that time. Thinking of these subjects altogether as a common body of thought can give us an idea of what Transcendentalism represents. Transcendentalism in America became a philosophy of life, the life of a country whose men and women had inherited a culture that had its origins in Europe, but that had evolved according to the demands of their lifetime and was also fed by America's own Native cultures, among other influences.⁹ Transcendentalists felt a need to change their attitude towards life, particularly towards religious and philosophical doctrines that were dominant in 19th century New England such as those defended by Unitarianism. They became predecessors in providing a different perception of reality. In this sense, the way they lived their lives had much to do with their own understanding and interpretation of the world that surrounded them. In this perception of that magnificent world they found the inspiration for their transcendental sense of life. This adjective described those who defended a view of life in which human being was the centre; a being whose soul was able to live in harmony with Nature, its Beauty, the Universe and all the things created. All these terms – Man, Soul, Nature, Beauty, Universe – share the essence of the transcendentalist doctrine: an immanent spirit that transcends all.

The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious. But it differs from the body in one important respect. It is not, like that, now subjected to the human will. Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is, therefore, to us the present expositor of the divine mind. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Spirit* 42)

⁹Native American epistemological thought and eco-social practices together with Asian scriptures and philosophies, like Buddhism, Confucianism and Hinduism, were appreciated by Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, who found in them methods and support for achieving spiritual fulfillment. For further information on these influences see *Native Americans and Environmental thought: Thoreau and the Transcendentalists*. De Cornell, (1992), and *Influences on Transcendentalism, Pragmatism, and other American Philosophies* (Lachs 57-58)

In giving the word “God” connotations that seemed to be far from Unitarian principles and the Puritan ethic (we could even say far from the Christian conception of God), Transcendentalists were defending the existence of a Spirit that pervades everything, a spirit that lives in the unity and diversity of all that exists and that is present in the natural world and in human being. The controversy that the Transcendentalists’ ideas brought about was so important because their thought could be applied to all areas of human knowledge and this posed a threat to established cultural beliefs. Their ideology opened the path to a world full of possibilities. Their claim of a common essence in human being and in Nature, which was the manifestation of the spirit of God in them, established a unity and a continuity among them that enabled human beings to improve their knowledge of life, since the same divine spirit pervaded all. Transcendentalists did not deny the existence of God; but aimed to give a new sense to what they had learned from their religious and cultural inheritance. Their purpose was to demonstrate that we live beyond dogmas or principles (imposed by others) that only restrict and condition our innate freedom:

But with whatever exception, it is still true, that tradition characterizes the preaching of this country; that it comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul; that it aims at what is usual, and not at what is necessary and eternal; that thus, historical Christianity destroys the power of preaching by withdrawing it from the exploration of the moral nature of man, where the sublime is, where are the resources of astonishment and power. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Divinity School Address* 86)

Transcendentalists wished to transmit this message through all the fields of human knowledge, from philosophy to religion, or art, in their case through literary expression. And, as educated people, writers, educators, and ministers, they did so through their essays, poetry, lectures, diaries, letters and sermons. Their testimony was spread orally and in their writings. And if there is a figure for Transcendentalists whose preaching comes “out of the soul” and whose aim is to explore the condition of human nature, that is the mystic. In reading Emerson’s words we can see that feeling of being one with the universe. In that, we could even see him as the epitome of the mystic:

Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Nature* 10)

In Emerson's address "The American Scholar" (1837) we find the following references to Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), the mystic, ". . . he saw and showed the connection between nature and the affections of the soul. He pierced the emblematic or spiritual character of the visible, audible, tangible world" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: 69*). The mystic's thoughts reflect the growth of a mystical consciousness as a result of the mystic's insight of union between sensuality and spirituality.

As I pointed out in the previous section, mysticism has been closely related to religion, especially to those religious aspects that tended to isolate man from reality in order to achieve a closer relation with the deity. But mysticism would be given a new treatment by Transcendentalism. Transcendentalists would not try to describe a mystical experience in terms of religion, and they did not explain the sense of being one with all the elements of the world in rational terms. Transcendentalists were critical of the concept of Understanding as the rational way to know the world. They understood the knowledge of the world in terms of Reason as intuitive insight. A constant contact with both the spiritual and physical world was necessary to learn and understand what Transcendentalists would define as the essence of God in man and in Nature. They conceived the mystic as one who is able to perceive that essence, that spirit or Soul, and its continuity through a continual communion with the real world. Emerson's words in the quotations above show how a change in the inherited conception of mysticism and the mystic was taking place within the American intellectual context in the early 19th century. In New England the traditional definition of mysticism would be shaped into a new and enlarged view by Transcendentalists, who gave the term deeper moral and religious values. By adapting their cultural inheritance to their particular vision of the world, we can say that they should be considered the starting point of what mysticism means today. Emerson's contribution to this renewed concept of the term would be unique:

. . . Emerson's approach to religion is inseparable from the philosophic, mystic, and scientific dimensions of his thought; for in Emerson's terms the impulse to knowledge and truth contained in the various systems of human activity, including religion, philosophy, mysticism, and science was the motive behind them all. That he stressed science and saw it as the means to establish the validity of the claims in each activity reflects his response to what he considered the intellectual trend of his time. To Emerson, his science itself was a dimension of religion in that it sought to make religious experience and truth more meaningful by establishing a coherent worldview proving the validity of its structures in universal terms. (Obuchowski *Emerson and Science: Science and Religion*)

Emerson defended a universal unity in his search for compatibility with notions from other world religions and within a vision which accepted the challenge of science together with a spiritual understanding of the world, "Emerson in his search to establish a connection between physical and spiritual truths did not abandon the awareness that a connection that ignored the physical dimension of experience was inadequate" (ibid.). Emerson would consider scientific and aesthetic premises in this renewed view of the world in which the mystical experience is understood as a relevant and necessary part of human activity. With the condition of innate freedom, man is able to use his consciousness to unite all the things that he sees in the world and manages to confer on them the continuity that only a clear perception of reality may allow. As Emerson points out, "[t]he soul created the arts wherever they have flourished. It was in his own mind that the artist sought his model. It was an application of his own thought to the thing to be done and the conditions to be observed" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Self-reliance* 278). The wish to transmit this perception of unity could be manifested through art, which emerges as a result of inspiration, as an act of creation, for ". . . in [America's] fine arts, not imitation, but creation is the aim" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Art* 431). The source of this creative act is in the ability of the artist to let his mind flow, free of will:

It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns, that beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled on itself), by abandonment to the nature of things;

that beside his privacy of power as an individual man, there is a great public power on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him; then he is caught up into the Life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals. The poet knows that he speaks adequately then only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or “with the flower of the mind”; not with the intellect used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life . . . (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Poet* 459)

When we deal with mysticism in the way that Transcendentalists understood it, this flowing of the mind has much less to do with isolation than with proximity to reality and to that common essence immanent in the self and in nature, for “the power depends on the depth of the artist’s insight of that object he contemplates” (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Art* 433). The artist’s insight reflects the view of continuity between the inner and the outer. Art, especially literature, becomes a medium through which Transcendentalists may express their search for truth and knowledge more freely. This is the reason why the mystic’s speech, like the artist’s insight, best depicts the inner thoughts of a search for the truth about the condition of a spiritual existence. Mystics of all times have tried to shape into words their perception that there is some sort of reciprocal feeling between human being and the natural world as if the world could join in the mystic’s speech: “The flowers I pass have eyes that look at me / The birds have ears that hear my spirit’s voice” (Very *Essays and Poems: To the Pure All Things are Pure* 166). The perception of harmony between the individual’s existence and the world leads to a sense of unity shared by many artists, thinkers and writers throughout history, from Neoplatonism¹⁰ to Romanticism and Transcendentalism, as we can appreciate in the following lines, in which we can easily understand why writing about nature means writing about human mind:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man;

¹⁰“Plotinus’ philosophy proceeds from a founding experience – the union with the One-Good – and develops as an inquiry into the conditions of its occurrence and recurrence” (Magee *Plato, Plotinus and Neoplatonism* Section I, chapter 4)

Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can
(Wordsworth *William Wordsworth. Selected Poems: The Tables Turned* 61)

The individual's interest in nature provides him with a set of symbols that help him deal with human concerns, as Emerson states in referring to the relevant role of the poet in this search for the truth about the condition of a spiritual existence: “. . . , and, following with his eyes the life, he uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature” (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Poet* 456). The mystic finds in prose and poetry the means and the forms to make others comprehend his perception of life as the perception of an existence in harmony with nature.

But all [mystical thinkers] alike agree in one respect, in one passionate assertion, and this is that unity underlies diversity. This, their starting point and their goal, is the basic fact of mysticism, which, in its widest sense, maybe described as an attitude of mind founded upon an intuitive or experienced conviction of unity, of oneness, of likeness in all things. . . For he [the mystic] bases his belief, not on revelation, logic, reason, or demonstrated facts, but on feeling, on intuitive inner knowledge. (Spurgeon 3-5)

Transcendentalists manifested many of their principles in writing; and mysticism, as part of their transcendentalist doctrine, would be reflected in their written works, too. Thoreau's personal account in *Walden* is a testimony of his mystical attitude to life:

To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clock says or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of the day if they have not been slumbering? (Thoreau 116-117)

Although they might have been known by their contemporaries primarily for their message rather than for their literary contribution, Transcendentalists have left us a literary legacy full of wisdom and respect.

II.1- Puritanism, Unitarianism and their Connections to Mysticism

As we have seen, Greek and Roman philosophical traditions had been among the greatest influences in European cultural education, along with Christianity. But the discovery of the New World would allow a continuity of all this cultural inheritance within a wider context, where its expansion would be greatly favoured by literary means whose origin must be sought in the distinct interpretations of religious scriptures given by different Christian groups. We must not forget that those men and women who claimed to have experienced a mystical revelation possessed deep religious convictions. This is why we should first try to comprehend their religious doctrines and, afterwards, analyze the relevance of their literary transmission.

II.1.1- From New England Puritanism to Religious Liberalism

The Puritan background was a determining factor of the religious beliefs and view of life of Unitarians and, indirectly, Transcendentalists. The New England Puritans in the seventeenth century considered themselves as other Puritans did, “a self-declared people of the Book” (Shea qtd. in Elliott 34). But the context of the New World would progressively encourage a renewed religious view. As Emory Elliot writes, “[t]he tendency to see the New World as the stage for the enactment of divine plans encouraged a tendency to read experience symbolically” (Elliot 1988: 65). This is how they developed a new symbolism centered on their vision of America. Elliot continues:

This inclination is fully reflected in one of the period’s most interesting nonsermonic prose works, Increase Mather’s *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1864) . . . Mather draws out the allegorical/symbolic evidence of God’s continuing concern for his people there. This work affirmed the seventeenth-century Puritan reading of their covenant relationship with a God who is actively involved in their lives while also, as we see in retrospect, foreshadowing a later tendency of American writers to render experience symbolically. (Elliot 65-66)

Puritans described God's concern for his people through allegoric interpretation. Their habit of rendering experience symbolically would retain a strong influence on American writers who would adapt the popular sermon rhetoric to the needs of their time, putting a new emphasis on the symbolic significance of America's natural beauty (Elliot 66). As Heimert points out, "[f]or puritans, the act of reading brought the word of God to life and the spirit into one's household and daily activities" (Heimert 501). Puritan preachers used similes and metaphors related to a sensory reality present in the daily lives of their hearers. According to Elliot, "[d]espite the heavy emphasis on sermons, first-generation New Englanders spent a great deal of effort on other kinds of writings as well, especially in refining the applications of their theology to fit the practical demands of colonial life" (Elliot 61-62). This religious Puritan message had to reach first of all the rational understanding of the listener and, then, the heart (his will and emotions) Spiritual life was defined as a pilgrimage in biblical terms, in which the pilgrim played a heroic role; he should challenge temptation in his experience of life. This lifelong spiritual experience laced with references to the sensory world presented the progression of the soul through distinct stages as a journey, an allegorical imaginative mode that appealed to listeners' imagination.

This allegorical tenor of thought was, of course, grounded in the sensory world and thus was entirely apropos to a generation of "pilgrims" who knew not only the allegorical poetry of Edmund Spenser but also the actual dangers and challenges of a sea-crossing and wilderness settlement. (Elliot 61)

Shea in his sermons and theological writings explains that the figure of the pilgrim – the soul – had to travel from Earth to Heaven to find his heart, his hope (qtd. in Elliott 56-66). As Robert Daly indicates, the natural world comprehended by man became "the image of and the key to a transcendent world of religion" (qtd. in Gilmore 34). The transcendent God was immanent in the world in those forms that human beings could understand. Puritans used the world in their search for Heaven and they did so through *religious meditation*. They understood meditation as an effort of self-examination in an attempt to purify oneself from sin.

In that sense, Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe states that, “[m]editation in Puritan spirituality began with the believer imaginatively entering the biblical text and allowing the text to stand in judgement over one’s personal life” (Hambrick-Stowe *Practical Divinity and Spirituality* 12). Meditative activity started in the mind, it searched for the truth and carried it over to the heart. It was the soul’s process for redemption. He also adds, “[s]piritual writing – including journal keeping, spiritual autobiography and meditative poetry – supported and gave these practices expression” (ibid.). This meditative activity meant a spiritual and literary approach to the sensible world, as a reflection of the spiritual world. As Robert Daly points out, “[t]he art of Puritan devotion was basically a method for channelling emotion into verbal structures – a poetic method.” (qtd. in Gilmore 36). Thus, meditation and poetry got closer in Puritan thinking. A process of reflection – implicit in that meditation – preceded the writing of a poem and it gave as a result a combination of thoughts, feelings and imagination. The poem appeared as a conversation between the poet and God, in which feelings and thoughts were expressed.

Puritans believed that God’s grace acted on humankind in accordance with the same “order of Nature” and affected first the head and then the heart. For this reason, the Puritan sermon was designed to address, in order, the memory, understanding and finally the will and affections. (Taylor *Gods Determinations and Preparatory Meditations* 20)

The Puritan response to worldly events was not only reflected mainly in prose and in the content of sermons, but also in poems. In the following stanzas in Edward Taylor’s *Preparatory Meditations* we can appreciate religious reflections and thought flowing through the lines of the poem as the poet’s speech with God. Taylor meditates on the purpose of his poetry by means of the symbolic presence of natural elements. The last lines collect the thought of his poetry as the poet’s creativity submitted to spread God’s message.

But shall the Bird sing forth thy Praise, and shall
The little Bee present her thankfull hum?
But I who see thy shining Glory fall
Before mine Eyes, stand Blockish, Dull, and Dumb?

Whether I speake, or speechless stand, I spy,
I faile thy Glory: therefore pardon Cry.
But this I finde; My Rhymes do better suite
Mine own Dispraise than tune forth praise to Thee.
Yet being Chid, whether Consonant, or Mute,
I force my Tongue to tattle, as you see.
That I thy glorious Praise may Trumpet right,
Be thou my Song, and make Lord, mee thy Pipe.
(Taylor *Gods Determinations and Preparatory Meditations* 158)

As Donald E. Stanford comments,

Taylor is at his best, however, when, instead of attacking others, he is expressing his own doctrine in *Gods Determinations*, and his spiritual experience of communion with Christ in the *Preparatory Meditations*. These are the poems which have established Taylor as America's first major poet and as the last important representative of the metaphysical school of poetry founded by John Donne, and continued by George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan. (Taylor *The Poems of Edward Taylor* xxiv)

. . . Taylor believed that during the administration of the Lord's Supper he was experiencing a union with Christ, whose spirit was actually present in the elements. . . These meditations are preparatory, written to prepare the preacher to administer and to receive the sacrament. The puritans stressed the need of preparation. (Taylor *The Poems of Edward Taylor* xxvi-xxix)

The presence of images and metaphors, as linguistic resources that affect the heart and link the invisible things of God with the visible things of the physical world, was the means, a form of figuration used, to describe the meditative activity as part of the *spiritual journey* to redemption. This contemplative and meditational attitude towards God and their world that we have seen in Puritans would have points in common with that of a mystic's. Norman Pettit emphasizes the relevance of inner experience as a source of spiritual knowledge,

By preparation [the Puritan divines] meant a period of prolonged introspective meditation and self-analysis in the light of God's revealed Word. . . . From conviction of conscience, the soul moved through a series of interior stages, always centered on self-examination, which in turn were intended to arouse a longing desire for grace. (qtd. in Maltby 86)

The search for spiritual truth in Puritanism and in mysticism required meditation in and contemplation of the sensible world, as a manifestation of the divine Soul in it; an inner revelation of God in their search for redemption and a spiritual comprehension of the world in their deeper knowledge of the self are Puritans' and mystics' aims respectively. The Puritan attitude had partly changed into a mystical one. Puritan moral strictness did not mean an obstacle for the continuity of mysticism as a concept of life, but, on the contrary, Puritan religious views at the time provided mysticism with literary contributions that would create a literary space for the practice of both doctrines. But this religious and literary practice, in the case of Puritanism, would be affected by the historical events that were about to occur in New England, particularly by the influence of the Enlightenment. Puritan religious issues were given a progressively liberal treatment in the American colonies throughout the seventeenth century. Religious discourse had established a relationship between contemporary experience and biblical contents, in response to their need to practise their faith under different terms and conditions to those inherited from European predecessors. The use of a symbology that kept a direct correspondence with natural elements and the reality of the world, along with the Enlightenment influence manifested in the use of reason and experience in order to attain knowledge, introduced relevant changes in the literary discourse at the time. This period would be a time in which America would make the "[t]ransition from the Puritan heritage toward a revolutionary destiny" (Marsden 1). In the early eighteenth century in New England the clergymen represented the group of people whose religious thought still had a strong influence on people's opinion and subsequently on intellectual advance. Faith faced a complex cultural context. As George M. Marsden points out, "[c]ountless Americans reared in conservative religious traditions have confronted the troubling issue of how their exclusive faith should relate to a pluralistic modern American environment" (Marsden 8).

A representative outlook of this period could be sought in Jonathan Edwards' works, whose lifetime was immersed in such a period of changes when, "nearly the whole of the American colonies experienced religious revivals . . . A 'great and general awakening' it was called at the time" (Elliot 114). In the struggle to define the role of Christian literature Edwards' life and writings were not only essential for the church, but also for popular audiences, "[p]opularizing and democratizing the relationship between speaker and audience, demanding a fervor of the intellectual (and an experimental religion of the Christian)" (Elliot 119). The Puritan need for redemption was now to be understood within the context of a more scientifically and philosophically grounded comprehension of God's word.

Jonathan never traveled widely, yet he saw himself in the midst of an international upheaval of immense significance. While [...] loyal to his Puritan heritage, he was also part of the first generation of New Englanders who had to face the revolutionary scientific and philosophical thought of the era. New Englanders had long been friendly to scientific advances and were confident that discoveries of God's ways of governing the natural world would only confirm what they knew from Scripture. (Marsden 60)

In *Jonathan Edwards* Perry Miller argued that the revival, at least as understood through the mind of Edwards, marked America's leap into "modernity" (Elliot 114). Edwards did not see any conflict between science and religion, between the material and the spiritual. As a religious man, he tried to comprehend the laws of nature and natural phenomena by means of contemplation and meditation in order to find God's presence in them.

Edwards engaged the intellectual traditions of the eighteenth century in a unique way, as he strategically both appropriated and modified whole intellectual traditions to subordinate them to his own theological ends. He did not simply accept the rules of the received intellectual traditions, but rather he returned to their first principles to reconstruct their outcomes in terms that were congruent with his understanding of Christian truth. (Ball 9)

Religious meditation, the path of the soul towards God, as inherited and accepted practice in the clergymen's spiritual search for redemption, allowed the transmission of religious perceptions – as a result of contemplation – through literary means (prose and poetry) which described this mystical experience. Somehow, that mystical attitude towards life inherited from European cultural influence had found continuity and a new interpretation in the New World. But this religious devotion and its literary practice encouraged during the Great Awakening would be deviated into secular views by the political interests and claims at the time of the American Revolution in the 18th century. “It was as if the tracts and treatises of religious controversy that form the dominant literary activity of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in America had undergone a secular transformation by which the quest for salvation was translated into the pursuit of liberty” (Elliot 139). Theologically-based, politicians and political discourse pursued the application of moral principles for a civil freedom that could not be fully developed within those Puritan religious restrictions. Political and religious convictions were ruled by contradictory principles and, consequently, faith and reason interacted. However, American identity would undergo an intellectual growth in the 17th-18th centuries due to all these circumstances.

Protestant ideology in the colonies featured an almost exclusive concentration on God's direct providential control over events and opinions. It also was inclined to view republican accounts of politics as heterodox substitutes for reliance on divine providence. The complaint against Real Whig or republican thought was that it made human self-reliance rather than divine grace the key to human flourishing, and that it put an Enlightenment confidence in human perception and human action in the place reserved for the orthodox reliance on God's all-seeing and all-knowing power. The great change of the 1740s was to align historical Protestant doctrines of providence with heretofore suspect principles of republicanism. (Smidt 45)

Religion, politics, history and their literary manifestation were part of the formation of a philosophical consciousness which, despite being based on inherited European knowledge and tradition, was also the result of a genuine American interpretation of life.

People's spiritual perception of their physical country (first, as colonists, and then, as American citizens) was the starting point for a philosophy of life that would find its best representative figures in Transcendentalists. This American intellectual growth was derived from the liberal approach to traditional doctrine – the inherited Protestant view of spiritual/religious life – and the cultural influence of the Enlightenment. Within the enlightened view of the world, the need for a spiritual consciousness and the practice of a mystical attitude (as a way to attain that consciousness) seemed to be secondary in a perception of the world ruled primarily by scientific and rationalistic interests. Before the Enlightenment, Puritans had accepted contemplation as a mystical means to revelation and, consequently, a way of communication with God and a path to redemption. Although this mystical practice was not explicitly declared as a religious concept in Scriptures, the emphasis upon a direct personal relation with God and on religious toleration – progressively introduced and practised by liberal theologians during Enlightenment – would encourage a Christian attitude shared and experienced in a more individualistic way of worship (Troeltsch 801). In the 18th century after the Revolution, religion should be adjusted to the new way of life, where a political, social, intellectual and technical development was taking place (Troeltsch 676).

However, several aspects of mysticism would eventually be included in these new interpretations of faith, which were subsequently concerned with the political commitments and rationalistic views dominant at the time. The practice of a spiritual religion, free from the church, would be the result of this individual perception of God, a perception that would only depend on the individual's vision of the world, like the mystic's view; the path to God depended on human condition and on the individual's interpretation of his experience of daily life. The conception of truth would be also affected by the concepts of tolerance and freedom derived from the Enlightenment. The idea of truth defended by Reformers in England and by Puritan immigrants in America referred to the religious truth found in the Bible. But with the Enlightenment, the belief in the individual as someone able to think for himself and in the relevance of experience as a means to understand reality made the approach to truth dependent on man's ability. If truth was attained by the Spirit in the Protestant tradition (the Spirit as it was allegorically described in Scriptures), now this *spirit* was more related to the human condition (Troeltsch 971).

Therefore, the path to spiritual truth was more subjective, since it was bound to the individual. Spiritual consciousness and spiritual religion would mean a step from orthodox Protestantism towards a spiritual practice that would include mystical connotations. The Reformers had emphasized Scripture as God's means of self-revelation, as the source of authority. They rejected mystical visions. Christian Scriptures were seen by them as the canon for divine revelation (Fanning 139). But from now on, the path to God was no longer reduced to the interpretation of God's Word; with this liberal Christian theology of the 18th century, human intellect and reason were introduced as necessary instruments in the understanding of the Puritan religious creed. This creed, as a respected set of beliefs, was to be interpreted by the individual, who could freely (free from dogma) establish a direct relation to God and, in this way, a direct revelation of the divine to the individual was allowed. Many critics describe this historical moment as a turning point in the evolution of America as a country:

Miller traces the decline (or declension) of covenant theology in New England. He is able to show that the ideas of the Puritans, despite their declining impact on American religion, had a great impact on the social and political culture of America. The greatest legacy of the covenant theology was to bestow upon America the myth of a national covenant, the belief that America holds a special and divine mission in the world. . . . The 17th century was a period of disorder, transformation, and creation. The 18th century was an era of growth and stabilization. Whereas Miller focused on the ideas and doctrine of the Puritans, Bonomi understands religion primarily as an institutional, not a spiritual, structure. She argues that the Great Awakening gave Americans a forum in which to experiment with notions of individualism, democratization, and resistance to authority. . . . He [Turner] suggests that theologians themselves paved the way for unbelief by adapting doctrines to keep pace with the rise of science and rationalism. . . . In the late 19th century, these adaptations opened the door to a system of unbelief. Changes in morality and sources of knowledge led agnostics to revere secular ideas instead of God and to construct a moral code independent from God. (Parish 590)

The beginning of such a differentiation in the religious practice within American Christianity was subsequent to the atmosphere of the wide socio-cultural, historical and political changes that precede and come along with the birth of a nation. America as a land to carry on with a divine mission was now the land of a nation in process of transformation, in which the mystic's concerns with the individual's existence and self-recovery were now the individual's concerns with the recovery of a national identity, on the basis of a set of beliefs and moral values which spread out through tolerance, freedom, and imagination.

II.1.2- Traditional Unitarianism vs. Unitarian Transcendentalism

The development of America as a country initiated the development of an American literature. Seventeenth century writing had been dominated by religious discourse and the eighteenth century was primarily a time when political discourse emerged. The nineteenth century – when the United States already had a democracy – was the time for literary interests centred on art to arise. Whereas Romanticism was the dominant intellectual movement in Europe, this romantic influence on the American continent would be now interpreted within the American context. Their past as colonial territories, which American people had experienced for so long, influenced them strongly. The sentiment of inferiority which still underlay their daily life would be counteracted by national ideas set on the defence of a social identity. On the one hand, the European strain of Romanticism, with its emphasis on individualism, emotionalism and nature was reflected in the interest in American natural beauty and the American past in literary terms. On the other, the way opened by American Puritans in applying the use of reason and contemporary experience to the treatment of religious contents had furnished the possibility to believe in the individual's power of reason and in his independent identity. For the individual's actions did not depend so much on church and established institutions as on man himself. This tendency to toleration and rationalism in the 17th-18th centuries evolved into a new religious tendency that allowed freedom within the church, which had been the centre of power and authority for the individuals of a community – usually drawn by an individual leader.¹¹

¹¹“As the eighteenth century lengthened, the Puritan religious literary heritage in verse evolved into an Augustan-influenced, aesthetically self-conscious, and politically motivated poetry concerned with the emergence of America as a new, independent nation” (Elliott 97)

The wish for freedom of thought was growing gradually, as well as the belief in the capability of the individual mind. The individual was seen as someone able to discover truth through the power of his mind and to transmit “valid revelations of spiritual truth” (Cooke 11). In admitting man’s ability to communicate directly with God and to use reason and think for himself, individual intuition and reason were of the same worth. This interpretation allowed “a rational insight into the problems of the religious life” (Cooke 14) and a private access to spiritual truth simultaneously. The allowance of this free spirit of individualism and the acceptance of the use of reason in the discussion of theological problems led to the belief in the existence of a rational spirit. Among the different groups of believers there were some who wished to respect tradition, but, at the same time, they needed to incorporate their own rational views and national sentiment into the traditional interpretation of the Bible (Cooke 13). Americans’ perception of their world and religious interpretation of their faith could not be separated. Their philosophy of life embraced all the historical, social, political and religious events that would define an American identity. The practice of their Puritan faith in this intellectual context developed a modern religious view within Congregationalism: Unitarianism. Although it originated in England, Unitarianism emerged in America as a movement of thought that had common features with European Unitarians, but it encouraged religious development in a different context: a modern religious context, in which contrary philosophical interpretations would be given to religious issues by members who shared the same Unitarian background. Unitarians in England defended religious toleration and the reasonableness of Christian religion, the principles of liberty of thought and the broadest comprehensive religious fellowship. They constituted a body of opinion opposed to the dogma of orthodoxy (Tarrant 4-5).

Unitarianism tried to apply the individualistic spirit to the interpretation of theological problems, as had happened with Protestantism. But Unitarians in England and in America wanted a practical and real religion founded on common sense and freedom: “In this way Unitarianism had its origin, in the teachings of men who were counted orthodox in England, but who favoured submitting all theological problems to the test of reason” (Cooke 18). They did not share with their Protestant predecessors an autocratic temper. They believed firmly in personal Christian experience as a means to practise their creed and to lead their conduct.

The individual soul could feel the supernatural power of God by human means. As Unitarians defended the reasonableness of Christian religion, they defended the thought of Christ as a man, not essentially different in his nature from the rest of human kind (Tarrant 4). Their concepts of God and the Holy Spirit differed from the traditional religious view and would give way to the conception of that Divine Spirit immanent in man (an interpretation that would be defended and expanded afterwards by Transcendentalists):

The opinions held by Unitarians, with respect to the Deity, are very simple. They believe in One God, a Being of perfect, undivided, uncompounded Unity, One Eternal Divine Mind. . . . Concerning the Holy Spirit, Unitarians believe that it is not a Person distinct from the Father, but his spirit, his power and energy . . . imparted to Christ without measure, and to his disciples and the early Christian in lesser degrees. (Atkinson 4-5)

This process of intellectual and religious exchange was transmitted by literary means. The early Unitarian movement in New England was literary and religious. In the practice of their Christian faith, they did not completely submit to the orthodox interpretation of religious principles within Protestant theology.¹² Theirs was a manner of thought that introduced philosophical concepts derived from the Enlightenment into the set of religious beliefs inherited from Protestantism. It could be considered as a liberal theological and religious strand. Unitarianism tried to introduce the modern spirit into Christianity and to harmonize religion with philosophy and science. Their belief in human knowledge as derived empirically, through the experience of the senses (as a result of the influence of Lockean psychology) made them rely much more on common sense and on a direct access to the deity. This attitude would become excessively rational; Unitarians held that “God and his laws are apprehended by rational reflection on the natural creation and the revelations of scripture, rather than by direct intuition” (Buell 4). Their rationalistic view influenced the belief in a deity that in Barbara Packer’s view, “. . . offered men and women the chance to achieve salvation through a rigorous and continuous effort of self-culture” (qtd. in Bercovitch 335-336).

¹² See Cooke (2004) for an informative history of American Unitarianism. See specially pp. 291-298 for a discussion of the literary qualities in Unitarian sermons and other writing.

This rational influence on the Unitarians' conception of truth made them seek that truth only by the use of man's own powers. As a consequence, the spiritual insight that was an inherent part of that process of religious search and revelation was changing into a mere application of the rational use of man's will. In their wish to reject the restrictive dogmas inherited from orthodox Puritan tradition in New England, Unitarian liberalism seemed "to cut man off from God" (Buell 4). The perception of God's spirit through man's innate ability of contemplation and reflection (a means accepted by Puritan ministers in the practise of their faith) would be a concept turned down by Unitarians' excessive zeal for reason and their interest in the search for God based on historical evidence rather than on religious faith. This attitude was not shared by all the Unitarian members; some of them would be in favour of a reinterpretation of old dogmas instead of their rejection, their thought ". . . [was] an attempt to combine rationalism with a modified supernaturalism, and was devoted to practical Christianity and humanitarianism" (Hart 683).

While mystical connotations can be found in the practise of Puritan religious methods, no mystical feature could be fitted into the Unitarian doctrine of this period, late 18th to early 19th centuries, in which reason prevailed in the treatment of religious matters and in the understanding of Christian faith. Most Unitarian ministers had received their education at Harvard and Unitarian moral philosophy had adjusted their Christian thought to the view of the world of the Enlightenment.

The professional training school for clergy at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has had a long and significant relationship with Unitarianism. Harvard College was founded in 1636 to train ministers for service in a godly commonwealth. Increasingly during the 18th century, Harvard became the school that was identified with liberal factions within the Congregational church. [...] Following the religious revivals known as the Great Awakening, Harvard and its students became identified with positions that were critical of the revival and affirming of plain, rational divinity. (Harris 237-238)

But this excess of reason in the practice of religious thought differed from the view which Transcendentalism would bring to the intellectual history of the United States:

. . . they [the Transcendentalists] may be defined in a somewhat wider perspective as children of the Puritan past who, having been emancipated by Unitarianism from New England's original Calvinism, found a new religious expression in forms derived from romantic literature and from the philosophical idealism of Germany. . . . we may also see in the Transcendentalists not so much a collection of exotic ideologues as the first outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization. (Miller *The American Transcendentalists. Their Prose and Poetry* ix)

The sense of response to loss implicit in De Certeau's idea of mystic speech is present in this "outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization", mentioned in Miller's extract above. The transcendentalist aesthetic framework tended to see the arts as instruments of spiritual growth, an idea collected in Elliott's words:

Once having defined intuitive experience and creative expression as the essence of religious practice and discourse, transcendentalism naturally became drawn to the idea that the theologian and the denominational preacher are less credible vessels of spirituality than the inspired artist. (Elliott 374)

The ideas of spirituality, intuition and imagination, which will be further discussed in the next section, would be brought back for them by the influence of German Idealism and would become core tenets for transcendentalist thought and discourse.

II.1.3- The Influence of German Idealism

A mystical attitude could not be part of this rationalized process of communication with God. But a radical position against this excess of rationalism practised by liberal Unitarians emerged among Unitarian members themselves. Transcendentalism represented this reaction within Unitarian thought and Transcendentalists were responsible for the expansion of Romanticism in American culture. They believed in subjective experience and emotions as the way to attain higher truths than that truth revealed by the use of intellect or reason.

The application of European romantic principles would be present in the philosophical contents introduced in religious thoughts by Transcendentalism. Rousseau's ideas of nature and intuition and Kant's philosophy would be decisive in Transcendentalist doctrine.

The idea of a life in harmony with nature allowed human beings to develop man's innate intuition. The human mind could also instinctively attain the truth without conscious reasoning or rational thought (Phillips 9-10). Kant's own definition of his philosophy reveals this thinking, "Kant called his philosophy 'Transcendental philosophy', because one 'transcends', or goes beyond, rationality or sense perception. Using intuition one can see beyond physical Nature and into what he saw as a higher truth, the spiritual world" (Phillips 10). Transcendentalists, as inheritors of this romantic view of life, believed in individuals and defended their ability to attain spiritual knowledge through innate intuitive powers. They rejected the Unitarians' idea of a direct access to the deity by the use of reason. They thought that man was able to establish an immediate relationship with God through his knowledge of Nature. This knowledge of nature was not to be attained by scientific means, but through an intuitive approach instead. Thoreau's words in his journal can perfectly describe the essential of this thought:

There is no ripeness which is not, so to speak, something ultimate in itself, and not merely a perfected means to a higher end. In order to be ripe it must serve a transcendent use. The ripeness of a leaf, being perfected, leaves the tree at that point and never returns to it. It has nothing to do with any other fruit which the tree may bear, and only the genius of the poet can pluck it. The fruit of a tree is neither in the seed nor the timber, - the full-grown tree,- but it is simply the highest use to which it can be put. (quoted in Searls 546)

If Nature, as a manifestation of God's spirit, shared the essence of God, then man in harmony with Nature could share that essence and divine spirit, revealed by intuition as a higher truth. Contemplation and reflection of the natural world enabled man to use intuition and help him understand the spiritual world within that outside world. This transcendental concept of life encouraged the need of a mystical attitude in order to comprehend that 'metaphysical or spiritual nature of reality' (Phillips 5).

Transcendentalism emphasized the spiritual significance of all things in response to the dominant values of the nineteenth century, such as commercialism or technological advances, which deviated humankind from those values found in a life based on a community with nature. A proximity with nature meant a proximity to God. In order to attain this spiritual significance the individual should learn from his intuition. The influence of German Idealism (Kant's philosophy and post-Kantian philosophers – Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) helped to determine the Transcendentalists' conception of self-consciousness (possibly their central dogma), as a kind of awareness in the individual that led him to that spiritual knowledge. A consciousness of nature and of human nature revealed the existence of a cosmic self and a human self respectively. While Locke conceived consciousness as a mere reflection or reproduction of sense impressions, 'a perception of what passes in a man's own mind' (Rehder 23), the concept of self-consciousness would be enlarged by romantics, who understood it in relation to man's freedom of will and ability of self-government (Mosier 216). This concept of consciousness would be understood according to Kant's transcendental deduction:

On the one hand, we have intuitions that are the result of the world's affecting us in certain ways through our senses, which make up a passive faculty of the mind. On the other hand, we also have an active faculty, a way of taking up these intuitions according to certain necessary rules. [...] only when both these faculties come together in the act of synthesis do we have consciousness at all. (Pinkard 35)

Admitting intuition as man's innate ability necessary to attain that consciousness differentiated the Transcendentalists' position from the Unitarians' rational attitude. For Transcendentalists the certainty of individual knowledge depended on original intuition (Mosier 159). If Unitarians did not believe in innate knowledge, Transcendentalists would accept the postulates of Kant's philosophy, which relate experience and innate knowledge: "He [Kant] tried to hold the balance between the materialist and the idealist, maintaining with the one the necessity of experience to give validity to our intellectual cognitions; with the other, that the intellect is the basis of our knowledge, and that it contains 'a priori' the conditions on which we know anything by experience" (Hunt 260). The concept of self-consciousness, derived from German Idealism, would have an important influence in the Transcendentalists' perception of the world.

German philosophers who followed some of Kant's philosophical principles shared his conception of self-consciousness and also added other interpretations, which would be introduced in America (due to American intellectual interest in European philosophy) through translations from German authors into English and through works of English literary figures, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose view of German Idealism would be influential on the Transcendentalists' view of morality and religion. A few of these philosophical interpretations of self-consciousness must be mentioned in order to see how this concept would be understood and applied by Transcendentalism.

For Kant, self-consciousness referred to man's capacity to abstract not only from what one happens to be experiencing, but also from one's own identity (Keller 1). "The self-consciousness expressed by the proposition 'I think' provides each of us with an impersonal or, rather, transpersonal perspective from which we are able to consider ourselves and others" (Keller 9). Kant differentiated a *transcendental self-consciousness*, as a representation of oneself that abstracts from what distinguishes one from other persons, not a representation of a bare particular (Keller 5). It does not represent any particular subject, but a transcendental subject, as a thinking subject in general. For him, this transcendental self-consciousness was subjective and objective simultaneously.

Fichte was the first Kantian to argue that self-consciousness must be an immediate (unmediated) *awareness* of the self. Self-consciousness must be conceived as an activity that enables man to experience his thoughts as a unity, for "[t]he activity of the I is at the same time self-awareness of this activity. There is a unity of the activity and the awareness of the activity that is a priori rather than outcome. It is exactly in the unity that both aspects become possible" (Woezic 60).

Another appreciation of self-consciousness is Schelling's; for him such self-consciousness is will, in which theoretical and practical reason meet. Therefore, "[b]y freeing ourselves from our representations and holding them away from us, we are able to explain them, and so to connect the theoretical and the practical self. Thus we arrive at the Ego as the principle of freedom, beginning with which we can now see the spirit and nature arise together" (Watson 90).

. . . we must abstract from all objects of knowledge, both outer and inner, and bring before our minds the pure activity which we put forth in so abstracting. The object thus presented for intellectual perception or contemplation is simply pure self-activity – an activity of the mind which returns upon itself or is its own object. The activity which philosopher thus sets before himself, by a free act of the aesthetic imagination, is pure self-consciousness – the consciousness of consciousness. (Watson 106)

This capacity in man to abstract from his own identity and experience, the awareness of the self to experience thoughts as a unity or this activity of the mind whose object is itself were some of the interpretations that would define the concept of self-consciousness. The introspection of the self allowed more possibilities of understanding. To know things better, the individual makes use of his capacity of self-consciousness, an insight that helps him to appreciate the qualities of the thing that he intends to know. With Hegel the term would include connotations of knowledge and faith. Although he made use of a language of religion, his philosophical doctrine could be related to a metaphysics of pantheism. For Hegel, religious consciousness is an essential stage in the march toward adequate self-consciousness, which is identified with adequate knowing (Williamson 95).

God is the world force or spirit immanent in the world and comes to self-consciousness only in the minds of those who are conscious of it as the Absolute (Williamson 234). Hegel added a new dimension, the concept of the Absolute as a transcendental unit; the absolute unity of all things was a manifestation of the absolute unity of self-conscious Being (Mosier 214). He related philosophical and religious consciousness through this concept of the Absolute:

The human consciousness could grasp God or the Absolute – there is no distinction between the Absolute known by the philosophical consciousness and the God known by the religious consciousness, and neither is there any disparity between knowledge and faith - and this grasping of the Absolute is realizable because finite reality is a self-manifestation of the Infinite, and finite human consciousness rises to the infinite; and the total process is a dialectic in which Spirit is coming to a self-realization as absolute Spirit. (Williamson 95)

American philosophy accepted the Absolute of Hegel. The Absolute should be embodied in nature, in society and in human nature, as a cosmic consciousness, the consciousness of God, which was only a reflection of the self-conscious activity of the individual man (Mosier 217). The influence of German Idealism meant continuity for a religious thought that had progressively become intellectual and philosophical in America. The principle of individuality (on which self-consciousness was based) had its origin in the Puritan emphasis on the individual, on his private thoughts – between a man and himself – and on his personal relation to God. Likewise, this Puritan religious practice had been inherited from Protestant emphasis on individual conscience. This tendency to introspection that allowed man an inner relation to himself and to God would be part of European and American romantic intellectual thought and, consequently, would find in literature the best way to expand not only as religious, but as philosophical doctrine. The concept of self-consciousness as the mind's own awareness of itself opened the way for a sensibility that allowed the individual an enlarged view of life.

If we accept that mysticism implied an individual experience elusive of reason, mental but also emotional, a real experience induced after contemplation and reflection, and aiming at human transformation (in an attempt to attain the evidence for truth), then we can understand why Transcendentalists gave relevance to the figure of the mystic and the mystical attitude, as essential for the development of that self-consciousness in the individual.

II.1.4- English Philosophical and Literary Influence

German philosophical postulates were not only introduced through English translations, but also through contemporary English writings. The admiration that Transcendentalists felt for English writers' works made them the literary vehicle of transmission of German philosophy into American culture. This romantic concept of self-consciousness was mediated by English authors like Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth emphasized "[t]he role of the poet as an interpreter of nature and as a representative or ideal man in his relationship to nature and to the life of the mind".

He saw the “[m]odel of poetry as a revelation and a spiritual, not merely literary, event, with significance for the development of the individual soul and its relationship to the universe” (Wayne 321) For him, self-consciousness was ‘the mind thinking about itself’ (Rehder 33) and the attainment of that consciousness would be possible in meditation and contemplation of the life in nature through personal experience and sensation (Spurgeon 55). This is how the real self realizes that it is part of a larger Whole (Spurgeon 144). This mystical attitude in Wordsworth can be found in his idea of the poet as a *seer*, a mystic with an unusual capacity for feeling. When the poet’s mind was freed, he reached a condition of equilibrium, a ‘wise passiveness’, or a ‘happy stillness of the mind’ (Spurgeon 58).

If Wordsworth’s influence on Transcendentalists appealed to emotions rather than intellect as a necessary condition for self-consciousness, Coleridge’s influence on them would be more intellectual. Both provided Transcendentalism with the mystical sense that would be present in the perception of their world. But while Wordsworth’s meditative mind was centred in the analysis of feeling in his own nature, Coleridge’s concern was truth or wisdom. His influence on Transcendentalism was philosophical. “...while Coleridge’s mysticism originated in the failure of his rationalist approach to the understanding of the phenomena, Wordsworth’s mysticism was born in his sensual experiences of nature” (Kumar 310). Coleridge drew upon Schelling’s Transcendental philosophy of connecting the realm of ‘nature’ with that of the ‘self or intelligence’ (Wayne 250). In Henry Frederick Hedge’s review of Coleridge’s work, Hedge stated: “. . . it was Schelling who ‘endeavours to show that the outward world is of the same essence with the thinking mind, both being manifestations of the same divine principle.’” (Wayne 250). Coleridge doubted whether the intellect was the only adequate instrument for arriving at truth and he was convinced that an act of the will is necessary in order to bring man into contact with reality (Spurgeon 97). For Coleridge “[i]ntelligence or self-consciousness is impossible, except by and in a will” (*Biographia Literaria* 159). The knowledge of reality required man’s desire and, as Coleridge believed in the symbolic quality of the things, this knowledge could be mediated by the forms and images of nature; man should be able to feel and see the truth that they embodied. With Coleridge, intuition and imagination became necessary values in the individual.

The act of will was more relevant than a process of reasoning and in self-consciousness man was able to find the essence represented by those symbols in nature. Following Kant, he gave the name of reason (as opposed to understanding) to ‘the intuitive power by which man apprehends God directly’, and he defined imagination as ‘the faculty, which in the light of this intuitive reason interprets and unifies the symbols of the natural world’ (Spurgeon 100). He understood self-consciousness as a kind of knowing in which the identity between the object and its representation becomes possible. And this kind of knowing, this self-consciousness, came after reflection. Coleridge expresses the idea in the following manner: “But there is one art of which every man should be master, the art of reflection. If you are not a thinking man, to what purpose are you a man at all? In like manner, there is one knowledge, which it is every man’s interest and duty to acquire, namely, self-knowledge” (*Coleridge’s Aid to Reflection* xlv). The attainment of self-consciousness played an essential part in the development of thought and knowledge in Transcendentalist doctrine. And this kind of consciousness involved mystical features such as contemplation of and reflection in the outer, features which help the individual’s comprehension of the subsequent vision of continuity between world and thought. A mystical behaviour was observed by those who sought that philosophical and spiritual truth.

II.2- Mysticism, a Vision of Life

Transcendentalists would admit mysticism in their intellectual/philosophical thoughts not as a doctrine itself, but as an attitude or a concept of life. Most Transcendentalist representatives would view the figure of the mystic as the individual able to reach a level of consciousness in which the perception of the unity of all things was attained.

Mystical experience, for him [Emerson], had nothing to do with salvation in the next world rather afforded insight into the guidance of practical life in this world. . . . Emerson did not seek to attain a state of beatitude, as the Oriental mystics did, but rather used “extraordinary experience” actively in poetic creativity. In this context the visionary moment was not a breakthrough to a realm beyond;

on the contrary, mystical union, Emerson asserted, is to be attained in this world as an experiential moment and impetus to the active conduct of life. Emerson's mysticism thus took an intensely pragmatic interest in the ordinary. (Hurth 161)

For them, the mystic represented the possibility for man to experience the essence, the Divine Spirit. In considering mysticism as an attitude that pursues spiritual knowledge, then, the concept of self-consciousness - in which an objective and subjective awareness of the mind guides intellect through contemplation to the knowledge of the self - is necessarily implicit in that mystical search.

The philosophical treatment of religious issues denoted that religious sensibility had advanced into new forms. Traditional views of religion had decayed and renewed conceptions were demanded. Spiritual consciousness as traditionally understood should be replaced by another kind of interpretation, in which the individual's intuitive power, reason, and his ability to interpret the symbols in nature (imagination) aimed for a perception of unity. A new conduct of life was claimed and this new attitude meant a new way of interpreting the concept of consciousness. The transition from a traditional interpretation of faith to a *pragmatic* and *moral* view of it would be carried out by Transcendentalism and, particularly, by the thinking of its main representative figure, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Many of the European philosophical principles would be transmitted by Emerson's works into the American vision of life, but with respect to his own interpretation of the concepts as self-consciousness and mysticism, Neoplatonic teaching struck him deeply.

Plotinus' idea of the world as emanation and the idea of the ecstatic union with the One (everything emanates from the One, the ultimate power and unity of things, and the first emanation is thought or mind) influenced Emerson's belief that the mind is a stream of thoughts and the universe is an emanation of God (Richardson 348) Also, Plotinus's conception of self-consciousness of the individual soul as the stage of mystical union of the self with the One, an ecstatic union in which there is no separation between the Subject thinking and the Object thought (God), would derive into a renewed concept of mysticism (Richardson 348). For Emerson, the most valuable experience for the individual would be that which is experienced in nature. His presence in nature allowed the feeling of being one with it.

If the universe and nature are an emanation of God, then this feeling of being one with nature becomes a feeling of oneness with God. The aim of the mystic would be to attain oneness with the divine (Richardson 228). In relating nature, man and God a sense of reconciliation between science, philosophy and religion arose. The spiritual world present in the sensible world had its unity represented in that mystical experience. Thus, Emerson interpreted that a mystical attitude was reserved for those who understood the benefits obtained from the spiritual perception of nature: through its physical beauty, the mystic was furnished with moral beauty (virtue) and intellectual beauty (truth) (Richardson 230).

In a kind of religious illumination, as Emerson himself conceived this act of inquiry into man's consciousness, the flowing of the soul, the spirit or the mind occurred – conscience, the voice of God or God himself immanent in man and in nature. And he added that this intuitive perception of spiritual truth in the mystic might be accompanied by disease and discredit:

For, by being assimilated to the original soul, by whom, and after whom, all things subsist, the soul of man does then easily flow into all things, and all things flow into it: they mix; and he is present and sympathetic with their structure and law. This path is difficult, secret, and beset with terror. The ancients called it *ecstasy* or absence, - a getting out of their bodies to think. All religious history contains traces of the trance of saints, - a beatitude, but without any sign of joy, earnest, solitary, even sad; "the flight", Plotinus called it, "of the alone to the alone"; Μυεσις, the closing of the eyes, -whence our word, *Mystic*. . . . But what as readily comes to mind, is, the accompaniment of disease. This beatitude comes in terror, . . . and drives the man mad; . . . In the chief examples of religious illumination, somewhat morbid has mingled, in spite of the unquestionable increase of mental power. Must the highest good drag after it a quality which neutralizes and discredits it? (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Swedenborg; or, the Mystic* 663)

And through language (words, as signs for natural facts), the individual shapes the abstractions behind things, behind those natural facts. For Transcendentalists, language depended on Nature as its source, and man had the ability to convert this outward world into language.

Words become the expression of those forms in nature that are, at the same time, symbols of a spiritual world. This is how the poet and the mystic become the sayer and the seer and their poetry is the expression by metaphors of the spiritual reality behind natural reality:

In the first volume of the “Animal Kingdom”, he [Swedenborg] broaches the subject, in a remarkable note. — “. . . the physical world was purely symbolical of the spiritual world; insomuch, that if we choose to express any natural truth in physical and definite vocal terms, and to convert these terms only into the corresponding and spiritual terms, we shall by this means elicit a spiritual truth, or theological dogma, in place of the physical truth or precept”. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Swedenborg; or, the Mystic* 673)

The concepts of truth – as the spiritual truth in mystical perception – and of beauty – as the sentiment inspired by nature expressed in the form of poetry – were closely related.

In his quotation above from Swedenborg’s *Animal Kingdom*, Emerson emphasizes the importance of language as the means to communicate the correspondence between the spiritual and physical worlds and how their truths were implicit in the symbolism of language. And this correspondence was sought by the mystic and by the poet, as individuals whose insight can perceive how mind and matter, thoughts and things are related.

The fact, thus explicitly stated, is implied in all poetry, in allegory, in fable, in the use of emblems, and in the structure of language. . . . Behmen, and all mystics, imply this law, in their dark riddle-writing. . . . It required an insight that could rank things in order and series; or, rather, it required such rightness of position, that the poles of the eye should coincide with the axis of the world. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Swedenborg; or, the Mystic* 673-674)

Swedenborg’s spirituality greatly influenced the romantic and transcendentalist concern with the condition of human nature.

A philosopher, a scientist, a theologian, when asked about how he, a philosopher, became a theologian, he answered: “. . . , I, too, from early youth had been a spiritual fisherman. . . a fisherman in the spiritual sense of the Word, signifies one who rationally investigates and teaches natural truths, and afterwards spiritual truths . . . because *the latter are founded upon the former*” (Swedenborg *A Compendium* 56). Swedenborg’s merit, in Emerson’s words in reference to the author’s highest end in “The Animal Kingdom”, would be “. . . to put science and the soul, long estranged from each other, at one again” (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Swedenborg; or, the Mystic* 671). For Swedenborg, the individual perceives by himself and naturally the harmony and disharmony of sensations:

. . . the soul naturally apprehends and is conscious of every thing harmonious or inharmonious which occurs to any sense. . . . The reason is that the soul is pure intelligence, and is the order and truth of its own microcosm. Hence the cognition of order and truth is a faculty born with us, and one that is rarely learned. Neither can the senses otherwise exist, for in order that there be a sense there must be the harmonious mixed with the inharmonious. (Swedenborg *The Soul* 15-16)

There is profound significance in Emerson’s statement above on Swedenborg’s philosophical and scientific contribution, “. . . to put science and the soul, long estranged from each other, at one again”. Emerson is clearly defining his own intellectual stance with a conciliatory tone. He turned to Nature as the primary source of moral principles (Richardson 233). Emerson’s religious view of the world differed from Unitarians’ conservative view. True morality depended on true knowledge. His belief that the individual is the only one able to attain truth was based on his belief in the individual’s resources, in self-reliance and in will. He accepted subjective knowledge as an important and necessary part of true knowledge. He grounded thought and religion (and art) in individual experience. For him, the mind common to the universe was disclosed to each individual through his own nature (Richardson 234). In self-reliance man reached a level of consciousness that made unconscious truth into available knowledge (Richardson 241).

This level of consciousness or self-reliance finds its expression in the poet's words as a rhetorical way to transmit a message that comes out of a sentiment of beauty and, in the same way, this self-reliance in the mystic inspires in him a spiritual message coming from God that communicates a religious truth. Both the poet and the mystic are induced by their perception of moral and spiritual truths behind the forms in nature to use art and religion as vehicles of their thoughts. Emerson enhanced the figure of the poet and his management of language because he found in him and in his qualities the balance in which the flowing of the divine essence was possible:

He [the poet] is isolated among his contemporaries, by truth and by his art, but with this consolation in his pursuits, that they will draw men sooner or later. For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression . . . The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and its representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Poet* 448)

For Transcendentalists, poetry and mysticism relate to the experiences of truth, which inspires a spiritual message in the poet and the mystic. The poet finds in poetry the expression for the divine essence/Soul/Spirit that he perceives immanent in Nature. The Transcendentalist concept of self-consciousness as a transcendental awareness of the self to perceive thoughts as a unity could be attained by the ability of the poet and the mystic to shape this feeling of continuity into words :

. . . Emerson was acutely aware of the problem of language in mystical experience, namely the gulf between the mystical vision itself and the limited possibilities of conventional language. Mystical experience seemed incommunicable, beyond human speech. And yet, Emerson insisted on the need to communicate mystical experience and give it adequate external expression. Only by communicating his experience does the mystic assert his own self. . . .

As both “seer” and “sayer”, the mystic poet, Emerson insisted, had to subject his pristine experience to a “controlled” “conversion” into precise, comprehensible form. (Hurth 164)

The mystic feels the divine presence in his isolated insight that leads him to an ecstatic union with it. This isolation allows the mystic a unity, a direct communication with the deity, in which Spirit pervades the individual. The poet tries to communicate his perception of this pervading and common essence between the elements in nature and his soul. The need for supernatural intervention - one of the reasons why many superstitious connotations were applied to the term “mysticism”- was rejected. A mystical experience was true when it was produced in the individual *from within* (Buell 59). The possibility to convert and express into language the inner perception and comprehension of the outer world as the result of an experience of union with the essence immanent in natural elements could open the way to share this vision of continuity between within and without with other individuals. A religious and mystical view of the poet was introduced by Transcendentalists: the faculty of Reason allows the human being to perceive spiritual truth intuitively; this inner perspective or individual insight permits a subjective awareness of unity between the individual’s condition and the elements of the world.

The innate need to know of the condition of his existence necessarily involves a subjective awareness in the individual’s experience of the world. The mystic needs to express, to externalise this subjective experience *from within* in order to transmit this perception of continuity between thought and world and thus assert his self-awareness. Artistic expression becomes for the individual a versatile tool. By means of imagination the individual is able to produce a creative answer, an artistic response, which collects this feeling of unity.

The perception of continuity in a mystical experience is subsequent to a sentiment of unity in the perception and experience of the world and has been transmitted through art through the centuries. On the one hand, we might not consider as mystics all those artists, thinkers and writers whose creative production deals with such a feeling and perception of unity.

But on the other hand, we could analyse how the concept of mysticism as an attitude to life is present in those whose work aims at the comprehension of how the expression of the feeling of the world-thought continuity may affect the knowledge of our condition of being, as will be further shown in the study of the selected works of Jones Very, Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell.

A clear example of such a mystical attitude is represented by Jones Very, who used art and religion as vehicles for the expression of his perception of moral and spiritual truths behind the forms in nature. His mysticism represented the evolution of a philosophical and spiritual consciousness. In the same way as Very's mysticism could be appreciated as a continuous search for God's presence in human being and in nature in the prevailing religious tone of his words, Wallace Stevens' poetry becomes the expression of a mystical experience from within as the means for articulating the sense of connection between the aesthetic and the divine.

As we can read in these lines from his poem "Sunday Morning", the sentiment of unity in the perception of the elements of the world pervades every single word of it. The poet's contemplative attitude on an earthly experience guides the reader's thought in order to share the poet's feeling of continuity. In this dreamlike setting, as if in a mystical experience, the poet struggles between some sort of religious skepticism and the soul's destiny:

What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering

The bough of summer and the winter branch.

These are the measures destined for her soul. (Sunday Morning, 1915)

Stevens' creative response would be the discourse of an inner view of the ordinary elements of his life experience and the need to find an aesthetic answer to existential concerns. This sort of inner discussion in the individual would be similar to the one dealt with by Very in his analysis on the treatment of the epic discourse. The change of epic matters into introspection as a sign of the epic hero's search for moral values reflects the individual's innate need to know on his self-condition. The loss of identity consequent to this lack of values makes human being look for them inside in order to overcome that sort of skepticism which the individual experiences after such a sentiment of emptiness of identity.

Likewise, if we consider a mystical experience as an experience *from within*, Stanley Cavell's quest of the ordinary teaches us to counteract this sort of emptiness and its subsequent skepticism with the richness of an experience of life *from within the ordinary*, that is, we must learn to learn from the immediacy of everything around us. Cavell's analysis on how words and ordinary language refer to things and how thinking acts in this inner process may provide us with the closeness to what exists outside of us, creating thus a sort of intimacy with the outer. Cavell's philosophical interpretation of literary texts brings us to an inner comprehension of the experience of life from the perspective which ordinary language transmits to us. His is a discourse on an aesthetic response with a philosophical basis rooted in the pragmatic view of the thought–world relationship which Romanticism and American Transcendentalism introduced.

The evolution in the treatment of the concept of mysticism comes along with an evolution in the individual's view of the world. The individual's change into an inner approach to his relationship with all those elements related to his existence would be encouraged by the need to know about the nature of his being. The creative response to this growth of self-consciousness would be the result of an imaginative act.

III - MYSTICAL HERITAGE: IMAGINATION AND REALITY

As we have seen in the previous sections, the change in the treatment of the mystical experience as a source of knowledge came along with America's historical process of growth and advance in self-consciousness in the 19th century. During the 17th and 18th centuries – a period of intellectual growth under the influence of religious and philosophical European inherited principles and under the effects of the American War of Independence, as well as a time conditioned by the growing philosophical and political differences and social changes within the American framework – the inner interpretation of the world implicit in a mystical experience would be relevant as far as it motivated the individual to deal with the existential concerns derived from such a cultural context, such as the complex feeling of a national entity and the conflictive will to be no longer a colonial territory while it was colonizing territories of its own.

From this moment on and during the 19th century, the role of mysticism would be meaningful for the recovery of the individual's identity, in a period in which the birth and growth of a nation and its intellectual progression encouraged the need of self-trust and a more pragmatic interpretation of the set of moral values, such as the transcendentalists would introduce. In a similar way to the Puritans' use of symbolism for the interpretation of Biblical texts and for the practice of religious principles in daily experience in the New World, the symbolic power of words would be the means for the transmission of this new pragmatic vision of the world in the transcendentalist thought. The power to interpret the symbols in nature and in ordinary life, imagination, opened thus a new path to self-knowledge within this process of intellectual development in America. The possibility for self-recovery was in the individual's interpretation and reading of his life experience. The development of an American literature would be grounded in this genuine reading of life events: the perception of an affinity between world and thought, as an intimacy between the ordinary elements of life and the individual's thought. This sort of intimacy with the world provides human being with an individual identity. This perception of the individual's affinity with the elements of the world would be the core of the process of awareness of the condition of his existence.

The change in the individual's awareness of reality and the growth of self-consciousness evolve simultaneously, but could mysticism be understood as a true source for intellectual progression? Would it be possible for the individual to find in the introspection inherent to the mystical experience the way to comprehend the condition of his existence in terms of an affinity between world and thought? In doing so, we could have a different interpretation of reality and a path towards self-knowledge. Such an abstract concept as the self cannot be easily defined since awareness of its existence depends on an intuitive experience which occurs within the mind. In the search for a sensual-spiritual affinity which the attainment of self-consciousness is related to, mystical experience became a means which favoured the view of that inexplicable unity between mind and world. Within the American context along with Emerson and the Transcendentalists in the 19th century, as stated above, mysticism was thus part of the intellectual process which attempts to understand the links between thought and reality. The mystic tried to shape his experience of self-awareness, as a spiritual experience attached to a sensual experience of reality, in order to study this possibility of the continuity between mind and world. Mystical heritage set part of the intellectual ground which encouraged the individual to comprehend the nature of his being by means of an inward look into the world.

Coleridge's conviction that the intellect was not the only instrument to arrive at truth, along with the pragmatism and the moral view that Emerson's intellectual heritage introduced into the interpretation of the world, made the intuitive use of reason and imagination two main resources for the comprehension of reality: "The sensual man conforms thoughts to things; the poet conforms things to his thoughts. . . . The Imagination may be defined to be, the use which the Reason makes of the material world" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Idealism* 34). Reason as the intuitive power by which the individual may attain spiritual knowledge and imagination, as the faculty that interprets the symbols in nature by means of reason, become values that lead human being in its knowledge of the world. This pragmatic and inner approach to reality made the individual's creative power the instrument with which thoughts are transformed into art, and thus, by means of the imagination, human being acquires an insight into reality. There are many examples in art which demonstrate the possibility of looking through things, and particularly, many literary creations which share a common feeling when dealing with reality from an introspective point of view.

Whilst common sense looks at things or visible Nature as real and final facts, poetry, or the imagination which dictates it, is a second sight, looking through these, and using them as types or words for thoughts which they signify . . .

Poetry, if perfected, is the only verity; is the speech of man after the real, and not after the apparent. (Miller 206-207)

In thinking of the condition of the existence of the self the individual's capacity to imagine becomes an essential tool to know more about his existential condition in a process of comprehension favoured and mediated by the context of nature. As Miller indicates above, the act of imagining permits the individual a second sight which looks through the things in Nature. We could say that what the mystic receives in his inner view of the world is comparable to what the artist projects in his creation. In our case, the symbolic power of language orders and shapes human experience. The individual attempts to define his self in the action of imagining. The individual's vision of nature may find the place of human mind in it by means of imagination. And this is something that we should try to keep in mind.

Today we are inheritors of that cultural legacy which has been modelling the concept of imagination throughout times. As an innate ability, the imagination has been a subject of controversy ever since its origins and the origins of humankind. In the same way as the term mysticism experienced an evolution in its concept influenced by philosophical interpretations, religious beliefs and historical events, the term imagination has been equally affected in its conception in the western tradition throughout different ages. But should not we secure that genuine sense of the concept of imagination which makes us individuals with an identity mainly defined by feeling and thought? In Richard Kearney's words, "We appear to have entered a postmodern civilization where the image has become less and less the expression of an individual subject and more and more the commodity of an anonymous consumerist technology" (Kearney *Changing Faces* paragraph 1).

If we study the etymological evolution of the term imagination, we will find it affected by connotations that, as in the case of the term mysticism, may have influenced in this concept and in its role for the individual's intellectual development.

Both terms mysticism and imagination relate to a process of the soul as far as they lead the individual in the comprehension of his relation to the world out of a subjective vision and, in both of them, this inward view and making of images in mind is as well closely connected with the intellect:

‘Imagination’ should be traced, of course, to its Latin equivalent *imaginatio*, whose root, *imago*, had meant a copy or likeness. In Virgil and Cicero this was used broadly for a statue, signet or spirit, but Cicero gave it also the more technical and psychological meaning of “an image of a thing found in the mind, a conception, a thought, an idea” In this the Latin reflects the Greek term *eikon*, meaning image or copy. Hence, etymologically imagination corresponds to the Greek *eikasia*, coming from *eiko*, “to be like”. (McLean 5)

In its origins the concept seemed to refer to the object as much as the subject who thinks of the object, but the term would eventually be more far-reaching,

The Greek had also the term *phantasia* from *phaino*, “to appear or to be apparent”. This was derived, Aristotle notes, from *phaos*, or light, which enables one to see. Neither *phantasia* nor *eikasia* originally referred to anything on the part of the subject rather than on the part of the object. However, through Democritus’ clarification of the distinction between sensation and its stimulus, there arose a great consciousness of the work of the subject imagining.

From the time of Aristotle this was reflected in the technical use of *phantasia*, rather than *eikasia*, in discussions of the process of knowledge. (ibid.)

Just as a mystic at first was negatively seen as a visionary, the concept of imagination was necessarily related to image, “[h]ence, though ‘imagination’ can be traced etymologically to the more objective *eikasia*, its meaning corresponds more properly to *phantasia*, as expressing a process of the soul or *psyche*” (ibid.). Although an image and/or the concept it stands for should apparently have nothing to do with any sort of pejorative connotation, the concept of an image is undoubtedly and implicitly connected with the action of the eye, that is, with subjectivity. The view of the subject plays the main role in the interpretation of any image which comes out of imagination in the individual’s inner approach to reality; human being’s perception of the outside world depends on its sight of it and its cultural growth directly depends on this sight.

But, somehow, the implicit subjectivity in the conception of an image is relatively questionable as an evidence of truth in this process of comprehension of the individual's existence. The term imagination would eventually be given a theoretical basis which set its conception apart from speculation and proved its relation to a faculty that has to do with knowing. This capacity to know comes as a result of the symbolic use of mental images, a fact that connects the term both to affection and the intellect. A mental image can provide the individual with an access to the elements of the world. Any experience connected with the sense of sight, or that goes into vision, could be attached to imagination. We should thus understand imagination as the making of images in the mind. As Jacob Bronowski explains,

Almost all the words that we use about experiences of the kind that go into visions or images are words connected with the eye and with the sense of sight. "Imagination" is a word which derives from the making of images in the mind, from what Wordsworth called "the inward eye". But the very fact that Wordsworth could use such a phrase makes it very clear how much the intellectual activities of man are eye-conditioned. (Bronowski *The Mind as an Instrument for Understanding*)

But it would be necessary to set its definition apart from any connotation of excess or deviation that may lead the individual to a misunderstanding in the interpretation of his relationship, necessarily mediated by imagination, to the world. As Richard Kearney recognizes, "[t]here is a growing condition that the images we possess are reproduced copies of images already there before us. The image which is has *already been*. Like every commodity of our mass communications society, the postmodern image has itself become an interchangeable consumer item" (Kearney *The Civilization of the Image* par. 8). This sense of interchangeable item provides an image with a multiplicity of interpretations, due to its power to evoke, which may derive into a devaluated appreciation of the concept of imagination as a true source of knowledge as far as it may deal with abstraction or it may lack reliability and a sense of thoroughness in the perception and comprehension of the world. Notwithstanding the above, this sense of interchangeable quality that is innate to an image is what has made of imagination an extremely versatile tool and a support in the individual's intellectual growth throughout times.

These features of versatility and subjectivity inherent to the term seem to be exactly the properties which encourage the evolution of the notion of imagination from the mental power to imitate reality into its conception as a creative power which “frames” the comprehension of reality, as Michelle Karnes states,

. . . imagination limps along for centuries, feeble and error-prone, before finally achieving prestige as the engine behind human creativity. In its prolonged prepubescent state, imagination mimics rather than invents, serving only to reproduce sensory or other data until it becomes “a productive or creative power which autonomously frames and constructs its own image of reality”. (1)

There are many aspects to be considered in understanding the meaning of imagination which make its technical use a support for creativity and thus for intellectual development, first within the European context and afterwards in its legacy in American culture. From its classical meaning that links imagination with phantasy – the means for the soul to be made available in the Aristotelian philosophy and a means for the development of a theory of how the mind works –, imagination evolves throughout the Middle Ages into the faculty which mediates in the discovery of truth, or into the means of the mind to bring the individual closer to God on its way from earth to heaven, within the western philosophical and religious context respectively. Greek philosophical principles would be introduced and shaped into the Christian doctrine throughout the Middle Ages. Neoplatonism profoundly influenced the emergence of mainstream and not so mainstream Christian theology. Religious and philosophical thinking would eventually merge with Neoplatonic thought on which the basis for a renewed view of the concepts of mysticism and imagination would be set:

As a philosophical school of thought that first emerged and flourished in the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity, . . . from the middle of the 3rd to the middle of the 7th century Neoplatonism became the dominant philosophical ideology of the period, offering a comprehensive understanding of the universe and the individual human being’s place in it. . . . As a grand synthesis of an intellectual heritage, the Neoplatonists absorbed, appropriated, and creatively harmonized almost the entire Hellenic tradition of philosophy, religion, and even literature.

. . . They together offered a kind of meta-discourse and reflection on the sum-total of ideas produced over centuries of sustained inquiry into the human condition. (Wildberg par. 1)

The concept of imagination would be redefined as a result of this “inquiry into the human condition”, product of its intellectual heritage. As we can see in Anne Sheppard’s words,

The final stage of Greek philosophy, Neoplatonism, inherits and develops a combined Platonic and Aristotelian tradition and here we find some interesting uses of the concept of imagination, although its full potential is not developed. Much Neoplatonist psychology is based on Aristotle. *Phantasia* does have a specific place in the psychology of Aristotle’s *DeAnima*, between perception and thought. What in Aristotle are psychological capacities, things we do with our souls, are presented as faculties in Neoplatonism. (qtd. in Destrée 362)

Different forms of inquiry into the human condition were subsequent to the influences derived from this Neoplatonic tradition during the Middle Ages (c. 400-1400), and these forms would evolve differently in the transition to the Renaissance (1400 – 1600) in the continent and in England. As Charles B. Schmitt states in reference to the different branches of humanist learning (historical, philosophical and religious) during this period of transition,

. . . from the beginning the battleground of theological polemic in England was that of religious practice and the application of Scripture to life. There was not the same organized, Scholastic type of debate, rooted in Greek philosophical and scientific categories, that marked Catholic – Protestant polemic on the Continent. (21)

The development of an intellectual argument on the existential condition of human being would be greatly favoured by all the scientific, philosophical and religious implications which the discovery of the New World meant. The greatness of nature in America posed for Europe the possibility of the application of Scripture to life, with all the subsequent literary practice attached to devotion. The interpretation of natural elements encourage the sense of achievement of proximity of the individual to God,

Europeans are also unusual in their belief that to transform Nature in this way is a crucial part of what it is to be a man; for Nature had been given by God to man for his use. Men were thus encouraged to see in the natural world a design of which they were the final beneficiaries. (Pagden 6)

The imagination would contribute to the “design” of the interaction between human being and the elements of the world. It would mediate in the interpretation of the symbols which natural elements stand for, something that may ease the individual’s comprehension of his condition as a being. The Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason in the individual’s interpretation of the world in the 18th century stimulated individualism, nature and free will as postulates of Romanticism first formulated in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century. In the expansion of the Romantic premises in Europe and America from then on we can find the key role of the concept of imagination for the individual’s growth into self-knowledge. Romanticism would mark a change of mind and made of arts its way of expression as a means of linking the different ways of thinking. Romantic artists shared a universal feeling in which they looked for themselves:

A Romantic person was first of all sensitive and someone on whom logic and pure ideas had little impact. It was a knowledgeable person whose actions were based on intuition: as a statesman, he would obey a generous or imaginary impetus; as a writer or poet his thinking was taking shape in images. . . . man was not an isolated creature in the middle of a silent world. Life was all around him. . . . Nature was not an empty architectural structure, mere décor or background. It was full of elementary beings, close to us, visible or invisible, and even the things in it were constantly changing. (Rosenthal 38)

Léon Rosenthal’s words in reference to Romantic inspiration clearly collect two of the individual’s qualities which come along with his innate ability of imagination: intuition and sensitiveness. Similarly to the mystic’s inner perception of the outer, intuition guides the artist in his search for inspiration in nature as well as his thought is simultaneously “taking shape in images”, that’s to say, imagination leads the individual’s interpretation of his relationship to the world and becomes thus a vehicle of self-knowledge.

Imagination as the main driving force of this creative impulse attached to inspiration would be greatly encouraged by the individual's proximity to nature. The Romantic artists were eager to transmit a common feeling: the sentiment of beauty imbued by the individual's presence before an untouched nature.

The New World would become the land whose natural splendour had not been damaged and altered by human action yet and the landscape on which the Romantic view of continuity between thought and world could be projected. The role of imagination would be encouraged in America in the early to mid-nineteenth century by the inheritors of European Romantic thought, the Transcendentalists, as a vehicle for the expression of one of their main concerns: self-knowledge. The ability to imagine would ease the symbolic interpretation of natural elements and subsequently the perception of continuity between the condition of being and the condition of the elements of the world. The relevance of the American experience from the Transcendentalist period on cannot be denied. As we have seen in previous sections transcendentalists developed a new way of understanding knowledge and some of their intellectual premises included terms like mysticism and imagination. These terms, mysticism and imagination, closely deal with existential concerns which relate to matters which cannot be stated with scientific certainty. The Transcendentalists searched for certainty through intuition, through an inner view of the world and a belief in the existence of an internal spirit. Also, for them skepticism as an innate need to doubt on all the established or imposed was necessary. And they defended the individual's free mind whose innate ability of imagination could help him to expand his self-knowledge.

Romanticism brought together art and life in a close embrace. It injected an aesthetic dimension into everything. The development and importance of art criticism and art history give testimony to it. Since then it has become commonplace that writers express their artistic feelings and impressions publicly. Our life has been enriched and ennobled. For all those reasons we should be thankful to this small group of feverish and generous young people who, a century ago and at a time when a materialistic civilisation was a threat to spirituality, came with the impudent but also invincible force of their youth to praise spiritual values and claim the supremacy of the Ideal. (Rosenthal 59-61)

Rosenthal's words collect the essence of the transcendental spirit and somehow envisage the continuity of a philosophy of life through the centuries whose core tenets underlie the work of the selected writers and thinkers of this study – Jones Very, Wallace Stevens and Stanley Cavell. In their writing a common feeling and thought is present: the relevance of artistic expression, particularly the use of language, as the instrument for the individual to shape the abstractions behind things, behind natural facts. Just as the poet and the mystic become the sayer and the seer of the metaphors of the spiritual reality behind natural reality, their work is a testimony of how an innate need to know in the individual encourages him to convert this outward world into artistic expression, into language.

The indelible imprint which the evolution of the concepts of mysticism and imagination had on the individual's process of self-knowledge is present in Very's, Stevens' and Cavell's creative discourse, a discourse which would collect most of the main values claimed by the Romantic thought. That innate need to know in human being becomes the innate need to express the outcomes of all this intellectual process. "The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Poet* 448). Knowledge and creativity appear to be necessarily interdependent in the individual's comprehension of his existence. This interdependence could be understood as mediation, that is, in shaping thought human being is shaping its attainment of knowledge and its comprehension of reality. Would it then be possible to expand self-knowledge by means of creative experience? If so, the creative expression of our mind would be a path to learn more about self-consciousness and to approach the nature of the self. Creativity thus shapes inner knowledge into outer expression. But what is the means which may lead to knowledge in the individual's attempt of intellectual shaping? An example could be heroic deeds, which can be understood as shaping the moral values of the epic hero's world and as a human model to follow by Transcendentalists, since heroic actions fulfil the hero's innate search for unity and harmony. The productive and creative result of imagination through artistic activity would also fulfil this perception of harmony. Thus we may describe the imagination as an activity of abstraction. In this case, does reality expand its own existence within mind as a result of this process of abstracting? "Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Language* 20).

The process of growth into knowledge matches the human being's process and historical drive to deepen its mind. In this introspective search human being guesses the possibility of affinity, in the sense of interdependence, between the terms matter and soul, what reveals the complementariness and reciprocity between them. Through art human being shapes its feeling of the affinity between the sensual and the spiritual. We can see a clear example of how the poet's experience of the world becomes a manifestation of spiritual concerns in Very's essay on Epic poetry.

The epic poet needed, and needs, to express his perception of harmony through poetry which, within the classical context, reflected the sentiment of spiritual affinity of the hero's mind with his people's through the defence of the moral values at the time. The literary treatment and philosophical interpretation of the fictitious epic context afforded the recreation of the genuine epic spirit, which meant the reconstruction of the existential meaning of the heroic figure. For Jones Very the recreation of that greatness of context implied the recovery of a lost unity in which the hero's spirit, that is, the poet's identity, was preserved. The poet's mind and the hero's world were thus interdependent by means of poetical creativity. The intuitive experience on which Very's literary work was based was a good example of the suggestive power of a mystical attitude. Mysticism for the Transcendentalists might also be interpreted as an intellectual resource for inspiration, in which philosophical and spiritual aspects concerning the notion of being were revealed to the individual's mind. The conception of being was understood in a relationship of continuity between man and the world by means of thinking.

The act of thinking is only innate to human being. Man possesses the key to the knowledge of the self. A wider knowledge of reality might only be attained in the unity of thought and world, where the essence of the self manifests and is perceived by human being. The individual's need to know more deeply about the nature of reality and about his own nature and existence as a spiritual being is closely related to his need to communicate the perception of beauty and harmony attached to this experience. By means of words and imagination the poet is able to reproduce the images in his mind which represent a genuine abstraction of reality, that is, those ideas which arise from this mediation and interdependence between the world and the mind.

The imagination brings along an insight of those concepts present in thought. The artist's introspective attitude seeks to share the beauty and the perception of harmony in those ideas. In the case of poetry, the poet realizes his subjective interpretation of the spiritual significance of nature. In the expression of this subjectivity we can see the multiple possibilities of mind and the ability of language to convey the poet's feeling. Could the individual find in mind the possibility to use the imagination as a way to comprehend his spiritual existence by means of art as its expression? Could the innate ability to imagine become a universal source of knowledge by means of art? Imagination and creativity evidence the intellectual process by which the sensual and the spiritual can be dealt with on equal terms, since in mind their affinity is possible and in this affinity they become a source of knowledge. Art would become a relevant value in the approach to the nature of the self. We could even say that the reciprocity between creativity and the imagination is the worthiest value in art.

When it encourages thinking in the individual, the imagination may inspire many kinds of values, such as religious, moral or artistic ones, as happens in the case of the mystic, the philosopher and the artist. As representatives of the individual's thought, their quest for knowledge is a search to attain consciousness of reality through mind. And in their perception of reality their quest may trespass the boundaries between the world and thought. In the ability to imagine the individual feels free enough to apprehend the unlimited possibilities of knowledge which the perception of reality conceals and introspection reveals.

Jones Very's literary work on the change into introspection which affected the literary treatment of the heroic character evidenced this intellectual process in which the individual progressively became more spiritually active: "Man needs no longer a vast array of physical means to effect his loftiest purpose. . . . He is learning to reverse the order in which the ancients looked at the outward creation, he looks at the world with reference to himself, and not at himself with reference to the world" (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 31). A mystical attitude was thus the individual's tool in this process of thinking to rebuild the self out of perception and imagination. Transcendentalists' renewed conception of the self pursued a spiritual richness that showed the power of the writer's intellect as a means to counteract the contemporary spiritual emptiness, partly subsequent to an excess of rationalism in Unitarians.

This emptiness, as one of the main reasons why Transcendentalists' proposals emerged, was due to the prevailing material interests that negatively conditioned the individual's free agency and, subsequently, his ability of an inner perception of the outer. Intellectual progression is thus partly set within the conception of the realm of non-material existence. Thinkers and artists have dealt with an inner conception of material things over time: "These [in reference to a group of Neo-Impressionist schools] are the searchers for the inner life of the external" (Kandinsky *On the Spiritual in Art* 31). Kandinsky's thinking in "On the Spiritual in Art" (1911) shows a mystical way in his approach to and vision of the elements of the world. The same common sentiment of spiritual continuity present in a mystical attitude pervades his thought and artistic experience and makes him an art theorist of the concept of an inner perception of material things, which reflected his belief in a correspondence between the different visual forms and sounds present in his creative production. The possibility of self-recovery remains within the artist's subjectivity:

That "what" constitutes the spiritual food for the now beginning spiritual awakening. This no longer will be the material, objective "what" of former epochs but an artistic substance – the soul of art – without which its body (the "how") can never lead a completely sound existence, as in the case with individuals and entire peoples. This "what" is the eternal truth embraced by art, and which only art can express by means essentially its own. (Kandinsky *On the Spiritual in Art* 20)

Kandinsky's words also allude to the proximity in different art expressions at "...an hour of spiritual evolution". (ibid. 34) From his artistic view, Kandinsky imagined spiritual life as represented in a triangle.

A large acute triangle divided into unequal segments, the narrowest one pointing upwards, is a schematically correct representation of spiritual life. The lower the segment the larger, wider, higher and more embracing will be the other parts of the triangle. The entire triangle moves slowly, almost invisible, forward and upward and where the apex was "today", the second segment is going to be tomorrow, that is to say, that which today can be understood today only by the apex, and which to the rest of the triangle seems an incomprehensible gibberish,

tomorrow forms the true and sensitive life of the second segment. At the apex of the top segment, sometimes one man stands entirely alone. (Kandinsky *On the Spiritual in Art* 16)

The artist is the man at the end of this triangle, whose mission is moved by an inner need to guide others in his spiritual search, “the true and sensitive life”, by means of his creativity and imagination. The beauty of the colours in a canvas could have a spiritual effect. The artist should try to create an inner effect in the individuals’ observance of reality. The power of the artist’s creativity is so influential that it can make the observers guess and share the artist’s feeling which underlies his creation. The work of art becomes the material construction of a non-material conception of the world, the physical expression of the artist’s soul:

. . . we are fast approaching the time of conscious composition, when the painter’s reason prides itself to explain his work constructively, (contrary to the accidental Impressionists, whose main pride it was, that they could not explain anything). We have before us the age of conscious creation with which the spiritual in painting will be allied organically; with the gradual forming structure of the new spiritual realm, as this spirit is the soul of this epoch of great spirituality. (Kandinsky *On the Spiritual in Art* 99)

If artists and thinkers have been concerned with a necessity to find the expression of their common sentiment of continuity between world and thought, Kandinsky’s statement that “the age of conscious creation” and “the spiritual” will be “allied organically” would be instilled by the same inner vision of interdependence and reciprocity. As some kind of spiritual knowledge was attained by the mystic through an experience of introspection, the artist’s introspective view of reality present in his creations is a reflection of the artist’s soul and represents the possibility of interdependence between mind and world. “The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things; but if this constitutes a certain single characteristic, it is the source not of a single value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things” (Stevens *Imagination as Value* 136). These words in Wallace Stevens’ essay from *The Necessary Angel* are an example of this intellectual process and progression of mind.

The complexity in the approach to reality from its abstraction through mind is present in such a revealing work as Stevens'. His writing could be understood as representative of that introspective process which many artists had previously dealt with in their creative production. The source of inspiration in Very's and Stevens' creative production is mostly found in their introspective approach to nature and the elements of the world. They both try to shape their concerns with existential matters into the possibilities laid out by linguistic interaction with the world, though they tackle such a complex issue from different views. While Very's creativity was the result of the inner interpretation of an experience of life which longed for the presence of God everywhere and the driving force of imagination was somehow restrained by his deep religious beliefs, Stevens' creative workforce was moved by the need to find support for his moral convictions in the introspective interpretation of an ordinary life experience and it was grounded on the use of imagination and on the relevance of those values which the sound of words stand for. For Stevens the poet's imagination concealed in the sound of words reveals a means to comprehend the individual's experience with the world. For Very the words of the poet and his creativity were meant to reveal the divine presence in them and in human nature as a path to God. Both highlighted the importance of the noble attitude implicit in the hero's performance and the poet's words: the moral values shared with his people. There is a common feeling which underlies epic deeds and lines.

In Very's and Stevens' poetry imagination flows through their words and mediates in their interpretation of the relationship of continuity between the individual's thought and the world. The source of inspiration for their artistic thought is to be found within and without, in mind and out in nature. Transcendentalist philosophy of life looked into nature as a way to understand the possibility of spiritual existence in the individual; the poet and his poetry, as interpreter and interpretation respectively of a dialogue between inner and outer perceptions, brought into mind the experience of the world. The poet's achievement, like the hero's struggle, is to be found in this dialogue with reality, and the power of his genius, evidenced in this linguistic interaction between thought and nature, is enhanced by means of the imagination and abstraction in writing. The expression of genius becomes the expression of the poet's introspective and inner convictions.

In the study of the figure of Wallace Stevens and in the literary expression of his philosophy of life we may find continuity to that genuine thought which comprehends self-knowledge in the interdependence between thinking and the elements which compound the individual's existence. As Stevens reminds us in *Imagination as a Value*, "Imagination, as metaphysics, leads us in one direction, and, as art, in another. When we consider the imagination as metaphysics, we realize that it is in the nature of imagination itself that we should be quick to accept it as the only clue to reality" (Stevens 1951: 137). For him the relevance of imagination resides in the power which it exerts on the mind and on its effect on the mind's interpretation of things and on the individual's relationship to the world. The interdependence between thought and world is understood in a dialectical manner by Stanley Cavell. As a philosopher, he shows how the discourse in Romanticism and American Transcendentalism may be read as a creative response to the lack of identity subsequent to a loss of values, due to a loss of intimacy with the world, and, also, as a way of self-recovery in the thought-world continuity by means of ordinary language and of imaginative richness. Ordinary language helps the individual to recover the lost intimacy with the world. Imaginative richness helps the individual in this search for expression as a means for self-fulfilment.

His is a similar response to Stevens' introspective interpretation of an ordinary life experience and also to his claim of that ". . . necessary angel of earth, / Since, in my sight, you see the earth again" (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 423), a claim which substantiates the necessity of both reality and spirituality of things, or similar to Very's criticism on the necessary change into the introspective treatment of the epic spirit. Cavell's philosophical and literary contribution means continuity to the intellectual discussion on the self-condition.

The literary response to this kind of intellectual debate should always act as the expression of human identity and its self-knowledge. The concept of the self should serve as the representative symbol of the individual's identity and that of his country's. The world and human being are a source of inspiration for the poet's mind. He, the poet, sees the revelation of a spiritual universe within every earthly and human element. He intuitively feels the condition of the self as human and divine, physical and spiritual, thus human being possesses in its self the secret of universal wisdom.

IV - JONES VERY, THE MYSTIC

The Transcendentalists' interest in the mystic's comprehension of his existence as a spiritual being had much to do with their concern with the poet's inner perception of the world. In their defence of the use of reason as the individual's intuitive power, and imagination as the ability to interpret the symbols in nature, both as intellectual resources to understand the individual's relation to the world, they found in creativity the means to shape their comprehension of the individual's existence as a continuity between a physical and spiritual condition. Artistic production, namely literary in the case of Transcendentalists, would embody the result of the reciprocal relation between things and thoughts. Although several Transcendentalist poets and contemporaries as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman also manifested a mystical strain, Jones Very is perhaps the most exemplary representative of Transcendentalism's mystical literary creativity, as we will see throughout this section.

In Very's imaginative approach to the elements and forces found in nature we find the reflection of a deeply spiritual, evangelically-inclined consciousness. In Very's imaginative treatment and approach to the elements in nature, as we will see in the study of his selected poems. Because he lived his own life both as a religious man and as an artist, he most fully gathered those qualities admired in the Transcendentalists' defence of spirituality. As Elliott points out, "[o]nce having defined intuitive experience and creative expression as the essence of religious practice and discourse, transcendentalism naturally became drawn to the idea that the theologian and the denominational preacher [were] less credible vessels of spirituality than the inspired artist" (374) and Very's life was the life of a part-time supply preacher (375) and a full-time, God-inspired poet. His imaginative play, particularly when he sensitively wrote on nature in his poetry, would come out of the growth of both a religious and aesthetic consciousness that was always guided by his intellectual rigour.

An approach to a literary figure like Jones Very necessarily means taking into account his particular view of life for his literary contribution was the reflection of his spiritual perception of reality. Very conceived his prose and his verse as a manifestation of the religious truth inspired by Nature and revealed to him by God.

His talent as a poet whose inspiration proceeded from his outward contemplation and love of nature would be overcome by his genius as a sayer of God's word, a revelation coming from within. His personal belief in himself as God's messenger discredited him as a literary contributor to Transcendentalism but eventually won him a reputation as a minor American poet.¹³

Born in Salem in 1813 into a family of seamen, he would break the Verys' links with the sea through his sympathy for the changing intellectual life in New England.¹⁴ From an early age, he was known for his seriousness and reserve, and his studious habits. His mother, Lydia Very, a woman of liberal personality, encouraged Very's keenness for books. His mother's fondness for all natural objects influenced her four children's lives, but it inspired a deeply spiritual feeling in Jones.

While attending the Hacker Grammar School, he worked as a store boy (at the age of fourteen) at an auction room, since he had to assist his mother, a young widow, in caring for her family. This experience at work allowed him to read all the books that were brought there. J. Fox Worcester, an erudite gentleman who fit young men for Harvard, assisted Very in his studies. He became his tutor and secured him an assistantship in the private Latin School presided by Henry K. Oliver. Both Worcester and Oliver encouraged Very's wish to create verse.

By the summer of 1833 he was already offering his poems to the *Salem Observer*.¹⁵ His first poems showed his literary preferences and influences: the late 18th century poets and the Romantic era. His sympathy with nature and man and the acceptance of events as divinely ordained were ideas revealed in his early compositions. The melancholy present in his verse was the manifestation of a mystic rapture and his willingness to be fit for great works.

¹³As has been pointed out by many scholars, "[J]ones Very presents an enigmatic figure: an anointed transcendentalist poet who never considered himself a transcendentalist; who claimed to take dictation from the Holy Spirit yet used demanding poetic forms; who was believed during his lifetime to be both a lunatic and a genius. . . . Were it not for his connection with Emerson, Very would scarcely be remembered at all, yet his verse is often quite good and strangely moving" (Bain 135)

¹⁴See Bartlett for further details on Very's life: Chapters I-IV pp. 3-71. The following information on his biography is taken from this source (pp. 104-107)

¹⁵"From 1835-1839 he was a contributor to the *Salem Observer*, from 1839 to the *Salem Gazette*, and from 1860 to the *Boston Christian Register*" (Bartlett 42)

His uncle's financial support allowed him to enter Harvard at the age of twenty, where he soon won a reputation for his serious study. He excelled in ancient and modern literature, but his chief interest was religion. His modesty and serenity won for him a small group of friends. Very was considered by his peers a man of intuition and mysticism.

Very's sense of the artistic was overcome by his obedience to duty. His poems usually draw a moral. They frequently represent a mood more religious than artistic. He found spiritual significance in any natural element, as a revelation of God's constant love. He contributed to classroom recitations and personal discussions and the originality of his interpretations won for him the admiration of his teacher, Professor Edward Tyrrell Channing, who helped Very to unfold his own interpretation of English and classical writers. Channing stressed the value of simple diction, clarity of thought and direct and natural expression. Very composed carefully, simply and slowly. His professor of Greek literature, Edward Everett, and his eloquence inspired in Very a great admiration for the Greek spirit. After his graduation in 1836, he was appointed tutor in Greek. He had won the confidence of the faculty at Harvard and this opportunity enabled him to pay for part of the expenses at the Divinity School, which he was determined to enter. He and his close friend Longfellow, also a tutor in Greek, took personal interest in their students. Their friendly manners in their teaching methods attracted students' enthusiasm for the Greek spirit.

His contributions to the *Salem Observer* brought him to the attention of Elizabeth Peabody, who made him conscious of his own poetic ability. He took his poems to her for criticism. She thought she had found in him a representative of a new spirit and persuaded him to read his essay on Epic Poetry to the Salem Lyceum in 1837. She appraised the intellectual powers displayed in his religious determination, though Very's message seemed not to have a particular application to society, as did Peabody's concerns with social growth:

What made Jones Very so unsettling for Elizabeth Peabody was the possibility that religion was not synonymous with gradual growth toward divine perfection. Liberal Christianity even offered the possibility of mystical experience as part of the shaping of a spiritually harmonious self.

But Very revealed another kind of mysticism, one in which one is beside oneself, possessed, protean, or else emptied of self and filled with a new identity. . . . For Peabody the most fascinating and dangerous part of Very's message was his insistence on self-emptying and will-lessness. For Channing and Peabody self-emptying had to do with overcoming selfishness or self-preoccupation in favour of what was perceived as a higher social good. One found a new will as one practiced moral rectitude. . . . but Very simply wanted to inspire perfectly self-emptied, spirit-filled selves who were led, as he was, to speak their message regardless of social conventions or propriety. (Ronda 154)

She also introduced Very to Emerson, who saw in his essay the qualities of a genius. But it was during his teaching time when Very's religious concerns began to become more absorbing and mystical. He had the conviction that God had revealed something special to him. He was convinced that this divine message was for New England youth and that he had to save the souls of Harvard undergraduates. Although Emerson and Very's friends admired the devout sentiment in him, Very's conviction that he was God's messenger aroused in all of them the suspicion that he could be mentally unbalanced.

Affected by a spiritual crisis and nervous excitation, he was asked by Harvard authorities to withdraw. On September 17, 1838, he entered the McLean Asylum. Before his entry, he sent his essay on Shakespeare to Emerson and during the time he stayed there (he left the Asylum in October 17), he finished his second essay on Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. After leaving the McLean Hospital, he returned home with his family, and completed his physical recovery. His mental state was still affected and it disconcerted those who listened to him speak about his spiritual communion with God. Emerson called him "our brave saint", since he admired Very's position against pulpit oratory and dogmatism. Emerson's entry concerning an event related to Very's religious sentiment in a visit to Concord is significant:

I ought not to omit recording the astonishment which seized all the company when our brave saint [Very] the other day, fronted the presiding preacher. The preacher began to tower and dogmatize with many words.

Instantly I foresaw that his doom was fixed; and as quick as he ceased speaking, the saint set right and blew away all his words in an instant, —unhorsed him, I may say, and tumbled him along the ground in utter dismay, like my angel of Holiodorus. Never was discomfiture more complete. (Bartlett 56)

Although Emerson perhaps disagreed with Very's obsessive religious concerns, he respected his deep devotion and admired his verse so much that he suggested its publication. A collection of his works (his three essays and sixty-six poems), *Essays and Poems*, would be edited by Emerson in 1839.

Very's poetry has periodically excited the interest of discriminating readers and critics. In his own day, not only Emerson, but Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Cullen Bryant were his great admirers. Critic Yvor Winters's rediscovery of Very earlier this century stimulated the modest critical interest that has been maintained over several decades. (Haralson 454)

Among those members of the Transcendental Club who became acquainted with Very and whose criticism of him was positive were Amos Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller and James Freeman Clarke. The latter, as editor of *The Western Messenger*, published many of his sonnets and an enlarged collection of Very's poems in 1886.

Very was licensed to preach, but he was never officially ordained. He was offered several pastorates, but never accepted them because he did not want to leave his home. Very preached frequently in New England. His ministerial career lasted approximately thirty years. His sermons were never published, but he left manuscripts for 129 of them. Their contents were in harmony with the deep spirituality and devotion of his poems. He spoke in them of the need for inward knowledge and stressed the importance of self-reliance and intellectual and spiritual communication with God. But he was never successful as a preacher because his excessive modesty did not transmit a convincing tone. He would spend the rest of his life with his sisters at his home in Salem till his death. The simplicity of his life, especially during his last years, was reflected in the simplicity of style in his later verse.

Some of the main reasons why he was misunderstood at the time must be sought in his excessive spiritualism and in his eccentric attitude. But these same features confer on his work literary values and mystical qualities that should qualify him as a controversial but representative figure within Transcendentalism. In the contradictory views that Jones Very's mystical experience of life instilled among his contemporaries we can see the philosophical, religious and literary connotations of the Transcendentalists' interpretation of mysticism.

IV.1- A Controversial Transcendental Attitude

A constant among Transcendentalists was their will to communicate a spiritual message, a universal truth; they shared a sentiment that came out of inspiration and experience: the perception of harmony between soul and matter. This harmony was possible because of the divine immanence in human being and Nature. Art became the means of transmitting this spiritual perception of truth. In Emerson's essay "Poetry and Imagination" in 1876 we can find some of the transcendentalist principles which strove for a change in the scientific dominant intellect of the time:

The primary use of a fact is low; the secondary use, as it is a figure or illustration of my thought, is the real worth. Hence Nature was called "a kind of adulterated reason". Seas, forests, metals, diamonds and fossils interest the eye, but it's only with some preparatory or predicting charm. Their value to the intellect appears only when I hear their meaning made plain in the spiritual truth they cover. The mind, penetrated with its sentiment or its thought, projects it outward on whatever it beholds. . . . and the facility with which Nature lends itself to the thoughts of man, the aptness with which a river, a flower, a bird, fire, day or night, can express his fortunes, is as if the world were only a disguised man, and, with a change of form, rendered to him all his experience. (Emerson *Letters and Social Aims* 10)

Transcendentalists believed the poet was capable of rendering this spiritual experience and insight, which aim at human transformation, into language and into words of beauty. For Transcendentalists the mystic as well as the poet challenge the individual to think outside the enlightened view of the world.

Transcendentalists and mystics's was a transformative and disruptive point of view which focused on intuition as the way of knowing the world, a direct insight into reality, instead of a vision subdued to reason by influence of the Enlightenment. The interpretation of God and religious beliefs reveal a pragmatic set of moral values, like in Emerson's view, or a natural phenomenon, like in Thoreau's case. Jones Very followed some of these principles in his personal life and in his life as a writer. As a man of religious convictions, his search for God within the individual and in Nature led him to religious illumination. If this religious sentiment had not obsessed him so deeply, he and his writing would probably have met a wider acceptance. His religious attitude caused disagreement among his contemporaries. He made of his literary work a combination of religion and rhetoric, the transmission of a religious and spiritual message. He relied on intuition as a source of truth and his intuition was based on his reliance on God and his love of Nature. He was ". . . self-reliant because God-reliant, Nature-loving because God-loving" (Bartlett 49). He did not find in society the sentiment that he felt in his isolation with the divine spirit. His was an independent transcendentalist position, as he devoted himself exclusively to his personal relationship with God, and left apart those other philosophical and moral aspects that made of Transcendentalism an intellectual movement.

The literary value of his work and his mysticism underwent a progression parallel to his personal life. The mystical aspects in his essays and first poems are less influenced by religious concerns than the mysticism reflected by the poetry written during and after his transient period of insanity. His first essay on Epic Poetry, written before his mental breakdown, had a notoriously moral tone, and was free from an excess of religiosity. As a tutor in Greek at Harvard, he demonstrated his interest and wide knowledge in classical authors, which led him to produce a work full of detailed criticism on the epic and Shakespeare. His was a deep literary analysis from a different and original point of view. Moreover, "[a]s a tutor [he] was much beloved by his students. His class was not as formal as those of the more established professors, and he was not afraid to leave Greek behind and deliver soliloquies aimed at the moral improvement of his young listeners" (ibid.). His prose reflected the freedom of his literary spirit, while his verse, though it reflected his rhetorical mastery, lacked this spiritual freedom. His growing belief in himself as God's messenger negatively affected his poems.

The expression of the beauty that he perceived in nature was full of religious connotations that reflected a strong piety. According to some critics, the excessive dominance of scriptural sources in his poems, along with an obsession with religious issues, restrained his talent. For example, Elliott argues that, “Very at his worst [was] a formulaic, repetitious ventriloquizer of biblical tags; but his best sonnets [were] powerful, intricate, luminous” (375). His poetry became his means of commenting on his private view and mystical experience of life, but his religious life seemed to have alienated him from his human condition.

His moral thoughts lost intellectual power due to a loss of subtlety. His excessively strong bonds to religion might have been the reason why those Transcendentalists who had believed at first in his genius felt disappointed with his attitude: “At a meeting in Emerson’s house, his host noted that Very passed with the other guests for insane, but that all were struck with his ‘insight’” (Miller *The Transcendentalists. An Anthology* 341). Although he devoted his life to ridding himself of his own will and to conforming to God’s will, his intellectual commitment to express such a longing for unity with the divine and spirituality into words would be appreciated by his contemporaries.

Transcendentalists firmly believed in the principle of freedom as a necessary condition for the human being to increase knowledge. The source of this human knowledge could be found within the individual, who, making use of this innate freedom, was able to find other ways of knowing and interpreting the world, that is, different paths for looking into the inspiring elements of the world, like the poet’s and the mystic’s insight of the outer, which provide a sense of continuity between the individual’s condition of existence and the elements of the world. In such a mystical experience of unity religious principles should therefore act in accordance with and be subdued to this principle of freedom. Jones Very’s religious principles were determined by his need of a mystical communion with God, though these same religious convictions deprived him of experiencing unity with the divine in freedom as they eventually became his obsession. However, a desire for intellectual, religious and personal improvement and a delicate sensibility are present in the sentiment of his words.

IV.2- Literary Contribution

Jones Very's literary contribution as the testimony of a man, a mystic and a poet deserves a higher recognition since with his writing, he came to represent some of the main philosophical principles of the transcendental group. Despite his reputation of being an important minor American poet, Very's concerns with and treatment of the condition of existence fostered the expansion of a universal sentiment which should be acknowledged.

IV.2.1- Epic Poetry and the Epic Hero's Mystical Search

For Jones Very, the advance of the human mind left its mark on the interpretation of the genuine epic spirit represented by the figure of the hero of remote times. To what extent was it actually possible to combine the spirit of modernity and tradition? Very poses this question and raises the central issue in the opening sentences of his essay:

The poets of the present day who would raise the epic song cry out, like Archimedes of old, "give us a place to stand on and we will move the world." This is, as we conceive, the true difficulty. Glancing for a moment at the progress of epic poetry, we shall see that the obscurity of fabulous times could be adapted to the earliest development only of the heroic character. There is an obvious incongruity in making times so far remote the theatre on which to represent the heroism of a civilized age; . . . reason will no longer perceive the beings which the infant credulity of man once saw there. (*Very Essays and Poems* 1)

The genuine epic spirit of the classical world could no longer be equally treated within the intellectual framework set of western civilization and eventually under the influence of reason in an enlightened and modern era. The use of reason implied a restraint on a writer's creativity and the beginning of a decay of the epic sentiment.

This issue becomes the subject of analysis in his essay on Epic Poetry,¹⁶ where he studies the difficulty in recreating those conditions of the past that place the epic hero in a context of fiction and wonder. And he also sees the need to preserve this epic spirit, which he poetically relates to the existence of a universal spirit, as the moral value that it represents and that can act as an answer to the present crisis of identity and self-knowledge of the individual in the mid-19th century. The spirit of the epic poet was represented in the spirit of the epic hero and his actions in the world. This was the starting point for Very's philosophical interpretation of epic poetry. He found the main resources for the heroic character to carry out his deeds in the literary treatment and philosophical interpretation of that remote and fictitious epic context.

This greatness of context reflected the greatness of the epic genre. The evolution from Greek and Roman civilization to the Christian world meant an evolution in the human mind and its perception of the world. In *Epic Poetry*, Very first analyzes this epic spirit in Homer, Virgil and Lucan, as Greek and Roman literary representatives; their subject was linked to the bounds of history while action took place in the outward world. In his discussion of Dante, Tasso, Shakespeare and Milton as relevant poetical figures within Christianity, he shows a view of the world free from those bounds of history – a view in which action takes place in the world within. The individual mind was progressively becoming more relevant as the centre of eternal interest. In his study of their works, Very traces the evolution in the treatment of the epic hero and his actions in several eras. In these physical actions a spiritual and mystical search is reflected as an immanent need in the epic hero that is unaffected by the course of time. Very's treatment of the heroic figure throughout history makes him and his deeds eternal. This hero is not only a hero of actions but a hero of mind and inner thoughts.

In fact, throughout his life Very remained committed to his beliefs in such a faithful way as the following words express: “. . . for the heroism of Christianity is not seen so much in the outward act, as in the struggle of the will to control the springs of action” (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 28). In a similar way to Emerson, for Very the heroic spirit is evidenced in daily living and personal performance.

¹⁶“The content of this essay was first delivered by Very in a lecture at the Salem Lyceum on 27 December 1837. The essay represents the manuscript which Very showed to Emerson on his visit to Concord in the spring of 1838” (Bartlett 45-46)

“Emerson’s heroism was defined as a courage that relates not only to extreme situations, such as standing up publicly for ideas or facing martyrdom for a cause. Heroism, “self-trust”, was necessary and put to the test in every aspect of daily life” (Wayne 145). The hero struggles to restore an order in his outer world as a reflection of his inner spirit driven by a sentiment of proximity with the elements of the world. Ultimately, his is a search for universal and spiritual harmony among all things. The hero’s commitment exhibits a change into introspection which has much to do with a change in the individual’s view of the world. It is articulated around “. . . [t]he idea of discovering the grand and the consequential in the apparently mundane” and “[t]he instinct to find the epic in the everyday, to weave grand narratives from ordinary actions” (Morley). Moved by self-awareness and existential concerns, by “a power within”, the epic poet progressively becomes the sayer of the epic hero’s deeds unrelated to battles, as Very states in his essay:

It is not so much that battles present less a subject for description than they did in the time of Homer, that they fail to awaken those feelings of admiration they then did, but because we have become sensible of a power within which bids the tide of war roll back upon its fountains. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 28)

Sharing a set of moral principles grounded in the experience of ordinary life means sharing a feeling of unity, which instills in the hero and in his people the common sentiment of belonging and recovery of identity. As a hero of inner thoughts, the defence of the morals of his age helps the hero in his quest for the recovery of the lost unity and for an existence in harmony with the elements of the world. Reinterpreting a genre like the epic, which has strong European origins, within the New World location becomes a key strategy to reaffirm the national sentiment, a sentiment of unity like the one shared between the hero and his people. For Emerson and the transcendentalists the quest for spiritual harmony and identity represented by the epic sentiment encouraged the possibility of recovery from that sense of lack of a genuine American identity.

Very's view of epic poetry reveals deep spiritual concerns. For him, the hero's quest for spiritual identity becomes a search for an identity with the divine presence. On several occasions throughout his essay Very alludes to the growing relevance of the hero's spirituality, ". . . that page of the heroic character is turned forever;—another element is developing itself in the soul, and breathing into the materiality of the past a spiritual life and beauty" (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 33), and also to the divine influence on epic deeds with metaphorical references like the ones in the following extract:

Man needs no longer a vast array of physical means to effect his loftiest purpose; he seizes the quill, the mere toy of a child, and stamps on the glowing page the copy of his own mind, his thoughts pregnant with celestial fire, and sends them forth, wherever the winds of heaven blow or its light penetrates, the winged messengers of pleasure. (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 31)

The figure of the epic poet in his search for beauty is identified with the epic hero in his search for harmony, a harmony in the outward world in the Greek and Roman perception of the world and, then, within himself in the Christian view, as we will see in the next two sections wherein the hero's physical quest will eventually become a spiritual and mystical quest.

IV.2.1.1- Epic Spirit in the Greek and Roman World

If we dilate in beholding the Greek energy, the Roman pride, it is that we are already domesticating the same sentiment. Let us find room for this great guest in our small houses. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Heroism* 377-378)

The noble sentiment of the epic hero hides an innate spiritual feeling in human being. The individual's intellectual and spiritual concerns advance in accordance with the development of transcendent qualities in man. Mind and soul experience a process of growth. The epic gathers all the necessary elements that show the existence of a universal spirit, whose revelation is the result of this intellectual process of spiritual growth. "Revelation is the disclosure of the soul" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Over-Soul* 393).

Very's criticism furnishes a philosophical interpretation of the epic genre. For him, the evolution in the treatment of the epic hero's spirit reflects the evolution in the individual's spirit. The progression from an outward to an inward perception of the world affects both and this outward perception is best represented in the Greek epic world by Homer in *The Iliad*. For Very, this poem has not to do with the history or character of early epic poetry, but with a wish to transmit a perception of beauty and noble heroism that is immanent in the individual.

He thinks that Homer's genius is displayed in his design of the poem. The siege of Troy provides *The Iliad* with a magnificent outward context. The poetical effect of time, action and characters enhanced the greatness of this epic poem, "a worthy form in which to manifest the working of his soul" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 6). The variety of actions and characters constituted an attractive combination for Homer's audience. They created noble thoughts in the human mind that awoke noble sentiments in their hearts, as well. The audience shared the same brave qualities as the hero's, a unique epic spirit resided in them. And the epic hero transformed that spiritual feeling into physical action through his deeds, "[m]an viewed himself with reference to the world" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 12). The expression and description of the visible world were given more relevance:

We have thus endeavoured to show that the manifestation of the heroic character in the time of Homer was perfectly exhibited in outward visible action, and that this reflected from the soul of the poet addressed to a seeing and listening, rather than a reading people, was the poetry of fancy rather than sentiment. (ibid.)

Very considers this epic world the first step in the evolution of morality and praises those values that create interest for spiritual concerns in human being:

We reverence not in Hector and Achilles the mere display of physical power, [...]; but we do reverence and honor those motives which even in the infancy of the human mind served to raise it above the dominion of sense, and taught it to grasp at a life beyond the narrow limits of its earthly vision. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 10)

The making of epic poetry exemplifies the evolution of the human mind and its capacity of perception, like a process of spiritual growth into maturity. This process meant a search, from without to within. The poet is the maker and the sayer of this process and his perception and expression of beauty transmit harmony to it. Thus, the epic poet adapts his creativity to the “universal laws of sublimity and beauty”:

The true poet . . . feels within himself the living standard of the great and beautiful, and bows to that alone: as far as it has become changed by human error or imperfection, he would gladly restore it to its original purity, by conformity to those universal laws of sublimity and beauty, which the critic has shown to be followed by nature herself. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 13)

In *The Iliad* the moral postulates of his age are incorporated by Homer into this representation of harmony and beauty. The greatness of the poem is attained by the unity of all these elements, the moral sentiment and the imagination:

. . . it is the poet who has felt more strongly than any other the great moral wants of his age, that can give to such a work its unity and power. . . . But in reading *The Iliad*, or a tragedy like *Lear* or *Macbeth*, or in looking sometime at a painting on which the moral sentiment of the artist is as strongly impressed as his imagination, instead of being obliged to humor the fancy that the charm may be kept alive, we shall with difficulty shake off the impression, when it is necessary to return to the real business of life. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 13-14)

The outward manifestation of the epic spirit is found in this unity of morality and beauty. Epic moral values result from the hero’s intellect, will and heart acting as one. They are properties of the individual’s soul. The secret of the hero’s world is revealed in the epic poet’s thought: the perception of a spiritual continuity and identity reflected in and through all the physical elements of the epic world. This sort of existence in harmony and belonging to the whole is subsequent to a universal and timeless condition.

This condition is the sense of being one experienced between the hero and his people in sharing a feeling of faithfulness, for “. . . within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE” (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Over-Soul* 386). The perception of this ONE, as an essence on which the human being’s spiritual development and wisdom depends, is within each individual’s reach. Man must learn to know his self as part of this One. This self-knowledge is the knowledge of the spiritual being within, the hero’s and the poet’s identity.

Homer’s words express the moral values of his age through his hero’s deeds; beauty is present in the noble sentiment shared by him and his people, a nation’s sentiment, their identity as a country. “An epic ambition would be the ambition to compose the nation’s first epic, so it must represent the bringing of language to the nation, . . . , to assess its faithfulness to its ideal” (Cavell *The Senses of Walden* 13). The epic sentiment of ambition should be understood as a need to attain a common ideal in the recovery of their identity as a people, that is, in the recovery of self-confidence. “Heroism was at the core of Emersonian self-reliance: ‘Self-trust is the essence of heroism’ ” (Wayne 145). The hero’s and his people’s sense of continuity between their thought and feeling of the world flows into the epic poet’s words as an assessment of a universal sentiment of belonging to the whole. In the same sense as Cavell’s remark “. . . the bringing of the language to the nation”, and paraphrasing Very’s quotation above (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 10), we should reverence those motives, displayed in heroic physical deeds and into epic lines, which serve to raise human mind beyond the narrow limits of its earthly vision. This act of raising human mind implicit in the epic action is moved by the individual’s need of moral values and virtues and, in this sense, Lawrence F. Rhu states (in commenting on Cavell’s reading of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*) that, “[h]eroic poetry best effects this ambition [move us to virtuous action] because it inspires us more than any other genre; it moves us most, and the consequence of such inspiration will be virtuous actions for the public good” (195). The advance of heroic actions in a search for moral values and the identity of the country, progressively set epic contents within the context of spiritual concerns.

The moral pragmatism which Transcendentalists introduced in their philosophy of life could also be understood as a moral perfectionism, which showed the individual's claim for an identity and for the attainment of self-knowledge, something that we can see in the hero's will to know about the condition of his self and in the need of moral values for the epic performance, values upon which self-recovery can be built. Among these values, the value of nobility, implicit in the noble action of the hero's deeds, would be one of the essential means for self-knowledge, as we will also further see in Wallace Stevens' poetry. For Stevens, "the idea of nobility" becomes "a characteristic of the imagination" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 7). The epic hero's quest is set as a search for his humanity and particularly for Very, a search for a spiritual condition within his humanity.

Homer's contemplation and admiration of his people inspired in him the wish to defend their identity as a country through his poetry. Thus, epic poetry makes a hero not only of the main character, but also of his poet. Homer becomes the hero of his own epic, since his work also entails a personal search for knowledge. Very's concept of genius is exemplified by Homer. Homer's spirit as a poet is the spirit of a hero. The hero's and the poet's personal fulfilment is attained by physical action and through the expression of the beauty in that action, respectively. Very saw in their search a mystical union with the outward world they inhabited. Both shared the same essence, a universal soul. A transcendental being was manifested in them, the eternal ONE. In his defence of the moral values of epic poetry, Very found in *The Iliad* the true model of the epic with philosophical concerns that could transmit a universal truth. His approach to this poem reveals Very's transcendentalist view. He argues that the growing power of reason in human being negatively affects the perception of the spiritual being in the hero: "There is an obvious incongruity in making times so far remote the theatre on which to represent the heroism of a civilized age; . . . reason will no longer perceive the beings which the infant credulity of man once saw there" (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 1). When he mentions "the heroism of a civilized age", he refers to the change undergone by the figure of the hero, who cannot act as a free spirit in an age limited by reason, and to a perception, ruled by reason, of all of his actions. Human being has lost its innocence or spontaneity of perception, as when a child becomes an adult.

Very suggests that the capability of using imagination has been altered by the growth of reason in the human mind. In Homer's setting the epic action breaks the dominion of a reality determined by history, and fiction and imagination replace reason and probability. The hero's will is present in his spiritual convictions: his deeds do not need to obey the civilized rules of reason, but his heart's, those moral postulates that confirm his spiritual identity. Again, this idea links Very to Emerson's thinking.

Heroism feels and never reasons, and therefore is always right; and although a different breeding, different religion, and greater intellectual activity would have modified or even reversed the particular action, yet for the hero that thing he does is the highest deed, and is not open to the censure of philosophers or divines. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Heroism* 374)

According to Very, poets' difficulty in creating epics was due to an increasing inability of the human mind to represent this action in another mind. Human interest was progressively moving from physical action to the mind, as a reflection of the progress of the soul. "The great struggle of the epic poets since the time of Homer has been against this narrowing of their field of action . . . The wonder and interest of the world is now transferred to the mind, whose thought is action, and whose word is power" (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 15). The Greek pagan conception of life and the morality as a country was based on this kind of patriotism in which the epic hero projected his personality through his deeds, beyond the limits of time and earthly existence. The change to an inner view of the epic implied that epic action, or the performance of the poet's thought, was no longer physical, but intellectual.

This was the difficulty which Roman epic poets like Virgil and Lucan had to face. The human mind in their time was becoming introspective and a new form of heroic spirit came out of this change in mind. They found it difficult "to carry into the past the heroic spirit of their own day" (Bartlett 73). As the power of action became more spiritual than physical, its context had to be moved in order to recreate that epic greatness differently. "There seems to be no interval between greatness and meanness. When the spirit is not the master of the world, then it is its dupe" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Heroism* 375). Greatness was no longer recognised physically, but spiritually.

The epic context demanded a heroic character that manifested his noble sentiments through his thought. The hero's courage should be shown in the action of his thinking. An example of the incongruity between epic context and the heroic figure is Aeneas because Virgil made of him the hero of a time Aeneas did not belong to.

His [Virgil's] poem is but a lunar reflection of *The Iliad*; . . . He summoned again from their long sleep the heroes and gods of Troy, but they appeared with dimmed glory amid the brightness of another age. He had . . . chosen the right point in time for his action, a time of tradition. . . . but he could not give his hero the character of another age, he could not make of Aeneas the Achilles of the Romans. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 16)

“The system of manners”, the hero's outward manifestation of the epic spirit of his time, could not be reproduced: “These manners perish with their age” (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 17). Virgil and other poets found difficulties “. . . in adapting to the story of a former age, and perhaps foreign nation, that peculiar system of manners which constitutes the outward development of the heroic spirit” (*ibid.*). Very focuses on the fact that the change into an introspective view of the world and, subsequently, the representation of such an inward spirit have a disruptive effect on this outward development. Likewise, this inward spirit loses its “dignity of thought” (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 16) if it is performed out of its context, out of the world it represents. This can cause a rupture in the perception of harmony and continuity between epic soul and matter. The epic poet's perception becomes a mystical experience of unity with the heroic world of his verse. This perception cannot be conditioned. Freedom is an innate and necessary quality for the individual in his epic search for knowledge.

For Very, history and reality limit the poet's freedom. As he comments in his essay, the historical content of Lucan's epic poem, *Pharsalia*, made it difficult for the poet to use his imagination freely. Its context should respect the demands of reality, “. . . if, like Lucan, they took their subject from the hands of History, the skepticism of a more advanced age deprived them of the use of machinery, and consequently of the power of exciting that admiration, which is the leading aim of the epic poem” (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 18).

Wonder and fiction had lost their epic power in a more advanced age. The poet's imagination was restrained by the audience's skepticism. A civilized hero cannot be placed in a remote past, a context that appealed to the imagination. To perceive the free spirit of the epic hero, the epic poet must create a context free of the restrictions derived from human reason. "To escape this thralldom and reach a point from which the heroic character of their age might be seen dilated to its full height, modern poets have fled beyond the bounds of time and woke the echoes of eternity" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 3). Very's approach to Greek and Roman epic poets as representatives of an early stage of epic poetry corresponds with the first stages in the spiritual evolution of human being. This progression of the spirit within was determined by the individual's perception of the world. Soul and mind are related to each other in the epic context. Their unity involves the greatness of the hero and this greatness is the reflection of the hero's spiritual and intellectual growth.

This intellectual growth is prompted by the hero's will to know more about the condition of his existence in communion with his people's. His deeds evolve into a search for self-knowledge. People admire their hero because of the transformative power of his brave spirit within. For Very, the change of the representation of the epic sentiment into the feeling of a common spiritual existence between the hero and his people is subsequent to this transformative power. As key elements of mysticism, self and the individual's spiritual condition progressively play a meaningful role in epic experience. Very's analysis of the epic spirit in the Greek and Roman world describes the evolution of mental skills: the hero's awareness of the spirituality inherent to human being and the perception of a connection between thought and nature. The language for the expression of this feeling and thought of unity in the epic was poetic. Influenced by Emerson's Transcendentalism and Romantic thought, Very understood a dependence of matter upon thought. The hero's attitude passes into a submission of his will and intellect to the knowledge of this divine presence, to the influx of a universal spirit. For Emerson this kind of spiritual insight, "the power to see", is the result of a "joyful perception"; joyful as it represents the possibility of a link between mind and matter. This link is to be found in the inspiration that "comes out of the heart of nature".

A thrill passes through all men at the reception of new truth, or at the performance of great action, which comes out of the heart of nature. In these communications, the power to see is not separated from the will to do, but the insight proceeds from obedience, and the obedience proceeds from a joyful perception. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Over-Soul* 392)

The feeling of the epic progressively moved into a context where the search for this link took place in the hero's mind, that is, in the poet's mind. Transcendentalists found a human model to follow in the hero's attitude, since he obeyed the innate call of his soul. "Heroism is an obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character. Now to no other man can its wisdom appear as it does to him, for every man is supposed to see a little farther on his own proper path than any one else" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Heroism* 374). The hero's innate desire for spiritual identity was encouraged by his heart and his mind simultaneously. This act shaped the heroic deed into the intellectual manifestation of a transformative and brave spirit within. The relevance of self-knowledge became gradually the subject matter of epic greatness.

IV.2.1.2-The Epic and Christianity

In Very's analysis of the epic in the Christian world, he studies how the heroic perception progressively moved into an introspective vision of reality, one in which a unity between mind and soul occurred in the diversity of elements that made up the hero's world. As Very states in his essay, an inward perception of the world was introduced into the epic by Christian influence. The relevance of the individual in the Christian world and his/her spiritual relationship with God led the poet to express the conflicts within. These inner conflicts corresponded with the hero's physical struggle of earlier times. The hero's performance was thus given a spiritual interpretation. The soul of the hero and an inner epic sentiment ruled all epic actions. The sentiment of unity with their country expressed by Homer or Virgil was the result of a search for identity. It reflected the epic sentiment of a national mind, a sentiment would not long be reflected in the outer actions but in the hero's psychological experience. As Kevin P. Van Anglen comments in his study on Greek and Roman classics, in relation to Very's essay on the epic,

. . . in his 1838 essay, "Epic Poetry", Jones Very is unstinting in his praise of Homer but regards all attempts to imitate him, from Vergil to the present, as doomed due to the cultural differences between archaic Greece and later ages. This is all the more true of Very's own century since "the expanded mind and cultural affections" of modernity have decisively shifted the focus of literary attention from physical action to psychological experience. . . . This change in sensibility would make a successful modern epic – were one possible – necessarily and fundamentally different from the Iliad and the Odyssey. (Myerson 5)

In the Christian view of the world, the poet's sentiment became the reflection of a search for spiritual identity with God. It transmitted a belief in the existence of a universal soul. The treatment of action, time and characters was directed to the expression of this new epic sentiment in the poet. The audience's interest was captured by the same concerns as the poet's: a desire for inward knowledge. For Very, inward knowledge is not necessarily attained through physical senses in the individual; he describes the experience of spiritual knowledge as an intercourse in which the poet has the sensibility "to open to the world . . . what has before been done in the secret corners of our bosoms":

. . . as Christianity influences us, we shall lay open to the world what has been long hidden, what has before been done in the secret corners of our bosoms; the knowledge of which can alone make our intercourse with those about us different from what it is too fast becoming, an intercourse of the eye and the ear and the hand and the tongue. (Very *Essays and Poems* 21)

Christianity shifted interest to the inward, intellectual life, and to the conflict within the individual soul (Bartlett 73). The poet and his poetry represent the innate human ability to attain spiritual knowledge and to communicate a spiritual truth. As a religious man, Very found that Christianity encouraged this ability in the individual. The hero's epic search for spiritual values implied that the sentiment of identity of the early epic was now the sentiment of a unity with the self, the being immanent in all individuals, in which human identity "...has been long hidden". Jones Very believed in a religious communion of the Christian heroic spirit with the divine through an inward knowledge of the self.

This concept of self-knowledge had much to do with Very's preoccupation with spirituality. Both the idea of the self and the divine spirit in the individual were determinant in the design of his essay. The approach to the epic spirit by Greek and Roman epic poets and by Christianity, the progression from its pagan interpretation to a religious one, allowed him to demonstrate his thesis. Although he regarded the time of epics as past, he saw in it the roots of modern spirituality and the starting point of a change. In his idea of epic John Bryan Hainsworth states: "Ancient history and the Latin language had been the vehicle of Virgil and Lucan; from neither could their imitator escape, but all that could be created with their aid was an imitation" (139). The epic poet locked into tradition should look for a key to release him from this sense of imitation present among Greek and Roman epic poets. In the Christian world, the individual became the centre for action, "[t]he effect of Christianity was to make the individual mind the great object of regard, the centre of eternal interest, and transferring the scene of action from the outward world to the world within" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 20). The Christian epic included a sense of divine influence as part of the epic sentiment of unity with the world. The religious sentiment of God within the individual pervaded the hero's mind. The Christian epic hero was much more concerned with the knowledge of his individual soul, as a reflection of the divine soul. The coming of Christianity introduced the conception of man's immortality and the poet's view was enlarged by the idea of eternity.

Very was obsessed with the idea of immortality in the life of civilized people, with a heroic spirit that transcended time. But this view of eternity provoked the loss of those limitations that conferred on the epic poem a sense of spiritual struggle. The actions that took place in that epic space did not create in the hero (and in the audience) the same sentiment of search.

The Christian creed, in opening the vista of eternity before the poet's view, and leaving him unrestrained by prescriptive forms, while it freed him from the bonds of history, by giving him a place beyond limits where he might transfer the heroic spirit of his age, . . . subjected him to a far greater difficulty . . . ; that of finding a subject, an action to fill those boundless realms of space, and call forth the energies of the spirits that people it. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 22)

The hero's need to project his personality, his spirit, through his deeds, or in his spiritual quest, in order to make them eternal had lost its epic power within that view of eternity opened before the poet.

It was only from this point that the Christian world could be moved; it is only in that region without bounds, that the heroism of immortality can be shown in visible action. . . . But such has been the progress of the human mind since their time, that it would seem . . . to have unfolded a new form of the heroic character, one which finds no paradise, nay, no heaven for itself in the creations of Milton, and for which the frowns of Dante's hell have no terror. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 3)

As the mind advanced and the interest in thought increased, it became more difficult to relate a deeper spiritual knowledge of the self to the human manners of existence as described by the epic. In Very's opinion, the heroic character evolved and developed within Christianity. If mysticism allowed the human being an experience of spiritual unity, the epic search of the hero became such a mystical experience of unity with that spirit, represented in his outward actions and his inward conflicts. Within Christianity this mystical experience meant a unity between the individual's self and the spirit of God, and Christian epic poetry represented this experience as a spiritual struggle of the self within the hero, as a reflection of his inner conflicts in a religious context. His was a spiritual fight that had to overcome different stages till the hero became aware of his spiritual condition and attained self-fulfilment, as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which the main character acts as a hero in search of his soul's perfection after a unity with the divine.

Very sees in epic poetry the means for the expression of a mystical experience: the soul's process to release itself from the obstacles to unity with the divine essence. For him, the Christian treatment of the epic sentiment was best attained by Dante's genius. "It [Dante's poem] had its origins, like other sublime works of genius, in that desire, which is continually felt by the greatest minds, of giving to their age a copy of their own souls, and embodied the vague but universal spirit of the times when it was written" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 23).

Very defines genius as an innate “desire” in the human mind to express in the form of art a “copy of their own souls”, of the spirit of the time. The reflection of this “universal spirit of the times” in the words of the poet made Dante’s masterpiece an example of the new epic interest in man. The use of “signs and emblems” and the creation of a “strange world of beings” were Dante’s means to reflect and criticize a religious belief taught “rather through the medium of their senses” than “the silent arguments of conscience” (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 24). Dante claimed an insight in man, the development of self-knowledge in human being, but he shaped this philosophical content into religious expression. He emphasized the importance of the progress of the individual’s spirit towards the divine. Dante conferred a mystical interest in the human soul on the Christian audience of his age. His three main characters stood for the concepts of man, faith and reason and the three stages of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven represented the path to attain the spiritual condition for a perfect unity with the divine. Greatness is found in the mystical experience of spiritual knowledge as an explanation of reality; the human soul finds spiritual harmony in feeling an approach to the divine essence. Dante described this experience of unity as a divine illumination in human being. Epic greatness in Dante’s poetical context was performed within the human soul. The *Divine Comedy* “[h]as the vision and function of an epic poem in that it expresses in canonical form the medieval idea of destiny of the human race, and in that sense it is an epic” (Hainsworth 140).

The epic sentiment had definitely been moved by the epic poet into a spiritual world. However, its representation was still subject to the transmission of the morals of the age, providing a religious rather than a philosophical interpretation of this sentiment. This fact partly restrained the poet’s description of the human spirit. It was not yet represented as the manifestation of a divine essence immanent in the heroic character, free from the implications of a religious context.

In Very’s opinion, heroism and spirituality are a masterly combination in Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*. With his approach to Tasso’s epic poem Very attempts to demonstrate the possibility to provide epic spirit with religious sentiment without losing the grandeur of classical epic poets. Despite its religious content, *Jerusalem Delivered* is set in a specific historical context: the conquest of the holy city implied the recovery of a symbol of religious identity and it opened a way to spiritual implications.

The spirit which the Greeks identified with in *The Iliad* within a pagan context was the same claimed by Tasso's hero within Christianity. The Christian heroic character in Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* acts in accordance with the historical circumstances of the time represented by the poet.

Although inspired by a Christian sentiment, the poem offers a pagan view in the sense that the epic interest is still without. "It [the time of the action] was the only age in which the heroic Christian character could be fully manifested in outward action" (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 18). The hero's own system of manners corresponds with that of the epic world where the poet has placed him, and with the structure which Tasso confers the poem, "...the structure of compromise which underlies the whole *Liberata*, a poem ideologically balanced between Christian orthodoxy – that is, the path leading to Jerusalem – and the 'pagan' temptations that block the pilgrim's progress, transforming it into a dangerous labyrinth" (Zatti 198). Tasso's epic succeeded in his time as Homer's had done before: "It is a new development of the Homeric spirit modified by Christianity" (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 18). The dignity of the hero's thought is preserved by the harmony between the subject and the time of the epic action. The hero's epic world acts as a response to the poet's thought: "It is by moving the mind to wonder that the epic poet achieves his aims" (Hainsworth 143). Moreover, the spirit of great and noble action in the epic hero's performance should also serve through delight. For Very, both Homer and Tasso shared the same aim and spirit. This admiration for a universal epic spirit in the hero's performance and the same sentiment of unity expressed by epic poets at different times revealed to Very the need for a spiritual identity in human being. The search for this identity led him to a growing interest in the knowledge of the self. As an example of this search in the individual, Very quotes the words of a critic in reference to the character of Hamlet: "'we love him not, we think of him not, because he is witty, because he was melancholy, because he was filial; but we love him because he existed, and was himself'" (Very *Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 20). Very admired the way Shakespeare showed the conflict within the individual in his dramatic poetry. While the epic story added the necessary contents for the making of the heroic character and the conception of his self, Hamlet manifested this conception.

I believe that of every other character, either in tragic or epic poetry, the story makes part of the conception; but of Hamlet the deep and permanent interest is the conception of himself. This seems to belong not to the character being more perfectly drawn, but to there being a more intense conception of individual human life, than perhaps in any other human composition. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 20)

Very's words show his admiration for Hamlet's attempt to approach his being through the knowledge of individual inner conflicts, an example of a process of self-consciousness, a process which Very describes as Hamlet's "wrestling of his own soul",

Often and often must he have thought, that, to be or not to be forever, was a question, which must be settled; as it is the foundation, and the only foundation upon which we feel that there can rest one thought, one feeling or one purpose worthy of a human soul . . . Here lie the materials out of which this remarkable tragedy was built up. From the wrestling of his own soul with the great enemy comes that depth and mystery which startles us in Hamlet. (*Very Essays and Poems: Hamlet* 86)

Very's comments on the epic hero in classical texts as well as his interpretation of Hamlet's performance focus on the description of a universal sentiment present in the characters' personal debate, that is, on the condition of their existence. All of them share a will to know more about their spirituality, "It was only from this point that the Christian world could be moved; it is only in that region without bounds, that the heroism of immortality can be shown in visible action. Milton and Dante chose this spot, on which with almost creative power they might show to mankind worlds of their own (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 3). The spiritual advance of the Christian heroic character is also explored by Milton in his *Paradise Lost*. In Milton's work, the materiality of Dante's Christian world is replaced by a representation of a world within the individual's spiritual perception of it and conditioned by his physical being. "He [Milton] could not adopt altogether the material or immaterial system, and he therefore raised his structure on the then debatable ground" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 25). Although still under the influence of religious contents for its subject, this poem reveals the epic interest centred on the individual's innate freedom of choice.

The Christian epic view in Dante emphasized the soul's progress to a mystical unity with God, and this soul's progress was now interpreted as the individual's knowledge of his self, like a free spiritual conscience in human being that leads to the perception of a divine truth. Goodness and evil in the human soul depended upon the individual's free agency. The philosophical concerns in the poet's thought were the subject matter of epic action. Epic interest was centred on these subjects that could condition human spiritual choice. "The interest of this poem depends upon the strong feeling we have of our free agency, and of the almost infinite power it is capable of exercising" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 26).

If there was no possibility for a more spiritual representation of the mind's action, there would probably be no other great epic. Adam's epic power in *Paradise Lost* was his innate freedom to choose. His spiritual debate recreated that great epic interest of the early stages of epic poetry. His inner struggle and the spiritual consequences of his will made of his thought the centre of interest. "This sense of free agency is what constitutes Adam the hero of *Paradise Lost*, and makes him capable of sustaining the immense weight of interest. . . . But that which renders Adam the hero of the poem, makes Satan still more so" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 28). The representation of the gods' spirit in the Greek epic heroes, like in Homer's *Aeneas*, implied a reflection of the gods' will acting in them; in *Paradise Lost*, Adam's decision depends on his freedom of choice, on himself. The hero's action, in this case his choice, does not stem from any kind of influence. His action is the response to his free will.

Why then it may be asked do we take an interest in Homer's heroes, whom the gods are ready every moment to shield or snatch from the dubious fight? Not, I answer, because we consider them mere machines acting but from others' impulses, for *then* we could take no interest in them; . . . but because . . . we give to them our own freedom; or because the gods themselves, whom Homer has called down to swell the fight, and embodied in his heroes; because *these* create the interest and make what were before mere puppets free agents. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 27)

Free agency, shown as the ability and the will to choose between good or evil in a Christian context, allowed human being to increase spiritual knowledge or to attain a divine truth. Adam's and Satan's approach to spiritual truth depended on the knowledge of their selves. Heroism was no more an outward act, but an inward manifestation of the self. Milton's characters demonstrated the relevance of self-knowledge and its relationship with spiritual identity, ". . . for the heroism of Christianity is not seen so much in the outward act, as in the struggle of the will to control the springs of action" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 28). Self-knowledge led the individual to the divine knowledge within ". . . because we have become sensible of a power within which bids the tide of war roll back upon its fountains" (*ibid.*). This knowledge of the self was also an act of self-reliance, which represented heroism and grandeur.

The connection between man's inner spiritual world and the divine world appeared as a soul's conflict in Milton's poem. "*There* is seen a conflict of 'those thoughts that wander through eternity,' at the sight of which we lose all sense of the material terrors. . ." (*ibid.*). Man, faith and reason in Dante, and the human soul, divine spirit and free agency in Milton, all these concepts shaped the epic matter of the poems. The poet's philosophical and religious approach to self-knowledge was the result of this new epic sentiment. Poetry became the expression of the hero's/poet's perception of a divine essence in the human soul. The poetical approach tried to adapt the poet's philosophical concerns to the religious interpretation and Christian perception of the world of the time. The hero was not the maker of the epic action, but the one in whom the epic action was made. "Adam is not so much the Achilles as the Troy of the poem. . . . greatness has left the material throne, which she has long held, for a spiritual one" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 29). The subject of the Fall of Man favoured an introspective interest in the human spirit. Man's interest in the objects of sense had lost its epic power. The poet's introspective mind was represented in his characters' inwardness. Epic greatness moved finally from visible action to a spiritual context. "The individuality of early times is lost. . . . and the deeds seen by the outward eye are thus dimmed by the soul's quicker perception of spiritual action" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 30). The evolution of Milton's Christian heroic character gave way to another element in poetry: the spiritual life and conflicts within: ". . . another element is developing itself in the soul, and breathing into the materiality of the past a spiritual life and beauty" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 33).

Very mentions again the relevance of the self, as he had previously done in his comments on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when he quotes Coleridge's words in reference to Milton's charge of selfishness:

In the *Paradise Lost*, indeed in every one of his poems, it is Milton himself whom you see; his Satan, his Adam, his Raphael, almost his Eve, are all John Milton; and it is a sense of this intense egotism that gives me the greatest pleasure in reading Milton's works. The egotism of such a man is a revelation of spirit. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 34-35)

Very finds in Milton's egotism the best example of the poet's spiritual search reflected in his characters' spiritual quest for a path to God and the proof of that increasing interest for introspection. This identity between them demonstrates the existence of a universal spirit. "To stir the secret depths of our hearts, writers must have penetrated deeply into their own" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 34). The human being's search for spiritual harmony became the centre of action. The advance in mind should be accepted as a progress of the spirit. The soul of the artist shared this progress of the spirit, a universal spirit inherited by all generations. The evolution in the epic spirit reflected an evolution of the arts as a progression in the epic poet's thought and sentiment. Very's prose is full of metaphorical references to the relevance of the figure of the poet within this process. He creates images that inspire our minds with a sense of continuity. Very's poetical description of the spiritual progress in human being, as shown in epic poetry, reveals his own mystical experience of unity as a writer and as a man. He relates the poet's creativity and inspiration to his human condition and to his spiritual perception of all the natural and divine elements that make up the poet's world. Very's noble sentiment and spiritual concerns are reflected in the simplicity of his metaphors, in which he manifests a sense of unity between the human and the divine.

Man needs no longer a vast array of physical means to effect his loftiest purpose; he seizes the quill, the mere toy of a child, and stamps on the glowing page the copy of his own mind, his thoughts pregnant with celestial fire, and sends them forth, wherever the winds of heaven blow or its light penetrates, the winged messengers of his pleasure. The narrow walls of patriotism are broken down, and he is a brother on whom the same sun shines, and who holds the same heritage, the earth.

He is learning to reverse the order in which the ancients looked at the outward creation, he looks at the world with reference to himself, and not at himself with reference to the world. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 31)

A religious tone is present in words like “celestial fire”, “the winds of heaven”, or “the winged messengers”. He perceives inspiration as coming from the divine, “its light”, heavenly light, like an illumination in the poet’s soul when he perceives that spiritual connection. He reveals here a deep mysticism as he does in his poems, but he is not so obsessed with a religious purpose. In these sentences he shows the relevance of human being as the centre of all things. The individual is described as the inheritor of that process of spiritual advance, in which a conscience of universal spirit has grown within the individual’s mind and soul, “... and he is a brother on whom the same sun shines, and who holds the same heritage, the earth” (*ibid.*). “Brother” and “heritage”, or “sun” and “earth” reproduce in our mind the images of a unity between all individuals and their common links with the elements in the universe. These ideas may also reveal Emerson’s influence on Very’s thought, specially, the conception of man as spiritually related to all the constituent elements of the world and the Universe. The individual’s consciousness of his self makes grow in him/her the sentiment of belonging to and sharing part of that universal spiritual existence.

His thought [the Idealist’s], - that is the Universe. His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded center in himself, center alike of him and of them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Centre of him. (*Emerson Essays and Lectures: The Transcendentalist* 195)

Knowledge of the self has helped human being to perceive its spirit as the axis of the created world, “...he looks at the world with reference to himself”. “He is learning to reverse the order in which the ancients looked at the outward creation” (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 31). “He”, man and poet, is described as a child who plays with words and grows in wisdom as he learns “to reverse the order”, that is, to contemplate and admire the world without from within.

This process of spiritual advance affected the theme for epic interest: "...the subject itself is incapable of exhibiting the present development of the heroic character, and cannot therefore be made the great epic of this age, or of any to come" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 36). The interest moved to the power of intellect in human being and the poet should try to represent that intellectual power in the heroic figure through his deeds.

What made Milton's subject great, and what can *now* alone make any subject for epic interest great, was the action made *visible* of a superior intellect on an inferior. Could intellectual power be represented with the same objectiveness as physical power, there might be as many epics now as there are great minds. (ibid.)

Epic greatness was no more a manifestation of the hero's power in physical actions, but the revelation of the hero's intellectual power and the poet's mind and his thoughts performed this new epic sentiment. The poet's power of transmitting an eternal truth would result in the eternal influence of epic power because epic was not only found in the hero's performance but also in the poet's message. Epic greatness was wielded by the poet's intellect. His poetry would be epic when it communicated a universal knowledge or wisdom that was the result of his spiritual search, the epic poet's experience of inward knowledge. For *Very*, the difficulty or impossibility for the poet to represent that experience of the mind in words caused the decay of epic poetry. Classical and Christian epic contexts could not recreate the necessary conditions for the representation of such a spiritual conception of the epic experience because this subjective experience could not be reproduced objectively in the audience's mind. As *Very* points out in the following excerpt, this might be the reason why the power of epics drifted into tragedy where the character could perform that spiritual debate of the heroic figure within an epic manner:

. . . and what can now alone make any subject for epic interest great, was the action made visible of a superior intellect on an inferior. Could intellectual power be represented with the same objectiveness as physical power, there might be as many epics now as there are great minds. The reason is obvious.

It is this manner of representing power which alone possesses a corresponding interest with tragedy, by which alone there can be a *hero* capable of sustaining the interest. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 36)

Very's last statements express his positive view of this decay in poetry, since it confirmed a real advance in the human soul. The change in the literary approach to the epic meant that the poet – the individual – had advanced to an inward perception and interpretation of reality. “We rejoiced at this inability; it is the high privilege of our age, the greatest proof of the progress of the soul, and of its approach to that state of being where its thought is action, its word power” (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 37). For Very, this inability, this decay in the treatment of epic matter, evidenced the power of language in the transmission of the evolution in the individual's awareness of his state as a being in which soul and thought interact. Also, this “inability” reflected the poet's need of intuitive perception, inspiration, which comes out of nature and the elements of the world and helps him shape into words that inexplicable spiritual condition shared with the whole and experienced between the hero and his people, together with that moment of transition between feeling and thinking, when thoughts are put into words and words are thoughts. Very focuses on this moment of transition as it reflects the individual's attainment of self-consciousness, in Emerson's words described as “a holy place” in which “[w]e stand before the secret of the world, there where Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety” (*Emerson Essays and Lectures: The poet* 453).

As we have seen, many features in Very define his personal and intellectual attitude as a Transcendentalist. Emerson's influence on him and his work had a direct reflection in his literary production. However, he would be set apart from the transcendentalist core due to his singular outlook and personal life. Alfred Rosa's words in the following excerpt perfectly describe Very's links and relationship to the movement and to Emerson:

Emerson's view was comprehensive and encompassing; Very's outlook was not as expansive, but was singular and Christian, and for those reasons, he thought, ultimately large. Emerson was delighted by complexity and organicism,

whereas Very sought to clarify complexity by aligning himself with his God in a somewhat more static relationship. That these men sought a higher reality and that they believed they must give themselves over to that reality through some form of transcendence makes them like-minded, but insofar as they felt differently about the intermediaries in that process, they are very far apart philosophically. (84)

Epic Poetry gathers most of the main philosophical concepts that Transcendentalism dealt with. Very's approach to the epic sentiment was related to his mystical interpretation of reality. Introspection and the growth of consciousness led human beings to a perception of unity between the human and the divine. The perception of this harmony produced a kind of spiritual regeneration in the individual. This interpretation of the epic sentiment revealed Very's mysticism. He saw the manifestation of a transcendental self in the spiritual qualities of the heroic figure. The heroic figure represented a spiritual awakening, a rebirth of the human soul, which was the result of a progression in self-knowledge. This process of intellectual growth was related to a growth in self-reliance. The epic hero learned to trust himself: "Self-trust is the essence of heroism. It is the state of the soul at war, and its ultimate objects are the last defiance of falsehood and wrong, and the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agents. It speaks the truth" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Heroism* 375). The hero's free agency enabled him to act as a master of his own actions and defend his inner convictions, which reflected his spiritual power. His soul and his mind established a communion. The use of this power created epic greatness.

The epic hero was self-reliant and this self-reliance conferred greatness and authenticity on epic performance, and made the hero free and unique. "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Self-reliance*: 263). This "great man" in Emerson's words who is able to keep his intellectual and spiritual independence in harmony within the crowd may be identified with the heroic figure able to defend his spiritual identity as part of the whole.

The epic hero became aware of a sentiment of harmony between his soul, his own being, and a universal spirit immanent in his people and in the world. The hero's attempt to keep that spiritual harmony became the matter of his deeds. Heroic performance passed into an attitude of spiritual isolation from the outward, a mystical introspection. This introspective perception of reality permitted a unity between mind and soul, between the poet's thought and the hero's spirit, an identity in the form of consciousness: the self's knowledge of its self.

Within Very's religious view and within a Christian conception of the epic, the hero's quest implied a process of redemption of the soul; but within a philosophical interpretation, the epic search became a recovery of the self. This experience of self-knowledge led the human soul to a rebirth, a spiritual progression that opened up the individual's mind to a divine wisdom or universal truth: the perception of and continuity with an immanent spirit that transcends all. The epic poet became the sayer of this mystical experience. His language was the means that shaped that advance of the soul. Epic verses described the heroic character imbued with the epic spirit and established a link between the poet's thought and the heroic sentiment. "Beauty is the moment of transition, as if the form were just ready to flow into other forms" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Beauty* 1105). The search for truth in the poet's thought and the sentiment of beauty in that truth found their expression in the poet's lines. Poetry shaped that moment of transition, the perception of the rebirth of the soul experienced by the hero and the mystic. Jones Very's interpretation of the epic expressed his conviction of a change in the consciousness of the individual as a result of the deep influence of Christianity and the progress of human history. This conviction had to do with his belief in a change of his heart, a religious sentiment that obsessed him personally. He identified his own spiritual change with the advance of human soul. He related his sense of sinfulness and personal need of spiritual regeneration with the rebirth of the soul as described in the epic genre. All these representative epic figures in the essay became for him an intellectual reference. They exemplified the mystical search of spiritual perfection: intellectual illumination of human being and identity of the soul with the divine.

The epic hero's behaviour was always determined by a need for spiritual involvement. The epic sentiment was described as a mystical option in the individual to experience a spiritual truth. The mysticism involved in the figure of the epic hero represented Very's model of the concept of transcendentalist self. All the elements that built up epic spirit recreated his ideal of divine manifestation. His defence of the spiritual values performed in the epic demonstrated his personal need for spiritual identity.

Mysticism was understood by Transcendentalism as an attitude in the individual that allowed communication with the divine essence immanent in human soul. In this act of communication, in this "conversation with the beauty of the soul", this mystical capability in human being frees its spirit from any kind of dogmatism that may restrain its intellectual performance. Within that state of freedom and individualism the figure of the mystic becomes central, because he is able to interpret and transmit through concrete language his experience of spiritual growth.

It is very certain that it is the effect of conversation with the beauty of the soul, to beget a desire and need to impart to others the same knowledge and love. If utterance is denied, the thought lies like a burden on the man. Always the seer is a sayer. Somehow his dream is told: somehow he publishes it with solemn joy: sometimes with pencil on canvas; sometimes with chisel on stone; sometimes in towers and aisles of granite, his soul's worship is builded; sometimes in anthems of indefinite music; but clearest and most permanent, in words. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Divinity School Address* 83)

IV.2.2- Verse: Study of Three Poems

If his prose adopted a philosophical approach to literary issues, Very's verse was devoted completely to the poetical transmission of the revelation of the God within. The subject of his poetry was determined by his search for redemption through religious austerity, his change of heart. Emerson's idea of the transference of nature into the mind, which leaves matter behind, strongly influenced him.

The idealist takes his departure from his consciousness, and reckons the world an appearance. . . . Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors. . . . All that you call the world is the shadow of a substance which you are, the perpetual creation of the powers of thought, of those that are dependent and of those that are independent of your will. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Transcendentalist* 195)

The spiritual change that Very claimed to have undergone was related to this thought. But Very's interpretation of Emerson's idea of a spiritual life in nature revealed an excess of religiosity. Very felt his self pervaded by God's Spirit and seized with a divine message. "James Freeman Clarke spoke of him [Very] further as 'a man in whose intellect all other thoughts have become merged in the great thought of his connexion with God'" (Bartlett 63-64).

His perception of the world was determined by the thought of the immanence of God. His perception of reality became the perception of a reality of divine things in which nature functioned as the emblem of God. Very was a Christian mystic who believed he was the messenger of a spiritual truth and he devoted his poetical creativity to this purpose. This attitude was reflected in "...a remark of Very's to George Bradford, that he [Very] 'valued his poems not because they were his, but because they were not'" (Baker 145). The psychological implications of this religious conviction led to his eccentric behaviour. The assumption that Very was mad denied his literary work, specially his poetry, an objective reading. His was considered a creative and visionary madness by a few.

Furthermore, his obsessive interest in the language of the Bible revealed a Calvinist influence in his temperament and literary vocation, although his writing was produced in a Transcendentalist setting. This duplicity demonstrated the existence of two Verys: the Calvinist, the will-less sayer of God's message, and the Transcendentalist, the Harvard humanist. This dual persona expressed the disagreement that he felt within his soul. Two contradictory voices can be heard in his poems – two voices that show this double spirituality as a conflict of the self with the self (Herbold 244).

In addition to these two voices, Calvinist/Transcendentalist, his voice underwent some changes due to the mystical revelation of a soul within which Very firmly believed to have experienced.

Two facts that have not been generally recognized are basic to the understanding of Very's poetry: the poems written during an approximately eighteen-month period in 1838-1940 were composed under the direct influence of a recent overwhelming mystical experience undergone by the author, whatever its origin; those composed earlier or later were not. Failure to appreciate this distinction has marred a good deal of the criticism of Very's poetry. Critics have frequently puzzled over inconsistencies between ecstatic poems and those written earlier or later. But these differences should not be surprising, for in a very real sense it was not the same mind that produced the poems of the different periods. (Deese *Jones Very: The Complete Poems* xxxv)

His poems can be primarily classified in three groups: those concerned with nature; those concerned with religion, and those which could be considered as personal or autobiographic.¹⁷ The treatment and mood in them varies depending on the subject matter, but his deep spirituality is present in them all.

20th century criticism on Very mostly focused on how his literary creativity was the expression of the dominant religiosity in him. Among the critics who have analyzed the collection of his works we can find Yvor Winters, Warner B. Berthoff, Harry L. Jones and Helen R. Deese.

. . . [Winters] praised "the quality of intense personal conviction" in such poems ("The Created" he thought his best work) and judged Very "one of the finest devotional poets in English". Winters argued that "Very was not a Transcendentalist at all, but a Christian and a dogmatic one", "whose theological and spiritual affiliations were with the earlier Puritans and Quakers rather than with the Unitarians or with the friends of Emerson". (Deese *Jones Very: The Complete Poems* xxxviii)

¹⁷Ralph Waldo Emerson's selection of sixty-five poems for *Essays and Poems* (1839) was the only edition to appear in Very's lifetime. He classified Very's verse into these three groups (Bartlett 81) Following his death, two other editions appeared: William P. Andrews' *Poems by Jones Very* (1883), (Bartlett 132) and James Freeman Clarke's *The Works of Jones Very* (1886) (Bartlett 135-136).

Although most of these critics shared the idea that Very's poetry was more evangelical than aesthetic, we should say that the poetical treatment that he gave to his religious thinking had as much to do with an excess of devotion as with a masterly management of an aesthetic sensitiveness in every word. It cannot be denied in reading any of his poems that a religious sentiment motivated his lines, but, in the same manner, those critical opinions that set him apart from the transcendentalist thought should have valued the romantic view which instilled writing in him. Under the same approach, Berthoff comments on Very's thought: "[Very] is the one figure of his generation who succeeded in translating the power of religious vision into formal poetry" (Deese *Jones Very: The Complete Poems*: xxxviii). Furthermore, Harry L. Jones' criticism on Very considers Very's mysticism as traditional in his use of symbolic language to convey religious experience: ". . . Very uses symbols traditionally associated with Christian mysticism as well as some personal symbols" (Deese *Jones Very: The Complete Poems* xxxix). The critical interest in Very was so closely bound to his religious concerns that it seemed to ignore Very's intellectual links with Transcendentalism and American romantic thought. "Sadly but justly, Channing eventually came to represent for anti-transcendentalists an exemplum of the transcendentalist as ne'er-do-well, just as Very seemed the transcendentalist as wild-eyed mystic" (Elliot 376).

On the contrary, Helen R. Deese's appreciation on Very's literary dealing with his religious awakening indicates that he deserved to be taken into account:

The note of egotism inherent in the poetry of one who feels himself a special mouthpiece of God is sometimes, to some readers, offensive. A concomitant note of paranoia also is sometimes irritating, though the reader should bear in mind that Very was indeed persecuted (by the Harvard authorities and by the Salem ministers) for delivering his revelations.

But the special nature of his poetry is also responsible for the breathless intensity of the verse. (Deese *Jones Very: The Complete Poems* xxxvii)

Very's verse was an attempt to deliver poetically a message of religious and spiritual content within a romantic approach.

Very was surely in agreement with the theory of correspondence expressed in Emerson's *Nature*, the notion that nature reveals by analogy spiritual truth.

In a few poems written late in the early period (the spring and summer of 1838), and in his ecstatic poems, the expression of this correspondence is likely to be compressed, charged, metaphorical, and integral to the poem's structure; in the early and late poems, it often appears as an obtrusive didacticism. (Haralson 454)

If he had not been temporarily affected by a mental crisis, his creative production, particularly his poetry, would probably have reflected a stronger moral tone, one which was in accordance with the moral pragmatism that transcendentalist thought involved, than the dominantly religious and pervasive spirit so strongly rejected by his contemporaries. Despite his excess of devotion, the deeply sensitive attitude towards all the elements of the world that underlies every word in Very's lines manages to instill the reader with the poet's sentiment of closeness and unity with nature; this feeling reveals that he shared the transcendental belief in the possibility of an existence in spiritual harmony.

Very found a strong mystic meaning in all the elements in nature and in his relationship to men. This mystical identification with reality made of him a spiritual interpreter of his time. To prove this argument I have selected three of Very's poems¹⁸ from the 1839 edition – *The Stranger's Gift* (1838), *The Soul in Dreams* (Date unknown), *Beauty* (1837). I believe that their content adheres to Very's existential concerns dealing with nature, religion and personal life respectively, and with the individual's spiritual condition and self-awareness as previously mentioned and as we will see in this section. In his poem "The Stranger's Gift"¹⁹ each line is a metaphor of Very's love of God and nature. His reverence for all the natural elements as symbols of the divine becomes the guiding line. His spiritual perception of natural beauty seeks the evidence of divine manifestation beyond the natural location of these elements in the poem. The sonnet deals with the sensations and thoughts that a bunch of flowers instills in the poet's mind.

¹⁸See Appendix II

¹⁹Very wrote more than 600 poems in his life. Among those in which the reader senses the reverence Very felt for nature and for God, we can also mention "The Tree" (119), "The Latter Rain" (137), "To the Fossil Flower" (114) and "To a Withered Leaf Seen on a Poet's Table" (110) (in *Very Essays and Poems*)

The poet represents himself in two settings, which correspond with the two different parts in this sonnet. Firstly, in the lines 1-8 he describes the sensations he feels on finding a bouquet indoors. The sight of it brings the presence of Nature in. Secondly, in the lines 9-10 he places himself outdoors in the countryside. The scattered and wild flowers along his path awake a spiritual perception in him and he intuits the reflection of God's spirit everywhere.

The sonnet's first line recreates Very's encounter with his object of contemplation, "I FOUND". These capital letters highlight the fact that the poet is not any observer but a lover of beauty in nature and a part of it. Like the I-Eye, or Emerson's transparent eyeball, he sees "[t]he currents of the Universal Being circulate through [him]" (Emerson *Nature* 10). The poet introduces himself to the reader before the sight of beauty as nature's and a stranger's gift. From the moment he sees the flowers, as an unexpected, but pleasant view, they personify spring in the figure of a guest: "Each flower that makes our Spring a welcome guest" (line 2). Their presence inside, probably at home, recreates the image of the fields and spring time within the poet's reach. The flowers have travelled from far to share their beauty with him in a domestic, more intimate setting, like a present from Nature, "far culled from fragrant field and grove" (line 1). Their fragrance advances the "welcome" presence of spring in the second line. The description of the bunch of flowers is full of delicacy and admiration for small details that appeal to our senses. As Irmischer points out, "Very's poetry is rich with visual impressions. . . . in Very's poetry, the human eye does not, Emerson-style, expand to god-like proportions to encompass the horizon. Instead, it contracts to the level of the smallest objects: everything is worth a look" (*Emerson and His Contemporaries*). His delicacy is found not only in the physical description of the bouquet, but also in the words that refer to the way in which the "stranger's hand", "unknown", has arranged them "[i]n one sweet bond of brotherhood inwove" (line 3).

The first reference to this stranger's action appears at the beginning of the poem, "culled". Very stresses the idea of a gift delicately arranged and made with care and love. All the elements that display the beauty of this object of contemplation direct our thoughts and senses to the natural world: "an osier band", "their leafy stalks", "their bloom".

We perceive through the poet's sensual description a spiritual atmosphere that fills up the room, like the scent of the flowers, motionless, "[a]nd fresh their fragrance rested on the air" (line 6). The unknown's spiritual presence remains there, "rested", within the beauty of his gift, but its physical absence and identity produces a sentiment of loss in the poet's soul: "His gift was mine — but he who gave unknown, / And my heart sorrowed though the flowers were fair" (lines 7-8).

Lines 7 and 8 refer to the title of the poem and the subject matter introduced in the line 5, "a stranger's hand had made their bloom my own". There is a progression in the poet's mood from the state of happiness in the first lines to an increasing sense of grief for the impossibility to meet the stranger, the giver of that gift. This change is introduced in the lines quoted above where Very's joy turns into a longing for knowledge.

In his study of the life and works of Jones Very and his contribution to American literature, William Irving Bartlett says that, "[t]he crowning glory of Very is his spirituality; unlike Bryant, he finds a strong mystic meaning in nature, and the realization of this discovery frequently so permeates his being as to melt his Puritanical reserve and inflame his soul into an intense and passionate interpretation of the spiritual significance of nature" (84). The expression of such spirituality becomes progressively stronger as we move on to the reading of these lines. The manifestation of natural and sensual beauty described till this moment progressively becomes Very's claim for a spiritual approach. When he asserts that "His gift was mine" he is no longer thinking of his physical possession but a spiritual one. He realizes that he possesses a common essence with the unknown giver and the gift, which is revealed through their mutual perception of the beauty within. The sentiment coming out of external contemplation moves into a series of appreciations that reveal his deep spirituality and mystical attitude towards all that was part of his daily life. The progress of his soul is reflected in the expression of the course of time within the poem.

This advance in the poet's perception of reality is introduced in the ninth line by the words: "Now oft I grieve to meet them on the lawn" (line 9). A progression of time and of his spirit is a constant in the following lines.

The nouns “dawn” and “sunset” reproduce in our minds the image of the poet walking in this fair landscape at different times of the day under the captivating effects of a changing light; and the reflection of light increases the perception of natural and spiritual beauty, which encourages the poet’s belief in the existence of a divine essence, the “One” (line 11), manifested in the diversity of all that greatness.

He finds in God’s spirit the maker of all that wonder: “In truth, Very’s poems seem often the essence of spiritual nature transmuted into the language of a devout disciple” (Bartlett 84). The poem becomes the revelation of this divine presence. The subtle delicacy described in the stranger’s present, “In one sweet bond of brotherhood inwove” (line 3), is also represented in nature’s gift and in God’s action in it, “As sweetly scattered round my path they grow” (line 10). The figure of God is represented as an artist, the source of beauty, “By One who on their petals paints the dawn, And gilt with sunset splendors bids them glow” (lines 11-12). These metaphors are reminiscent of the effect of the dew at dawn, like little drops made by an artist’s brush sprinkling on the petals, in contrast with their gilt colour under the vanishing light at sunset, in the next line. As an artist himself, the poet reflects his perception of a divine influence in the beauty of his words. This divine and spiritual presence is also perceived like an unending flowing, such as the progression of time from the dawn to sunset reflects.

He concludes with an ironic sentiment of reproach, “For I ne’er asked ‘who steeps them in perfume?’ / Nor anxious sought His love who crowns them all with bloom” (lines 13-14). In these last lines, another metaphor of flowers, Very sees the bunch as crowned by God’s hand, as a manifestation of divine influence and power. The verb “crowns” enhances the end of a process, in which the flowers with their outer bloom and their perfume steeped in God’s spirit attain a unity. Their bloom as an emblem of God’s love and their perfume as a symbol of divine essence in them come from the same spiritual being. They possess beauty because they own God’s love and soul. The poet adopts an ironical tone (lines 13-14) in order to recreate this experience of spiritual continuity in the readers’ thought. He is calling our attention to an immanent spiritual presence within the gift of nature by asking us directly who steeps the flowers in perfume. He intends to instill in our minds a sense of remorse because of our missing the genuine source of all that beauty (line 14).

God's presence is greater as we approach the end of the poem. The poet's feelings have experienced a spiritual advance from the indoor setting to the outward landscape. And in his outward perception he has attained an awareness of the divine. This poem reflects Very's interpretation of nature submitted to his religious view. He progressively reduces the relevance of the sensual self in order to let his spiritual self open up to the flowing of God's spirit. His words evidence his mystical perception of reality.

His experiences of contemplation and meditation on natural elements are absorbed by a search for spiritual and divine manifestations. His search ends in a spiritual revelation, the perception of a common and unique spiritual presence in natural elements, though conditioned by his religiosity. Although the overt references to God, "One", "His love", do not possess an excessively religious tone, he wants the reader's perception to undergo a spirituality influenced by the poet's religious interpretation.

Very's intellectual debate between the conditioning principles of his faith and his more humanistic perception of reality arises as some kind of spiritual incompleteness, the sentiment of a soul unsatisfied due to Very's loss of freedom in his process of self-knowledge. In wondering about the source of such a gift of love and beauty the poet's sensual perception of natural beauty changes into its spiritual interpretation. The beauty of the bloom in the bouquet and in nature instills in him a wish to know about the nature of this source of beauty. He seems to guess the existence of a unique spiritual source within, whether the present comes from a stranger's hand, as a human/divine gift, or from a natural setting, as a gift of nature. The gift stands for the symbol of a universal spirit, whose essence pervades everything with its immanent beauty. God, man and nature, as givers and partakers of this beauty, are thus pervaded by the same soul.

Very's treatment of this universal spirit within the human being and nature in this poem would be subsequently enlarged by other literary figures in a poetical tone that is less subdued by religious austerity. Very's lines in "The Stranger's Gift" may look forward to Emerson's "The Rhodora" (1834). The same tone of seeking the essence which pervades and connects the human and nature can be found in Emerson's poem.

Also set in springtime, Emerson praises in it the sense of beauty which the sight of the flower inspires in him. While Emerson expresses his admiration for the wild condition of the Rhodora, which stays true to its essence, outdoors in nature, Very in his poem appreciates the beauty of the gift of flowers "...far culled from the fragrant field" indoors instead. Both poets are concerned with what or who brought the flower to them and the two of them wondered about the source of beauty, about who or what gave the flower its essence: "I never thought to ask, I never knew", in Emerson's, or "For I ne'er asked 'who steeps them in perfume?' ", in Very's. Beauty and the values that natural elements stand for are worthwhile if the individual is able to admire them. Emerson and Very appreciate beauty just for what it is and for what it means, "Then Beauty is its own excuse for being", "His gift was mine". Likewise, they seem to guess that the same divine or spiritual essence that brought them to the flower(s), brought the flower(s) to them. Emerson refers to it as "the self-same Power", whereas Very adopts an overtly religious view, "Nor anxious sough His love who crowns them all with bloom". Ultimately, we can appreciate how Emerson and Very shared the romantic and transcendentalist belief in nature as a source to grow in wisdom available to anyone who wanted to learn from it.

A parallelism could also be found between the spiritual value represented by that natural gift of love in *The Stranger's Gift* and in Walt Whitman's lover's gift in *Song of Myself*, Section III lines 59-65: "Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels swelling the house with their plenty" (Whitman Death-Bed edition 32). This gift left by the poet's bed-fellow after his leaving at dawn possesses a symbolic significance. Whitman's perception of the self's individuality is represented in his fellow's setting off at dawn, an image which stresses the physical and spiritual individuality of the lovers: "As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread". At the same time, a sense of the self's continuity is transmitted by and as a result of the experience of love they share through the sensual connotations of his lover's gift. Whitman mixes spirituality with a sensual reality in order to express the sentiment of mystical union that he experiences in the presence and absence of his lover. The physicality of their union, metaphorically recreated in the poet's allusion to the baskets, "white towels swelling the house with their plenty", appears as a symbol of a spiritual unity that remains after his lover's withdrawing.

The religious connotations in Whitman's lines in the 1855 edition (Whitman First Edition 20), "As God comes a loving bedfellow", in comparing his sentiment of spiritual unity with the divine and the feeling of identity with his lover's self, enhance the idea of a unique spiritual self in that mystical experience, fellowmen – God – the poet. Whitman recreates his feeling of oneness with God and fellow men into a vision of love in these lines and establishes a kind of parallelism between the mystical union with the divine and the physical union with his lover. He goes into a spiritual rapture through his physical experience, which leads him as a poet to express his perception of a sense of spiritual continuity, a universal identity among selves – his self and his bedfellow's self, God's self and his divine presence. The poet's spiritual representation of the self's oneness (through the image of Whitman contemplating his lover's gift and his withdrawing) resembles Very's sentiment in appreciating the spiritual presence within the bouquet and nature in spite of its unknown giver's absence. The poets' words trespass the boundary between the self and the world. Theirs is a sensual approach through their lines to the mystical conception of the self.

This sentiment of kinship revealed by Very and Whitman in their sensual perception of their gift's spiritual value is also expressed by Robert Frost in his poem *The Tuft of Flowers* (Frost 32-33). The last lines 39-40 "Men work together . . . Whether they work together or apart" might sum up the subject matter of the poem. The idea in these words recreates within a natural landscape Very's religious interpretation of this thought and Whitman's approach to the conception of his self and the selves' continuity. The "I" in Frost's poem addresses himself in his loneliness and feels the mower's loneliness (lines 7-8): "But he had gone his way, the grass all mown, And I must be, as he had been, -alone," but goes on to find his own spirit in the mower's spirit (lines 33-34): "And feel a spirit kindred to my own, So that henceforth I worked no more alone". We can find a mystical interpretation of the individual's loneliness in the presence of nature in these lines. By means of this physical isolation, the individual intuits the flowing of a unique spirit through nature and his being. The poet no longer feels isolated spiritually, but part of a universal essence. The presence of the tuft of flowers, as a fellow's gift, whose giver is no longer there, reminds Frost of a common bond between them, a sense of understanding in their perception of beauty, which unites them and reasserts their sentiment of belonging to and sharing a universal spirit.

The mower and the poet work no more alone, since the spirit kindred to them pervades all and exists within that physical loneliness. The sensual description of the flight of the butterfly, “But as I said it, swift there passed me by / On noiseless wing a ‘wilderer butterfly’”, and the sound of the scythe, “And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground”, end in the revelation of a spiritual message from the dawn, “The butterfly and I had lit upon, / Nevertheless, a message from the dawn”, like an illumination for the poet’s and the mower’s soul, “And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech / With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach” Their senses are captivated by the spiritual harmony they perceive between human being and natural elements. The poet’s spirit is part of the spirit of the landscape which he describes. The poet acts as the observer and interpreter of the sight of beauty, which inspires this spiritual affinity.

Through his references to Nature, Very examined those issues that would be a constant in his poetry, such as God’s action in the world and the revelation of a divine and spiritual unity between all the natural elements and human being. Although his creativity was always mastered by a sensual perception and a religious interpretation, in the poem “The Soul in Dreams”²⁰ his spirituality permits a philosophical approach to the soul’s condition. He describes the soul’s immanence in nature metaphorically. This poem reflects his deep belief in the flow of a spiritual essence through the natural world and his conviction of its divine source. We can see in his words a transcendental approach to Nature and the expression of a mystical attitude. If we accept the transcendental premise that revelation in a mystical experience comes from within, then the subject matter of this poem may evidence Very’s mystical attitude. The sentiment of revelation is transmitted by his spiritual approach to the natural world. The poet expresses his intuition of a real existence of the soul within a mystical experience set in dreams. A state of introspection leads the poet to a vision of reality within an oniric world, in which the sensual and the spiritual interact. Very recreates his perception of a sense of continuity with the Soul. He shares the Soul’s view in its flowing through nature, which permits the poet a deeper comprehension of reality.

²⁰See Appendix II. Very addresses the soul in many other poems: “The Soul’s Freedom” (Poem No. 504), “The Soul’s Invitation” (Poem No. 89), “The Soul’s Opportunities” (Poem No. 736), “The Soul’s Preparation for Adversity” (Poem No. 203), “The Soul’s Questioning of the Universe, and its Beginning” (Poem No. 563), “The Soul’s Rest” (Poem No. 407) and “Soul-Sickness” (Poem No. 193) (in Deese *Jones Very: The Complete Poems*)

The poem reflects the poet's soul's progression to spiritual knowledge, his spiritual advance to the perception of a divine essence in the Soul. The first quartet introduces Very's mystical and introspective view. The words "The soul heeds not" (line 1) describe this ability of introspection, an isolation from reality, as the first stage in a mystical process that aims at illumination, "though darkest night / each object doth conceal; / In dreams it sees the noonday light, / which all things doth reveal" (lines 1-4). "In dreams it sees" might well refer to that mystical state and condition in which spiritual revelation is attained. It reminds us of the action of closing one's eyes in order to perceive things differently. The course of physical time, from night to noonday, stands for the approach to knowledge as illumination, the transition from darkness to light.

In the second stanza the poet goes further in the description of his introspective perception of reality. Very posits a spiritual existence beyond. Lines 5-7 refer to the adverse actualities that may deviate the soul's advance to knowledge, "Nor doth it heed the Winter's snow, / That deep around it lies". "The Winter's snow" "lies", that is, it physically hides something below; it symbolically conceals the truth. The adversities represented by "snow" and "wintry winds" and described as earthly conditions will be overcome by the soul's flowing, flying into sweet dreams: "But in sweet dreams it flies". Again, dreams represent metaphorically that mystical introspection, the means to isolate oneself from reality in order to see into things deeply. Very's state of introspection progressively advances into knowledge through the spiritual interpretation of all the symbols in nature in the following quartets. His approach to natural beauty reveals his intuition of nature as a source of spiritual inspiration. This approach reveals Very's belief in the mystical identification of the soul with nature (Bartlett 84). The beauty in natural elements instills in him a sentiment of spiritual harmony in freedom (lines 9-12).

The illuminated condition of the soul at this point "But in sweet dreams it flies / Where Summer clothes each vale and hill" pervades the perception of reality, in which the growth into knowledge "And plucks its fruits and flowers" is encouraged by innate freedom "And wanders freely at its will / Amid its blooming bowers". This sense of freedom in the soul's flowing is attached to a sense of a boundless existence (lines 13-16): "To gardens ever green and fair".

The images of the flowers, “roses” and “lilies”, as “deathless” in their beauty, and their “bloom” and “scent” as an outer manifestation of their inner beauty can be identified with the soul’s condition as an eternal source of spiritual wisdom.

The course of a lifetime might also be seen in the symbolic significance of a rose as the spring of life and a lily as an image associated with the end of it. The words in line 16 “It oft in slumber goes” at the end of the quartet, enhance this image of the soul’s eternal presence and act as a concluding thought, which ends the soul’s description in relation to earthly elements. The poet perceives a divine source beyond this sense of eternal existence, which he expresses in the last two stanzas. His lines have progressively described the soul’s knowledge as a result of the poet’s experience of self-knowledge. This mystical process into spiritual knowledge will finally reveal a universal truth. Sensual and natural conditions do not affect the soul’s nature: “‘Tis not to sense, nor Nature kin, / Nor grows it ever old” (lines 17-18).

The following lines “Though dim the eye, and mind within, / It can its youth behold” might perfectly sum up all the qualities that make of the Soul a source of wisdom. “[I]ts youth” symbolizes its unaffected genuineness, immanent in all the elements which the soul flows through; “behold” reflects its ability to contemplate and transcend things; “in sweet dreams it flies” (line 8) refers to that introspective state, “dreams”, which favours to see and perceive freely, “it flies”, the common essence in them. The soul is a source in itself. The poet understands these qualities as the result of a divine condition in the soul’s nature: “For ‘tis of a celestial birth”. This divine influence, “celestial birth”, is transmitted through the soul’s flowing into all the elements which share its spiritual essence: “And casts around it here / A glory, that is not of earth, / But of its native sphere” (lines 22-24). These last words, “A glory” and “of its native sphere”, reflect Very’s religious and humanist convictions. He intuitively dreams the soul’s nature as a universal essence of divine source that shares natural and human conditions. The flow of the soul through nature can be identified with the flow of the poet’s mystical thought. Those properties of eternal and free existence of the soul are found in the poet’s thought, that is, within his mind and in his dream. Like the mystic’s inner view of the outer, the poet’s imagination provides his deep insight of the soul in the poem with the interpretation of the strong symbolism of nature where the soul’s existence is set.

The dream becomes a bridge which integrates all natural symbols. The poet is trying to solve the conflict of the soul's existence through the interpretation of dreams. The dream is saying something. It is delivering a key message through a state of mind: the poet dreams of the soul's existence in the boundaries between thought and matter. This is the realm where the soul's existence lays. Therefore, the continuity between mind and soul is attained in this inward perception of reality. The individual's ability to dream is his soul's ability to dream: the flowing of the same spiritual essence.

The mystical representation of "The Soul in Dreams" gathers part of Very's spiritual concerns, but the perception of a divine influx within the Soul described in it was also experienced by him as a sentiment of love. Love aroused a personal spiritual debate in Very and this can be found in "Beauty".²¹ If the previous poem reveals philosophical and spiritual concerns with religious connotations, in this sonnet, "Beauty", Very's deep religious convictions finally overcome any other sentiment in him. The sentiment of love appears as a human and divine source of inspiration. The conflict within the poet's soul becomes a conflict of his heart. His thought reflects a poetical spirit divided by opposite feelings: Very, the passionate man and Very, the religious and devout believer in God. His personal experience of love changes into the search for a divine truth within this feeling.

If Beauty exists in that continuity of the Soul within man and Nature, then Love might be the means to experience Beauty in the spiritual union between the individual's and his/her beloved being's soul. The poet's spiritual approach to this sentiment reflects his finding of God's love as a source of Beauty. The octet in the sonnet describes Very's experience of natural human passion. Line 9 sets up a turn in the poet's state of mind. The feeling of love becomes strongly spiritual and divine in the sextet. The poet expresses his perception of love as an inner struggle, in which earthly love is finally overcome spiritually by his deep religious devotion. His emotions intensify gradually when their poetical setting moves from earth to heaven. The poet's thought steadily advances into a dominantly spiritual perception of love.

²¹See Appendix II. "This poem could be included in that group of poems considered as autobiographical. It belonged to the period which marked Very's religious excitation. Very's engagement to a young woman of Salem was broken because of Very's illness and consequent insanity" (Bartlett 99). Two other autobiographic poems should be mentioned here: "Thy Beauty Fades" (121) and "Love" (134) (in *Very Essays and Poems*). In both of these "[t]he ephemeral quality of earthly love is contrasted with the soul-satisfying, everlasting quality of divine love" (Bartlett 99)

The first lines (1-2) reproduce the intense sensations that this love inspires in him. These sensations move through his heart into his mind. The contemplation of his beloved's beauty "I GAZED upon thy face" pervades his being's soul and thought. The poet's spirit appears possessed by his lover's spirit. Again, like in the first poem, "The Stranger's Gift", we have the I-eye gazing, through which "[t]he currents of the Universal Being circulate". In contemplating her face, the poet feels that his heart stops beating, "once stilled", to keep any disturbing thinking away, "every thought whose being was a strife", "Each in its silent chamber sank to rest" (lines 3-4). An enormous feeling of spiritual peace fills his heart and his thoughts, and his soul and mind share this spiritual joy. The metaphorical references to the heart, "beating life", "sleepless pulses in my breast", "silent chamber", as that place through which the source of life continually flows, strengthen the spiritual connection between the soul and the mind. His being becomes spiritually dependent on his approach to love and this spiritual existence occurs in the poet's mind: "I was not, save it were a thought of thee" (line 5). He perceives his self in his thinking of her. A mystical union between them is experienced in the poet's thought. The poet's feeling of continuity between soul and mind is poetically recreated in the expression of her beauty as a mystical experience of love.

The next lines (6-7) refer to the physical world as a reflection of his love's spirituality. Her soul's presence is earthly and heavenly; it is reflected in all the natural elements, "the world" and "every star". The poet sees the greatness of love everywhere, below, "a spot where thou hadst trod", and above, "From every star thy glance seems fixed on me". In the line 8 "Almost I loved thee better than my God", the poet's love of God has a stronger and deeper meaning than his human love. "And still I gaze", line 9 echoes the subject in line 1, the contemplation of his lover's beauty, but his gaze is now fixed upon a divine source of beauty.

The poet discovers "a holier thought", he experiences a deeper spiritual insight of love. God's spirit immanent in beauty pervades thus the poet's self. All the references to this divine love express a higher intensity of his sentiments, "a holier thought", "a purer ray", "a lovelier robe". His mind and soul are absorbed by this renewed experience of love, "— but 'tis a holier thought / Than that in which my spirit lived before" (lines 9-10).

Those same natural elements in which his beloved's spirit was reflected now possess a more revealing greatness, "Each star" and "Earth" (lines 11-12). The last lines (13-14) conclude the description of Beauty as an illumination coming from the divine. The natural reflection of his lover's beauty becomes a spiritual reflection, not of her human spirit, but of a divine soul.

His perception of God's presence is not only transmitted by the inspiring elements in the outer world, but by revealing sentiments in the world within. He makes of love a source of inspiration. Love opens his senses to the perception of a mystical unity between the human and divine soul. Nature and its elements appear as an inspiring poetical source for this sentiment of love. Through natural references he also manages to release those powerful religious feelings within him. His concept of Beauty has to do with his religious insight and his faith in God as a primary source of inspiration. He transfers the sentiment of spiritual continuity with his love into a religious feeling of union with God's spirit.

The sincerity of this prevailing religious feeling in most of his poems is described in the words of his biographer as follows: "His exceedingly simple diction and his almost total lack of conscious rhetoric or of stylistic device are a fitting garment for his sincerity, and accentuate the reverential attitude he bears towards his subject" (Bartlett 84). His religious commitment not only pervaded the content of his lines, but also his style, which aimed at the expression of a sincere heart. On the contrary, Christoph Irscher's comments on Emerson and his contemporaries describe Very in the following way: "However, the stereotypical image of Very as a mildly annoying – though gifted – kook [...] is only partially correct. He did feel vastly superior to his contemporaries, including Emerson, and regarded them as spiritually bereft. In "The Dead" he compared them to leafless trees, stripped not by autumn but by the distance they have created between themselves and God (*Emerson and His Contemporaries*). His strong convictions -which we could find excessively eccentric- on religious issues and on his faith implicit in a statement like the one in the previous quotation cannot be denied. Notwithstanding, Emerson addressed him as his "brave saint" and he appreciated the genius in him and in his creative work despite their differences in thought. The following words of Alfred Rosa would sum up the main aspects of their relation:

The major points of comparison between Very and Emerson are their attitudes toward Nature, God, man, and self. For Emerson everything is secondary to Nature; for Very all things are secondary to God. Emerson seeks to find self through subservience to Nature and Very seeks God by abandoning self. Emerson wished man to be a “transparent eye-ball”, to be a seer of the richness and complexity of the world even if that meant reflecting its inconsistencies and paradoxes as well. Emerson’s God was Nature and it was an impersonal God. Very was sure of his God – sure that He existed and sure that He was immanent. (83-84)

In the three selected poems we can appreciate all these aspects which illustrate Very’s connection with the philosophy of life of Transcendentalism and to his concerns with the individual’s existential condition. The Soul’s presence, God’s spirit, is immanent in the physicality of the inner and outer world in *The Stranger’s Gift*. This spiritual continuity is shared by the Mind and the Soul within a world of dreams in the second poem, *The Soul in Dreams*. In dreams, the Soul transmits its flowing through reality into the Mind. Human being’s ability to dream opens its sensual perception of the natural world to that spiritual space in which the poet’s imagination connects the Soul and the Mind through his words. The border between the spiritual and the physical is trespassed by the poet’s language. Words build up the setting of thoughts, where the poetical interpretation of natural elements acts as a symbol and reflection of a universal spiritual existence. The Soul provides the Mind with a complete perception of reality. Poetical creativity permits the poet to shape and match the sensual and spiritual perception in his thoughts as in a view of dreams. The poet’s deed aims to reflect his identity within this sensual and spiritual continuity. Through his art, the poet participates in an immanent and universal essence, which is the source of all inspiration and revelation. The poet’s soul instills a dream of beauty in his mind, in which his self exists in a harmonious continuity with that universal essence. The poet houses a mystical hero in his self.

Very’s representation of the search of the outer and the ordinary from within as is the case with the mystical experience is underlying the flow of his lines. The poet’s inner look attempts to understand the links between thought and reality.

His mysticism leads the reader through his words into that sort of intimacy with the natural elements of the world so inspiring and revealing for Very in order to deal with existential concerns. Very makes poetry the stage of imagination. His genuine interpretation of the symbolism in nature and in the elements of the world reveals his conviction of the spiritual condition of human being. His deep insight, openly present in the “I” in the very first line of two of the poems analysed in this section, becomes the keyhole which looks into dreams. His intuition and creativity shape his profound sentiment of unity between world and thought, or what is the same for Emerson’s “brave saint”, both sustain his epic quest for the affinity with the divine.

IV.3-Very’s Mysticism: Evolution of a Philosophical and Spiritual Consciousness

The figure of Jones Very should be considered as representative of the mystical sentiment within Transcendentalism. Very’s poetry becomes a path to explore self-consciousness, the immanent identity within his self that transcends the poet’s words. By sharing a set of moral values deep-rooted in their experience of the world, the epic hero and his people experience a feeling of belonging and a sentiment of unity which helps them to overcome that sense of loss of identity and self-unawareness. This sense of recovery encourages the poet’s sensibility to transmit a spiritual revelation of beauty in the perception of an existence in harmony between the individual and the elements of the world. A mystical attitude in the poet, that is, a spiritual perception of natural elements as a divine source of beauty, encourages his belief in the existence of a universal spirit, which provides reality with spiritual identity, with a feeling of sharing a common condition of being. This spiritual identity is perceived by Very in the reality described by the epic poet. The making of the epic reveals that all epic elements share one purpose: the transmission of the epic poet’s perception of a unique spiritual existence immanent in the world. The sentiment that grows within the hero represents the growth of self-consciousness within the individual. The hero’s awareness of his spiritual affinity with his people is the culmination of a process of self-knowledge: the consciousness of a common spiritual being. Despite his pervasive deep religious convictions, his spirituality inspired the creativity and originality that characterize his prose. Instilled with the heroic sentiment in his personal search for knowledge, Jones Very pursued a harmony between his thoughts and feelings.

His desire for spiritual knowledge was encouraged by his intellectual interests. He applied his intuition of the existence of a spiritual presence to his treatment of epic matter. His writing on the epic was a response to his innate impulse toward self-knowledge. He saw in the epic the realization of a process in which human behaviour revealed a spiritual progress within. The culmination of this progression was the finding of spiritual continuity.

Very's spiritual perception of nature was mainly religious and it partly restrained the growth of a philosophical consciousness in him. Although his sensual contemplation of the world conceals his own epic search for a deeper knowledge of his self, his intuition and, subsequently, his poetic creativity were excessively affected by his religious interpretation of all the symbols in Nature. His mystical experience was not seen as true by his contemporaries as it was not completely understood as a revelation coming from within, free of will, but as a result of his will to demonstrate his religious convictions. As a mystic, his interpretation of the physical perception of beauty was not moral or intellectual, but religious. But even so, his intuitive perception of reality was praised by the Transcendentalists. This intuitive perception was not only present in his verse, but also in the philosophical approach of his essays to the individual's change into introspection, namely in his analysis of the evolution in the poet's treatment of the hero's performance. His prose was closer to a philosophical interpretation than his verse. In his prose, Very defended the individuality represented by the heroic Soul. He admired the subjective experience in heroic deeds: the hero's emotions led his spirituality to higher truths. Very found in the intellectual advancement of heroic actions a reflection of the growth of introspection in the hero's attitude. A heroic introspective attitude implied that the heroic search for identity became a search for self-awareness. Thus, the hero's epic world opened the path for the poet's thought to advance into spiritual knowledge. If the individual, represented in the figure of the hero, attained self-awareness, this spiritual recovery would allow his/her self-fulfilment. Very intuited the progression of the epic as a consequence of the growing relevance of the self.

Very's literary experience reflected the course of his intellectual and spiritual growth. He based the knowledge of his self on his interpretation of the heroic spirit. His approach to the epic revealed his belief in the existence of a spiritual identity.

But his epic search for this identity became the search for self-consciousness in the manifestation and religious interpretation of God's spirit everywhere. The delicate description of earthly elements in his poems recreated his spiritual epic quest for God's presence. The intellectual mysticism of his prose gave way to the mystical perception and religious interpretation of a divine presence in Nature of his verse. A consciousness of nature and of human nature was also revealed in his lines. If mysticism implied being initiated into a mystery, Very's mystical attitude was related mentally and emotionally to the revelation of some kind of spiritual mystery. He made of his literary work the progression of his soul towards God.

His Christian faith and spiritual tendencies defined his mystical concept of life, which, in some aspects, differed from the mysticism and the way of life understood by Transcendentalism. The transcendental progression of the Soul, the self's advance into spiritual knowledge, implied an unconditioned view of reality, a sensual perception free from any kind of dogmatism, which might restrain a mystical introspective interpretation. Very's perception of reality was mastered by his religiosity and God's presence everywhere while at the same time his intuition and mystical approach to reality instilled a sense of continuity with the elements of the world in his thought.

The inwardness that eventually pervaded the epic poet's thought also instilled Very's introspection. The mystical thought of his prose later provided the epic sentiment of his search for divine manifestation in poetry. The spiritual presence he claimed in his verse was the result of his conviction of the divine influence necessary for the self's recovery. He only understood the individual's self-fulfilment in the perception of a spiritual affinity between the human and the divine. Leaving aside an excess of devotion, Very's intellectual contribution to Transcendentalism should be seen as a literary and philosophical endeavour to transmit his notion of being. His attitude was representative of a sentiment and a thought shared by the Transcendentalists on their view of mysticism: not only intuition and the sensual experience of divinity in nature but an occasional feeling of exaltation and freedom of mind accompanies the creative act of the poet. Transcendentalists collected these traditional mystical elements and imbued them with moral pragmatism. In Very's case, as a sayer of this feeling, his seer's perception should have been more humanistic. His spiritual and poetical life was like a hero's mystical pilgrimage.

His poetry reflected his soul's epic progression. Each one of his poems represented his epic spiritual journey, but, as reflected in his lines, the course of this journey lacked an unconditioned intellectual evolution, the self's growth into wisdom should be a result of the individual's interpretation based on innate freedom. The revelation of a universal truth, the correspondence between the poet's spiritual world and the natural world, should be mystically experienced by the epic soul in freedom.

We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man, that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound, it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves; therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Nature* 41)

The perception of this free and universal spiritual identity would inspire many other artists, who followed this epic attempt and mystical attitude in their creative lives. The Transcendentalist legacy opened the way to renewed philosophical interpretations of the self as an independent existence whose universal essence was part of each individual. This concept of identity would influence cultural and artistic productions. The perception of the greatness of a country was the perception of the greatness within the individual. And art made viable the transmission of this spiritual greatness. The philosophy of life that emerged from Transcendentalism allowed the traditional American view of life an access into modernity. The philosophical thought derived from the Transcendentalists allowed American culture an intellectual independence from European thinking, since it found in their genuine interpretation of American life its best source of self-knowledge. The progression of their thought was from then on related to a view of life inspired by their own country. The American philosophical attitude which the Transcendentalists encouraged did not need to look back to Europe in order to advance and grow intellectually.

The Transcendentalists' relevance of self-consciousness may seem to consider external facts as secondary, but, on the contrary, the attainment of this knowledge of the self was found in the creative power instilled by natural events. This conception of creativity founded on nature gave way to a metaphorical representation of this spiritual perception in the arts of painting, sculpture and music. Transcendentalist philosophy was thus a philosophy of art. The visionary and intuitive attitude of the poet in his writing with the aim of seeing beyond reality, as in a mystical experience of illumination, was also adopted by different artists. The artist's intuition of the spiritual essence was present in his/her creations. The expression of this sentiment of spiritual identity in human beings and nature can be seen in the works of literary figures such as Walt Whitman, Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson. The romantic treatment of existential matters is present in the creations of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. The representation of this original Transcendentalist vision of life instilled the Romantic landscape painters of the Hudson River School and the Luminists, Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Albert Bierstadt, Martin Johnson Heade, William Hart, James Hart and John Frederick Kensett, among many others. This view is also present in the paintings of women artists like Sarah Cole (Cole's sister), Emily Cole (Cole's daughter), or Julia Hart Beers whose work ". . . reflects the same romantic sensibility, respect for balance, luminosity and love of picturesque landscapes" (Dobrzynski *The Grand Women Artists of the Hudson River School* par. 9). Their perception of beauty in the visual effects of light on natural settings reveals the presence of a common spirit in them. Whitman's epic sentiment of national greatness within each individual could be compared to the feeling present in the detailed recreation of every natural element in the great landscapes of their paintings. As well, Emily Dickinson's introspective vision of beauty in nature shared the same spirit. The exaltation of "the spirituality of nature" would also be reflected by composers like Edward MacDowell and Charles Ives in their music (Edmondson 187). The artist's self had become the subject matter on which creativity was based.

The relevance of the individual's interpretation of his relationship to the world for the knowledge of his condition is evidenced throughout ages by the individual's commitment to find the expression for such an experience of intimacy.

With the artistic response in all its forms as one of the most versatile means for this purpose – in our case literary and philosophical discourse – the concept of imagination introduced with Romanticism and Transcendentalism becomes the means to shape the individual's experience with the elements of the world, that is, with reality. Jones Very's shaping of his perception of a common condition of existence between natural elements and the individual was possible by means of his imaginative capability. He transmitted and transformed into words his mystical experience of intuition of a divine presence everywhere; thanks to the imagination he used natural elements as symbols for the expression of a religiously influenced and introspective view of the world.

Among many other thinkers and writers, men and women, who are concerned with reality and the individual's interpretation of his relationship to the world, Wallace Stevens would provide continuity to the philosophical premises literarily settled by romantic discourse in dealing with the individual's condition in terms of imagination, as we will see in the following section. Like Very, Stevens' creativity would also be the result of introspection, but with a mainly moral and aesthetic commitment, inherited from the romantic concern with the absence of God; his perception of God was completely different from Very's. If Very was somehow obsessed with feeling the presence of God everywhere, Stevens questioned the idea of God and found in poetry an alternative for the expression of the idea of an existence in harmony, something which used to be implicit in everything related to the sacred according to Very's religious view of the world.

Contemporarily influenced by the socio-cultural factors of the twentieth century and within the context of urban landscapes, Stevens' poetry would become the expression of the vision of a poet who found the possibility of continuity between thought and world in his ordinary life. Both Very and Stevens mold their poems to express their belief in the idea of spiritual harmony. Literary and philosophical texts become for them the mainstay on which they deal with the existential concerns on the condition of being that underline their discourse from an intuitive interpretation of life experience. Their belief in the need to establish a dialogue with the elements of the world and in the need of a recovery of moral values as necessary paths to self-awareness is the core tenet of their mystical discourse.

V – POETIC REALITY IN WALLACE STEVENS

The imagination will not drown. If it is not a dance, a song, it becomes an outcry, a protest. If it is not flamboyant, it becomes deformity; if it is not art, it becomes crime. Men and women cannot be content, any more than children, with the mere facts of a humdrum life – the imagination must adorn and exaggerate life, must give it splendour and grotesqueness, beauty and infinite depth. And the mere acceptance of these things from without is not enough – it is not enough to agree and assert when the imagination demands for satisfaction creative energy. (Williams *Imaginations* 200)

Freedom of thought enables human being to find in mind and its expression a large number of possibilities of knowledge. There is a figure whose free introspective interpretation of reality reveals the relevance of mind and that is the poet. The way in which the individual's existential interpretation has evolved in the Western tradition reflects the realization of an inner process of abstraction from reality. The poet, the writer, reveals the possibilities of knowledge in his inner view and interpretation of reality. "The real is constantly being engulfed in the unreal . . . [Poetry] is an illumination of a surface, the movement of a self in the rock" (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 639). These words emphasize Stevens' conception of the figure of the poet as an interpreter of reality, and poetry as the reflection of the poet's introspection. Much of his literary contribution and writing is inspired by a philosophy of life which comes out of a personal need for dialogue with the surrounding world, its nature and all the elements which compound it.

In his introduction to "The Necessary Angel" Stevens mentions the subject matter of his study, which is ". . . poetry itself, the naked poem, the imagination manifesting itself in its domination of words" (viii). Although he states that his pages are not meant to be criticism on philosophy or literature, they do show Stevens' philosophical and literary force in dealing with the interpretation of the world, and especially with nature.

His treatment of the world and nature stems from his imaginative and creative thought. We can appreciate in his thinking how the physical world acts as a source and reflection of the reality in mind. The role of the poet is to act as an interpreter and mediator between the world and the mind and he finds that the poet is the artist of the imagination. The art of language, poetry, establishes communication with all those universal elements which make up the poem of earth.

The world may, certainly, be lost to the poet but it is not lost to the imagination. I speak of the poet because we think of him as the orator of the imagination. And I say that the world is lost to him, certainly, because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of earth remains to be written. (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 142)

In his thought Stevens confronts the inspiring source of nature and its elements with the comprehension of reality which derives from them. His commitment to express his perception of reality by means of imagination reflects his belief in the relevance of their meaning as a whole. The influence of his personal evolution and private life in this vision and perception of reality had much to do with this belief. As an American representative of literary modernism and as an upper-middle-class man, his wish and will to write coexisted with his need to become economically self-sufficient. Due to this duality, the kind of values which were his main source of inspiration were part of a complex view of reality that was informed by the different social, economic and historical circumstances at the moment (Elliott 984-985). He experienced a personal progression from the privileged he had been born into,²² to a growing feeling of closeness with those who had only experienced the consequences of economic and social differences in life.

²²“His father, Garret Barcalow Stevens was a respected citizen, successfully practicing law and active in the local politics of the bustling, newly industrialised city of Reading, Pennsylvania. His mother, Margaretha Catharine Zeller Stevens, who before her marriage had been a schoolteacher in Reading, devoted herself to family and community” (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 9)

He eventually became aware of the importance of earning one's living in order to be self-sufficient and thus to be able to devote one's lifetime to doing what one really loves.²³ In his case, Stevens felt the need to write about his perception of how relevant the influence of reality was in the process of self-knowledge. But in spite of an experience of life whose context was very far from anything that could be related to the natural world, Steven's view of life was close to nature.²⁴ The values which articulate harmony in nature inspired his creativity while the time he spent on writing and creating helped him tackle the harshness of daily life. The management of this interaction between world and thought seems to belong to the poet's domain of words, as Donald McQuade states, "Stevens saw poetry as an 'accuracy with respect to the structure of reality'; it was formed by the pressure of the mind against the outside pressure of reality" (1803). This harshness of ordinary life, the reality that he had to live in, instilled him with the feeling to find on earth a path for the recovery of values which furnish the individual with identity. As he says, the poem of earth is still to come, ". . . the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of earth remains to be written". Classical mysticism aims at human transformation by exploring the divine within the individual. This same intuition of the spiritual condition of being and search for self-knowledge within is fostered by nature in American transcendentalist concept of mysticism.

With Stevens the possibility to attain such a transformation from within is to be found in the performance of values like goodness and nobility, which lead the individual to an existence in harmony with the outer and thus counteract that harshness of life. In Stevens, reality is filtered through imagination and this is how the poet as "the orator of the imagination" experiences the close connection between the poet's soul and nature again, as a mystical experience of continuity between thought-world.²⁵

²³"Stevens became a successful insurance executive, specializing in the insuring of cattle being sent to market. . . . The poet's home life was not ideally happy, apparently, since Elsie [his wife] was a difficult person. She would not, for example, allow him to have poet friends, such as Williams Carlos Williams, as house guests. He lived, on the surface at least, an ordinary life of a successful insurance executive. . . . He walked to work, and, . . . , composed his poetry on the way to the office" (Elliott 985)

²⁴"Stevens was a heroic walker from his childhood. . . . 'Walking', he wrote, 'is my only refuge from tobacco and food' " (Stevens *Letters of Wallace Stevens* 69). "The writing down in his journals of what he saw and heard on these walks was practice for that important dimension of his poetry that turns the appearances of the landscape into a way of naming the colors of the mind and of the imagination" (Elliott 983)

²⁵We will see Stevens' concepts of reality and imagination further detailed in the next section

The force of the creative process in Stevens' writing proceeds from controversial feelings in him, but, above all, from his love of poetry. Not only is his passion for poetry and its relevance evident in the content of his verse, but also whenever he deals with poetry in his essays. The genius of his thought is revealed in his treatment of the relevance of poetry through his reflections on it in his prose. His essays collect the essence of his thinking on poetry and, subsequently, his view of life and those values which may help the individual to know more about the condition of his being. Likewise, his poems are the testimony of his feelings on nature and art. On the poetical composition of images related to his conception of art and nature he builds his dualistic vision of reality, made up of the physical world, the real, and the spiritual world, the imagination. The content of his artistic production reflects his concern with the need to find a creative response which expresses the complementariness between feeling and thought. And it is in the expression of such complementariness where we find Stevens' mystical streak. The selected poems and essays analysed in the following sections embody the writer's different ways of looking into life experience. Stevens' poetical view of the world is a view of continuity between the different elements in it. His vision, like the mystic's, breaks the limits between the physical world and its representation in thought by means of imagination. Imagination becomes a mystical experience for him, one that finds expression in the poetic act.

He displays his philosophical and literary view on reality and the imagination in most of his writing, particularly in his essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words", and in many of his poems, such as "Not Ideas About The Thing But The Thing Itself" and "The Idea of Order at Key West". As well, a good testimony of his concerns with art and nature are poems like "Anecdote of the Jar" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", and the essay "The relations between Poetry and Painting" among others. All his production is representative of Stevens' aesthetic concern with self-questioning, but in this section we will specifically delve into his mystical, philosophical and literary dealing with self-concerns and with relevant moral principles and values for him, like nobility and the imagination, which can act as an answer to the crisis of identity and self-knowledge in the individual in the early 20th century.

V.1- Stevens' Philosophical and Literary Views on Mysticism, Reality and the Imagination

. . . Yet to speak of the whole world as metaphor
Is still to stick to the contents of the mind

And the desire to believe in a metaphor.
It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of
Belief, that what it believes in is not true.
(Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 291)

These lines of Stevens, as many others in his poems, reveal how much he was concerned with the idea of reality and imagination. The metaphor which he mentions here in reference to the world is present in most of his poetry and it is the result of his attention to and contemplation of reality, as in a mystical experience, which in his case, when dealing with poetry, was the individual's means to approach the good in his experience of life as far as it concerns a search for harmony. In the following excerpt from a lecture by Stevens at Harvard in 1936, the poet states his concepts of the mystic and the poet, categories to which he certainly seems to belong to, according to his own definition of them:

All mystics approach God through the irrational. Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational. If we descend a little from this height and apply the looser and broader definition of pure poetry, it is possible to say that, while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry in order to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose: The Irrational Element in Poetry* 786)

The search for harmony implicit in the sense of continuity between matter and soul which the mystic introspectively viewed in his contemplation and admiration of the world is for Stevens, as he states above, the equivalent to the poet's quest into the condition of the good for harmony through his lines of verse.

The poem becomes a kind of spiritual exercise in which the poet declares his faith in life. Stevens claims a necessary part of irrationality in our view of the world in order to achieve good and the harmony of self-fulfilment. And that irrationality is channelled by means of the imagination as the creative faculty of mind and the way to approach material and spiritual reality. Imagination may encourage the sensitivity to experience the ordinary elements of the world, that is, reality. The imagination may lead us to the perception of reality through the abstraction of the physical world and thus to a wider comprehension of it. Stevens was able to reflect the possibility of continuity between the objectivity of reality and the subjectivity innate to creativity. His conception of reality was closer to the belief in a set of values which comes out of a pragmatic view of nature and life, within a secular position similar to Emerson's. "Stevens usually means by *reality* an undetermined base on which a mind constructs its personal sense of the world" (Dogget 200) His perception of nature was subject to his belief in the individual's need for those values which may guide him in the interpretation and comprehension of reality. These kinds of values may change our state of mind and favour our interpretation of reality grounded on the interdependence between matter and mind. The relationship between the physical world and thought is understood in terms of continuity. They help us attain a wider comprehension of our existence and serve the individual in his intellectual advance.

According to Stevens, imagination is a necessary value for the individual's comprehension of reality, for the experience of the world as complementariness between the material and thought. The experience of the physical world and the experience of mind are not opposites; on the contrary, both meant continuity by means of a set of cultural and moral values such as imagination, which in Stevens's words ". . . is the source not of a certain value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 136), and nobility. The sensual experience of reality and thought is a reciprocal relation: "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 6). The individual has progressively advanced in his comprehension of reality according to some principles which may be considered appropriate within the context of both empirical and spiritual experiences. Stevens thought that the imagination provided mind with a context in which these same moral principles or values, like nobility, could act and encourage a wider comprehension of the world from an inner approach.

Stevens defends the role of the poet as the artist able to shape the complementariness of the world and thought by means of words. The poet's imagination creates the context for the interdependence between matter and soul, and this interdependence is mediated by the value of the nobility of thought. He understands the concept of nobility as a necessary premise to confer unity to the individual's intellectual process; he understands nobility as a value which reflects a universal sentiment. In the idea of nobility Stevens finds the adherence of the world to the mind possible.

Stevens' goal is an aesthetic study of poetry where the goal for poetry is established as well. He was interested in stating the nature of poetry and the role of the poet (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 27). However, although Stevens' view seems to be partly devoted to a literary and aesthetic treatment of this subject, he is also aiming at the comprehension of the process by which ideas act in mind.

Stevens' tendency to express the proximity between the concepts of imagination and reality in his theory of poetry reflects the basis of his thought: to comprehend the paradox or dilemma between them as a sort of link rather than an opposition. His is a work on the poetry of ideas and he also shares Emerson's view of poetry as the utterance of thought:

Poetry finds its origin in that *need of expression* which is a primary impulse of nature. In nature there is no rest. All things are in perpetual procession, flow, and change. Every thought in man needs to be uttered, and his whole life is an endeavor to embody in facts the states of mind. (Emerson *The Selected Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 84)²⁶

However, we should not think of Stevens only as a poet of the mind. And we should not think of him as a philosopher either.

²⁶“Emerson first delivered ‘The Poet’ on 16 December 1841 as the third in a series of eight private lectures entitled *The Times* at the Masonic Temple in Boston. . . . Emerson's lecture ‘The Poet’ bears virtually no relation to his famous essay ‘The Poet’ (1844). Instead Emerson apparently held the lecture in reserve for thirty years during which he undoubtedly drew from it for other lectures on poetry that he delivered over the years” (Emerson *The Selected Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 82-83)

He incorporated in his writing all those elements which were part of the landscape that makes America genuine, in the same sense as Transcendentalists attempted to rediscover it, that is, in the same way as they adapted the intellectual values inherited from the past into their contemporary context.

Within Stevens' context of life the correspondence between ideas and reality was not so focused on the need for a reinterpretation of moral values as the American romantic tradition was. Stevens' view as a modernist enhanced an aesthetic purpose within his intellectual commitment. For him poetry was the instrument which allowed an access to the world that all of us know by means of moral and aesthetic values. His philosophical attitude was strongly attracted by the alternatives which the power of imagination may offer to the individual's comprehension of reality.

He dealt with the idealized concept of imagination from a critical point of view. For him the image or symbol created by the artist or the poet should mainly keep a balance between the sense experience of the physical world and its inner comprehension. For Stevens the goal for poetry becomes the possibility to create the suitable image, or metaphor, which may reproduce and keep in words the inner procedure of mind in its experience of the outer world:

The aesthetic for Stevens is a process of making interior, from the real space of the streets of New York to the private space of his room and then into the psychic space of consciousness . . . where pastoral experience can be made safe and where in his room, literal and psychic, the pastoral can be had any time, any place. (Lentricchia *Chicago Journals* 755)

This process of making interior, that is, of moving from the outer, from "the real space", into the privacy of mind, is possible through words, which embody the individual's experience and thought of the world, ". . . and yet it is a great pleasure to seize an impression and lock it up in words: you feel as if you had it safe forever (Stevens *Letters of Wallace Stevens* 30). The relevance of the aesthetic comes along with the relevance of the idea and, for that reason, Stevens seeks to find the appropriate dialectic between mind and matter.

His is a search for sensual references rooted in the physicality of the world which lead us by means of imagination to the world again. The abstract use of metaphors creates this dialectal poetry, words-world, in which the individual may attain a philosophical comprehension of reality.

According to Wallace Stevens, the sound of words is their importance in poetry; sound is the principal business of poetry. The poet harnesses reality and makes a reader's or listener's first response an aesthetic one. As Stevens says: "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words".

We attempt through words to express the truth of our existence, our thoughts, and feelings. And we respond to these words not only with analysis but with our physical senses. (Greene 1327)

His is an aesthetic and intellectual commitment to poetry and with the ideas which can be transmitted by means of it. As I have mentioned before,²⁷ the poet reaffirms his faith in life through his poetry and the poem should thus reflect the spontaneity and constant flowing of changes in the same way as they occur in life: "Life, for Stevens, is a series of states of consciousness with neither start nor finish. If the poem is to be true to life it must be a constant flowing of images which come as they come, and are not distorted by the logical mind in its eagerness for order" (Hillis Miller 201). We could even go further and say that Stevens' interpretation of this poetical search describes an awareness of the self within the world and within thought. For him this awareness of the self is an experience of continuous change and the perception of such change affords the individual's access to the knowledge of being. Life then becomes an experience of change through which the poet nourishes his mind. Stevens' words in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" reveal the poet's sentiment of change as a symbol of self-identity.

There was a will to change, a necessitous
And present way, a presentation, a kind
Of volatile world, too constant to be denied,

²⁷See quotation and comments on page 160

The eye of a vagabond in metaphor
That catches our own. The casual is not
Enough. The freshness of transformation is

The freshness of a world. It is our own,
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves.
And that necessity and that presentation

Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer.
Of these beginnings, gay and green, propose
The suitable amours. Time will write them down.
(Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 344)

His concern with the individual's existence is reflected in his concern with the role of the poet and his words. In his reference to the freshness of a world, which he previously describes as volatile, with a constant changing condition, "too constant to be denied", as our own freshness and a glass in which we may feel reflected, he focuses the experience of identity, of ourselves, with those elements of the world. Stevens is progressively defining himself in favour of the poet of the mind, the individual who cares about the expression of his perception of the world in thought. His conception of the individuality which the figure of the poet represents remains attached to the reality that the American landscape and its diversity and richness of elements provide as the ground and inspiration for the poet. The process of the perception and comprehension of the world through imagination becomes mainly subjective before the objectivity and credibility which the physicality of the world itself represents. The study of opposites becomes the subject matter in Stevens' artistic creativity. He understands the individual's creative power, and particularly the power of words, as the possibility of counterbalance between philosophical contents and poetical production.

The revitalized search is, in one sense, an investigation of the power of the mind itself and the relation of the mind to reality. But, unlike the philosopher, whose investigations of consciousness and the relation of subject and object are directed toward the discovery of a system or theory of knowledge, Stevens directs his investigations toward a better understanding of the processes of the mind that lead to a new poetry. (Hines 30-31)

The emptiness of identity due to the lack or loss of moral values, subsequent to Stevens' contemporary circumstances and ours, leads the individual to find in art the resource for self-recovery. Artistic expression mediates for the individual to attain those intellectual values which may strengthen the perception of his nature as a spiritual being.

Stevens' concern with the relationship between the individual and the world, subject and object (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 109) led him to an intellectual debate of confrontation and a search for parallels between philosophical thoughts and literary means.

His artistic view on the matter reflected his passion for poetry as well as his depth of thinking. His perception of beauty in the interaction between mind and matter, a product of his meditation on the world, is evidenced in poetical terms, the artistic expression of an experience of reality which moves from without to within, from the senses to mind, and whose complexity could be better comprehended in abstracting from the world, that is, in the realm of imagination.

V.1.1- Nobility and Imagination in Stevens' Prose

Reality and the imagination are sources of knowledge in their reciprocity. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words"²⁸ Stevens describes nobility as a genuine value which interacts with these sources: ". . . the imagination gives to everything that it touches a peculiarity, and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility I mean that nobility which is our spiritual height and depth; and while I know how difficult it is to express it, nevertheless I am bound to give a sense of it" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 33-34). His essay poses a challenge to the idea of nobility as traditionally understood and constitutes a defence of the power of the word in what he perceives as a historically determined progression in the states of mind.

²⁸“The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’ was read at Princeton, as one of a group of essays by several persons on *The Language of Poetry*, made possible by the interest and generosity of Mr. and Mrs Henry Church, and was published by the Princeton University Press in 1942. *The Language of Poetry* was edited by Allen Tate” (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* ix)

The significant part of the poet in this intellectual advance, like the hero's into introspection the same change which Jones Very analysed in his essay on Epic Poetry again reveals a process of self-making. We can see the aim of self-fulfilment, that is, of an attainment of knowledge on the nature of being, in the poet's and the hero's intellectual progression. Stevens establishes a parallel between the poet's inspiration together with the product of his imagination as an act of revelation and the vision of a mystic. Patricia Rae comments on this connection between the poet and the mystic in Stevens' psychological experience described in this essay:

That he [Stevens] thinks of the poet's moment of inspiration as both intuitive and seemingly revelatory is apparent in a 1937 essay in which he affirms the importance of the "irrational" element in poetry and draws an analogy between the poet's inspiring vision and the mystic's insight into some transcendental order. Later essays, including "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1942) and "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (1943), reinforce the picture of a poet gifted with the power to glimpse truths that to others lie hidden behind a veil. We read of the "occasional ecstasy, or ecstatic freedom of the mind that is the poet's special privilege", of the feelings of "exaltation", "elevation" and "illumination" that accompany his urge to create. (108)

From the very beginning in his essay, Stevens establishes a parallel between the figure of a rider and the nobility of his performance on the one hand, and words and the force of their sound on the other. As long as Stevens maintains his faith in the noble rider and the winged horse and in their possibilities to attain heaven, that is, as long as he believes in imagination, his soul keeps ascending to heaven; but from the very moment in which he adheres to what is real, the horses fall from the sky, the poet ceases in his use of the power of imagination, and his mystical experience ends. "Stevens' engagement with the figure breaks . . . when he recognizes that it fails to 'adhere to what is real', that is, when he remembers that the soul to which it refers 'no longer exists' " (Rae 107). Throughout his essay Stevens refers to different artistic and creative masterpieces which exemplify the evolution in the duality of reality/imagination and show the relevance of words in this process. "Stevens links the fundamental danger of rhetoric to its greatest challenge: rhetoric has to provide a body for the sense of nobility underlying its sense of eloquence as a form of human power" (Jost 483).

The power of the concept of nobility resides in the sound of words. He begins his writing describing Plato's classical figure of the charioteer in his advance through heaven, an image which reminds us of a symbolic quest for true knowledge, like the hero's introspective search. Stevens compares the charioteer's mastery to the poet's power of words and imagination to deal with reality. It is possible to believe in the existence of the pair of winged horses and the charioteer, in what they mean (the perfect and the imperfect soul), and in the values they represent (good and evil) as long as we have the will to imagine them as real. And we will imagine them as real if they partly adhere to what is real, to what confers them with a physical existence. Thinking of them as if they only exist in the realm of thought can make the possibility of their being vanish in our mind. We can fully believe in their existence if they keep that share of reality that relates them to earth. Like the charioteer leading the winged horses in a symbolic attempt to ascend and attain knowledge, it is necessary to be earthly and divine and preserve the physical and spiritual condition simultaneously. And this is possible due to the faculty of the imagination which shapes our experience of reality within mind. In imagining these figures as real, we can understand the poet's feeling and share his view. It inspires a common sentiment in us, the charioteer's need for self-control.

The value of nobility is recreated by the action of the charioteer. His guiding of the winged horses in search of wisdom makes them noble and, allegorically, high in heaven, while if the rider fails to see reality through the eyes of intelligence, if he is unable to appreciate what is not visible, then he falls back to earth. It is as if the noble rider, the charioteer, would lose his vital force in leaving aside the whole vision of reality which only the use of imagination may provide. Thus, Stevens introduces the theme of his essay:

What has just been said demonstrates that there are degrees of the imagination, as, for example, degrees of vitality and, therefore, of intensity. It is an implication that there are degrees of reality. The discourse about the two elements seems endless.

For my own part, I intend merely to follow, in a very hasty way, the fortunes of the idea of nobility as a characteristic of the imagination, and even as its symbol or alter ego, through several of the episodes in its history, in order to determine, if possible what its fate has been and what has determined its fate. This can be done only on the basis of the relation between the imagination and reality. (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 7)

Stevens studies the relevance of the individual's management of the imagination and how it affects his interpretation of reality. Human being has always wondered about the nature of its existence. The comprehension of it has been determined by the perception of reality and Stevens states that there are distinct degrees of reality. Stevens expresses his conception of reality in terms of the perception of it as a correspondence and contrast between physical and spiritual worlds. The perception of reality is always mediated through our senses. The terms which make our perception of reality credible and acceptable are related to the individual's sensual and subjective interpretation. But are we in need of some sort of values which may rule this credibility? Is there a lack of values that may lead us into a sense of loss of faith in our-selves?

The individual needs to know that what he believes in is true, but he also needs to feel the beauty of reality which seems to arise from the spiritual view of the world that can only be instilled by the imagination. In Stevens' dualistic conception of reality the poet displays his perception of the link between the physical and spiritual world in the power of the sound of words. He understands this power as the whole of values which confer words with nobility.

Charles Altieri comments on Stevens in relation to rhetoric and poetics: "Stevens, too, is committed to the close link between sentences and souls. But for him the orator most fully succeeds when even distinctions of persons fade away before what the psyche experiences as it reflects on its powers of imagination sustained within the music of words" (quoted in Jost 487). There is an intricate and close connection between that quality of the sound in a word, "the music of words", and the nobility that it transmits. The degree of spiritual affinity is performed by each word together with the moral value that it stands for. Its sounds displays its nobility.

If the individual's view of the physical world by means of imagination goes too far from that necessary share of reality, it will lose its credibility. It will not be acceptable. The impulse to know and the innate ability to imagine encourage human beings to trespass the boundary between the physical and the spiritual. And the individual's own free will, the power to decide whether to believe in the spiritual or in something whose existence does not completely depend on the physical, makes him an exceptional being. This exceptional quality can be traced back to Emerson's humanistic view of the hero. In the advance from classical to medieval times heroic deeds had shaped not only courage and loyalty but also moral values. The hero's exceptional behaviour is due to his intellectual interpretation of the world, no longer ruled by his physical strength but by the hero's understanding of his inner-self or inner-world. The nobility of his acts set on his self-knowledge and on loyalty to his country guides the hero in his search for unity in the application of moral principles and this unity was based on a common sentiment of spiritual affinity with his people or, according to Very's religious view, it dealt with a mystical experience of spiritual continuity. Emerson thought the nobility of the hero's performance represented the intellectual independence which inward knowledge provides.

The hero is a mind of such balance that no disturbances can shake his will, but pleasantly, and, as it were, merrily, he advances to his own music. . . . Heroism feels and never reasons, and therefore is always right. . . . Heroism is an obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Heroism* 374)

If Emerson thought of the vision of new possibilities as a quality of great men, Stevens found in the individual's faculty to imagine the possibility to face any kind of disruptive pressure of reality on his free intellectual progression, particularly to the reality of the historical events whose intellectual reflection immediately affects the artistic response. "By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 20). He demonstrates that the degrees of reality and the imagination reflected in the artistic works at different ages vary and subsequently the idea of nobility present in them is affected by this variation too, which, at the same time, is due to the pressure of reality.

So reality and nobility could be balanced by means of the individual's ability to imagine. In his comments on Verrocchio's statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni, he defends the idea of nobility as timeless, represented by the magnificent figure of an invincible man.



Equestrian Monument of Colleoni c.1483-1488, the Venetian army commander Bartolomeo Colleoni, also called the Colleone, by Andrea del Verrocchio (1435-1488) in Venice (Janson part three 12-17).

One feels the passion of rhetoric begin to stir and even to grow furious; and one thinks that, after all, the noble style, in whatever it creates, merely perpetuates the noble style. In this statue, the apposition between the imagination and reality is too favourable to the imagination. Our difficulty is not primarily with any detail. It is primarily with the whole. The point is not so much to analyze the difficulty as to determine whether we share it, to find out whether it exists, . . . , or whether we regard it . . . as a thing of a nobility responsive at the most minute demand. (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 8)

The idea of nobility has not only been relevant during certain periods of the past. It progressively advanced according to the demands of time and, for Stevens, its conception will directly depend upon the possibility to preserve the equilibrium between reality and the imagination.

And this is the point where Stevens emphasizes the power of words as a clear example of the means which show a positive evolution in the concept of nobility and its usefulness. “A variation in the sound of words in one age and the sound of words in another age is an instance of the pressure of reality” (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 13). As he states, this can be seen in the change from a denotative to a connotative tendency in writing or in any other artistic expression. Stevens’ artistic references do not try to demonstrate the dominance of reality or imagination in the evolution of different artistic tendencies. He analyzes the connotative tendency as a result of the use of the imagination within an artistic context and how this tendency can spread its influence into distinct areas of knowledge; likewise, the pressure of the circumstances of life may also directly and/or indirectly affect the development of the individual’s character and intellectual evolution.

The use of imagination is determined by the facts present in reality and the contemplation of and reflection on them, and it discloses the development of a consciousness which is particularly present in and revealed through its expression into art. Stevens believes in the use of the power of the imagination and its influence on artistic means as a way to counteract the possible negative effects of the context of reality on this process of intellectual development.

What happens is that it [the imagination] is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality. . . . It [the pressure of reality] exists for individuals according to the circumstances of their lives or according to the characteristics of their minds. . . . the pressure of reality is . . . the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual. (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 22-23)

For Stevens the influence of the imagination, the spiritual world, on the perception and comprehension of the physical world determines the individual’s character and this character is artistically displayed by means of a process of abstraction mediated by the imagination.

He argues that the connection between the physical and the spiritual which imagination eases is not set in terms of what could be seen as a direct connection or correspondence between mysticism and imagination; on the contrary, it is much more a sort of analogy. As Patricia Rae indicates, “[o]ne of his ways [Stevens’] of demonstrating his commitment to demystifying the imagination is to stress that the analogy he draws between the poet and the mystic is just that, an analogy; it has none of the force of an absolute identification” (Rae 108).

A search for harmony is intended in the adherence of the spiritual to the physical and it is founded in the concept of nobility. This value represents the will to believe in the spiritual as a realm of equilibrium. There is some kind of assumption of rupture stemming from reality, “the pressure of reality” in Stevens’ words. He points out the necessity of such a value as nobility in order to recover the essence of the individual, his consciousness, which seems to be found in the interdependence between the physical world and the imagination.

The creativity and the nobility of thought of the poet are the result of the will to imagine. The poet is the figure, “the noble rider”, whose acts are shaped into artistic response. These acts or poetical performance are the creative and artistic product of the imagination as an experience of knowledge: the individual’s will to transcend boundaries and find the links between the physical and the spiritual world which make up his perception of reality. Stevens’ theory of poetry is an attempt to demonstrate the possibility of continuity in this interdependence. In his study of the theory of poetry Stevens is describing the psychological process in which human being is able to face the external by means of knowledge. In this process the recovery of such a value as nobility permits the individual to defeat those circumstances which press on his life from without with the faculties within.

. . . he [Stevens] addresses the need of the poet’s voice in a time of violence, pressure, and international crisis. But he is speaking with equal conviction, though in a more muted accent, of his own immediate and personal circumstances. In the face of “the spirit of negation”, he defends the “romantic” as our salvation and “the way out”.

He goes on in the essay to quote from a 1933 lecture by Benedetto Croce, who defends “the fusion of sound and imagery” in poetry and then asks from whence such poetry is derived. Surely Stevens was thinking of himself as he quoted Croce’s response: “It is the whole man: the man who thinks and wills, and loves and hates; who is strong and weak, sublime and pathetic, good and wicked; man in the exultation and agony of living... Poetic genius chooses a strait path in which passion is calmed and calm is passionate”. (Lensing 6-7)

The value of nobility is present in the noble rider’s performance as in the hero’s deeds; both are able to act according to the demands of their time and their contemporaneous needs and in the case of the poet he is capable of producing the necessary changes through the imagination. Therefore, the poet, the noble rider and the hero share one purpose: to restore those values of the past which may lead the individual to an attainment of consciousness within a frame of contemporaneity. At the beginning of his essay, Stevens’ description of the image of the charioteer induces us to feel and share the spirit of the rider and the nobility which pervades its action. The symbolic truth represented by Plato at his time is perfectly understood by contemporary readers at present because of the universality of its value. The intellectual heritage is thus part of the present by means of words. Stevens saw in the artistic response, that is, in the poet’s ability to shape the perception of the world into words, the possibility of defence of timeless values which help to preserve the individual’s identity.

The greatness of a people is present in this idea of greatness in nobility. Like Whitman’s epic call to the greatness of a nation, we could say that in his defence of poetry Stevens claims that the noble and epic feeling in the power of the sound of words functions as an instrument against the loss of cultural significance and identity. Similarly Jones Very analyzed how the epic search for noble values enhanced a common sentiment of belonging among individuals, which evolved as representative of a unique and universal feeling, a universal identity. Very’s and Stevens’ discourse are complementary as both of them understand that the nobility in the values present in the epic hero’s performance and in the sound of words poetically shape this sentiment of identity.

Reality provides the context for the individual's comprehension and attainment of those values which evidence our identity. Stevens' conception of reality involves the action of imagination or the lack of imagination on our experience of life. Thus, those values may be within the context of the physical world and within the context of mind encouraged by the imagination. They arise from the sentiment of continuity between thought and world. If we look back at Emerson's words and thought, we can see how both Emerson and Stevens focus on that ability of our mind through which an abstract experience - the spiritual or the soul in Emerson's words, a mystical experience according to Very's vision of life- could occur; Emerson and Very focus on the action which may lead us to self-knowledge. As writers they shape this experience in their legacy of words. The need to know and the need to express this approach to knowledge match in this process of quest for identity. When Stevens focuses on the role of the poet and poetry as representatives of the value of nobility, he is referring not only to the poet's noble action, which is present in his thought and words, but also to his social commitment and the possibility to alter the negative effects that the world may have on the individual's identity.

Many aspects in the routine of Stevens' daily life together with a frustrating need to try to alter it sparked unrest within the writer. Stevens' marriage to Elsie Kachel seems to have been unhappy mostly because, according to his biographers, Elsie had a difficult character (McQuade 1803; Elliott 985). In writing he found a way to escape from that repressed sentiment which domestic events inspired in him. His writing turned into the literary answer to tackle the pressure of reality by means of imagination. This response was mainly an artistic attempt to appraise the necessity of such values as nobility within a contemporaneous context. The noble rider's performance imbues readers with the poet's view of reality within mind, a view which represents the will to preserve the feeling of identity inspired by nobility and also a vision that partly acquires a social role as far as it can serve as a model to encourage and transmit the individual's sense of identity with his community and, subsequently, the possibility of self-recovery.

The social role of the poet is to be found in his will to show a path to self-awareness within the individual's life experience, within the pressure of reality and as a response to this pressure through his inner vision of the effects of contemporaneous events.

Stevens also dealt with social issues, including the war in Ethiopia and World War II, and never lost his concern with the social function of poetry, as in *Owl's Clover* (1936) and *Parts of a World* (1942) (McQuade 1802), but even though “[S]tevens ruminates about the social role of the poet, . . . his genius was not essentially social and ethical in character” (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 89). He remained pre-eminently a poet of the inner life.

We can see in the following excerpts how both Emerson and Stevens view the experience of life as the main source of inspiration for the mind. Creativity may evidence the existence of the world within the realm of the imagination, within thought. If imagination does not become productive, when it fails in producing an artistic reaction, then life provides mind with the necessary means to be creative again. Life encourages imagination and, in his apprehension of life, the artist, the poet, finds a source of inspiration for the mind and thus a source of knowledge.

The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other. When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended, and books are a weariness – he has always the resource to live. (Emerson *El Intelectual Americano* 62)

I think [the poet's] is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives. (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 29)

Both Emerson and Stevens identified the experience of life as the resource which nourishes the poet's mind and whose common inspiring effect in those who share the poet's inner view may awake a renewed perception of reality in them. The nobility of the poet's performance is reflected in his will to be the light in the minds of others. There is an intellectual purpose in his artistic manifestation. The sound of his words instills the individual's mind with the thought of reality from his poetical view, moving the sensual perception of the elements present in the world into the spiritual or abstract comprehension of them:

“Stevens’ poetry makes us aware of the process by which the imagination translates reality into a poem. . . . Stevens so highlights the often hidden-process of translating into words that we become conscious of what and how words are” (Cook *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens* 318). Although Stevens finds in poetry a social and subsequently a moral commitment, he does not think of the poet as necessarily bound to teach morals through his words. Above all he defends life and innate freedom as the subject matter of poetry. “Yes: the all-commanding subject-matter of poetry is life, the never-ceasing source. But it is not a social obligation” (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 28). The subjective process of abstraction becomes an activity or action of thinking which orders things by giving them a meaning and the poet becomes the maker of this intellectual process: “[The poet] has had to do with whatever the imagination and the senses have made of the world. He has, in fact, had to do with life except as the intellect has had to do with it and, as to that, no one is needed to tell us that poetry and philosophy are akin” (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 30). In this activity of thought which poetical interpretation mediates, Stevens clearly differentiates two worlds:

There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, in the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive it. (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 31)

This passage may remind us the concept of circularity in Emerson. Stevens’ words describe a dynamic process similar to the one described by Emerson in the following excerpt:

The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. . . . The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning to itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find,- so entire, so boundless. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The American Scholar* 55)

The world, nature and reality are understood as inexhaustible sources for the mind and their relationship with the poet's thought is boundless. Their interdependence permits the oscillation of intellectual values between the world and the individual's thinking. Stevens' words in the previous passage reveal how reality comes to be the fiction in the poet's mind, his interpretation of his empirical perception. This interpretation is directly linked to the poet's use of imagination and to the will to act and think within the context that the world and nature provide.

Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty, we cannot even see its beauty. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The American Scholar* 60)

The poet's words reflect his experience of the physical world and they are also a reflection of the poet's spiritual comprehension of such an experience. But, above all, they are the testimony of the individual's action of thinking and the attainment of self-awareness. If we look back to Emerson's or the Transcendentalists' view of imagination and fancy, we understand how the attainment of consciousness of reality, subsequent to the sensual perception and spiritual comprehension of the world by means of intuitive reason, leads the individual to wisdom, to the attainment of self-knowledge in Emerson's thinking, to the supreme fiction in Stevens' thought as the goal for poetry. The concept of reason as intuitive understanding affords human beings access to the natural symbols that words stand for. According to Emerson, words represent natural objects and they are also symbols of the spiritual states that these objects may suggest to us. Language depends on nature and nature becomes a metaphor for the mind. Thus, words are the vehicles of thought and of some particular spiritual condition.

In language, the capacity to perceive the connection between all things is accessible to all men. Poetry displays such dependence between the natural symbols and their spiritual meaning and becomes a resource for the individual's recognition of the continuity between the mind and the world. For Emerson the poet was the sayer of this sentiment of continuity grounded on a common perception of the surrounding world. And this perception of the outer is necessarily attached to the individual's intuitive comprehension of reality. Mystical and epic sentiment provided clear examples of this intellectual advance into introspection. For Emerson the poet was the interpreter of reality by means of an intuitive use of reason. The hero's goal is the poet's aim, that is, the view of the world which instills a common sentiment, a universal identity shared by all individuals. The mystic's goal is an attempt to shape his intuition, his visionary experience or revelation of the world and this unique feeling of identity into words. Stevens' defence of the language of poetry was thus a defence of the belief in intuition as a process of abstraction implicit in this act of shaping into words.

For Stevens, nobility becomes "a kind of test of the value of the poet" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 32). The value of nobility in the hero is just the same as the noble value of the poet. Both search for perfection in the expression of their thoughts and feelings because it is in words and through their sound where they can assert their humanity. The hero's path toward the set of moral values shared with his people is the path of poetry. It is in words where the hero, the poet and the mystic express their attainment of consciousness of themselves, where men and women are aware of their common condition: "Those of us who may have been thinking of the path of poetry, those who understand that words are thoughts and not only our own thoughts but the thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is that they are thinking, must be conscious of this: that above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 32).

In his treatment of the value of nobility in this essay, Stevens is calling our attention to the need to believe in the noble sentiment which rules the will of the artist whenever he deals with the inward and the outward. At the same time this noble sentiment arises as a free feeling whose only purpose is to question its own thinking of reality. The poet believes in that free feeling as a previous condition which permits an understanding of the world not determined by means of reason.

The mystic as a visionary thinker desired to grow in knowledge in experiencing reality. Stevens' noble rider is the poet who grows in knowledge through his poetical perception of the world. The charioteer able to control the horses is the poet capable of perceiving the connectedness between the world and thought. In ascending to heaven the charioteer intends an ascent and approach to God, to perfection. Though Stevens' reading of this performance may seem to be giving poetry the role of the divine, this is not exactly so; as Richard Poirier comments on this idea, "[i]t would be wrong to conclude [...] that 'the sound of words' is here given a position once occupied by God. . . . Instead, he [Stevens] deifies the *activities* by which a sense of these things and a feeling for them, might, on occasion and very rarely, be produced. This is within the power, he says, of only 'the acutest poet' " (160). Stevens is enhancing the reach of the poet's power in the sound of his words since the poet's activity resembles God's action as it is both sensual and spiritual, "a sense of things" and "a feeling for them".

The sound of words is thus the vehicle of nobility, a timeless value which cannot be fixed by a definition since it is always changing according to the shifting movements of life on which the existence of this value depends, for ". . . , nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 34). Stevens' commitment to defining poetry and its relevance for the individual's intellectual progression reflected his convictions and belief in the evolution of human being determined by the reciprocity between thought and world. With his essays, and particularly in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words", Stevens makes the faculty of imagination the ground of poetry. His sense of imagery enables him to rebuild the interpretation of reality which the inexhaustible source of nature and the world provides to the mind. This act becomes an attempt of creativity and philosophical comprehension of life, which is after all an act to reaffirm self-identity.

For Stevens poetry is a noble project of understanding in which the "pensive man" must argue with himself "One would continue to contend with one's ideas," with his readers, whom he challenges and persuades, and with the world itself as he wages "the fundamental and endless struggle with fact" that is the fate of consciousness. (Kertzer 148)

This noble project of understanding, this sort of argumentation and struggle with himself conceals the secret for self-recovery. The need to know incites the individual to wonder and question his self. As we will further see in Stanley Cavell's section, skepticism urges us to go on seeking; Cavell's rereading of texts may help us understand the need to recover from the loss of those so necessary values as that of nobility in Stevens' concerns. "About nobility I cannot be sure that the decline, not to say the disappearance of nobility is anything more than a maladjustment between the imagination and reality" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 33); the relevance to learn from language can encourage us to speculate and seek. As McQuade points out in this respect: ". . . in his sceptical, ironic, and whimsical humor he [Stevens] lightens into modern American speculativeness the seriousness of English discursive verse" (1804).

Stevens' work on nobility reveals his thinking about the affinity between thought and the world as mediation, in which philosophical contents and literary creativity interact. The last sentences of his essay reveal his belief in the individual's need to preserve his identity and his last paragraph is a defence of the individual's ability to imagine: "It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 36). In using the terms "pressing" and "pressure" in reference to imagination and reality respectively, Stevens is creating the image of some kind of balanced interaction between thoughts and facts. There is an oscillation from reality to imagination, a movement from matter to mind, in which the ideas constantly flow just as the author's focus on thinking oscillates throughout his essay. For Stevens, this balanced interaction, this sort of reciprocity between matter and thought on which the individual speculates and seeks is set on the qualities of nobility and imagination as redeeming and necessary qualities to activate this intuitive path towards self-knowledge.

V.1.2- Philosophical Concerns in Stevens' Poetry

Along with this meaningful essay, which so clearly exemplifies his thinking on this subject, a detailed study of four selected poems²⁹ – “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” (1954), “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1936), “Anecdote of the Jar” (1923) and “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1923) – has been carried out in order to further appreciate how Stevens deals with some of his main philosophical concerns through poetic expression. One of the poems which best describes Stevens' thinking on the idea of continuity between thought and world is “Not Ideas About The Thing But The Thing Itself” (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 451).³⁰ In this poem, the poet's feeling of interdependence between art, life and nature is always underlying his words, as in most of his poetical compositions. It is an example of Stevens' literary creativity with philosophical implications. The poet wonders about the possibility to broaden knowledge and develop the understanding of existence within the poet's metaphorical insight into the appearance of nature and the ordinary. B. J. Leggett's appreciation of the poem: “If the winter can be figured as reality's plain sense of things, then spring is its new sense of things” (Serio 72) perfectly describes the course of the poet's self-reflection throughout the poem. Furthermore, the fact that it was written at the end of the poet's life makes it even more relevant since it reflects Stevens' mature philosophical understanding of the human capability to create imaginative structures out of the observance of the everyday world. The poet's conclusions are the result of a whole life's deep thought on this issue.

In this poem of six stanzas which, though unrhymed, create a rhythmic flow through the tercets, the title makes us reflect from the very first line on what is going to be its subject matter. The term “the thing” will make reference to a bird's cry or to the sun along the poem. And this “thing” will be replaced by “it” afterwards. So we are uncertain about whether the “thing” and the “it”, stand for different entities or not.

²⁹See Appendix II

³⁰“Not Ideas about the Thing” is the final poem of *The Rock* and brings to a conclusion the seasonal motif that began with *Transport to Summer* in 1947. Together with “The Plain Sense of Things” (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 428), “[b]oth poems depict states of nature – the coming of winter, the coming of spring – as states of mind” (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 71-72). “Not Ideas about the Thing”, which was published in 1954 when he was 75, is the last poem in Stevens's final book.

“Not Ideas about the Thing, but the Thing Itself” is, then, a poem about the appearance of something out of hiddenness, out of occultation: the sun; the cry; spring; the earliest ending of winter; the poet waking up out of sleep, coming into consciousness. These are all said to be like one another, metaphors for one another. They were all forms of appearance that are related to the thing itself, whatever *that* is: some kind of “it”. A “thing”, in the sense of a gathering together . . . ; a “thing” in the sense of some substratum which is hidden and never appears, something that remains outside – these are versions of the thing. (Hillis *Tropes, Parables, Performatives. Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature* 255)

This poem describes the poet’s inner reflections on the comprehension of the artist’s perceptions. The poet’s mastery to express his perception of the boundaries between the inner and the outer is shown from the beginning. Nature appears as a creative source of images in the comprehension of reality. The poet seems to be confused just for a moment in his perception of one of the elements of the physical world, particularly a bird’s cry; he wonders whether it comes from outside or from within, from the poet’s mind: “At the earliest ending of winter, /In March, a scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind”. Stevens displays his belief in the connection between thought and world in the first stanza. This idea of continuity between mind and matter is enhanced by the relationship between space and time throughout the poem.

The combination of elements related to space the natural setting of the composition, full of sensual elements like the sound of the bird’s cry and the sunlight with those elements related to the course of time such as the change of season and the advance from winter to spring provide the sensual experience of the world and nature with a feeling of progression. The scene described in the poem has a witness: “He” (line 4), the poet, the artist, the individual alone before this natural landscape, who seems to contemplate the elements in it like in a painting and listen to the sounds in nature as if he were part of them in sharing their presence, “He knew that he heard it”. The sense of individuality, the only human presence in the middle of this natural view, is focused by the use of the personal pronoun in the second stanza.

The elements of the natural world inspire a series of images in the poet's mind, which seems to counteract the sense of detachment of the poet before the world, since the feeling of their existence comes from within. The perception of their physical presence moves into a kind of intuition of their presence. The poem becomes an act of creation. It creates the world before the poet's eyes. "The leap of the heart as the speaker realizes that the axis of the seasons has turned, that spring is miraculously his once again, is like 'a new knowledge of reality'" (Vendler *The Ocean, The Bird and the Scholar. Essays on Poets and Poetry* 196). It is like an experience of rebirth into reality. In this sense the "he" as a personal subject seems to awake to a new reality.

In his poems Stevens induces us to look beyond the physicality of the world; the reader becomes an observer of reality through Stevens' view. Emerson's influence can be seen here when the poet's will intends to see beyond the reality before him. Stevens' figure of the poet always attempts to transcend what has been given to him by the world. The artist is able to discover what nature conceals. Fiction and the creative power of imagination provide him with the means for a new comprehension of reality.

Within this context of awakening that inaugurated "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" Stevens seems to convince himself progressively that his perception is not a dream. The cry from outside at the beginning of the poem draws our attention outwards. However, he feels that it also comes from inside: "seemed like a sound in his mind". The boundaries between the outer and the inner disappear with this sense of interdependence which pervades all the images in the poem.

The tentative, then surer, placing of that bird-cry imitates the mind and ear coming to consciousness, at first hearing as in a dream, then realizing actual sound, outside. The sound of the predawn that Stevens loves comes as a kind of gift. He plays easily with old arguments of inside and outside. (Bloom *Bloom's Period Studies. Modern American Poetry* 248)

In contemplating the scene and wondering about this kind of experience in nature, full of connotations of light and sound, he seems to be on the boundary between the world in front of him and his own thought of it. All the images in his mind are instilled by the outer elements surrounding him.

The figure of the sun in heaven appears as a powerful presence above and as the inspiring force in nature from which the individual attains consciousness of the nature of his existence before the physical presence of the world: “The sun was rising at six, / No longer a battered panache above snow . . . / It would have been outside” (lines 7-9). The perception of daylight at sunrise arises before the poet’s eyes as a revealing source, like a metaphor of attainment of and advance into knowledge. The poet contrasts the image of the sun and its heat, as a symbol of the power of imagination and art, with the coldness of snow, as a symbol of lack of creativity.

The scrawny cry, the bird’s cry,³¹ comes from the colossal sun far away. The adjective “scrawny” reminds us of a child and an old person at the same time, as a reference to birth and death, the beginning and the end of an existence. The idea of advancement attached to the course of time is advanced by this implicit sense of growth into maturity in the connotations of the scrawny cry. The poet also describes this feeling of motion in his reference to the progression from the coldness of winter to the coming of the new spring season full of light and life and thus emphasizes the sense of some kind of approach to knowledge. The figure of the poet as witness appears as the model of the human in an act of thinking before the image of the sun “The sun was coming from outside” as a symbol of the view of light or illumination, like some kind of intellectual attainment.

If the poem is read independently, outside its context in *The Rock*, it is a poem about the speaker’s new knowledge of reality. Read intertextually, it is a poem about the coming of spring as itself a new knowledge of reality. The trope is appropriately bold; it is not the speaker’s knowledge but a new season as a new knowledge, not ideas *about* the thing but the thing itself. The *it* . . . always refers to the bird’s cry, as it does in the final sentence. It is the bird’s scrawny cry, from *outside*, evoking the sound of a newborn baby, that is like a new knowledge of reality. It is Stevens’ final version of the final fiction, a supreme imagination that awakens at the end of winter to imagine spring. (Leggett 21)

³¹The element of the “cry” is used by Stevens in several of his poems, as it happens in “The Course of a Particular” (460) and in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. XII” (404) (in Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose*). In these poems, differently to its evoking to a new knowledge of reality, the cry alludes to desolation, weariness and despair in the absence of imagination.

The poem transmits the sense of rebirth to knowledge of reality since the “he”, the individual, seems to progress to a new view of the world after this sensual and probably accurate experience of nature. It also brings to a conclusion a seasonal motif and an ambiguously depicted relationship between the two worlds, the self and the earth, which Stevens had introduced and named in the opening lines of “The Rock” in “An Old Man Asleep” (ibid.).

The artistic and creative act which the poem represents comes from a learning experience. And this coming into knowledge is the result of the poet’s recognition of the existence of the outer as a separate world that is evidenced by the scrawny cry. The reciprocity between art and life which Stevens dealt with in his theory of poetry could not have been better put into words. The scrawny cry passes into the figure of the chorister, an image announcing something greater, the choir, which comes before the figure of the colossal sun and its choral rings, “That scrawny cry—it was /A chorister whose c preceded the choir. / It was part of the colossal sun” (lines 13-15).

Every element precedes and seems to announce the next one as a new step into knowing. The alliteration of letter “c” produces this sense of advance within a chain of elements. It emphasizes the sense of correlation and coexistence.

As Robert Pogue Harrison has pointed out in a perceptive reading of the poem, one of the means by which it grants a separate existence to the external is to acknowledge its “earliness”. The time is “the earliest ending of winter” in “early March”, “at daylight or before”. The poem, in Harrison’s words, places us at the heart of the inconceivable priority of nature in the speaker’s recognition that the “outside”, although it resembles the “inside”, does not depend upon it. (Leggett 25)

Stevens expresses that an idea does not come out of the observance of nature, but, to the contrary, nature is the context where the idea is born. The sensual experience of the outer evokes the poet’s inner view of the world. The poet witnesses an approach to light and sound as a symbol of progression to the knowledge of his nature as a being. This view advances from one stanza to the other.

Like a painter, the poet draws in his lines the figures in nature which may resemble the attainment of self-knowledge after an intellectual and sensual process. The idea of sunrise emphasizes this idea of progression. The progressive movement of the rising daylight becomes a metaphor for a visionary and illuminating experience of comprehension of reality. The sun is not only a star; it may also represent the idea in the poet's mind. "In Stevens' symbolic lexicon, the sun is the archetypal First Idea, a constant presence in the poetry, from the "savage of fire" of "Gubbinal" to the "battered panache" of "Not Ideas about the Thing, but the Thing Itself" " (Strand 76). The poet expresses his conviction that a source of knowledge comes from the spiritual and inner interpretation of the sensual perception of the outer, "Surrounded by its choral rings, / Still far away. It was like / A new knowledge of reality" (lines 16-18). Stevens shows the power of imagination in such an abstract perception of natural elements. He demonstrates how representative and relevant for the individual's inner and comprehensive view of reality art is. The world creates art. Art creates the world. A sense of reciprocity is present.

The perception of the scrawny cry belongs to nature, but it has the same nature as he perceives it in his fiction. This cry has a separate existence in the outer world, but it shares the nature of the poet's fiction. The outer is not the poet's. It exists independently of his imagination. Again the role of the poet is a symbol of the human being's attitude towards the world. The experience of imagination helps the individual to transcend the reality of his everyday life. The poet is an individual who is gifted with the power to glimpse truths behind the elements of the world. The freedom of mind instills his experience of reality with an ecstatic feeling that manifests itself as a kind of illumination like the mystic's, an illumination which encourages him to create. With his poetical view and philosophical approach Stevens claims that what we experience through our sensual perception of the world and what we know is a whole combination of reality and the thought of it simultaneously. We can guess through these lines his belief in nature as the set in which the idea is born. Thus the nature of idea depends on nature itself. Stevens sees imagination as the possibility to transform natural elements into symbols of our thoughts. "Still far away. It was like a new knowledge of reality." The sun as the concept of idea appears still far from the poet's reach. If the idea of the course of time in the poem represents the course of time of a whole life, the possibility to attain knowledge by means of reality and imagination still seems to be far.

There is some sort of a sense of weakness in the poet's recognition that it is "still far away" because the cry belongs to the sun's world, not to the world of his imagination. The purpose of fulfilment, that is, the attainment of knowledge of the nature of being, which the classical poets reflected in their heroes' spiritual search, finds in poetry the possibility of realization. Stevens' purpose of fulfilment adds the need of imagination to the poetical reconstruction of the experience of life.

The poet fuses reality and imagination in his perception of the world. Stevens finds in art a response to represent the interaction between reality and imagination and the means to project his perception of the continuity between thought and world.

Stevens' poetry balances between deprivation and possession, sadness and delight, solitude and company-with-the-world, fiction-denying and fiction-making. He reacted, as every poet must, to his own experiences and found his origins in a wrenching sense of loss – but never fatalistically or with final despair. Stevens rescued himself from loss by reaching out for what had always bewitched and beckoned him, the world itself. If he could not find love in another, he could love star, sun, sea, and field. If he could not passionately *possess* another, he could passionately *pursue* the other, and to this end, he gave both heart and head. (Lensing 5)

In writing on his view of imagination and reality interacting with each other he would reflect self-fulfilment out of the experience of life. This romantic thought pervades his words. The way in which Stevens deconstructed nature and reality could be closely related to a romantic and transcendental comprehension of the world and the individual's existence. Stevens transmits his comprehension of the concept of the self as a source of feeling and thought by means of literary creativity. His dealing with it within a philosophical treatment makes his view of being much more objective. He appeals to imagination as inspiration from the infinite possibilities of words and language to comprehend reality. There may be multiple subjective connotations in the conception of the self; however, Stevens distances himself from subjectivity. He believes in both the objectiveness and subjectivity of art to alter and transform reality. The objectiveness is defined by the nobility of words. He understands the sound of words as the sense of what is right.

The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which . . . are all the truth that we shall ever experience . . . makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. . . . those who understand that words are thoughts . . . must be conscious of this: that, above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds. (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 32)

In his speech he repeatedly appeals to nobility in the action of writing. The writer becomes the noble rider whose strength is the power of his words and the subsequent pressure or effect they may have on reality. The imagination, poetry, must also be based on reality. It must be grounded in the poet's thoughts and serve as a link between the world and mind and, thus, the expression of his inner being. Stevens addresses poetry as if it were a person, as he does in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transference that you bring is peace.
(Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 329)

Stevens is simultaneously correlating our sense of feeling, thinking and being in sharing the poet's imagination and, particularly, in sharing his use of imagination as a means for self-recovery. The complex relation in his view of reality as a correspondence between the physical world and the world of mind and between the objectivity and subjectivity inherent to them is also described in his poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 105).³² The poet makes us believe in the presence of the singer through her absence.

³²See Appendix II

We can feel the influence of her spirit and the power of the sound of her voice over our mind. Our perception of Key West will progressively be altered throughout the poem. As the analysis of the selected poems in this section shows, many of Stevens's poems are the testimony of a creative process in which the poet expresses his deep belief in the need for poetry and the need for art. Poetry and art can have the effect to transform and alter the individual's view of reality.³³ From the very first line in this poem,³⁴ "She sang beyond the genius of the sea", there seems to be an oscillation between the images and feelings inspired by the sea (and related to the physical and to nature), that is, the water, the white foam of waves and their rhythmic movement and sound, and those images and sentiments instilled by the woman and her voice (and attached to the spiritual and the imagination):

The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

Throughout this modernist poem of seven stanzas with varying length and lines, written in the formal meter (iambic) with no rhyme, the poet tries to make us identify with the poet's perception and the woman's interpretation of the sound of the sea, and the sentiments and thoughts which this action inspires in them. He ponders on the inner relationship between the figure of the woman and the music of her song, and the image of the ocean and the sound of waves. The whole poem is a metaphor of the poet as an observer who strives to guess the continuity between the outer voice of the sea and the inner sound of the woman's song. "[Stevens] characterizes the poet as a shaper of imaginative order as much as a medium of inspired words" (Cohen 56).

³³Regarding this idea present in "The Idea of Order at Key West", we must also mention "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 135), in which the sound of the guitar, the power of imagination, in the same way as the woman's song, can define reality.

³⁴"The Idea of Order at Key West" was written in 1934. It is one of many poems included in his book, *Ideas of Order* (1935). It was also included in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1954) for which he won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (Elliott 754, 925, 989). "It is the poem that most expresses the ideas that would emerge into Stevens' most fully expressed work in later years, the work that set out his aims and thoughts regarding the role of poetry and its sources" (Bloom *Bloom's Major Poets* 55)

In contemplating the sight of the sea and writing on the sentiments which this scene and its sound instill in him, the poet stresses the importance of poetry in daily life. He provides his perception of reality with a spiritual depth by means of words: "The sea was not a mask. / No more was she" (line 8). Stevens' goal for poetry is related to the comprehension of the nature of the self. The sentiment and thought out of the sensual apprehension of the world and nature lead the individual to meditate about the existence of a unique essence of being that pervades everything and is shared by the individual and nature: "It may be that in all her phrases stirred/ The grinding water and the gasping wind; But it was she and not the sea we heard" (lines 12-14).

In listening to a woman singing on a beach at Key West the poet and his friend change their perception of reality. In fact, the "inhuman cry of the veritable ocean" changes into the woman's utterance of words in her song. As Janet McCann comments on the intensification of reality given from the imagination's engagement with it:

There is a "genius" or presiding spirit to nature, but its cry is "not ours"; it is nature's own impenetrable utterance . . . The woman identified only as "she" sings "beyond the genius of the sea" and in so doing changes nothing but what is in the mind; her song is like reality, but it is not the same as reality. The imagination is not the voice of reality, "the dark voice of the sea." Neither is it our own understandings of reality, "her voice and ours." Rather, it is the intensification of reality that is given from the imagination's engagement with it. (qtd. in Nelson paragraph 2)

There is a kind of movement forwards and backwards between what they hear as the real sound of waves and the sound of the sea in her song. Moreover, the pronoun "she" plays different roles. It masters the voice of the sea and the transition from nature to subject. It may refer to the sea, to "the maker of the song", to the concept of imagination, or even to the self. The sense of movement or oscillation recreated by the natural sounds in this poem, as well as the course of seasons in the previous one, emphasizes Stevens' conception of the poem as a means of constant flowing of thoughts and sensations.

“Life, for Stevens, is a series of states of consciousness with neither start nor finish. If the poem is to be true to life it must be a constant flowing of images which come as they come, and are not distorted by the logical mind in its eagerness for order” (Hillis 201). The images in the poem as a reflection of life represent this advance or flowing as a heightening of consciousness in the natural landscape which the sea represents, “For she was the maker of the song she sang. / The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea/ was merely a place by which she walked to sing” (lines 15-17). The poet wonders about the origin of the sound that they hear: “Whose spirit is this? // . . . If it was only the dark voice of the sea / . . . If it was only the outer voice of sky . . . / But it was more than that, /More even than her voice, and ours” (lines 18-29). His thinking progressively advances and he seems to clear his doubts about the nature of this “something more” than the “outer voice of the sky” and “her voice” in the 5th stanza, when he finally explicitly names the source of all his feelings and thoughts as “the artificer of the world”, the self which pervades the world, the sea, the song and, in this case, the woman as the maker of the sound. The sound that all of them can feel and share acts both as a physical and spiritual link:

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

The world, the sea, and the sky are all phenomenal appearances from a unique creative source whose nature Stevens senses as spiritual: “Whose spirit is this?” Furthermore, these elements of nature share a universal essence, which is depicted by Stevens in these images in the same way as Emerson declared,

And all the uses of nature admit of being summed in one, which yields the activity of man an infinite scope. Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, it is faithful to the cause whence it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Spirit* 40)

On their return into town and after this experience on the beach, Stevens and his friend, Ramon Fernandez, see the world in a new light.³⁵ In approaching those elements of their everyday life they seem to approach a renewed understanding of this daily context after such a revealing experience of harmony with nature. The fact that they got confused with the origin of the voice, nature's or human, makes them think of the existence of a common nature of being. The idea of beauty is represented by the harmony between the sound of the sea and the woman's voice. The sound of waves and her voice act simultaneously throughout the poem. Both sounds, nature's and the human voice, cause a strong effect on the listeners' mind. They create some sort of complementariness. The poet's words evoke the effect which these sounds have on his thoughts and how they can alter his perception of reality. Words can help us to see beyond reality and to find in the expression of our thoughts that harmony without from within. The poet appears as a speaker and as a creative observer who perceives and depicts the powerful effects of nature on mind. The words that he utters come from nature, but are not nature's.

We have noted three aspects of Stevens' concept of self: he lumps together imagination, thought, feeling and creative perception; he finds this compounded self ceaselessly, endlessly involved in action and reaction within the physical world; and he believes that the imaginative act of perception is a fact of life as well as of art. (Bevis 148)

The possibility to lump thought and feeling, imagination and creativity is in the inclusive and transformative power of words as the expression of the poet's experience of the world. The final stanza of the poem relates all those elements previously mentioned in nature and in town to words, as if words enclosed their meaningful essence; "words of the sea" and "words of the fragrant portals" as a crossing point between the world and the poet's feelings and thought. In relating words to portals we seem to cross over the border between two worlds and enter the realm of thinking and imagination. "Dimly-starred" appears here as an idea of complementariness and continuity.

³⁵"Fernandez was a critic familiar to Stevens from the pages of the *Nouvelle revue française*, the *Partisan Review*, and the *Criterion* (where he was translated by T. S. Eliot)" (Longenbach 161-162)

It may indicate the transition from darkness to light, the access to a renewed self-knowledge when the poet refers to portals of our self and of our origins. As observers the poet and his friend acquire a new understanding through listening to the song; it is an act of perception of continuity, a portal and access to the knowledge of the nature of being performed in the essence of the sound, the origin of everything. The nature of the sound is perceived as human, the woman's voice, and as natural, the sound of the sea. Though the sound is unique, it shares the nature of both of the means through which it manifests. Its dual nature, physical and spiritual, shares a unique essence. The real sound of the sea and the woman's voice act as a metaphor of truth. As well, they represent a threshold which we can cross by means of imagination. The poet is masterfully dealing with the spiritual effect which imagination and poetry may have. Art provides the individual with an access to self-recovery by changing our way to see reality. This action of self-recovery implies the idea of recovery of his identity as a spiritual being.

The ordering rage of the poet gathers together origin and unreachable end, near and far, people and the sea around them, into one complex and highly differentiated whole. The earlier part of the poem suggests that our "origins", at least the origins of our language, therefore of ourselves as they are made by language, maybe the sea and the seawind sounds. . . . the word "idea" comes from the Greek *idein* to see. An idea was a visual image, the image something made on our eyes and then on our power of seeing. . . . To say that "she" is the idea of order may mean either that she is order made visible in the "idea" of it, that is, in its visible embodiment, or that she is the personification of the invisible idea of order. (Besserman 207-208)

Stevens searches for the role of poetry as a need of this idea of order within his perception of disorder in the real world. He again focuses the importance of inspiration as the maker's rage to order words. As James Longenbach indicates in relation to this idea of order: "Stevens believed that we cannot live without ideas of order, but . . . he understood that he could not talk about order without raising the specter of disorder, and that any idea of order that did not leave space for its own dissolution could not be tolerated" (161-162).

Stevens studies this sense of order as the result of a human impulse to look for order that leads us to a learning experience, as the line of verse that opens the poem's last stanza illustrates: "Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon, The maker's rage to order words of the sea". For Bloom the fact "[t]hat the emotion is rage and not desire, not lust, not more cerebral, indicates Stevens' ideas regarding artistic and expressive compulsions that characterize a sentient being when confronted with the grandeur of the world. Rage is half madness, and in this case half anger at the inability to fully articulate order" (*Bloom's Major Poets* 57). Words are the vehicle from the earthly sea outside to the spiritual one inside; the poem advances in sequences of images and sounds related to natural elements such as light, air and water, moving from the inner to the outer: the dark voice of the sea, the outer voice of sky and cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled, the heaving speech of air, the meaningless plungings of water and the wind . . . , bronze shadows heaped on high horizons, mountainous atmospheres of sky and sea. The richness of this description depicts the poet's vision of the physical strength of nature and the effect of its spiritual power.

The presence of a human element in the middle of this natural setting, the woman's voice, becomes a call for order. The woman makes the world in her song. Human being creates order in the world. This is a poetical context similar to the setting in the poem "Anecdote of the Jar", in which Stevens observes how a non-human element imposes order into the wilderness of a hill. The poet's interpretation of the language of the sea and its voice reflects a process of comprehension of the condition of the maker of the sound. The contrast between all those elements of that natural landscape could perfectly represent the poet's inner struggle in a search for order. This contrast represents Stevens' personal impulse to understand the mechanisms which lead to that condition of existence in harmony between opposites.

Stevens opens with a human agent singing beyond the genius of the sea. He closes on a sound and a desire for sound that will go beyond and beyond, keener than any genius loci, whose old calling is faintly heard in Stevens' word, for spirits and ghosts also wail or keen. Stevens deepens and enchants as well as ordering the night. He does so by conceiving of a rage for order, and a rage to order, not just the idea of order. He used the word "blessed" in conjunction with rage earlier . . . , and with biblical force. . . .

Neither romantic rage nor classical order, this rage for order becomes, godlike, a rage to order. (Cook *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* 133-134)

Through his command of language and imagination the poet shapes his need to know the human or natural condition of the voice. The poet gives order to the world and finds in poetry the supreme fiction which rises out of imagination. This sentiment, this “rage to order”, pervades the poem and reflects the poet’s process of self-knowledge. The perception of nature encourages the poet’s will to know about the nature of his own being. The search for order becomes a search for the comprehension of the nature of the individual’s existence. For Stevens the individual perceives a sense of order in the existential harmony between the physical and the spiritual condition of natural elements. Order represents the possibility of continuity between matter and mind. This sense of order moves into a sense of loss and disorder when the individual’s knowledge of the world is lost, that is, when the perception of harmony between the world and thought is gone. Language makes possible the expression of this sense of continuity between world and thought. The power of words seems to bring about the power of the natural elements which words represent.

Nature is the vehicle of thought. . . . Words are signs of natural facts. Nature is the symbol of spirit. . . . It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Language* 20)

Both the physical world and the spiritual world, the imagination, act together according to some kind of complementariness and at this point Stevens focused his critical view on the issue. Stevens attempts to analyse the mechanisms by which reality and imagination interact. He reflects on how matter and mind as apparently opposite entities become part of a unique frame by means of words. Stevens felt the need to understand those poetical mechanisms through which the artist, the individual, comes to the reflection of such a universal feeling of continuity.

Wordsworth's attitude towards art and nature and the imaginative interpretation of the experience of life can be appreciated in Stevens' lines: "When Wordsworth writes of the poetic spirit, he writes of what he believes is important to all men. The poet is 'a man speaking to men' above all when he writes of the poetic spirit, for when he does this he speaks to what is most valuable to all men – the vital principle of perception with which they shape their own reality" (Durrant 27). For Wordsworth as well as for Stevens, the poet's task is the product "[o]f a mind deeply concerned to speak to other minds and awaken them to their own capacity for delight" (ibid.). The poet is able to make other minds aware of and share his perception of the world and the individual's existence as an experience of interdependence and continuity.

Emerson's experience of American culture and nature is seen through a renewed awareness. Stevens captures the beauty of the moment of the individual's awareness of interdependence between thought and nature in his concern for the aesthetic. He asserts the independent existence but mutual influence between mind and matter. In both of the poems discussed above the solitude which affects the poet is relevant. The poet's words represent this state of solitude as an attainment of consciousness which makes the poet's experience unique. Emerson focused the relevance of the presence of the poet alone before nature since this state allowed him freedom to think and the ability to imagine. We could think of this condition of solitude also present in Stevens' poems as a necessary state for the poet's flowing of thought and for the feeling of continuity between thinking and the world. Stevens might have been looking for the possibility to create order in the world by means of language as it is in words where the poet can build or rebuild the world. In reading "The Idea of Order at Key West" we should wonder about Stevens' definition of order in it. Was his concept of order related to the innate condition of freedom that enables human being to comprehend the relationship between mind and world as continuity? The individual is free in experiencing life. In this experience in freedom Stevens associates his sense of order with a sort of sentiment of peace, though this state of peace may only exist in the imagination, in the words of a poem that symbolically represent the multiple possibilities of "a freshening of life", a recovery from the sense of loss and disorder.

Stevens himself tried to define the “order” of his poem and volume in some letters of 1935: “If poetry introduces order, and every competent poem introduces order, and if order means peace, even though that particular peace is an illusion, is it any less an illusion than a good many other things that everyone high and low now-a-days concede to be no longer of any account? Isn’t a freshening of life a thing of consequence?” (Bloom *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* 93)

The poet’s experience of the world matches his experience of mind. The physical matches the spiritual in the framework created by the poet’s imagination and his use of language. Stevens shows us the difficulties of disclosing the infinite functions of language.

In this sense, “The Idea of Order” is a poem that dramatizes both the finite productivity of the limits imposed by language and the simultaneous infinitude of possibilities made available by accepting these limits. To order reality, at Key West, as anywhere else, is a matter of tapping the mimetic, revelatory, and/or self-sufficient potentials of language; but to keep poetry alive, for Stevens, was always a matter of, at the same time, evading the entrapments and oppressions of excessive order and of lingering in that realm where the merest suggestion of an idea of order provides the greatest pleasure. (Eeckhout 230)

For Stevens “the mimetic, revelatory, and/or self-sufficient potentials of language”, as Bart Eeckhout indicates above, would help us reveal the secrets of reality. Like the mystic, we should learn to see beyond reality of individual perception. In *The Idea of Order* “...it is clear that the sea, beach, fishing boats, village, stars, Ramon Fernandez and the speaker exist outside of the woman’s song. Stevens believes that there is a real world, but that we perceive imperfectly. . . . He shares with Wordsworth the idea that the senses “half-create” what they perceive” (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 34). Here is where the imagination fulfils the emptiness and/or the loss of identity caused by the uncertainty which may exist in the relation between the individual and the world. Stevens’ poetry was a metaphor of this connection between things and thoughts in the world.

V.2- Art and Nature in Stevens

As part of nature he is part of us
His rarities are ours: may they be fit
And reconcile us to our selves in those
True reconcilings, dark, pacific words,
And the adroiter harmonies of their fall. (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 117)

For Stevens, the language of poetry and the imagination would be the vehicles for the expression of existential concerns and this relates to the mystic's intuition of a spiritual condition of existence and to Stevens's conception of a universal poetry, as we see in his comments on the subject matter in his essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting", first delivered as a lecture at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1951. In this essay Stevens establishes a sharp comparison between artists. Although he does not conceal his admiration for European art and its cultural values, Stevens clearly defended American originality and the genuine values of American painting, against the European cultural dominance in art at the time, especially French painting.³⁶ Stevens' reflections on the relationship between poetry and painting prove the existence of a common universal feeling and sensibility that is present in the language of the poems and the images in paintings.

Words and images are manifestations of a conception of reality that is shared by artists, whether poets or painters, whose approach to the world seeks an aesthetic production with existential meaning. They define what could be considered the language of a universal poetry. For MacLeod, "[t]o consider Stevens' poetry in the context of other arts, or of analogies between the arts, is to think as the poet himself thought. Stevens agreed with Baudelaire that there exists "'a fundamental aesthetic' that underlies and unites all the arts" (*Preface. Part IV: Other Arts* par. 7).

³⁶“Stevens's interest in art is well documented: he frequently referred to artwork and the art world in his letters and essays and he wrote comments regarding art reviews in his notebooks” (Wallace Stevens *Wallace Stevens: The Problems of Painters and Poets* online)

Poets and painters share not only a common feeling but also a common purpose. The individual's attempt to search for the supreme truth by means of a philosophical, mystical or religious approach throughout history would be now understood as the search for a supreme fiction within Stevens' modernist position. This supreme fiction means the possibility of the conception of reality reconstructed by means of poetry or any artistic expression with a unique subject matter: human being and the intellectual concerns related to the individual's existence as its center. The expression of existential concerns with the purpose to bring order and peace into the individual's existence may come in the fiction which words and images can create; as Harold Bloom indicates in his critical analysis "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

As Stevens noted several times, the "supreme fiction" is poetry, and thus the first line, "And for what, except for you, do I feel love?" is addressed to his muse, to the poetry itself, to the confluence of fiction and the urge, the "rage" to make art. The "vivid transference" poetry brings is "peace". That peace is the supreme fiction. (Bloom *Bloom's Major Poets* 73)

This concept and value of peace, which the vivid transference of poetry brings, relates to other values that we have previously seen present in poetry, like those of nobility and harmony, and all of them also relate to similar values sought in mystical discourse. In the previous essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words", Stevens spoke of the relevance of the value of nobility as a "symbol or alter ego" of the imagination (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 7). He also speaks of ". . . the analogy between two different forms of poetry. It might be better to say that it is the identity of poetry revealed as between poetry in words and poetry in paint" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 159). His analysis in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 157) is a description of what he calls "the poetry of mankind" (ibid.) and of the whole world as it has been written and painted. He compares representative literary works and paintings at different periods of history in order to prove his conception of a universal poetry and his belief in the fact that poets or painters all share the "rage" to make art.

Stevens compares several artists' production throughout history (Claude and Virgil, Villon and Proust) whose works in poetry and painting evoke other artists' creations due to similarities in sensibility, and he points out that they create by means of a constructive faculty: imagination (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 164). The imagination acts by the reconstruction of the memory of experiences in our mind. Stevens makes a clear differentiation between imagination and memory. When the artist simply reconstructs the experience of reality or sensations, he is just making use of memory and repeats the experience of the familiar. But when he makes his own constructions out of experience, then he is using his ability to imagine: "This is the typical function of the imagination which always makes use of the familiar to produce the unfamiliar" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 165).

Poetry and painting evoke each other when they try to reflect the same perception of existence in harmony. The harmony between the elements in a composition is the result of the artist's search for perfection, "*deliciae* of the spirit as distinguished from *delectationes* of the senses and this was so because one found in them the labor of calculation, the appetite for perfection" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 166). The subjectivity which the poet and the painter print in their composition is the artistic reflection of their spirit or, what would be the same, the reconstruction of their existential meaning as individuals. The search for the perfection of the soul in mystical thought was also transmitted as an aesthetic search in mystical writings. The beauty in the mystical experience of a union between mind and world should somehow be reflected in the beauty of words as a reflection of the individual's thought of the world. Transcendentalists think that the harmony in nature can be traced in the mind and these experiences of the search for perfection in the harmony between thought and world could be comprehended as a search for order. Indeed, Stevens' interest in values was closely related to his conception of the aesthetic, that is, order and its aesthetic manifestations, poetry and painting, for ". . . there exists an unascertained and fundamental aesthetic, or order, of which poetry and painting are manifestations" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 160). Together with all these common features in artistic manifestations Stevens refers to two qualities of art. He speaks of modern art as uncompromising and plausible, because it has a reason for everything. The figure of the modern artist represents for him the figure of the freeman of the world of art (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 167).

For Stevens the significance of art is in the awareness of this sense of continuity between mind and world, and the interpenetration among poetry and painting created by the artist's ability proves the individual's awareness of this sense of continuity. Poetry and painting are examples of the interaction between content and form. They make possible the interchange between the world about us and the world within us.

The concluding part of the essay summarizes Stevens' main reflections on the power of poetry. Modern art becomes a referential value for the modern man's existence. The power of belief which the imagination and a work of art can instill in the individual can counteract his loss of faith, or disbelief, and act as a source of self-confidence: "Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince. Consequently their interest in the imagination and its work is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 171). Emerson's concept of soul corresponds to Stevens' of imagination: "The soul created the arts wherever they have flourished. It was in his own mind that the artist sought his model. It was an application of his thought to the thing to be done and the conditions to be observed" (Emerson *Essays: First Series* 278). In Stevens' thought, fiction emerges as the possibility to reconstruct reality by means of imagination. Stevens studied the common and necessary values in the composition of art works and understood these as the reflection of a universal sentiment (at different periods of time and under the influence of contemporary events). Similarly, Jones Very analysed the advance into inwardness in the literary treatment of the hero's deeds as the reflection of the parallel change into inwardness in the poet's perception of the world. Heroic actions progressively moved their settings from the epic search in the world without to a search for knowledge of the world within. They eventually became a search for an acceptable truth which could be found in the continuity between mind and world that the epic poet tried to shape in his composition. The poet's imagination reconstructed reality within the fictitious context of his lines. Likewise, the visionary faculty in the mystics would be the best example of imaginative experience. As well, romantic poetry, with its visionary images, would be an artistic attempt to reflect the poet's achievement of self-recovery. The metaphysical comprehension of reality which Transcendentalist tradition attempted would become the construction of reality by imagination within Stevens' literary context.

These intellectual approaches to an insight into reality share the individual's purpose of fulfilment in a unique universal sentiment: the expression of the perception of continuity between thought and world. Human being is always in the center of this process. Stevens looks for an acceptable fiction in the creative response which the individual gives to nature and to the world as integrating parts of the reality of his existence. The imaginative response of an artistic action is simultaneously feeling and consciousness.

Poetry and painting act as sources of self-knowledge since they offer the individual an access to reality by its recreation through an acceptable fiction. Acceptable because it helps human being repossess and reassert its identity by fictitious means in a poetical sense of interpretation. This poetical sense reflects the harmony between the distinct elements of the artistic composition in the same way as the harmony in the elements of nature. The artist as imitator of reality pursues physical and moral perfection in his creation. This attempt at perfection is evoked by the harmony between the elements (pictorial/ poetical) of the artistic work. Poetry as imagination is the expression of creativity and the expression of the individual's mind and, thus, it displays the spiritual condition of his/her nature as a being. This creative source lies both in nature and in consciousness. It should provide the individual with fulfilment. Poetry becomes the invention of the mind and the reflection of the artist's insight by rhetorical means. For Stevens the supreme fiction, that is, the possibility of the conception of reality reconstructed by means of poetry or any other artistic expression with the individual's existence as subject matter, would provide human being with self-knowledge and with the possibility to preserve its identity.

In Stevens' literary production his prose and verse could be described as the pragmatic expression of a creativity which arises from his ability to parallel a natural landscape with emotionally and socially determined settings. In that sense, the relevance of nature in Emerson's Transcendentalist thought and in Stevens' thinking fulfils the same aim: to preserve the individual's identity. The role which the poet has in Stevens' conception of poetry is the role of the individual whose awareness of reality permits a construction of it by means of creativity.

In Emerson's view of the world the figure of the poet represented the possibility to attain consciousness of the individualism of human being by means of nature, and poetry allowed the expression of that communication between man and nature. The individual's experience of loneliness before the world and its natural elements instilled the individual with the thought about his nature as a spiritual being, a dominantly religious being within Jones Very's mystical approach. This view of the individual's loneliness before nature as an inspiring source was shared by Stevens, who also perceived the individual as a social being. He was interested in both the spiritual and social meaning of an individual's existence.

The artistic response and the best images in which the (re-)construction of this identity is reflected arise from a common source of inspiration: the landscape of America and its nature. They become a humanistic and aesthetic resource. Stevens was deeply concerned with the role of the individual whose existence is determined by the interaction with a natural and social environment. The contemplation of the world allows the artist to reflect on those outer elements which may instill an introspective feeling in him. This introspection may subsequently result in a sentiment of harmony with the context and circumstances of the outer. He found the artistic and creative response a challenging manner to counteract the circumstances which may negatively affect the individual's innate freedom and, subsequently, his self-knowledge. Stevens believed in the individual's ability to approach the condition and nature of his existence by means of imagination, especially by means of words. Stevens felt fascination for the variety of interpretive possibilities in nature and it becomes the scenery for fiction and imagination. Human being is integrated within this frame of nature in the same way as the different elements of a painting or the words in the lines of a poem are the parts of the artistic composition.

When Stevens turns to nature, he is searching for inspiration and answers to those conflicts which alter the spiritual harmony that the observance of natural elements may inspire in him.

Modern poets were particularly innovative in their treatment of the image, and they looked to the visual arts for inspiration and example.

Through their association with painting, poets found a way to break poetry's reliance on statement and formal convention and to recenter their project around a principle of expressive design. Stevens was attracted to the many visual arts movements that emphasized how things are seen rather than what is seen. Impressionism, the dominant American aesthetic during Stevens' young adulthood encouraged his penchant for recording effects and atmospheres, moods and changes in himself and in the environment. Impressionism rejected the idea that painting should reflect objective knowledge of a fixed reality and concerned itself more with the conditions under which the individual viewer sees reality. Its emphasis on painting outside, from life, and capturing techniques of brushwork and palette the fugitive effects of light, weather, and movement across the surface of a scene can be felt in many early Stevens' poems. (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 167)

The expression of this harmony is transferred into the inner perception of harmony in contemplating the elements in the composition of a painting or in a poem and represents the possibility of recovery of that balance in human being's nature. Stevens is not escaping from the harshness of reality, but facing it within a natural landscape. The elements of nature inspire his best thoughts on the socio-cultural conflicts which affect the individual's identity and self-knowledge.

Any artist, whether a poet, painter or musician, gathers in his production the images which best reproduce the perception in his mind. The outer world would be lost without the reconstruction of it within the individual. And our mind needs the elements of the world to look at ourselves in them. McQuade argues that "Stevens showed American poetry a new way of being American –not by regionalism (though he wrote memorable poems about Connecticut), not by patriotism, not through use of the common vernacular, but by an adaptation of English literature to the American language" (1804). The adaptation in his use of language and his composition of images within the whole of the artistic work reveal the artist's treatment of his view of reality.

Stevens' view of reality was closely connected with his concept of the relationship between art and nature. And he clearly expressed his mind on this matter in several of his poems. A good example is "Anecdote of the Jar"³⁷ (Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* 60-61) in which the poet contrasts the beauty of art and imagination, represented by the image of the jar, to the inspiring and creative power of nature, represented by the image of the hill. ". . . and he wanted . . . to position an American jar in a new continent without forgetting the urns of Greece or the stanzas of England" (Vendler *Words Chosen Out of Desire* 58). There seems to be a dialectic challenge in poetical terms between those complementary values which art and nature provide to the individual's perception of the world. Stevens' thought always seems to stress the need to appreciate the relevance of reality in order to be able to explore the mechanisms of consciousness by means of imagination. In this poem he depicts the greatness of the natural landscape and contrasts it to the dominance of an inanimate object on it.

The poet's description of the two main elements in the poem reveals complementariness between them. The jar, not necessarily an object of art, becomes ". . . tall and of a port in air" within a natural landscape and the slovenliness of the hill is "no longer wild" in the presence of the jar. The coexistence of elements so different in their condition changes into an idea of continuity before the poet's eyes. The dependence between nature and mind is presented as some sort of aesthetic competition in poetical terms. The two elements of the poem are introduced to us by the poet in the first and second line, "I placed a jar in Tennessee", "And round it was, upon a hill". "Placed", "upon", the jar is standing there before the poet's eyes, on the hill.

If we observe this view of the natural landscape from the perspective of the poet, we can imagine the rounded contour of the jar on the circled shape of the hill. They match their simplicity of forms. Thus, he portrays the interdependent relationship between the human, with the jar as its symbol and a symbol of art, and nature, symbolized in the hill.

³⁷See Appendix II. "Many of the short poems in *Harmonium* are what we would now call 'conceptual art' – the originality of the idea behind them, rather than the linguistic execution, gives them their poetic energy. 'Anecdote of the Jar' is such a poem, in its witty reversal of Keat's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. The British poet may have an illustrated marble urn in the British Museum, but the American poet has only a bare gray stoneware jar in the Tennessee wilderness. And whereas the British poet can write in opulent stanzas derived from Shakespeare and the sonnet, the American poet cannot find any diction or stanza form that he is comfortable in" (McQuade1802)

The human element that introduces the poem undergoes a change. The condition of the voice that leads us through the poem experiences a progression from the subject to the object in the presence of nature: “. . . the ‘I’ who does the initial act of placing gets lost after the first line. The human actor becomes a panoramic onlooker, a distant voice, an innocent bystander: the jar takes on, somehow, an intentional life of its own: ‘I placed’ but ‘It made’ and ‘It took’ and ‘It did not give’. The jar did it” (Lentricchia *Close Reading: The Reader* 140).

The poem is a reflection on whose power is greater, nature’s or human power. The poet tries to define the terms on which the connection between an inanimate object, the jar, and a hill, with the unlimited possibilities implicit in the context of nature, is set. The wide and empty space of the hill and its “slovenly wilderness” surrounds the jar. The shape of the jar is described as “gray and bare”. The contrast is drawn not only by their contour, but also by the opposition of their natures. Which one could be greater? On the one hand, the order which the jar introduces in this scene does not apparently seem to change the essence of nature and its wilderness present in the hill. But, on the other hand, the lively power of wild nature is going to be affected by the presence of a lifeless object on it. Something has changed. This is the sense of duality which Stevens perceives in his view, but at the same time the poet expresses a feeling of continuity implicit within this perception of duality.

His description of this view of complementariness between the jar and the hill, like a search for the good in the possibility of their coexistence in harmony and order, is similar to the mystic’s vision of unity between world and thought, matter and soul in his search for a common condition in them. As Bonnie Costello comments on Stevens and painting, “he was endowed with a rich visual imagination” (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 169), but, above all, and as we can see in this poem, he was even more committed to the power of words to capture the individual’s original view of the world.

Stevens’ composing activity is inseparable from a theorizing activity: to construct is to present an idea about the relationship between the imagination and reality, about the purpose of modern art and the condition of modern man.

. . . modernity involved a constant re-examination of the nature of reality, and that each work of art was not only an assertion of being, but a philosophy of being. . . . the poet draws from the artist's struggle to unite perception and composition. (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 170)

Is the sense of order attached to this need of complementariness between the physicality of things, nature and the jar, and our thought of them? Has their essence somehow changed after we apply our imagination to them? There is a progression in this sense of dominance of the inanimate object over nature. The power of the wilderness of the hill progressively appears surrounded or shaped by the order spread over the landscape by the influence of the jar.

An old point of controversy about this poem – is Stevens *for* art or *for* nature? – disappears when we note that he lets nature get the last word in by characterizing the autonomous jar of art, at the end of the poem, as an absence of nature. Nature: maternal, creative, pliant; the jar: a receptacle that doesn't receive and from which nothing emerges – inflexible, hard and possessed by a classic case of womb envy. "It did not give of bird or bush/ Like nothing else in Tennessee" (Lentricchia *Close Reading: The Reader* 141)

Though nothing may seem to "emerge" from the receptacle, the effect of the image of the jar is the action of the sense of order which this material object spreads in nature with its presence. This interaction between both spaces, that of nature and the jar's, is depicted like a circular motion which the roundness in forms transmits. The poet emulates a sense of continuity that arises from the round form of the jar and it finally controls our view of the wilderness, "The wilderness rose up to it / And sprawled around, no longer wild" (lines 5-6). And in "It took dominion everywhere" (line 9), the jar and its implicit sense of order have completely invaded the realm of nature. Art is having an integrating effect with nature.³⁸ The reiterative reference to their common roundness throughout the poem centres both the artistic object and nature.

³⁸On the contrary, Stevens exposes the poverty of an existence in which there is no possibility of change in an established order, where the natural elements do not have the integrating effect and the sense of continuity which the images of the jar and the hill instil, in two of his poems, "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons" (113) and "Winter Bells" (114) (in Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose*)

The curves represented by the shape of the jar seem to be part of the curve of the image of the hill. "The jar was round upon the ground" (line 7). They reproduce the idea of harmony between artistic and natural elements. They mean continuity in their existence. The poet expresses a sentiment of unity of being. The contemplation of the world, the act of observing the jar and the hill, is like a visionary process in which Stevens realizes an essential unity. He meditates on a principle of relation that integrates art and nature through fiction. The poet places the jar on the hill. Stevens not only looks for a sense of order in the external and the outer, but also intends to find the way to apply this order in the inner view of the world.

In Stevens' conception of the world, he tries to find meaning and order in the physical world as well as to know about the limits of human knowledge. He attempts to find a balance between the world of objects, the physical world, and the spiritual world, imagination, which make up reality. But this duplicity in his perception of reality leads him to try to solve an existentialist issue and one of his main intellectual concerns: the disorder that the individual's experience of life may suppose requires imagination if the individual wants to find a response to this experience of the world, otherwise, this experience of life would become meaningless. This sentiment, closely related to nihilism, can find an answer in and be counteracted by the possibility to find beauty. For Stevens, beauty is to be found in the artistic response. Beauty is not something fixed. Maybe the source of beauty is in the inspiration that comes out of the changing nature of the physical world.

It is that transient moment found in the perception of continuity between appearance and being: "'Anecdote of the Jar' . . . reveals a process by which landscape enables the poet to respond to his world affectively. Landscape involves the exclusion of certain realities and the transfiguration of others, but it also has the effect of disclosing what is otherwise unobservable" (Costello 63). This act of disclosing the unobservable finds its expression in the artistic. The poet's words reflect his perception of continuity between an artistic element, the jar, and nature. Both are integrated within the poet's perspective: he perceives the equivalence between the physical condition of the world and the nature of the jar, subsequent to the affection and sentiment which their contemplation awakens in the poet's thought.

Disclosing what is unobservable comes as a result of this change into the vision of union between two elements, the jar and the hill, of apparently distinct condition: the sense of order that the natural elements of the world share pervades the jar's condition in the poet's view of continuity. Beauty arises from this sense of continuity produced by a change in the poet's perspective.

Another example of the relevance of the poet's perspective in the observance of daily elements in natural life is in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird",³⁹ where we are instilled with the poet's thoughts on the movements of a blackbird within the context of nature. The contemplation of it would be similar to the visual effect of contemplating this image in a canvas. Both produce parallel sensations. The real and the imagined are constantly compared throughout the poem, since ". . . much of the world of fact is the equivalent of the world of the imagination, because it looks like it. . . . the visible is the equivalent of the invisible" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 61). The poet depicts the scene as if we were looking at a cubist painting in which the artist analyzes the image by displaying the subject in a multiplicity of contexts.

His "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is more verbal than visual, its "ways" having more in common with rhetorical riddles than with geometrical angles of vision. Yet some of the conceptual drive of cubism, especially its concern with structure and multiplicity in form, likely motivated this poem of assembled fragments. (Serio *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 168)

Our vision of the blackbird is shaped through a sensual display of natural elements. We find a different image every time we look at it. We can have simultaneous and diverse perceptions of a unique object.

Stevens wished to emphasize the contemplation of reality, not reality itself. The blackbird is something of an *x* factor whose identity changes in relation to the speaker's mood and context.

³⁹See Appendix II. "'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' was published in Wallace Stevens' first book, *Harmonium* in 1923 and reprinted in an expanded form in 1931" (McQuade 1801)

As the title and insistence on verbs of looking, knowing and seeing emphasize, the poem is about what we know and how we know it. Each stanza brings the blackbird into some relation with the mind. (Schwarz *Narrative and Culture* 123)

All that is related to the bird is full of symbolism and displayed with simplicity in forms. Through the thirteen stanzas of this poem and the numbered variations-on-a-theme format to depict the different view of natural elements which each stanza represents, we are introduced to an exercise of the mind. Although apparently long enough, its stanza is short enough, from two to six lines of inexact rhyme, to make us think about the poet's sensations. The poet wants to share with us the same questions that he asks himself in observing the scene and its sensual effects. Every line brings about something new in every word. It is like an approach to some kind of attainment of knowledge. The poem becomes an interpretative exercise. It is a process of meditation in which the natural elements are the support for the description of the poet's way of thinking. He wants to share with us his experience of the physical world as a way of intellectual enlightenment.

Every stanza is a step in this meditative contemplation of a natural setting, in which the rest of natural elements around "Among twenty snowy mountains" (line 1) are static elements before the only moving element in the poem, the bird's eye. In reading the thirteenth and last stanza we follow and collect the whole of sensations which the contemplation of the movement of the bird inspires in the poet's thought. Also, the presence of time is a reference to the things that are happening at the moment when the poet is describing them, or are just about to happen. The bird is introduced in the third line as the eye which sees everything, "The only moving thing / was the eye of the blackbird" (lines 2-3). When the poet says "I was of three minds, Like a tree / in which there are three blackbirds" (lines 3-5), he seems to observe the landscape through the birds' perspective, which is not the only one. It is the view of the world of those that seem to share one feeling.

In this first stanza, the blackbird is at the same time seen and seer. As the thing seen, the blackbird provides perspective, focus, proportion. The blackbird defines the value of the vision.

As seeing/seer, on the other hand, the blackbird acts upon the vision of the observer. No one is the master of the visual, for seeing is not a stasis. The moving eye of the blackbird introduces change, uncertainty, even chance, that which is unseeable. (Camden 129)

The fact that our view of the landscape is somehow conducted from the beginning of the poem till the end by the birds' eye confers the birds with a powerful sense of control of mind.⁴⁰

The physical figure of the tree in the second stanza may represent a safe place, it could stand for the mind, where the three birds stand and think of the world before their eyes.

. . . the piece contains thirteen stanzas, each limited to a single aspect of the poetic persona's concern for blackbirds – from the purely perceptual to the more abstractly conceptual, from their purely surface appearance to their placement somewhere within that persona's worlding world. To the thing as it exists in itself there is no reference: only the aspects . . . through which the bird makes its appearance to the poetic consciousness. The poem is thus "epistemological", showing how, within human experience, something comes to be known for the particular significance it has for the perceiver. (Kaelin 171)

In the third stanza the blackbird seems not only to be contemplating the scene, but also to get involved in it: "The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds" (line 7). It is as if the action of nature could not be controlled by the blackbird. The bird and the thought which it metaphorically represents are immersed in the strength of nature. It is a small element within life: "It was a small part of the pantomime" (line 8). The bird has a powerful part in the interpretation of the pantomime of life; its view is relevant for the significance of this experience of the senses, but its role, the role of thought, is a small part within the greatness of the experience of life represented in the uncontrollable force of the natural elements, "whirled in the autumn winds".

⁴⁰Other poems which deserve being mentioned in relation to a moment of intense perception and control of thought, like the one described in this poem, are "Nomad Exquisite" and "Tea" (77) (in Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose*)

In the fourth stanza the sense of unity and oneness is repeated, “A man and a woman and a blackbird are one” (line 11). Stevens guides us in this process of thought that the poem stands for through his self-questioning. It does not matter whether man, woman or bird; they offer us different perspectives and all share one unique essence. There are three entities here, like the three blackbirds at the beginning. Stevens describes this essential kinship between the human elements, man and woman, and the bird in their thinking of the world.

When the poet describes the sound of the bird in the fifth stanza, the whistle described in terms of music refers to the sound of its voice, the inflections, and to the silence that comes after it, the innuendoes, though there seems to be something, some state or condition, “or just after”, that the poet guesses in this experience. The poet speaks in terms of opposites and wonders what he prefers, something he can perfectly perceive with its changes, inflections, or the echo of it in his mind, that is, the feelings which the sound may suggest after listening to it, innuendoes. There is an explicit contrast between the sound as we hear it and the effect which that sound has on us. Stevens is overtly alluding to the intellectual consequences of the sensual experience. The appreciation of the physical world in our mind, that is, the picture of the bird’s eye, can help us to share its perspective and lead us to the same thought.

Stevens goes on in guiding us through his process of self-questioning by means of nature. When in the sixth stanza the poet describes the icy landscape out of the window, the image of the icicles, like bars, seems to set him apart from the bird’s sight that crosses and flies freely outside. As observers that share this view, we are also distanced from the range of the bird’s sight. As viewers, we are left trapped in the shadow, in a state that provokes in us a feeling of ignorance, “The mood / traced in the shadow / An indecipherable cause” (lines 22-24). It suggests the loss of intellectual trace when the individual’s thought is far from its source of knowledge, nature. A return to this source is demanded in the seventh stanza when symbolically the poet reminds “men of Haddam” that truth is so close that they do not notice it: “Do you not see how the blackbird / Walks around the feet / Of the women about you?” (lines 27-29). The masculine as opposite to the feminine is poetically used by Stevens in order to display how we may miss the essence of what is in front of us because we do not know how to perceive the new in the ordinary.

The observer(s) seem to have lost their thought in a useless search for something, “golden birds” (line 26), so far from the ground where the blackbird, the eye that can see everything, acts. The bird’s vision can reach anywhere because it knows how to look at things, how to bring the physical world to mind. We must draw our attention to “the feet of the women”, to the ordinary and make a new perception of it.

In the eighth stanza, when Stevens speaks of his abilities in writing, “I know noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms” (lines 30-31). He does so because he wants the bird to get involved in them; he includes the blackbird and what it represents in poetry, “In what I know” (line 34). The poet’s allusions to his skills are the evidence of a source of knowledge that he shares with the bird, nature. The bird’s experience of life nourishes the poet’s own living experience.

And again in the following stanza, the ninth, the idea of continuity is expressed in terms of roundness, like in the previous poem in which the jar and the hill seem to share their existence, an existential meaning, within their common round shape. Now the only moving thing, the blackbird, has flown out of sight; it has trespassed the borders and its essence spreads all over: “It marked the edge / of one of many circles” (lines 36-37). In its flight it moves around as within a circumference. The trace of this circular flight may close the chain of many circles: the circles of life and nature. It encloses everything in its course. It is the line of the horizon within our line of sight.

The bird’s eye, the central element of the poem, its axis, becomes the image of the self; it is the center around which everything turns. It reminds Emerson’s image of the self as a center that defines its circumference:

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. . . . Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Circles* 403)

A sense of disillusion pervades the poet's words in the tenth and eleventh stanzas. His perception of light, "Flying in a green light" (line 39), referring to the birds, their beautiful sound, "the bawds of euphony" (line 40), now a sharp cry, and their shape, mistakenly the shadow of the equipage, announce a change in the perception of the natural context. The blackbird in its flying has guided our thinking throughout the poem. The image of the glass coach may be associated with some sort of weakness or fragility in thought. There seems to be a menace; the connection between the poet's view and the bird's eye throughout the poem has been broken now: "Once, a fear pierced him / in that he mistook / the shadow of his equipage / for blackbirds" (lines 43-46). There is a sentiment of guilt because of a feeling of having lost the bird's eye, as the emblem of life without imagination.

The movement of the river in the twelfth stanza like the course of time and life is followed by the bird's flight. If the course of water goes on, then life goes on. We can almost foresee the end of the poem. The poet seems to have recovered the course of life.

The idea of thought represented in the bird's eye on its experience in life goes flowing like the water in the river. The sentiment of loss in the previous stanzas is gone. The poet returns to nature as he shares the bird's sight. They both have attained consciousness of their common nature as beings in their common view and experience of nature. Every element of nature makes us aware of an approach to the end of life, as we can see in the reference to the weather: "It was snowing" (line 50). With this image of snow as a symbol of winter and as the last season of the year, Stevens highlights the end of this life process. Likewise, the reference to time: "It was evening all afternoon" (line 49) as forewarning of the coming to an end of a process, together with the description of the blackbird's flying and approaching to its last stop symbolize the growth of our intellect and the attainment of knowledge. All terms and their meanings relate to the end of an experience. The poet has attained an experienced view that ends with the end of the bird's flight.

The last lines describe this last stop in the bird's flying: "The blackbird sat" (line 52). It seems to have found a place to rest, "in the cedar limbs" (line 53). It returns to the tree, the physical representation of the individual, to the starting point of the poem, there where the realm of nature and the realm of mind seem to share their boundaries.

These two poems, “Anecdote of the Jar” and “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”, display Stevens’ call for the need for a deeper view of everyday life elements which can transmit a wider comprehension of the ordinary. This understanding of the physical world under the renewed vision of the imagination permits the poet to show the richness of his thinking by reflecting the richness of sensations which everyday and natural elements inspire on him.

Wallace Stevens thought that it was possible to look at things that way, that we have a choice about the way things are, and that what they are depends on our imaginations. He thought that poetry wasn’t a way to figure out and give order to the past, but a way to start again, to begin something new. You start with nothing except what is there; with no idea except what you are just beginning to think. The poems are not about eternal truth but about the truth of the surface of things, the truth of the way things have just begun to be. (Koch 119)

His poetry reveals his inner thoughts on self-questioning. His is an artistic vision and philosophical conception of the bonds between the individual’s life and life in nature, one filled with revelations. There are some aspects wherein we can see a mystic’s view in him. On the one hand, the sources of his inspiration and creativity: feeling and thought and mostly being. As some sort of revelation, the poet’s inner vision of the world which these inspiring sources instill in him reveals the close and intimate bonds between them in terms of continuity. On the other hand, his dealing with heart and mind in terms of reciprocal interaction through imagination is full of a deep symbolism which, as in the mystic’s view, permits him to transmit the strong sense and sentiment of a common spiritual condition of existence in the individual’s experience of the world. As a poet, he succeeds in transmitting his imaginative power to the reader. John N. Serio in his introduction to Wallace Stevens’ edition (2011) of selected poems claims, “Stevens touches and moves our deepest and most private sense of self. In doing so, he fulfils his goal of making his imagination ours” (xiii). Stevens tried to remind us of the need to reevaluate the routine and the ordinary. Like the epic hero, the nobility of his words, “. . . nobility, a quality which he defines as our spiritual height and depth” (xii), defies the loss of faith in the world by means of the force of imagination. His art is the result of the poet’s creative vision and reflection on “the surface of things”.

Stevens' reflection on the world is the triumph of imagination and language, as powerful means for the interpretation of reality and life experience and as the expression of the individual's deepest conviction of the spiritual condition of the self, respectively.

For Stevens, poetry becomes an experience of finding and the expression of the achievement of self-fulfilment for those who share the view of reality by means of a creative act. Fulfilment is understood as the result of the work of imagination "as a vital self-assertion" (Stevens 748). The belief in a spiritual reality which mystical experiences carried along and the thought of a spiritual unity in the romantic and transcendentalist tradition gives way to an experience of the imagination in Stevens' thinking. Just as Emerson did not understand the relationship between mind and nature, spirit and matter as a relation between opposites, but as the reflection of a unity of experience, Stevens emphasized this conception of unity as a balance of opposites.

He sought a sense of spiritual purpose to life which the meaningful action of art, and particularly poetry, could provide. He added to this act the trace of the historical experience of his time. The essence of being, which the symbolism of the poet's words depicted throughout literary tradition, is understood by Stevens as the essence of the poem and its reflection of living experience.

In his analysis of the relations between poetry and painting Stevens sees them as creative acts in the individual's quest for unity and self-recovery. In the epic quest, the hero's and epic poet's sense of lost unity and identity could be recovered through the self-trust which the thought of a common existential condition may instill in the individual. Through the action of imaginative composition which these artistic manifestations imply for Stevens, the individual, poet or painter, compensates the loss of faith in his self.

The imagination which encourages arts helps human being overcome its indifference and skepticism and recover the lost intimacy between the mind and the world: "He (Stevens) saw a crucial relationship between the effort of mind . . . required by both poetry and painting" (Schwarz 193).

Stevens translates the sentiments inspired by the experience of life into philosophical and aesthetic terms. For him, poetry not only gives us pleasure, it also provides us with the capacity to cope with and change reality. Poetry should not be subordinated to mind, but should have the effect of illuminating it. Like the illumination in the mystical experience transmitted through mystical discourse, this illuminating effect of poetry has a transformative power in human being and helps the individual progress towards self-knowledge.

VI – FROM MYSTICISM TO IMAGINATION: THE RELEVANCE OF THE ORDINARY

Romanticism encouraged imagination as the means to personal growth since it helped the individual to express a universal feeling and a common sentiment depicted in words by poets and writers. This feeling came out of the observance of those elements of daily life in order to explore “the near” and “the common”, a feeling that may come as an “auspicious sign of the coming days”, as Emerson states in his address “The American Scholar”:

I read with joy some of the auspicious signs of the coming days, as they glimmer already through poetry and art, through philosophy and science, through church and state. One of these signs is the fact, that the same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state, assumed in literature a very mark and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful; the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized. That which has been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts. The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign, -is it not? of new vigor, when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. . . . I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. . . . show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature. . . . there is no trifle; there is no puzzle; but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The American Scholar* 68-69)

A religiously conditioned view of the world resulting from mystical meditation was now grounded in a perception of continuity between thought and world free from any sort of restrictions and encouraged by imagination and creativity. And this vision could be comprehended and shaped into poetical terms.

If Emerson's transcendentalist thought provided romantic intellectual background with a pragmatic and moral basis that was grounded in life and added philosophical contents to the religious vision and comprehension of the world, Stevens' view on poetry and artistic work brought this moral interpretation of the romantic heritage close to the individual's social and interactive role with the world around him. The events in daily life were for Stevens the source of inspiration of a literary creativity through which he showed that a new romantic view of the world was possible. He felt that the individual's loss of faith in his self had led him to some sort of skeptical attitude. Self-trust was being lost as a consequence of disillusionment and a lack of inner view and contemplation of the world. This sense of loss meant a sense of disbelief in self-evidence and in the individual's insight into his condition as a being.

Transcendentalist thought partly emerged as a sort of skeptical answer and rejection before an excessively rationalist comprehension of the individual's existence. The need to restore self-trust would be subsequent to this skepticism. The need for a renewed romantic vision is demanded. For Emerson the possibility to grow intellectually as an individual lies in nonconformity and self-reliance, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Self-Reliance* 261), and, significantly, these values are found in an inner look into the common elements of the surrounding world and in ordinary life experience, ". . . a man who stands on his feet is stronger than a man who stands on his head" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Self-Reliance* 282) This section will delve into Stanley Cavell's philosophy of the ordinary through the analysis of some of the key texts in his essay collection "Texts of Recovery"⁴¹ (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 50) from which relevant information related to this theoretical and philosophical framework can be drawn and developed. The feeling of disbelief rising out of an excess of rationalism encouraged a pragmatic view and comprehension of the world and of contemporary events, which found in the ordinary the potential for self-reliance and a way to preserve one's identity. The individual's access to know more about the spiritual condition of his being was to be found in the connection between thought and world.

⁴¹"Texts of Recovery" are part of the lectures delivered by Stanley Cavell at Berkeley and collected by him in "*In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*", in which he discusses on the appearance of romantic texts.

The difficulty of dealing with the representation of the unrepresented, the abstract concept of being, led thinkers and writers, like Emerson and Stevens, to find in intellectual values, representative of thoughts, the means for the individual's broadening of self-consciousness. Stevens' concern with the aesthetic and the power of words as values and an access to the expression of our thoughts was closely related to the sense of relevance of words as symbols in Emerson. Both Emerson and Stevens guessed that there was something else, unrepresented, which the act of imagination permitted to shape in a dialectical manner. "Yes: the all-commanding subject-matter of poetry is life, the never-ceasing source" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 28). The poet's source of inspiration is mainly his experience of life, that is, a pragmatic view of the world and his reflection on the common. The individual's ability to use and interpret the symbolism of language affords him a wider pragmatic comprehension of reality. The power of the poet's thought is in his management of the correspondence of symbols with words, and the correspondence between the world and thought is set in poetical terms.

The individual eventually learnt to interpret those values present in the ordinary things of the world which might help him to find order. In literary terms, Stevens' aesthetic interest was just a quest for an aesthetic order that meant a way of organizing outer and inner life. By portraying the ordinary the individual's existence is thus being enhanced. Both Emerson and Stevens found that necessary redeeming power in the presence of nature and in the reflection on natural elements and daily events.

The individual needs to rediscover the infinite possibilities that everyday life hides. The routine and conventionalism of modern life seemed to demand a return to an attitude of inner isolation, but an inner look into those elements of ordinary life could help the individual to experience the world by means of an imaginative view that may show the richness of his own thoughts, in which his self-trust exists: "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Self-reliance* 261). The only certainty that the individual seems to have is the belief in his ability to act and in his independence of thought. They are tools for the knowledge of the condition of his being.

In considering the interpretation of the common or the ordinary as relevant for our intellectual growth, we should also reconsider the growing skeptical attitude in the individual as a relevant part which may encourage self-knowledge.

Here my thought was that skepticism was a place, perhaps the central secular place, in which the human wish to deny the condition of human existence is expressed; and so long as the denial is essential to what we think of as the human, skepticism cannot, or must not, be denied. This makes skepticism an argument internal to the individual, or separate, human creature, as it were an argument of the self with itself (over its finitude). (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 5)

To talk about skepticism as a place where the human wish to deny the condition of his existence is expressed could mean that in skepticism the individual may find the terms and context within which to deal with the fact that he refuses to admit that he cannot know what condition his self is in. The relevant symbolism of words in Emerson and the aesthetic and the power of words as values in Stevens possess the power of imagination, which would substitute all the implications of definitive knowledge.

This wish in human being to deny its human condition leads the individual to think about his identity and the sense of his existence. Stanley Cavell's philosophical views open a reinterpretation of that essential thought and renewed romantic vision on life in which philosophical matters and their expression necessarily interact in order to preserve the self's identity. The way in which Cavell deals with ordinariness and skepticism is revealing. Both concepts are meaningful in that ". . . the ordinariness in question speaks of an intimacy with existence, and of an intimacy lost, that matches skepticism's despair of the world" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 4). This sentiment of despair represents the feeling that human being cannot have a definitive knowledge of the world and therefore cannot possess the world. And this impossibility to possess it is related to the loss of an intimacy with the ordinary elements of the world. Just as disbelief implies believing and disbelieving, skepticism can be understood as a different form of certainty, in which a sentiment of despair is present.

By means of disbelief and a skeptical attitude and within the context of the ordinary the individual faces the consequences of the loss of intimacy with the elements of the world. However, skepticism can also be understood as an attitude which helps human being to go on looking for a response to this sort of existential emptiness. It makes the individual keep on thinking of the human. In relating the concept of ordinariness with the idea of intimacy Cavell describes the individual's existence as a close relation with the common of the world and as identity with it. The common or the ordinary is thus part of the inner experience of the world and the experience of the ordinary comes along with a feeling of doubt and loss. The doubt of the nature of his existence may lead the individual to a lack of self-trust. The individual needs something to believe in and, most specially, he needs to feel confident in his thought. If the sense of loss of humanity, "the wish to deny the condition of human existence", pervades his thinking, then he will also learn how to avoid the human need for certainty. We can introduce Cavell's thinking as part of the conception of a philosophy of life based on the idea of continuity between thought and world I have been exploring throughout this dissertation. Cavell traces the responses to skepticism in the observance of the ordinary and bases them on the transcendentalists' intellectual heritage. In previous sections we have seen how Jones Very and Wallace Stevens worked through their discourse on the romantic premise of the individual's concern with his existential condition. The relevance of human being's relationship with the elements of the world and the experience of life would be determinant in this process of self-knowledge. The mystic's introspective view of the world understands the existential condition as an existence in harmony with all the elements which are part of the individual's experience of life.

Despite the differences of their respective historical contexts and lifetimes, both Very and Stevens aimed to understand and express how the continuity between world and thought could be mediated and shaped into words in the creative, intuitive manner which imagination may instill in the individual's mind. And both, in their poetry and essays, produced a renewed discourse which was romantic in its subject matter in that it encouraged the need to know the condition of being for the individual's intellectual growth. With their discourse, they had already sought to find a response to the skeptical attitude in human being – subsequent to the loss of self-trust – in the creative answer which language conceals.

As a philosopher concerned with the wide range of possibilities that language may offer to the individual's intellectual growth, Cavell understands skepticism as “. . . that anxiety about our human capacities as knowers” (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 4). He believes that the individual is subjected to doubt and this dependence on doubt makes him able to go on intellectually growing.

He defends the tasks of philosophy and the tasks of language as necessarily compatible and complementary in reconsidering the idea of skepticism as an enlightening argument. For him skepticism is necessary in order to keep on thinking about the condition of existence of the world and the individuals' existential condition. The individual's lack of certainty about the nature of his being and the sentiment subsequent to skepticism, “that anxiety”, keeps doubt open for him/her. Cavell comes to the conclusion that feeling and thought provide the individual's identity with existential meaning. The development of ordinary language philosophy, as far as it deals with the ordinariness that speaks of that lost intimacy with existence, and American transcendentalism in the “[d]evotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low” would constitute the axis of his thinking on this matter (ibid.) He reflects on the importance of discourse and the role of language in dealing with philosophical issues. His thinking would be a relevant link within this process of search of the evolution of the romantic idea of continuity between thought and world.

VI.1- The Idea of Thought-World Continuity: Stanley Cavell's Views on the Ordinary

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (Schofield *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* 21)

The individual's thought on the nature of his being has conditioned his intellectual progression and his existence.

This intellectual process is the result of an experience of life, a sensual perception and inner comprehension of the world in which spiritual and moral values interact. If a sentiment of negation and disbelief derived from the loss of moral values arises in the individual, then this experience of life will be affected and thought will be pervaded by the need of recovery,

. . . [b]ut in all philosophical seriousness, a recovery from what? Philosophy cannot say sin. Let us speak of a recovery from skepticism. This means, as said, from a drive to the inhuman. Then why does this present itself as a recovery of the self? Why, more particularly, as the recovery of the (of my) (ordinary) (human) voice? What is romantic about the recovery of, the quest for, the ordinary or everyday? What business is it of philosophy's? . . . philosophy's essential business has become the response to skepticism. (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 26-27)

Cavell's answer to this question highlights the interconnection between feeling and thought, which has much to do with this process of self-recovery within the voice or expression of the ordinary: "The everyday is ordinary because, after all, it is our habit, or habitat" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 9). Thus, we could consider our experience of common life, our feeling and thought of the familiar, as the ordinary. As Cavell indicates, those values present in common life will definitely help the individual in his recovery from a loss of identity. The individual has the perception that there is something extraordinary within the ordinary, a "perception of weirdness" (ibid.). And in the ordinary the action of the artist's imagination fulfils its purpose: "This is the typical function of the imagination which always makes use of the familiar to produce the unfamiliar" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 165). This sense of something out of the ordinary in ordinariness is imbued with implications that pose a kind of recovery from the identity crisis which affected the individual, strongly influenced by convoluted historical events throughout the 20th century within the American context. By the early twentieth-century the economic interests that encouraged the "foundation of a consumer society" (Elliott 718) negatively affected the values which rule everyday life in America. Urban industrial life had replaced Emerson's vision of "[a] world in which everyday chores are simplified by a combination of American energy and ingenuity" (ibid.).

The pervasive materialism of American culture inevitably led to disillusionment in a system in which individuality was being threatened by “[a] system of a mass production” (Elliot 719). But “[i]n the decades leading to World War II, public discourse chronicled the nation’s efforts to come to terms with these confusions by positing a renewed and more durable sense of individual and collective identity” (Elliott 718). The insight into natural world which Transcendentalists understood as a path to self-knowledge and identity would emerge again among those intellectuals eager to preserve natural world from this “mechanical invasion” (Elliott 721) as an alternative to these urban conditions of life.

The role of the intellectual and of public discourse within American culture from then on favoured the development of “[a]lternatives to the wonders of mechanical world” (Elliott 732). The skepticism subsequent to the anonymity implicit in the commercialism of American culture made it possible “[t]o maintain secure intellectual identities in the free exchanges that constitute the democracy of ideas” (ibid.). This rejection and skeptical attitude of the anonymity of industrial life placed emphasis on a response which aimed at the simplicity found in the individual’s daily experience and in ordinariness. That is, the prevailing tendency to de-individualization and the subsequent loss of identity encouraged skepticism as a counteracting factor.

In his writings Cavell explores such skepticism and the tendency to negate our humanity and understands them as a necessary attitude for the “perception of weirdness”, to see the extraordinary within the ordinary. For Cavell, understanding the various manifestations of this experience of the ordinary can lead to an inner comprehension of reality in the individual and a recovery of moral values. Very found in the epic the moral value of the hero’s common sentiment of identity with his people represented by the epic hero’s performance. For Stevens, nobility and imagination help the individual to attain order within his perception of disorder in the real world. For Cavell, common sense, on which we build “our ordinary beliefs of the world” (*Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* 22) as an ethical principle, must guide the individual in his comprehension of life experience and give a response to existential concerns related to identity and self-knowledge.

If we look back to classical sources, in which the epic sentiment in the poet's words reflects the struggle to share an identity with his people in the hero's defence of moral values, or if we learn to see beyond, with the mystic's inner view of the outer, we might learn to appreciate the importance of how "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" is produced and "exist[s] in mind", as Wordsworth so adequately puts it. The power of poetic language resides in its transmission of the ordinary experience of being as a state of intimacy between world and thought. This renewed perception of the ordinary helps us keep on thinking about the relevance of understanding the condition of our relation with the elements of common life. And in order to achieve a better understanding of this condition it would be necessary to analyze how the expression of this relation works. As we will see in Cavell's thought, in the everyday world we may find the possibility of self-recovery and the medium of a constant renewal.

Jones Very's mystical experience of life as a search for the divine presence everywhere as well as Wallace Stevens' belief in the imagination as a value and in the aesthetic power of words share the sense of a quest for certainty in the relation between nature and consciousness, something which Cavell finds in the ordinary. This is Cavell's subject matter in the collected essays *In Quest of the Ordinary*; his is an approach to the conception of philosophy in the way he thinks that it should be understood, as a philosophy of living. Many of the principles of the romantic intellectual background are part of his philosophy of life.

Literary criticism for Cavell is a way to display his belief in the possibilities of philosophy and the different ways of understanding experience. His reading of literary works and the interpretation of their philosophical meaning are relevant in this regard. His writing becomes his defence of the expression of philosophy by literary means and especially of the expression of thought. In dealing with such an abstract concept of the self and the implications of the term skepticism he displays his philosophical concerns with the romantic tradition and its intellectual legacy practically. Likewise, we could define his thinking as both literary and philosophical. His thought represents a philosophy of life that demands taking into account the different possibilities which the reading of a text, whether philosophical or literary in its content or form, may express.

Also, Cavell's criticism could be seen as a challenge. His concerns with the expression of thought become a claim on the experience of life from an ordinary language approach. His is a defence of the survival of philosophy within his view on the ordinary and grounded in the romantic idea of a relationship between nature and consciousness. Cavell's intellectual roots can be traced back by comparing and contrasting in a dialectical manner the philosophical and literary legacy of romantic thinkers and writers.

He finds in Wordsworth's interest in the incidents of common life, in Emerson and Thoreau's thinking, as well as in Heidegger and J. L. Austin's philosophy, the romantic intellectual trace which may lead the individual to see the common of life as a source for self-recovery from the loss of identity and as a source for the knowledge of human condition. Cavell's defence of the importance of the commonness of life is related to his thought of a philosophy out of the experience of life and out of the ordinary feelings derived from such an experience. These regular feelings reflect a philosophical concern: the individual's thought of uncertainty about the nature of his being. Feeling and thought match in a quest of the ordinary that tries to find a response to the individual's skeptical attitude. Human being's skeptical vision of life needs to be shifted into comprehension of it. This skeptical attitude creates a sentiment of urgency in the individual: the need of changing our vision of the ordinary "[a]s it were an argument of the self with itself" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 5). Cavell suggests the possibility to find a revealing power in the use of ordinary language and in our interpretation of the ordinariness by means of it.

Stevens' dealing with elements and events of common life in his writing shows how the effects of imagination can enhance the power of the sound of words. The faculty of imagination discloses the poet's management of simple language and its power in reflecting elaborated contents of thought. The faculty of imagination confers intellectual strength on the individual's use of ordinary language. The experience of ordinariness and its transmission through imaginative language thus become a source of knowledge. In this same way, Cavell focuses skepticism as a necessary attitude for the individual to accept the limitations to knowledge, the tendency to negation, which this same skeptical attitude causes to human being. David A. Granger comments on Cavell's conception of skepticism:

Basically, Cavell conceives of skepticism broadly as a general orientation toward the everyday world – “a perpetual dissatisfaction with human position, a demand for a God’s Eye View or Nothing, that degrades the only perspective that is actually available to us.” This means that skepticism and the quest for certainty are really two sides of the same coin for Cavell. Each embodies a desire to live beyond or transcend the natural parameters, the limits and liabilities, of the human condition. Importantly, though, he also maintains that this skepticism is in some degree inevitable given the aleatory nature of our world, where uncertainty is an inexorable part of this human condition. . . . Cavell’s aim, then, is not so much to cure us of skepticism as it is “to teach us to live gracefully (and perhaps gratefully) with it”. (172)

To comprehend the everyday world the individual needs to learn from the language which conveys ordinary things to the mind and the linguistic expression of philosophical thoughts grounded in the ordinary is necessarily mediated by the imagination. The experience of life is presented to the mind by means of the imagination. In this sense, we can appreciate Wordsworth’s influence in Cavell’s quest of the ordinary. In his “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” Wordsworth refers to the source of philosophical language as an act of communication resulting from the individual’s experience with the elements from common life. Wordsworth mentions the conveyance of feelings and notions as part of this act of expression of the ordinary with a perception renewed by the effects of imagination on it.

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; . . . The language, too, of these men has been adopted . . . because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society . . . , being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.

Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets. (Scofield *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* 7)

Language and philosophy are closely related in their use. In words the philosopher and the writer shape and match their thoughts; it is the discourse which makes it possible for them to assert their identity. On the other hand “[t]here is no philosophy present until the philosopher is *being read*” (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 19). In language the individual is acknowledging his humanity, his identity. “*Being read*” means much more than the act of reading literally. It becomes an assertion, the assertion of identity and sense of recovery through the expression of thinking which occurs in the discourse. Discourse establishes the terms on which the individual can turn a word into a moral value. In “The Claim of Reason” Cavell gives a clear definition of what discourse, in our case moral discourse, means to him: “. . . moral discourse is not singly an order of public debate on issues known and taken to be of moment, but is a form of intimate examination, you might say private, by one soul of another. It teaches us to ask not alone, What is to be done?, but as well, What am I to do?” (*Foreword* xii). For Cavell discourse implies argumentation and interpretation of the individual’s reaffirmation of his conduct by means of the transmission of moral concepts through words. Our words reveal our conduct as they stand for our thoughts and our knowledge of the world. The significance of the individual is to be found in his character, that is, in the words he utters. We probably fail in the reading and comprehension of our thinking, that is, of ourselves.

Language and discourse become philosophical means in a process of intellectual advance within the context of the ordinary. The word as a symbol of thought is the representation in mind of the individual’s perception of the common elements which are part of his ordinariness. In their call for writing writers and philosophers shape and reassert their identity as individuals. The belief in the truth of their convictions and thoughts and the will to defend them are a reflection of their identity and genius. Their call for writing, that is, their shaping in language of their thinking, evidences their trust in words for the recognition of their identity and the defence of their mind:

Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string. . . . Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Self-Reliance* 260)

In “being read” their identity (the writer and the philosopher’s) is being reasserted. Their convictions are being reaffirmed. Self-trust can help the individual to overcome the effects of the lack of belief in human being, for it encourages self-recovery and intellectual independence. However and following Cavell’s view on the need of skepticism, the tendency to negate the condition of his nature also favours a spirit of non-conformity which encourages the need to go on self-questioning. Together with this value of self-trust, the spirit of non-conformity which makes the individual unique and different contributes to preserve his intellectual independence. The individual’s belief in his intuition makes him dependent on emotions and these emotions can change according to the effects which the outer can have on the individual. For Emerson the spirit of non-conformity, which helps the individual advance intellectually, makes him unique; it confers independence on him. The loss of this feeling could, in fact, negatively affect intellectual growth. And although the need to keep on doubting and trusting his self simultaneously may appear contradictory, this is not so. On the one hand, self-trust confers the individual with the ability to live without certainty; on the other hand, skepticism protects him from the human tendency to desire certainty. Both a skeptical attitude and self-trust balance the individual’s view on the ordinary.

In reference to Emerson’s statement that a given word may raise or cheer us, Cavell alludes to the fact that writer and writing need to be read (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 23). The literary and philosophical aspects implicit in the moral discourse are to be taken into account as its significance is both in the effect of words and in the true content of the thoughts that these words represent. In his theory of poetry, Stevens deals with the relevance of truth in philosophical issues and the beauty in the sound of words in literary creations. Cavell analyzes the conditions in which philosophy and language match truth and beauty in order to bring about a context for self-recovery.

. . . a prior questions is bound to rise to the lips of a philosopher, simply the question what difference it makes, what philosophical difference, whether the countenance of speech saddens or cheers us, which are psychological matters of the *effects* of words; whereas what matters philosophically is whether what is said is true. (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 24)

Cavell's approach to the language of philosophy could be compared to Steven's concern with the language of poetry. As thinkers they both guess that the mode in which language shapes thought is a clue to knowledge. In shaping thought the individual rebuilds his perception of the world and of life as he assembles an allegory of reality through words. Both Stevens and Cavell are concerned with the relevance of language in dealing with philosophical issues. Cavell's focus is on the philosophical implications of the psychological effects of words and on the truth of their content; he believes that the philosophical and linguistic nuances in discourse attend each other. If words stand for thoughts, then the dominance of language, that is, comprehension and expression, would mean an access to mind. Emerson, Stevens and Cavell worked on the knowledge and interpretation of language in order to trespass the boundaries between thought and feeling. "The simplest words, – we do not know what they mean except when we love and aspire" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Circles* 413).

Human beings seem to have lost the capacity to use the means that help them to recognize the moral principles that confer the individual with identity. Cavell wonders about whose business it is to find a response to such skepticism and implicit in this response is a sense of recovery. The individual should learn to recover from the lack of faith in those values which enable him to have a perception of continuity between the world and thought. If the truth of our convictions is hidden within words, if they are the most immediate access to our mind, then the individual should be able to recognize the values which they stand for, and also to share the sense of identity that they represent. Human being can read the content of mind from the psychological effect of language. We should learn how to read and be read. Cavell thinks of philosophy and of literature as means for the recognition of our human nature as sensual and spiritual beings, as the possibility for self-recovery, a recovery from the drive into the inhuman or into the wish to deny humanity subsequent to the lack of values.

Furthermore, “What is romantic about the recovery of, the quest for, the ordinary or everyday?” (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 26). If that drive to the inhuman or skeptical attitude demands a recovery, this action should help the individual redeem himself, that is, recover from the loss of the inner values which may bring him toward self-fulfilment. Cavell speaks “[o]f a recovery from skepticism. This means, as said, from a drive to the inhuman” (ibid). This act of redemption should be understood as a rescue from the human drive to make ourselves inhuman. This drive is one of the main themes compelling many Romantic characters (from Ahab to Frankenstein) In the 19th century the progressive intellectual advancement of heroic actions into introspection reflected such a need for self-recovery. Romantic thought found in the hero’s introspective quest an attempt to recover the moral values which the hero shared with his people and which led him to self-fulfilment; those values represented a common and unique feeling. In Transcendentalism this universal sentiment was to be found in the observance of nature and its elements and in life events, in ordinariness and everyday habit. They made up the moral and pragmatic romantic view of life in America. Nature provided the individual with patterns of life on which he may find the essence of his existence within from without.

In Cavell’s conception of skepticism he seems to appreciate the same implicit sense of recovery and rescue in the need of a response which a skeptical attitude seems to demand. He focuses on those features in skepticism which can make of philosophy and of literary expression a redeeming source of knowledge, and particularly, how philosophy can help the individual “redeem” himself.

Cavell’s view is related to the romantic approach to the world. He believes in the romantic idea of the subjective and the objective, the sensual and the intellectual. For him, the nature of human being manifests itself in the ambivalence between a sensual and intellectual existence. He shares the conception of the nature of human knowledge as both subjective and objective. In his comparative study of the works of Kant and Emerson Cavell analyzes this ambivalence and discusses Kant and Emerson’s use of the terms of language in order to find the source of our sense of the world. In this search for terms Cavell refers to Fate and Freedom as conditions and he understands conditions as limitations. He does not use the term limitation in a restrictive sense, but as a way to preserve and secure knowledge.

The individual is necessarily attached to language for the expression and comprehension of his own character and thoughts. Cavell's concept of fate as a condition matches Emerson's concept of Fate as "laws of the world" and "irresistible dictation" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Fate* 943). By means of words the individual describes the meaning of his existence. Language shapes and limits thought and in doing so it also sets the individual's character. In Cavell's comments on Emerson's Fate he says, ". . . that what we are is written all over us, or branded; . . . that our language contains our character, that we brand the world, as for example with the concept of Fate; and then listen again to such an idea as that one's character is one's fate" (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 39). Likewise, Emerson adds in his essay: "If we must accept Fate, we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, the power of character" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Fate* 943). Freedom represents the individual's ability to be independent. The act of thinking makes him free since in thinking the individual has the power to know, and knowledge gives the individual the power to respond. The sense of freedom in Cavell is related to Emerson's conception of freedom as a rejection to any sort of imposed convictions or dogmatism. In considering ourselves as fated beings and according to Emerson's premise "Intellect annuls Fate", then our thought and language, as the expression of thinking and of our character, make us free. Cavell understands philosophy as the field which enables us to exercise our freedom and intellectual independence. The individual exercises this ability of freedom and reaffirms the significance of his existence. Cavell works on contraries in the same way as Emerson worked on opposites like fate and freedom and introduces us to his thinking as a struggle of terms for freedom. He appeals to ordinary language in order to deal with philosophical issues and their aesthetic expression, and with the philosophical expression of literary matters.

His thinking shows how both literature and philosophy can share a common humanist sentiment of uniting subject and object. This unique sentiment speaks of a claim of an experience of life that can be displayed through different uses of language in different contexts. Cavell's endeavour in the relevance of opposites is linked to his conviction that the study of the ambivalence or polarity between terms can lead the individual to comprehend the intellectual values which these terms stand for and that lead to self-fulfilment. For him, this sort of confrontation means complementariness.

Confronting philosophy and literature on linguistic terms is a way to preserve these values since words and their symbolic power stand for values. The possibility to bring these values back to life is in the interpretation of the symbolism within language, that is, in imagination. Imagination is intrinsically linked to creativity. Creativity as one of the main elements in poetry is inspired in and by the elements of the world. The close relationship between poetry and the world makes of poetry the source for this process of self-recovery. By means of poetry the poet is able to create an artistic context that is adequate for a recovery from that sense of loss of values which may lead to skepticism. Cavell sees in skepticism the source of our sense of the world as independent of us (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 37).

In western culture there seems to be a sense of loss of the interdependence between nature and consciousness. He sees in poetry the possibility for the individual to go back and recover the connection between thought and world. He understands skepticism as the individual's need to keep doubting and he finds in poetry the answer to this need as a form of redemption and recovery.

Against a vision of the death of the world, the romantic calling for poetry, or quest for it, the urgency of it, would be sensible; and the sense that the redemption of philosophy is bound up with the redemption of poetry would be understandable; the calling of poetry is to give the world back, to bring it back, as to life. (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 45)

VI.2- The Power of Language to Approach the Ordinary

After these introductory ideas to his thinking which bind the conception of the American philosopher's task to the idea of continuity between thought and world and to Emerson's influence, Cavell advances to the main war-horses of his reflections on Romanticism and in his quest of the ordinary, whose intellectual trace is to be found in the European heritage. Throughout his collected essays he tries to find support for and display his deepest philosophical concerns.⁴²

⁴²“The lectures collected in *In Quest of the Ordinary* were delivered by Stanley Cavell at Berkeley, Stanford and Vienna from 1983 to 1986” (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* vii-viii)

These concerns have much to do with the implications of the term “philosophy” not as a term whose aim is the defence or defeat of contents, but as a term that analyzes the conditions of knowledge and the conditions understood as limitations. Identifying these limitations would precisely be the task of philosophy. For him philosophy should act as a response that sets limits in order to preserve the arguments that link us to knowledge. These arguments may help us in our dealing with life as a source of experience and, subsequently, as a source of knowledge.

In Cavell’s case the philosophical arguments necessarily deal with such concepts as skepticism and the ordinary. He finds a close relationship between the terms knowledge and skepticism because they are part of Romanticism’s task, “. . . as the task of bringing the world back, as to life” (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 52-53). The action of bringing the world back to life means finding alternatives for our reinterpretation of it. It would be a return to the ordinary and an experience of the world as world. The fact that the title of these collected essays is *In Quest of the Ordinary* is quite revealing. It suggests the idea that we must search as if on a quest for something that defines our identity as human beings, but something that we have lost and must try to find along the way.

Sandra Laugier, Cavell's French translator, focuses on how Cavell "shows at once the fragility and the depth of our agreements" in language. It is a standing task to articulate and to maintain or renovate these agreements (quoted in Goodman 86). She also comments in reference to these agreements in language that “. . . we do not immediately know what our uses of language are, that our agreements are not immediately transparent or transparent at all, and that they always must be established. . . . It is no longer only a matter of a discovery or a construction of the world, but of recognizing and claiming my voice in this world” (Laugier 117). Laugier relates agreements to the idea of convention and our ability to speak together and thus to achieve an agreement in the words which directly refer to life. The agreement is not only in words but also in the elements of life which these words represent.

It is not easy to know “what we mean” or “to mean” what we say, and this is an essential element of the thought of ordinary language, which is traversed by doubt, not about the possibilities of saying but of *meaning to say*.

Thus, skepticism is the symptom of the ever-present possibility of a break in the linguistic contract, of a loss of contact with language and hence with the world. (Laugier 117)

For this purpose, Cavell experiments with the philosophical reading of different literary texts. These texts appear full of connotations that permit a renewed interpretation of their contents. Thus, when he speaks of texts of recovery,⁴³ the term with which he refers to the possibility of self-recovery in the interpretation of the interpretation of them, he looks for support for this reinterpretation in the possibilities that language may offer to philosophy. We find Cavell's genuine vision in his reading of these texts. But recovery from what? As we have seen, it is a recovery from the sense of loss and despair in the individual that is subsequent to his loss of the perception of harmony between thought and world, a perception that was so essential to romantic thought. Furthermore, Cavell argues that we need to change our view of what we understand by knowledge. He speaks of *acknowledging* instead because this term "[i]s not an alternative to knowing but an interpretation of it" (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 51). He demonstrates how the individual should learn to interpret and try to express such a difficult state as that of intuition: "Such words ['experiencing things as things face to face', 'the life of things'] mean nothing whatever . . . apart from their accuracy in wording an intuition" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* 53). If we think about how relevant the task of philosophy in Cavell's thought is, the fact of experiencing things face to face and the action of bringing the world back to life would be important means for "acknowledgement" or, as he says, for "the interpretation of knowledge".

If the discovery of America meant the discovery of a land full of new possibilities, America had the chance to begin philosophy again from a renewed vision of life provided by such a wide and genuine cultural context. According to the Transcendentalists, Americans should be able to return to philosophy by breaking with the European philosophical heritage and reformulating it according to their character.

⁴³Cavell analyzes Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner", Heidegger's "Das Ding", Wisdom's "Gods" and Wordsworth's "Intimations"

As we have seen in earlier sections, Emerson argued that the American character was grounded in the use of imagination and of language as means to search for an identity in communion with ordinary life. This kind of renewal of philosophy in America began with a renewed view of the ordinary elements of daily life and this was possible by means of the use of ordinary language. Cavell does not try to discover but to find and reintroduce again this genuine sense in the individual's use of words – one that recalls the Transcendentalists' and Stevens' idea of continuity between thought and world. The dependence on language in their view of the world makes individuals share the expression that represents their moral and pragmatic view of it so that they can subsequently share philosophical concerns derived from this experience.

The moral pragmatism in Emerson's transcendentalist thought had a strain of perfectionist commitment implicit in the possibility of recovery that the individual's renewed insight meant. For both Emerson and Cavell, the intellectual and emotional answer in experiencing daily events reflects the moral growth in the individual. For Cavell, new moral insights and responses can be found in the renewed reading of ordinary life and the familiar, that is, in the recovery of the use of language, recovery in the sense of a renewed interpretation of words, and these responses imbued with moral pragmatism encourage perfectionist commitment.

A central motif of Cavellian moral perfectionism is the idea that particular modes of affective response are necessary for moral understanding and that it is inevitably possible that new modes of response will bring fresh moral insights within reach – and will in this sense further “perfect” us. (Crary 3)

This need to return to the familiar and to the common that Emerson and Thoreau had already dealt with has much to do with Cavell's quest of the ordinary as a recovery from the loss of the use of language. Language is not to be reinvented, but to be recovered. Cavell's rereading of what he calls texts of recovery means a genuine way of reading and interpreting texts. There are many philosophical hints of Austin and Wittgenstein's influence in Cavell's reading of texts.

His focus on the use of words comes from the influence of their philosophical examination of language. "Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language" (Wittgenstein 109). We must try to find and understand moral insights in the way in which language works and in the way in which words transmit our thoughts and relate to ordinary elements. Cavell analyzes texts as in a dialectical process. He works on them in order to know more about how language functions, how we shape an intuition into words and how we work with psychological expressions. He is concerned with the use of words in the context of everyday life. The individual seems to have forgotten how to look at the ordinariness and familiar things. The study of the resources which ordinary language makes use of can help us delve into our understanding. In doing so, this means that philosophical issues could be approached by trying to understand the way in which we are bewitched by words. Linguistic resources help to intensify the psychological power of words and can become a stimulus to mind and Cavell focuses his attention on the process by which a word may instill emotional connections in mind. "The moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Nature* 23). For Emerson, language conveys nature information; speech is emblematic and metaphorical.

The individual's expression of particular meaning is assisted by natural objects and familiar things, and the image of an ordinary object furnishes us with the emotion which the memory attached to this object may bring to us. Cavell's interpretation of readings is grounded in the figurative meaning which any statement may instill in us. The allegorical power of metaphors can have a deeper moral effect in the individual. As Emerson pointed out: "Speak to his heart and the man becomes suddenly virtuous. Within the same sentiment is the germ of intellectual growth, which obeys the same law" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Over-Soul* 389). The contrast between the metaphorical and literal sense of a word leads the reader to infer its meaning. Cavell follows the steps initiated by Romanticism: he tries to work out the effects of skepticism by means of finding in the familiar, "in the quest for a return to the ordinary, . . . , a new creation of our habitat" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 53) a philosophical and linguistic response that reconsiders skepticism not as a threat or a crisis of knowledge, but as the expression of an answer.

For Cavell this answer can be formulated in the form of a quest. For him, the task of philosophy, its main objective, is not only the knowledge of the nature of the self, but also the knowledge of the nature of knowledge; it is not so important to get a final response to this matter of self-questioning as it is to encourage the individual's ability to shape the condition of knowledge in this process of seeking. Human needs, particularly the inner needs that may act as an incentive for intellectual growth, eventually change. According to the satisfaction of his inner needs, the individual's despair or sense of disbelief may be counteracted. Philosophy and language provide the individual with the necessary means to transform the demand of inner needs that lead to further knowledge into a process of self-reaffirmation that values what the individual ordinarily does. Through the expression of our thoughts in writing human beings may attain freedom, that is, the possibility to make a new sense of inherited knowledge; the management of words and the ideas that they stand for can help to change a skeptical attitude into a renewed vision of the elements of the world which inspire these thoughts and that we love. In the course of writing, the philosopher and the poet try to find that renewed view; Cavell's sense of quest occurs in the context created by the expressive power of language. The philosopher's and the poet's inner needs are transformed into a search for the new in the outer.

VI.3- "Texts of Recovery": Cavell's Philosophical and Literary Rereading of the World

Cavell's procedures in his analysis of texts are attached to his concept of ordinary language and how it works in practice.

An interesting point that Cavell makes in regard to the metaphorical expression of words is that to understand a metaphor, or to be able to give its paraphrase, we need to understand the ordinary meanings of the words first, *and then* we are able to see that the words are not being used there in their ordinary sense; we are now invited to look for the meanings of the words *imaginatively* . . . the function of metaphor opens up the meaning of words in a more or less indefinite way, so that the words can mean as much as the speaker can imagine.

. . . philosophers are interested in the case in which the speaker does not know what she means, even if she knows what the words mean in the metaphorical or literal sense. In fact, Cavell brings up the point that there are some modes of figurative language in which what the expression means cannot be stated at all, at least not in a conventional way. (Kwak 67)

Cavell analyzes how the treatment of the characters and/or the management of language can reflect the poet's and the writer's view on the conditions of humanity. The allegorical pictures which words may draw or the moral acted by the conduct of the characters in these texts may help us comprehend “. . . that it is natural to the human to wish to escape the human, if not from above then from below, toward the inhuman” (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 59). This reflection in his comments on “The Ancient Mariner” is one of many of Cavell's accounts on his defence of skepticism as a necessary attitude for recovery.

In the next sections, we will delve into the authors that have inspired Cavell's philosophical approach to literature. For him, the relation between words, the speaker's (the poet's and the writer's) sensations and thoughts, as the result of a psychological process of introspection, construes the conditions of existential intimacy, that is, it builds a relation of nearness established by means of self-questioning. This relation challenges the individual's comprehension of reality since in speech he experiences an evolution of his feelings and thoughts.

VI.3.1- Coleridge's “The Ancient Mariner”

Cavell's analysis of Coleridge's poem is a study and interpretation of the use of words in order to name the world and its subsequent effect on the condition of knowledge. The dreamlike atmosphere in the poem represents the poet's attempt to connect nature to words, as we can see in the following lines:

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idled as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean. (Coleridge *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* 108-115)

In his study of “The Ancient Mariner” Wittgenstein’s influences can be appreciated. The poetical description of human behaviour is a clear reference to the mind and it can reflect the loss of criteria, understood as criteria of judgement, which may lead the individual to a crisis of knowledge.⁴⁴ The utterance of these criteria is by means of statements; depending on their condition of true statements the human knowledge derived from them (criteria) will be identified as comprehensible and sound or acceptable. “The focus upon statements takes knowledge to be the sum (or product) of true statements, and hence construes the limits of human knowledge as coinciding with the extent to which it has amassed true statements of the world” (Cavell *The Claim of Reason* 17). Coleridge’s imaginative use of language creates the suitable context in which the statements set the plot of his allegorical poem: human understanding is defied by the natural world. In the poem, the individual attains some kind of spiritual comprehension or experiences a sort of enlightening in his attempt to understand the defiance set by the natural elements of the world and then he feels the need to share this experience with others. Cavell’s comments on the implicit sense of failure in the mariner’s act of killing the bird and its moral implications are related to his concern with the nature of knowledge.

Although the main character of the poem is compelled to tell his story time after time, he seems to be relieved in doing so. In naming his failure by means of words he tries to overcome the implications of his action on nature, the negative effects of killing the bird:

And I had done a hellish thing
And it would work’em woe:

⁴⁴“Cavell observes that Wittgenstein’s notion of a criterion is never evoked in the *Investigations* in connection with the question of our right to be certain, or our right to claim to know something. The concept is used rather in a context of reminding us of what our criteria for something are, or pointing out that we apply different criteria in different circumstances, or that our criteria are more complicated than we think, and so on. . . . Eliciting criteria is rather a matter of coming to command a clear view of our use of words, of noting how we discriminate or distinguish cases” (McGinn 210-211)

For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow (lines 90- 93)⁴⁵

The character's behaviour is charged with symbolism. In shaping into words the mariner's act on nature the poet is shaping the character's attainment of knowledge, that is, the reflection of the character's consciousness. And the mariner's attainment of consciousness is the poet's achievement of knowledge. The statement of their experience is the testimony of their self-consciousness.

Hence the poet may have cause to fear that his art is as fatal as science's; more fatal, because he had hoped to overcome . . . science's or the intellect's murdering to dissect; whereas he now finds that he had murdered to connect, to stuff nature into his words, to make poems of it, which no further power can overcome, or nothing further in the way of power.
(Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 60)

Cavell analyzes the mariner's psychological progression as a process of self-acceptance. His death-in-life is the character's penance for his killing the harmony between his and the bird's existence; it is an allegory of the rupture of the harmony between the poet's words and its representation of nature.

Coleridge's curse, like the Mariner's, was not alone to know that his suffering could not be communicated, as if it were in fact incomprehensible to others . . ., but to know that he was more radically incommunicado, a state he describes or identifies as inexpressiveness in his "Ode on Dejection". (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 59-60)

Likewise, the mariner's penance should not only be seen as a punishment, but as a way to remind us of the moral consequences of his action. In being rejected from the human world his death-in-life condition is a state of isolation, which is not different from the other individuals' isolated state in their life-in-death condition. Through Cavell's personal interpretation of this poem we are encouraged to draw our own moral lesson from it.

⁴⁵ All the following lines quoted on this section in: Coleridge *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Other Poems of the Romantic Era*.

The image of the Albatross hanging around the mariner's neck presents human and nature as one. The poet's fantasy sees both man and bird together as if they shared one fate: the loss of their own condition and their fall into the others' incomprehension:

Ah! well a-day! what evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the Cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung (lines 136-139)

The mariner's action leads him to share the bird's silence. Thus they experience and match their human and non-human nature under the effects of incomprehension. We can see here both the poet and the mariner as one: they fight to find the state in which communication with nature occurs beyond the limits of the human condition. As Cavell indicates: "It presents itself to me as a state of incomprehensibility, the state Wittgenstein's fantasy of a private language is meant to capture" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 59-60). In his poetical reflection on the mariner's emotional state, a solitude not shared by others, the poet's management of language matches Wittgenstein's definition of a private language, ". . . a language whose words refer to the speaker's immediate sensations" (Williams *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: Critical Essays* 134). This state of incomprehensibility which Cavell refers to returns to the starting point of his comments on the rime: the need to search for the mariner's motive in shooting the bird. Cavell gives this performance a romantic interpretation, ". . . the centrality of the killing of the Albatross is, rather, put in question as if it were both asserted and denied, as it is both fundamental and derivative" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 56).

The lack of motive and the will to kill are signs of a skeptical attitude: ". . . as an issue of the human denial of the conditions of humanity for which there is no (single) motive" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 57). The need to know the reason for this shooting could be related to the individual's need of self-knowledge and to the wish to know more about the condition of knowledge. In Coleridge's figure of the mariner and in what his performance represents Cavell finds the best example of how the literary and philosophical quest for the linguistic expression of a psychological process becomes an attainment of consciousness:

I close my lids, and kept them closed,
And the balls like pulses beat;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay like a load on my weary eye,
And the dead were at my feet (lines 245-249)

The state of isolation and non-communication that the mariner experiences due to the incomprehensible nature of his action matches the poet's inability to find in words the means to express the correspondence between thought and nature. Subsequently, this makes both the mariner and the poet aware of the limitations within their human condition that set them apart from the bird's innate natural condition.

Cavell's reading of Coleridge's poem analyzes the condition of knowledge in this process of awareness and self-knowledge and his view on the mariner's action is revealing. The inner should be searched for in the identity with the outer, not in the identity with ourselves. The process of awareness of this identity is a search for continuity and harmony between the inner and the outer. Breaking through the limits between human and natural conditions does not mean an act of rupture but an attempt at continuity. The mariner's act has an implicit sense of transgressing the human and crossing the line into the realm of the inhuman. "The initiating act of transgression – that which for me evokes the Fall – is the act of "crossing the line". It may be . . . that killing the bird is derivative from the ensuing drift into the cold country" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 57). It becomes an allegory of the Fall and an image of perversity. The Mariner seems to have lost self-control and fallen into temptation:

The spirit who bideth by himself
In the land of mist and snow,
He loved the bird that loved the man
Who shot him with his bow (lines 399-402)

His action has an implicit sense of prohibition. Cavell reconsiders this action as some sort of spiritual transgression that should be seen not only as perverse, but also as expected. Thus, the Mariner's will to share somehow the bird's condition and trace the knowledge of the inhuman may appear as both a perverse and intended performance.

Even though he is aware of his penance, he seems to defy the incomprehensible nature of his action. He seems to be willing to commit the crime of killing the bird in order to break his connection with the others and with human nature. However, there is an implicit sense of hope in that action of shooting the bird: the opportunity to connect to nature by making a poem out of his reflection of the power of nature in words. For Cavell this conflict, “the human effort to escape the human” (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 59), that might have led to inexpressiveness and incomprehensibility allows the poet the context to find the words to name the world. If language is the vehicle of thought, then, in naming the world, words match thought and world. And if we attach words to naming sensations, then language directly deals with the results of a psychological process of introspection. The Mariner’s suffering as a result of his effort “to escape the human” condition is translated into rejection and skepticism, but it also opens for him a trace to follow, the way to match the human condition to nature’s.

Cavell relates his conception of Romanticism to his dealing with skepticism. The mariner’s attitude could be understood as a defiant act of disobedience. Similarly, Cavell understands skepticism as a romantic manifestation of defiance and an alternative to the comprehension of the human rejection. “The idea of perverseness here suggests defiance. It, so to speak, romanticizes skepticism” (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 59). The need for an attachment of words to sensations arises from the sense of rupture and disharmony between our human condition and nature’s condition. The subsequent skepticism is simultaneously a consequence of this state of incomprehensibility and a motive to connect more closely with nature.

The comprehension of human nature means an intellectual challenge in which the individual must try to learn to recognize his limitations as a being and his implications with the world, something that inevitably conditions their intimate co-existence. “Then the Mariner’s may in this way be a message of romanticism as such, that there is such an intimacy at large, and that poetry is responsible for giving it expression. . . . the expression of our intimacies now exists only in the *search* for expression, not in assurances of it” (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 65).

In his philosophical analysis on the first of his readings of four literary texts Cavell approaches the conditions of existence of human nature and, as happens to Coleridge's figure of the Mariner, the redemption of human nature is conditioned by and attached to the redemption of the things of the world. This redemption could be understood as a return to or a recovery of the genuine condition of existence. The knowledge of natural elements avoids the destruction of the human element. "The redemption of the things of the world is the redemption of human nature, and chiefly from its destructiveness of its own conditions of existence" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 66). The romantic idea of the possibility of redemption by means of poetry is implicit in this thought, that is, the conception of poetry as a means of recovery in the search for the expression that matches the human element to nature within the context of the ordinary. This possibility implies the possibility to find a response to skepticism. Cavell traces how we can know with certainty of the existence of something. His reading of this poem leads us to wonder about the relationship between eliciting true statements of the world and judgement. He focuses on the difficulty of matching language to world. The task of philosopher matches with the poet's when they try to shape the limits of knowledge.

While Wittgenstein's claim for criteria could seem to try to counterbalance the effects of the uncertainty of knowledge, Cavell seems to find a renewed understanding of the nature of skepticism and its relation to the criteria of judgement in his rereading of poetry. "A formidable criticism of skepticism – as of any serious philosophy – will have to discover and alter its understanding of itself" (Cavell *The Claim of Reason* 38). Skeptical doubt would be attached to the need to know about the certainty of the existence of something. Cavell analyzes how skepticism expresses itself and how uncertainty and the need to doubt implicit in its expression may lead and help the individual to set the limits of certain knowledge. Coleridge's poem allegorically shapes this philosophical content into predicates. It evidences the possibility of response to skeptical doubt in bringing the limits of human knowledge to consciousness by means of words. And it does so by comparing and relating the condition of the Mariner's human nature to the condition of the bird's nature; the continuity between their natures is set as a relation of intimacy on poetical terms. In his comparison the poet is defying and breaking the limits set by judgement, breaking down the limits between world and thought.

Cavell sees in Coleridge's lines an effort to express the certainty of continuity between thought and world; for Cavell this continuity is not a mere possibility, it is a certain truth.

VI.3.2- Heidegger's "Das Ding"

Cavell's concern with the lines of skepticism and Romanticism goes one step further in his reinterpretation of Heidegger's essay "Das Ding". Cavell is also interested in writers and thinkers like Heidegger, whose work challenges us to reflect on the way in which thought was traditionally approached. His reading of this essay is in line with his concerns with the conditions of human knowledge.

The power of poetical expression in Coleridge's poem evidenced the trace of these conditions in their relation to the conditions of world and nature. As a relevant part within this trace, individuals must try to learn how to recognize themselves as human beings and as beings of the world. ". . . Heidegger is saying that in order for us to recognize ourselves as mortals, in participation with earth and sky, we must satisfy the conditions of there being things of the world" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 66).

Heidegger's essay takes into account many aspects in order to compare and describe the existence of human being and the notion of the self as a continuity and discontinuity between body and soul. He studies how human being gets involved with life and how the essence of its being is related to the way in which the individual copes with his experience of life. He focuses on the interaction between humans and objects, but he redefines the conception of the object as a thing, that is, when the common use of the object appears to us in new ways, and a new relation of nearness (when being far or near does not depend on distance) is established between us and the object/thing, ". . . Heidegger's task was much more to become aware of that, which more than anything else, can become the object of knowledge, of that which first makes the knowledge itself, questioning itself, or thinking itself possible" (Gadamer 26). In this act of awareness the individual rediscovers his interaction with the elements of the world in a relation of proximity by means of self-questioning.

This complementariness between the world and human nature makes the redemption of them, or the recovery of the necessary conditions for their existence, possible in a linguistic account of their being within the context of everyday life. This linguistic account of their complementary relation, worldly-human condition, connects the essence of being to thought. In the expression of our thinking we manage to connect the term “being” to both human and natural conditions. In Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” we can see how he locates the existence of being in the connection between thinking and language. McNeill describes Heidegger’s connection in the following manner:

We are still far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough. We view action only as causing an effect. The actuality of the effect is valued according to its utility. But the essence of value is accomplishment. To accomplish means to unfold something into the fullness of its essence, to lead it forth into this fullness – *producere*. Then only what already is can really be accomplished. But what “is” above all is being. Thinking accomplishes the relation of being to the essence of the human being. It does not make or cause the relation. Thinking brings this relation to being solely as something handed over to thought itself from being. Such offering consists in the fact that in thinking being comes to language. Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying. (239)

In coping with the things of the world by means of this connection between thought and language the individual is calling attention to the affinity of the multiple experiences of the world: the experience of thinking matches the experience of language. And to reach the essence of things we should first think of them just as the things that they are and recognize their condition as things of the world. Heidegger’s essay displays how the way in which things are presented is determinant. He focuses on the relevance of how the individual approaches ordinary objects. For Heidegger the individual’s feeling and language of his experience of ordinary things is more relevant in order to comprehend the world than the scientific thought of it.

He discusses the interdependence between things as objects (ordinary objects independent from us), our attitude as humans to them and the context in which both human and object interact.

When and in what way do things appear as things? They do not appear by *means* of human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents - that is, explains - to the thinking that responds and recalls. The step back from the one thinking to the other is no mere shift of attitude. It can never be any such thing for this reason alone: that all attitudes, including the ways in which they shift, remain committed to the precincts of representational thinking. The step back does, indeed, depart from the sphere of mere attitudes. The step back takes up its residence in a co-responding which, appealed to in the world's being by the world's being, answers within itself to that appeal. A mere shift of attitude is powerless to bring about the advent of the thing as thing, just as nothing that stands today as an object in the distanceless can ever be simply switched over into a thing. (Heidegger 179)

Our experience of things as a result of our perception of them, set within the context of space and time in which this experience occurs, provides things with a particular character, since the individual's condition establishes a correspondence with the condition of things in this act of perception. Thus we can think of our own condition as beings of the world and we can also learn to think of ourselves in another way; this may help us recognize our human condition in communion with the condition of things.

The individual's innate condition of humanity is linked to the nature of things, although their conditions, the individual's and nature's, may appear as set apart: the Mariner wanted to share his human condition with the bird, something which seemed inexpressible within the context of nature's world; the Mariner needed to share his fate with the bird's in a world that seemed to set their worldly experiences apart since the moment their speech arose incomprehension.

Cavell's concern with the task of Romanticism as a need to change our way to save things by means of a change in our way to think about them reaches a turning point in his analysis on Heidegger's essay, ". . . roughly, that the recall of things is the recall, or calling on, of humanity" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 67). Heidegger's "Das Ding" is a quest for the being out of which the essence of human being and the essence of the things of the world grow. Heidegger's idea of the thing as a means of uniting could be compared to the romantic view of continuity between world and thought and to the concept of gathering in animism, all of them as a reflection of interaction between the elements of the world and human being in thinking. This interaction would depend on our interpretation of the world and on our expression of it. In order to make this interaction possible, there should be suitable conditions for it, which would mean the need to abolish the limits between worldly and human conditions of existence. To attain this closeness or overcoming of boundaries we should learn to look at things in other ways. This sort of closeness is in the possibility of finding a dialectical nearness between the nature of things and human nature. Cavell's reading of Heidegger tries to find this possibility of kinship between thinking, language and philosophy, for he believes that ". . . [t]his redemption can happen only poetically" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 66). "The voice of thought must be poetic because poetry is the saying of truth, the saying of the unconcealedness of beings" (Heidegger x). From these words we can deduce that both thinking and poetry dwell in proximity.

If we step back into the mystic's inner interpretation of the outer and the philosophy of life related to this thinking, like the romantic concern with self-knowledge out of the intuitive observance of the world, it is possible to reconsider the conception of an introspective view of the experience of life as a source of knowledge; we can see how both rational reflection in and the irrational experience of the world need thinking. "Philosophy as a rationalist creation, detached from life, is powerless; mysticism as an irrationalist experience is purposeless" (Caputo 7). The complementariness between them is possible in thought. This complementariness could be feasible by means of the dialectical nearness which poetry creates. "To understand how man may think in this way, recalling to mind the being that has, according to Heidegger, long been concealed in oblivion, one must understand the nature of the language by which thinking is able to say what it thinks" (Heidegger x).

Cavell sees how relevant for these dialectical conditions the mediation provided by poetry is, with which the growth into knowledge and the advance in thinking are possible. Cavell's concern with the skeptic's concern with the existence of the external world is connected with the demand for a proof of the existence of something related to perceptual cognition, or to the things of the world. The skeptic seems to demand a justification of the belief in the external world. He doubts whether things are as he experiences them to be. Cavell is convinced of the ability of speech to find a renewed comprehension of concepts, especially when we move these concepts into a different context. His rereading of texts is an attempt to find a new view of rational justification. His is an attempt to establish a new relationship between the reader, the text and the context.

Cavell's analysis of Heidegger's text and Heidegger's idea of the thing as thing, gathering or uniting something or other (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 68), encourages the reader to think about the need and the kind of relationship between the individual as a being and the things of the world. This sort of relation could be understood as an idea of coherence, in which our way of dealing with things and our way of inquiring into them may help us find the evidence whether the world is as the individual experiences it to be. In Heidegger's case language, and particularly poetry, may help the individual measure the relationship between his being and the world in terms of closeness. The creative and artistic response to our experience of things would try to capture the essence of their being. Language and reality work together in our understanding of the question of being. Cavell's dealing with the effects of skepticism as a response to the quest of shaping the conditions of knowledge is simultaneously an act of shaping the individual's condition of his own nature as a being.

Cavell's approach to Heidegger reflects Cavell's quest for the nature of being within the context of the individual's relation to the things of the world. The way in which we as human beings understand the world and think of it is mainly set on linguistic terms. What we say in words underlies our thinking and our experience of the things of the world.

We have lost our sense that what is said in one word, *this* word, may well underlie everything which is worth thinking about, that the question of Being is indeed the question of meaning per se, and that a failure to respond to the question of what it means “to be”, to take it as settled or as merely meaningless (an “empty” word, a “vapor”), is to fail in our calling as human beings, or, more properly, as “Dasein”. . . . For Heidegger the question of Being is a question about language because meaning itself, the way we understand the world as the home for our own “to be” is constituted *by* language. As Heidegger says famously in a later essay, “language is the house of Being”. (Polt 126)

Our own nature is conditioned by the nature and condition of the things with which we share our existence in the world and in both cases, human being’s and the things’, language makes possible the expression of the conditions for their existence. Words represent the way we understand the world and our experience of it. The expression of this experience of existence in harmony, as an experience of human being and the things of the world sharing one nature, conceals an implicit sense of continuity in their condition of being. By means of our perception of the things of the world our thinking is pervaded with a feeling of continuity, as we all share the condition of beings of the world. “For Heidegger, the world was not . . . a realist object outside of consciousness, but [...] a space of meaning that, phenomenologically speaking, was bound up with human existence” (Woessner 205). This idea of Heidegger’s view of the world as a space of meaning that is connected with human existence matches Cavell’s claim on the relevant role of the mechanisms of ordinary language for acknowledging, that is, for integrating the individual’s and the world’s condition of existence. Cavell’s concern with human being has much to do with his concept of skepticism as the need to know about the certainty of the existence of something and therefore the will to get involved in the knowledge of the self by means of understanding our ways of dealing with ordinary life.

Cavell emphasizes the role of what he calls “acknowledgement” in our dealing with others – a willingness to see others as capable of making claims on our considerations; from his perspective, scepticism about other minds presupposes a distorting vision of ourselves and our involvement with others. (McManus 24)

Skepticism could be seen as an attitude to renew our approach to the knowledge of the nature of the self so that we can better understand the conditions of the existence of being. In this way skepticism does not mean negation or rejection, but the affirmation of a renewed willingness to know and to get involved with claims that mean a revision of the ways through which we have an access into knowledge, and one of these ways means acknowledging, that is, accepting or integrating the elements of the world as part of our existence or presentness. As Tim Milnes explains:

For Cavell, knowledge cannot be abstracted from its interpersonal basis, from the act of *acknowledgement*. . . . skepticism is depicted by Cavell not as a paradox or as a cruel maladaptation of reason, but as a thoroughly human *tragedy*, one through which we must pass in order to appreciate that the ‘presentness’ of the world to us ‘cannot be a function of knowing’, but must instead ‘be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged’. (59)

This access into knowledge as an “act of acknowledgment” is as wide as the multiple possibilities which the mechanisms of language offer to the individual’s mind. These mechanisms help to integrate the meaning of the things of the world by making them part of our consciousness and an essential part of the comprehension of our existence.

In Emerson’s words, the skeptic in his attempt to comprehend his existence and in questioning any existing order would find himself in the previous stage to intellectual growth:

Skepticism is the attitude assumed by the student in relation to the particulars which society adores, but which he sees to be reverend only in their tendency and spirit. The ground occupied by the skeptic is the vestibule of the temple. Society does not like to have any breath of question blown on the existing order. But the interrogation of custom at all points is an inevitable stage in the growth of a superior mind, and is the evidence of its perception of the flowing power which remains itself in all changes. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Montaigne; or, the Skeptic* 702)

If we tried to find an intersection between the romantic discourse on self-consciousness and Cavell's concern with the relevance of how we read and interpret this discourse, it would be the role of language in shaping thought and particularly poetry as a key instrument of interpretation.

VI.3.3- Wisdom's "Gods"

The individual does not reject an argument on the conditions of knowledge when he appreciates in this argument the possibility to be confirmed as right or reasonable. Regarding this, Cavell analyzes Wisdom's "Gods" as a proposal of a new view of rational justification on the ground of how we project our emotions. Wisdom studies whether the individual's feelings towards the natural elements and the linguistic treatment of these feelings may suggest an appropriate or inappropriate attitude related to their reasonableness.

He metaphorically describes a situation in which the individual's sentiment towards nature may derive into the suspicion of pathetic fallacy. The difference between how two people feel about the conditions of existence of a garden (depending on whether there is a gardener who looks after it or not) and what they call this garden raises a suspicion as to who is right. Wisdom also argues that if this is the only question that really matters, then would it be adequate to wonder "what is reasonable"?

For one of the two people involved in this imaginary situation, for the skeptic, the projection of emotions would become unacceptable in order to confirm or grant the existence of the figure of an "unseen and unheard" gardener who supposedly looks after the garden. The other believes in his existence because of the manifestation of his presence through his works. How can the belief in this gardener be confirmed?

The other man says "No, someone would have heard him and besides, anybody who cared about the plants would have kept down these weeds"

The first man says "Look at the way these are arranged. There is purpose and feeling for beauty here. I believe that someone comes, someone invisible to mortal eyes. I believe that the more carefully we look the more we shall find confirmation of this". (Wisdom 45)

The evidence of the gardener's existence is not supported enough by the fact that the garden keeps on growing or keeps on being grown. Both people make use of the same language in order to defend their beliefs, but each one gets a distinct outcome. One's belief is evidenced by the senses and the other one's is evidenced by his faith.

The Believer, therefore, finds himself engaged in a "language game" in which his best (indeed his only) shots are ruled illegal. His faith-sponsored "evidence" is systematically discounted in favor of sense-sponsored "fact". Had the tables been turned, had the Sceptic been forced to argue his disbelief under the rules of God-talk, the jungle encounter might have had an entirely different outcome. (Merrill 9)

Their use of language becomes a language game in which both speakers try to demonstrate their search for truth as valid. And this seems to depend only on how they use words. The validity of the existence of the gardener seems to remain in the acceptable expression of a logical thought. Language fits the interpretation and is able to change our interpretation of a circumstance. Cavell's reading of *Wisdom* challenges us to wonder whether language can even manipulate reality and our comprehension (our attitude and feelings) of it. "Wisdom presents the parallel as showing how an explanatory hypothesis, such as that of the existence of God, may start by being experimental and gradually become something quite different" (Rundle 7).

Subsequently, would our knowledge and its sources be linked to observable things, or, on the contrary, should we admit as valid the individual's consciousness of a reality whose meaning exists independently from the empirical experience? Our sense of knowledge seems to lie within a crossing point between the reflection on what is known and apparently seems to be logical and on what may appear unconventional. Our use of words could make language the answer to this question and the link between the logical and the unconventional. Certain insight may appear as revealing and valid when it may offer us a new understanding of the significance of reality, independently of the fact that the empirical experience is complete.

In “Gods” Wisdom says that the issue of God’s existence is no longer an “experimental issue”. He means that it will not be settled by experimentation and data gathering, and in this precise sense is not an experimental hypothesis. . . . it nevertheless could still be a meaningful issue. . . . meaningful issues in various areas of life can arise and be intellectually pursued after all the data are in, after all the particulars are known. (Kellenberger 69)

Although the believer’s attitude seems to be inappropriate to the skeptic, he (the believer) does not refuse to go on to project his emotions as something valid to defend his hypothesis despite the unconventionality of it. It is in their language game, directly connected to emotions and thought, where both speakers evidence that the treatment that they give to reality by means of words can alter our view of it. The creativity in language may offer the individual the adequate interpretation for both empirical experience and an insight of reality, that is, for that which is logical and for what may appear as unconventional, that is, for what needs to be seen from within, like in the mystical experience, or from an intuitive observance of the world, like in the romantic premise for self-knowledge. If we try to connect this idea with romantic thought, we can see that the moral pragmatism which Transcendentalism introduced did not reject the idea of God. With their philosophy of life, Transcendentalists, who could not deny their religious background, were the best example that God was the center of creativity in the individual’s relationship to the world, but they also worked on the idea that human creativity could have a parallel meaningful role for the significance of reality.

Creativity as the ability to mould and adapt our expression by means of our choice of words in order to interpret our experience of the world produces the discourse which reflects our identity. It is here where the discourse becomes a text of self-recovery. Is the world as the individual experiences it to be? The way in which human being understands the condition of its existence in relationship to the world and thinks of it is set into words and closely linked to its reading, that is, and paraphrasing Heidegger “. . . [la]nguage is the house of Being” (qtd. in Polt 126). In his reading of “Wisdom” Cavell shows us how our view of the world can be challenged by the individual’s use of language and how this vision is also conditioned by its reading.

VI.3.4- Wordsworth's "Intimations"

In his analysis of Wordsworth's "Intimations" Cavell's reinterpretation of the pathetic fallacy, particularly its genuine connection with a figurative way of speaking which might communicate a false impression in describing natural elements, is set within the context of the wide range of possibilities of comprehension that the study of the communication between objects and the things of the world may produce; he sees a means to grow into knowledge in this kind of communication, or more precisely, he tries to seek the mechanisms that the path of nature offers to us in order to speak of a sort of knowledge which cannot be spoken by means of words. The transmission of this kind of knowledge would be by means of the elements of nature as if they spoke to us. As we read through Wordsworth's lines we understand how nature can instill the poet with such deep thoughts. The result of this experience is not only that the poet is telling us whatever sentiment the contemplation of natural elements inspires in him, but it is also the subsequent effect of the awakening of the same deep thoughts and feelings on us as readers in sharing his view of nature.

Cavell's dealing with the poem has a purpose: to make us see the evolution which the poet himself experiences in his speech with nature; the poet's view and comprehension of the feelings and thoughts which natural elements instill in him shows a return from his view as an adult to the eyes of a child. There is an implicit sense of recovery within this genuine vision of the individual's experience in nature.

Cavell wonders whether the communication with objects representative of a pathetic fallacy, the fact that the poet could speak of feelings in natural elements, is as acceptable and accurate as the contrary, that is, the fact that we are spoken to by nature.

The adult's reflection on his experience of nature through the child's original view reveals the main issue in the poem: the poet's wish to speak about a kind of knowledge which is wordless. The nearness to natural elements makes our communication with them easy and thus gives us an access to this sort of knowledge which the objects of the world may reveal. In this poem we can appreciate Wordsworth's reconstruction of the ordinary and his influence on Cavell.

Communicating with the objects of nature would mean being able to understand the truth which they may reveal. The expression of this truth would be the expression of the works of nature as a result of our closeness and intimacy with such natural elements. The acquisition of such an intimacy would be subsequent to the individual's evolution in his experience with nature. Moreover, this evolution has an implicit sense of growth, that is, the growth into maturity of the human mind from childhood to adulthood. And this growth into maturity might simultaneously have an implicit sense of rebirth. With this rebirth the individual becomes part of a process of recovery of something that seems to be gone; human being is born again as a child who might recover, return to or remember a condition which has been lost or forgotten: the ability of imagination.

Seeing life through a child's eyes allows human being to abandon that state of disillusionment, which the adult may eventually have fallen into, and permits the individual to feel relieved in the thought of the possibility of returning to the feelings and the view of the things of the world that are only to be found within a child's vision. The child's condition of intimacy with all that constitutes his world awakens within the adult's thought of the world. The individual feels the need to recover from the sense of loss which the incomprehension of worldly things may in the course of time create in him, and needs to utter the genuine vision of the splendid which in his lines Wordsworth constructs out of the ordinary, the poetical view of this rebirth to knowledge.

In his reading of Wordsworth's poem Cavell sees the image of earth as an omen, which he understands as "open to interpretation by us"; the possibility of communication with all the objects that are part of earth is mediated by our nearness to them, having access to them, "like rooms that communicate with one another" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 71-72). The poem poses a task for the intellect, "a psychological task" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 74), when the poet encourages us to recollect the dream of life and to participate in the child's game of playing with creative inspiration. Cavell is calling our attention to what Wordsworth seems to lament through his lines: the loss of imagination, the decline of creative power, the power which the feeling of joy inspires in the individual and becomes essential to the mind and to the universal sentiment of harmony with nature.

Wordsworth's distress for this lack of creativity as well as Cavell's genuine claim for skepticism in his rereading of texts become the conditions of change. The change comes out of "recollection" in the poet's words or out of "a quest of the ordinary" in Cavell's terms. The poet's lines encourage us to learn to recollect and recover interest: the ability to change and reconstruct a new vision within the ordinary. We must see through the child's eyes and get this childish view back with the splendour that remains in it.

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now forever taken from my sight,
 Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
 We will grieve not, rather find
 Strength in what remains behind,
 In the primal sympathy
 Which having been must ever be,
 In the soothing thoughts that spring
 Out of human suffering,
 In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind (Wordsworth *William Wordsworth*.
Selected Poems 180-191)

The sense of recovery which these last lines express, "radiance, splendour, grass, glory, flower, strength, sympathy, faith", is the conception of recovery which Cavell focuses on in his analysis of texts. The philosophic mind hides behind the child's observance of the world.

Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind (Wordsworth *William*
Wordsworth. Selected Poems 110-113)

He looks within, not without. The poet's eyes are the philosopher's eyes. Both look into their experience of life, their heritage, with the interest of a child. If in Emerson's words "the sun . . . shines into the eye and heart of the child", we should agree that in Wordsworth's and Cavell's thought the simplicity of childhood may reflect the individual's wisdom.

Cavell's selection of the four texts, philosophical in the case of Heidegger's and Wisdom's and literary in the case of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's, for a comparative analysis on the issue of skepticism poses one of his main concerns with Romanticism: the connection between the realm of mind and the realm of matter set in philosophical and poetical terms, a connection which matches the relation of the individual to the world. In this relation it is fundamental to comprehend the reasons why the individual becomes skeptical about the conditions of existence of the elements of the world on the ground of the senses and on the ground of mind.

There is an implicit sense of denial in the difficulty to comprehend the conditions which define and delimit the individual's nature as a being and which also determine his relation to the things of the world. Cavell appeals to how these conditions work according to the individual's experience of life.

Cavell collects the main conclusions of his reading on what he calls texts of recovery in "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 153). He thinks of skepticism and its moral as a matter of acknowledging. For him, skepticism is not a threat in the sense that it has implications of loss, but it is itself a response to that threat of loss. The individual needs to acknowledge the power of ordinary language to track the intimacy of words with the world. The sense of loss of intimacy with the world comes from the sense of the existence of the world as separate from the individual's existence. Emerson's insistence on the relevance of the individual's presence in nature would have much to do with Cavell's idea of acknowledging the world's existence by means of ordinary language. "I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Nature* 10).

The individual's proximity to the elements in the world and the everyday would imply the possibility of closeness to the knowledge of his condition as a being. The individual would find a way to reassert and reconstruct his nature by means of the things in common between the world's and his own existence.

I said that the new philosophical step in the criticism of skepticism developed in ordinary language philosophy is its discovery of skepticism's discovery, by displacement, of the everyday; hence its discovery that the answer to skepticism must take the form not of philosophical construction but of the reconstruction or resettlement of the everyday. (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 175-176)

The presence of the elements of the world is in the presence of language, which represents the world's and the individual's existence in correspondence. The individual may try to assert himself by means of ordinary language and before the impossibility of doing so, skepticism could be understood "as the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by" (Cavell *In Quest of the Ordinary* 154).

In his sketch of different texts Cavell tests them as resources of different views and sets up a practical thought of what he considers the power and capacity of the extraordinary within the ordinary. Ordinary language permits the individual to name the world; it represents the possibility to express in words our relation to the world; it means that we may find in language and in literature – by means of the artist's creation, through the hero's actions and in the poet's words – the response to the necessary threat of skepticism. Philosophical concerns with the individual's condition of existence have its answer in the intimacy which the artist creates between thought and world in his literary work, that is, in finding the odd within the ordinary. The individual's need to explain the world is associated with his demand to know, or better, to acknowledge the condition of his existence and his own nature in relation to the world. This need of acknowledgment is thus part of a process of intellectual growth which makes the individual's experience of intimacy with the world a spiritual task. This sort of intimacy is conditioned by the intimacy of the words with the world.

American Transcendentalism and Emerson's work as well as romantic thought were in themselves a response to skepticism. They discovered in the ordinariness of language and in everyday words the possibility to recover the lost intimacy with the world which the dissatisfaction that skepticism represents claims. Within the experience of life the observance of everyday elements and its representation by means of speech conceal an intellectual process.

There is a correspondence between ordinary language in literary works and ordinary language philosophy in the sense that both work for the representation of thinking. Cavell analyzes thinking through poetry, how the lines of thought are immersed in the speech of the individual's experience of the elements of the world and how the language of poetry gets the individual to think. The aesthetic purpose of a literary work, particularly poetry, fuses with the intellectual purpose of philosophy. Both try to articulate their perception of beauty as a sense of harmony out of the experience of the ordinary elements, out of the thought of the world.

The poet, whose words expressed a sentiment of unity with the condition of the natural elements of the world for Transcendentalists, as well as the mystic, whose sensual perception involved a spiritual comprehension of nature, both share the experience of the existence of a common sentiment; the same unique feeling which the epic experience and the hero's deeds instilled in his people, the same one which the view of flowers brought indoors by a stranger or which the observance of the jar and the hill outdoors in nature might inspire; a universal feeling shaped in the fusion of the sound of the sea and the woman's voice or in the image of man and bird together in their incomprehension. All these creative experiences are born from the individual's need to know about the certainty of his nature, they arise out of that sceptical attitude which encourages human being's will to know about and to express the condition of its existence.

VII – THE CREATIVE ANSWER: UNDERSTANDING THE CONDITION OF BEING

As we have seen, this dissertation aims to demonstrate that the path towards self-knowledge lies in the creative response that grows out of the interaction between philosophical thinking and literary production within the American intellectual context, mainly within poetry in our case, during the 19th and 20th centuries. We could draw a line of the progression in thought and art in following the work of thinkers and artists who share a common sentiment instilled by the individual's need to know about the condition of his existence and encouraged by the eventual change into introspection in the individual's view of the world. The concepts of mysticism and imagination will likewise have a deep influence in the development of such a creative response. A mystical experience, mental and emotional, induces an attitude of reflection and contemplation of the world. Imagination encourages creativity as it allows the individual's interpretation of such an inner experience of the outer by means of symbolism. Both terms, mysticism and imagination, and their treatment throughout centuries play a key role in the individual's process of self-recovery. In studying its etymological evolution in the first sections we found that the meaning of mysticism was intrinsically linked to philosophical and religious concerns which aimed to apprehend such an abstract concept as the concept of being. In the classical world and in the Middle Ages the concept of being, the Soul, or the self, had to do with irrational connotations or non-empirically grounded premises. In many cultures and eras the individual has wondered about the possibility of the spiritual condition of his existence; he has always questioned the nature of his self. Philosophical and religious concerns were part of the process of awareness embedded in a mystical experience and, in this case, part of a process of self-awareness. As we saw in Section I, according to the philosophical and classical tradition, mysticism and, subsequently, a mystical attitude were related to an act of contemplation and meditation that was not limited to the senses or to a physical apprehension of the world. This mental and emotional experience would evolve and would come to be understood as a direct experience of the divine, due to the influence of the different religious practices and traditions in which the allegoric and symbolic use of the elements of nature involved in this act of contemplation shaped the individual's interpretation and thought of the world.

From the classical philosophies of Greek and Roman society to Neoplatonism and Christianity, philosophical and religious teachings insisted on the relevance of personal experience and, particularly, on an experience that may lead the individual to self-knowledge. In his apprehension of the world, the individual's experience becomes a process of sensual and spiritual awareness. But can reason and faith be compatible? Can a rational view of life, like the vision that would be taught by the spirit of the European Enlightenment, and the inherited strictly religious view of moral issues, like the one shared by the distinct influential religious practices spread all over the Christian world, work together? As I further described in this section, the fact that the mystical experience could not be empirically proved encouraged the conflict between faith and reason. But this conflict would be understood as interaction in an intellectual context that reconsidered that the religious and philosophical elements engrained in a mystical experience were complementary and contributed to a more complex understanding of the individual's knowledge concerning the nature of his existence. The discovery of the New World and the American settlements would become the perfect setting for the development of such an intellectual context and for the practice of a renewed intellectual discourse whose source of inspiration would collect the principles of a model of life grounded in religious pragmatism. The renewed religious thought practised by the Unitarians saw art and the aesthetic power of language as the possibility to achieve the expression of moral principles free from the inherited Puritan dogmatism. The founders of this new concept of life longed for a balance between man and nature, and their convictions reflected the sentiment of a people strongly determined by their belief in the possibility of a common spiritual existence. A new comprehension of the intellectual implications of mysticism would be possible under the influences of European Romanticism within these American circumstances and with the reinterpretation of philosophical principles, such as the redefinition of the concept of reason, understood as intuition. Through the experience of the senses, reason could act as an intuitive power to arrive at the knowledge of spiritual continuity between the individual and the elements of the world. Reason as intuitive knowledge had much to do with inspiration. The act of thinking of the world was going to be set into both a rational and subjective context. The comprehension of the intuitive approach to and contemplation of the world was mediated by the interpretation of the powerful symbolism of natural elements.

Imagination allows human being to understand the symbols in nature and to produce an artistic and creative answer to the act of contemplation of the world. The inner interpretation of the outer conveyed to the individual the feeling of the possibility of continuity between world and thought. Imagination instilled by the inspiration in natural elements gave access to spiritual truth. Inspiration not only meant the feeling instilled in the individual's mind by the contemplation of the outer, but the inner experience of that truth. The mystical heritage which favoured the introspective view of sensual experiences strengthened the individual's ability of imagination. This change in the individual's understanding and interpretation of the world led him to a new attitude towards life. The intellectual progress based on the knowledge of the mind found in mysticism a source of knowledge founded on the thought of life as a union between sensuality and spirituality. The possibility of a spiritual condition in the individual's existence would find its expression by means of imagination.

In Section II I focused on how within this context of change to a new sensibility in the individual's view of life American Transcendentalism arose as an intellectual movement with philosophical and religious concerns which focused on the knowledge of the mind and on self-knowledge. Some of the tenets in the transcendentalist view of the world made mysticism the pragmatic concept that would eventually be attached to the ability of imagination to produce a creative response leading to a better comprehension of existential concerns. The new American land provided the context for the individual's belief in the possibility of the physical and spiritual condition of his identity which underlies his relationship with the elements of the world. Imbued with this spirit of compatibility between the practise of faith within a liberalized religious thought and Enlightenment ideas, transcendentalists encouraged their renewed view of the mystical experience as the means for a new interpretation of the experience of life. For them, the maker of a creative answer to this experience of knowledge was the poet. Like the mystic, the poet became the interpreter of such a process of awareness which could be comprehended as a process of growth. This process meant growth as it reflected the individual's ability to adapt to the conditions of his existence. "The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold. . . . For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always to be waiting for its poet" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: The Poet* 450).

Emerson's words refer to the relevance of the poet as the one able to "unfold", to reveal in his poetical discourse "a new thought", the growth of a moral sentiment; "the experience of each new age" is part of the process of intellectual growth in which the individual's need to know obtains a response, like a "confession" coming in from without, in which the outer responds to the inner connecting thus world and thought. In the following section we saw how the interpretation of the mystical attitude as an individual experience in which mind, reason understood as intuition, and imagination interacted with each other. This interaction would gradually derive into a practical use of philosophical contents and literary means whose artistic expression tried to shape a creative response to the nature of being. This creative response might not seem significantly different from any other artistic creation, but it is. This artistic answer, product of the action of imagination on such an inner experience of the world, discloses the state of linkage of matter to thought as a flow of the same condition of being. The practical use of imagination thus stands for a rich and concrete source of knowledge. Furthermore, this practical use finds its most acute expression in the poet's words; the sensual experience of the natural elements of the world instills in the poet an attitude towards reflection and the awareness of a spiritual condition in the individual's existence; in this act of contemplation of the outer an insight of continuity with the world pervades his thought.

The poet gathers the qualities of a mystical attitude, intuition and imagination, which permit him a new apprehension of the world. His words are the aesthetic means for the transmission of a renewed experience of life which offered human being the possibility to find the individual's self-fulfilment in the correspondence between man and nature. Within the American transcendentalist concept of life the poet becomes the representative of a universal feeling of uniqueness. Although this sentiment (that there is a common condition of existence between matter and thought) has been shared by philosophers' thoughts and has been present in the arts through the ages, it becomes particularly revealing not only in American transcendentalist thought in the 19th century but also in the 20th century because it opened a path to find answers to existential matters which could not have been found in religious and philosophical disciplines. In America, the possibility to progress in the knowledge of the condition of being was to be found in the adequate interpretation of practical knowledge and the means of expression of this experience of self-fulfilment.

In the transmission of thinking and with the expression of feeling respectively, philosophy and literature are complementary fields which interact in an intellectual debate. Words stand for knowledge and we must learn to interpret their content. Hence the importance of symbolism and the use of imagination as part of the romantic European intellectual heritage. The advance in the individual's knowledge of his existence becomes dependant on the adequate argumentation between thought and feeling. Language mediates their accessibility and universality. Within this intellectual framework in the 19th century, American romantic thought furnished the adequate philosophical and literary context for mysticism to advance as a practical exercise of interpretation of the experience of life in the wide cultural conditions which the American setting offered. Due to the strong influence of faith within the American vision of the world, that is, within the inherited Puritan religious view of life, the individual's awareness of his condition as a being was understood in terms of a personal progression to spiritual knowledge. This view of the spiritual condition of existence as part of a process of intellectual growth would eventually be supported by works in philosophy and literature as complementary fields. That is, human being's interpretation of its existence could progress by the correspondence between philosophical issues and their literary transmission. The debate on the condition of existence could be argued from a philosophical view by literary means. Transcendentalists and the inheritors of this transcendentalist thought and view of life in the 20th century evolve towards the development of a discourse for a renewed reading of ordinary life experience. Human being supposes continuity between the existence of the exterior world and its own existence as a spiritual being. The evolution in the thought of the world is thus reflected in the creative product of an artistic process and in the artistic careers of those who share the vision of a universal sentiment of continuity between world and thought.

In section IV I tackled with Jones Very's creative literary production, which was representative of this feeling of continuity. On the one hand, he thoroughly dealt with the possibility of union between matter and soul, a sentiment steered by his deeply religious beliefs that was reflected in his poetry. On the other hand, a parallel feeling ran in the treatment of philosophical matters in his works in prose; he shared the American transcendentalist tenet of the possibility of union between world and thought.

The development in human being's interpretation of its existence was portrayed by the advance into introspection through a new understanding of the epic spirit. This action echoed the change in the individual's interpretation of his nature as a being. Very's philosophical and literary analysis on the epic shows how the literary dealing with the traditional and classical epic hero as an individual of outer actions moved into a representation of a hero of inner deeds, something that reflected the epic poet's progression to an inner interpretation of the conditions of the individual's existence in harmony with the elements of the world. For Very, this change took place with Christianity and the shift of interest to the inward, intellectual life, to the conflict within the individual soul. The poet became then concerned with existential matters which made him wonder about the nature of his being and the conditions of a spiritual existence. The poet depicted this change in the hero's concerns and in the moral patterns that used to rule his behaviour; he was now the man who made use of his intuitive knowledge to share with his people an experience of uniqueness with the world. The epic poet's inner comprehension of the world was applied to the hero's performance as a reflection of the intellectual growth in human being – a growth as a necessary process to adapt to the individual's inner demands from an evidence of truth in the condition of his existence. As relevant sources for intellectual development, mysticism and imagination contributed to providing the individual's existential meaning with the evidence of truth, that is, with the necessary arguments to understand the individual's thought and insight of his outer experience of the world on a rationally and emotionally acceptable basis. In the search for the knowledge of the condition of its nature, human being has tried to find the best way to transmit thinking and feeling in order to share with others the sentiment of affinity with the elements of the world, something that the individual perceives as common and universal. Jones Very tried to portray this sentiment as an evidence of truth through his analysis on the existential concerns which progressively pervaded epic thought and matter.

Within such a conflictive intellectual context as faith and reason may imply, philosophical discussion and literary discourse find it difficult to ground the necessary and compatible premises for the expression of the thoughts and feelings related to the individual's awareness of his existence as a spiritual being. But creativity allows the individual to produce the artistic context in which such philosophical and literary contents can coexist.

The philosopher's task deals with the thinking of thoughts; the writer's task makes these ideas present before us by means of an aesthetic approach to the thought of the world. The philosophical discourse on human subjectivity must become not only perceptible as any other discourse, but a discourse representative of the individual's inner feeling of a common existence. The writer must obtain a response from the reader which confirms that he also believes in the correspondence between the thinking of the world and the world itself. The need to know about the condition of his existence is thus closely related to the individual's creativity and subjectivity. The artistic interpretation of life and its creative production had much to do with the subjectivity inherent to the mystical view of the world.

At this point we could say that the aesthetic value of artistic expression allows the individual to unfold the symbolic meaning of the literarily represented world. The individual advances in his experience of the world and learns how to interpret symbolically some aspects of ordinariness. The interpretation of words as symbols of the ordinary elements of the world means the ability to guess and deal with the wide range of values that words may stand for. The aesthetic dimension will be crucial for the transmission of the sentiment of affinity that the individual perceives in his comprehension of the world for American writers and thinkers in the 20th century who were concerned with the possibilities of interpretation in the symbolism of ordinary language. The possibility to know further about the condition of the individual's existence could now be searched through proximity to the ordinary. The elements of ordinary life reveal themselves as a source of knowledge and subsequently the possibility of intellectual growth. If the mystic "closed his eyes and lips and was ready to be initiated into a mystery" (Constantelos 176), likewise by means of imagination the individual has eventually learnt to share the poet's soul and feel the fascination with the symbolic within the experience of the ordinary. In the next section I analysed how Wallace Stevens' philosophical thought was the reflection of his intellectual search through poetical meditation on ordinary events. His quest as a poet and thinker focused on the individual's ability to imagine the links between his mind and ordinary elements of the world. In Stevens the poet's creative act becomes an intellectual experience of the ordinary. Stevens' writing on poetry displays his reinterpretation of the romantic concept of imagination as a means for the search of self-consciousness within the context of the ordinary.

He is concerned with the role of the poet and his words as a resource for self-recovery. For him, the changing conditions of the world demanded the individual's need to adapt in order to keep his intellectual growth within an experience of identity with the elements of the world. Poetic devices furnished the individual with the means of dealing with such changing conditions. Stevens understands poetry as the manifestation of imagination through words, that is, the utterance of thought and the shaping of the individual's process of self-awareness. He sees the poet's creativity as a search for the aesthetic values of words which may help the individual in his self-questioning. For him imagination creates the context in which these aesthetic values stand for moral principles, and they, words, as the aesthetic means of moral premises rule and mediate for the complementariness between world and thought. Stevens searched for a poetry which tried to understand the process of thinking. By means of imagination the individual, the poet, is able to create the suitable image, or metaphor, that can reproduce the balance between the inner procedure of mind and its experience of the outer world, for ". . . [a]rt sets out to express the human soul" (Stevens *The Necessary Angel* 30). The complementariness world-thought becomes a balance between the sensual experience and its inner comprehension.

For Stevens, the poet's insight into the ordinary conceals the answer to the condition of his existence, an existence grounded in the intellectual values which the contemplation of and meditation on the ordinary elements of the world may instill in the poet's mind. Stevens shares in his thought some of the tenets of the transcendentalist philosophy of life: intuitive knowledge, grounded in inspiration after the contemplative attitude of natural and ordinary elements, and moral pragmatism, as the individual's need of a set of moral values. For Stevens, values such as nobility can help the individual in his intellectual development. Along with the power of imagination, the value of nobility, as a value which reflects a universal sentiment in which the adherence of the world to the mind is possible, becomes a necessary premise to confer unity to the individual's intellectual process of self-making. Nobility has always been present in the hero's attitude: in his epic performance of sharing the same moral values as his people and in his advance to an introspective view of life as a means to achieve an existence in communion with all the elements of his world and his age. His noble performance shows the hero's will to adapt to the inner demands of his time and to his people's feeling of belonging.

In Jones Very's words: "What, indeed, are the writings of the great poets of our times but epics; the description of those internal conflicts, the interest in which has so far superseded those of the outward world?" (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 34) He also argues that:

We have thus endeavoured to show the inability of the human mind, at the present day, to represent objectively its own action on another mind, and that the power to do this could alone enable the poet to embody in the hero the present development of his own character, and give to his poem a universal interest. We rejoice at this inability; it is the high privilege of our age, the greatest proof of the progress of the soul, and of its approach to that state of being where its thought is action, its word power. (*Very Essays and Poems: Epic Poetry* 37)

An existence in communion with all the elements of his world and his age implies that the individual needs to keep pace with the changing conditions of its elements. The possibility of access to the world is also the intellectual path for self-fulfilment since it is in this state of thought and sentiment of a common essence in their existence, between the elements of the world and human being's, where the individual advances in the knowledge of the condition of his nature. For Stevens, poetry allows us to adapt the intellectual values to a contemporary context. The poet's imagination offers us alternatives for the comprehension of existential matters. Through the aesthetic power of words the individual can attain an intellectual commitment: the possibility of self-recovery in the wider knowledge of the nature of his being which the potential of language may offer. Stevens was aware of the relevance of imagination and moral values for the individual's experience of the world and thus for his intellectual growth. In his view, the lack of these values in its process of self-fulfilment could lead human being to an emptiness of identity. Emerson's focus on the need of the virtue of self-reliance in "The American Scholar" as well as Stevens' emphasis on the value of nobility in "The Necessary Angel" remind us that in self-trust the individual, driven by his own free will and convictions, is able to find a new intellectual path in which he can shape a universal thought and a sentiment of uniqueness, like the feeling of inner challenge posed to the hero within the epic poet's introspective view.

On the other hand, and although it might seem a contradiction when dealing with the concept of self-reliance as a premise to intellectual development, we have seen that the individual also needs to become skeptical and question the spiritual condition of his self. The need to know is necessarily linked to the need to doubt. The loss of faith and self-confidence leads the individual to wonder about the condition of his nature and to a sort of skeptical attitude which encourages him to keep on searching for the condition of his existence. In Section VI I introduced Stanley Cavell's genuine reading of poetical and philosophical texts, which shows us how a renewed romantic interpretation of the world is possible. Imagination provides the individual's search for identity with creative resources which shape the thought of the world and his experience of the ordinary. The artistic expression of the interaction between world and thought reflects the affinity between them and conceals the necessary values for self-recovery and self-fulfilment. For Cavell, the lack of an inner view may affect the individual's contemplation of the world due to a sense of disbelief in self-knowledge, that is, a feeling of negation of his own condition as a being, like a tendency to non-conformity, and also as a consequence of an excess of rationalism in his existential concerns. This tendency to non-conformity is the same as the one present in Jones Very's view of a change in the hero's will to an introspective quest for inner moral values; as well within Emerson's conception the individual's sentiment of non-conformity makes the individual independent and unique. The spirit of non-conformity encourages human being to go on self-questioning; it helps the individual in his intellectual advance.

Cavell thinks that the connection between the sensual perception and inner comprehension of the world is lost in the late of 20th century and this sentiment of negation pervades thought. For him, the experience of common life and its ordinariness conceals the set of values –resulting from the interaction between feeling and thought, values which offer the possibility of recovery of the loss of identity, that is, the loss of that sentiment of continuity in their condition of existence between the individual and the elements of the world. The individual can have an experience of the extraordinary within the ordinary. This is Cavell's philosophy of living, a philosophy on the ground of ordinary feelings. He works on the expression of thought as a literary and philosophical reading of the experience of life from an ordinary language approach.

Cavell's rereading of the literary texts reminds us of the importance of Very's claim on the need of a change in the individual's view of the world and of Stevens pursuit of the supreme fiction in the supreme poetry. Cavell transfers their literary and philosophical conclusions to the 20th century. He encourages us to reread them under a new light. With Cavell's genuine philosophical approach to his precursors's literary texts, we learn to self-question and to share their insight and, thus, we recover the lost intimacy. In highlighting the meaningful role of self-questioning and in acknowledging our humanity within such a process, Cavell rescues Very's and Stevens's endeavor with the creative answer as a path to shape the state of intimacy between the world and thought into words. Through their creativity and imagination and as artists committed to the power of language, Very, Stevens and Cavell epitomize the process of transformation in the individual's intellectual growth into self-knowledge.

An insight into those elements of ordinary life with which the individual has an intimacy can help him to appreciate the sense of his existence. He can learn to confide again in his thought and be able to overcome the skeptical attitude and the consequent loss of self-trust due to the lack of certainty in the nature of his being. In the same way as Stevens found the representation of the necessary moral premises for an approach to the notion of being in the aesthetic power of the sound of words, Cavell's comparison of philosophical and literary issues in a dialectical manner permits a change in the vision of the ordinary and offers a recourse to self-knowledge. For both Stevens and Cavell, imagination mediates the experience of life. Imagination leads to the production of the discourse of thought; language as the means of this intellectual discourse allows the individual the assertion of his identity in the expression of his belief in the truth of his convictions; it thus reflects the trust in his self. For Cavell, the clue to knowledge is in the expression of thought and feeling, that is, in the crossing point between the language of philosophy and the language of poetry.

Reality as the result of the individual's experience of perception of the world and life is made into an allegory by means of the power of imagination, whose artistic and creative expression, language in our case, permits the recovery of the faith in those values hidden in words. These values as moral principles in its philosophical interpretation and literary expression confer us with our identity and help us to recognize the sensual and spiritual condition of our being.

The individual's concern with the condition of his nature as a being has led him into a process of evolution in the comprehension of the limits between the mind and the world, and this process of advance should be understood as part of a philosophical and literary context. Philosophical interpretation of life and its literary expression help us to understand such an abstract concept as being. The individual's ability of imagination permits human being to communicate and comprehend in terms of art and beauty the expression of the real, concealed in the correspondence between beauty and truth. In "The Conduct of Life" Emerson describes Beauty as, ". . . [t]he form under which the intellect prefers to study the world. . . . The question of Beauty takes us out of surfaces, to thinking of the foundation of things" (Emerson *Essays and Lectures* 1102-1103). This conception of Beauty can help us understand the relevance of the individual's experience of beauty in his approach to the world. The artistic and creative expression out of this experience reveals the truth which the elements of the world may conceal: with this expression the individual shapes the affinity between his spiritual condition and physical existence. The individual needs to know the condition of his being. He has learned to close his eyes and read the poet's soul, whose creative answer unfolds the understanding of this condition.

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the evolution in thinking reflects how the individual wonders about the conditions for his development as a being of the world. And the individual's account of his experience of the world by means of mind remains a question rather than an answer to the condition of his existence. The hard times which the individual currently faces – economic, political, racial and environmental crises – should make us wonder whether there is any rather important point in the condition of our existence that we may be missing: are we possibly forgetting part of those relevant intellectual values and moral principles which define our nature as human beings? Are we not brave enough to try to rebuild that sense of universal feeling and shape it into our experience of life at present? Our existence becomes the result of our experience of nature and human life, and we need to go on questioning on the condition of our existence in order to keep intellectually growing:

The ground occupied by the skeptic is the vestibule of the temple. Society does not like to have any breath of question blown on the existing order.

But the interrogation of custom at all points is an inevitable stage in the growth of every superior mind, and is the evidence of its perception of the flowing power which remain itself in all changes. (Emerson *Essays and Lectures: Montaigne; or, the Skeptic* 702)

Like the poets and philosophers considered in this thesis, I believe that the mystic's insight and the romantic's imagination as representative expressions of the individual's inner thought of the world are key intellectual means to restore the sense of harmony between the condition of our existence and the world's from its state of rupture. This sentiment of harmony which has frequently pervaded and become the core of many artists' creativity and thinkers' concerns throughout time evidences the relevance of our need to know about the nature of our being.

What are we losing if we lose the poet's voice and the philosopher's thought? We may be letting a belief in the possibility of a better future fade away. Perhaps we need to learn to recognize what we reject. We should learn to accept that we must change. We should allow ourselves to be changed by the power of words and by the values that they represent: imagination makes us the artists of the world.

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APPENDIX I: RESUMEN EN CASTELLANO

Introducción: La Condición del Ser. La Necesidad de Saber.

Entre aquellas características esenciales que definen al ser humano, sin duda alguna, se encuentran el pensamiento racional y el lenguaje. Como cualidades inherentes al individuo, en su evolución se refleja la preocupación por conocer y definir cuál es la condición de su naturaleza como ser. El individuo no solo se percibe a sí mismo como un ser físico, sino también como un ser espiritual. A lo largo de la historia, este conocimiento de su ser, o auto-conocimiento, ha estado influenciado por la dualidad implícita en una percepción objetiva y subjetiva de la realidad. La realidad, entendida como la experiencia que el individuo tiene del mundo, no podría comprenderse tan solo como una experiencia objetiva a partir de los sentidos, sino también como un acercamiento subjetivo, en tanto en cuanto dicha experiencia se encuentra mediada por el pensamiento del individuo y, consecuentemente, por su interpretación interna del mundo. Se convierte en una experiencia que imbuje el pensamiento del individuo de un sentimiento de continuidad entre lo material y lo espiritual. La actitud contemplativa e introspectiva del místico junto con la expresión creativa del poeta en su visión interna del mundo serán instrumentos esenciales para el individuo en este proceso de autoconocimiento y de conciencia de sí mismo. Durante el Romanticismo en Europa y en la América del siglo XIX especialmente, la búsqueda de autoconocimiento en la percepción de afinidad entre lo sensual y lo espiritual jugaría un papel importante en el crecimiento intelectual, quedando así el conocimiento derivado de una experiencia mística integrado en el marco filosófico y poético que busca y expresa la evidencia de una continuidad entre mundo y pensamiento.

Objetivos y Metodología. Breve Visión General de Conceptos.

Esta tesis tiene como objetivo examinar los conceptos de la mística y de la imaginación en la poesía y en el discurso poético americanos de los siglos XIX y XX y su influencia significativa en el avance intelectual del individuo a través de un estudio en profundidad de una selección de trabajos poéticos y filosóficos realizados por Jones Very (1813 – 1880), Wallace Stevens (1879 – 1955) y Stanley Cavell (1926 – 2018). El discurso místico de la poesía en América, particularmente desde el enfoque introducido por el pensamiento romántico y trascendentalista, contribuyó de forma relevante a la creación de un camino hacia el autoconocimiento. La huella de elementos místicos (la meditación y la reflexión, la revelación y la intuición, herramientas clave para el desarrollo de dicho camino) junto con el importante papel del lenguaje y de la expresión se encuentra presente en las obras de muchos poetas y filósofos americanos de los siglos XIX y XX, y especialmente en los trabajos de Very, Stevens y Cavell. Finalmente, el objetivo de esta tesis será hacer un seguimiento de este proceso de autoconocimiento vinculado a la evolución y tratamiento de dichos conceptos: la mística, como actitud que dirige una mirada interna hacia la condición humana basada en la experiencia de vida del individuo y en su relación con el mundo, y la imaginación, como la capacidad de respuesta de una mente creativa a esta experiencia. La base de mi marco teórico ha sido el Transcendentalismo americano como escuela de pensamiento. Este pilar teórico ha sido complementado por trabajos críticos filosóficos e históricos que han arrojado luz sobre los conceptos clave mencionados: mística, imaginación y autoconocimiento. La metodología seguida en mi análisis ha sido así pues una lectura detallada de una selección de los trabajos realizados por pensadores y poetas representativos, desde Ralph Waldo Emerson hasta Jones Very, Wallace Stevens y Stanley Cavell, cuya producción creativa demuestra la continuidad de la tradición del pensamiento romántico y trascendentalista –la preocupación del individuo por conocer la naturaleza de su ser – dentro del marco de un discurso filosófico y literario favorablemente renovado. Aunque éstas son mis fuentes principales, también he basado mis ideas en la evolución y transmisión de la mística y de la imaginación como conceptos filosóficos y artísticos a través de los tiempos, desde el mundo clásico griego y romano hasta la tradición cristiana, como veremos en las secciones contextuales y analíticas.

Como se podrá ver a lo largo de esta disertación, demostraré la relevancia de la mística y de la imaginación en la continuidad de dicho pensamiento y de su expresión literaria en Estados Unidos, la cual se ha manifestado de forma evidente en la capacidad y necesidad del escritor de adaptar su creatividad a los cambios derivados del contexto histórico y socio-cultural del momento, fuertemente influenciado en América desde sus inicios por la tradición europea, a través de la cual se incorporaría el Romanticismo dentro del amplio ámbito y potencial cultural que implicaba el Nuevo Mundo.

Desde sus orígenes en las sociedades griega y romana y posteriormente en el mundo cristiano, la mística no solo incrementaba el interés por el conocimiento del espíritu, sino que enriquecía el intelecto. Esta especie de dualidad en el tratamiento de la mística levantaría puntos de vista opuestos en lo que respecta a su aceptación como fuente de conocimiento. La búsqueda de su identidad conlleva la expresión de una experiencia en la que el individuo persigue la transformación humana en el crecimiento del conocimiento de su ser. Los escritos místicos y sus enseñanzas mostraban la experiencia personal, resultado de una interpretación interna del mundo sensual basada principalmente en la intuición, como el camino del alma, del espíritu, hacia su cambio. En tanto en cuanto la facultad de la intuición iba ligada a una experiencia más allá de los sentidos, no podía estar vinculada al intelecto, ni a la razón. No podía ser considerada como evidencia de verdad mientras que el concepto de verdad estuviese unido al concepto de razón como facultad racional y empírica que nos permite el conocimiento del mundo, siguiendo el pensamiento de Locke. Los postulados filosóficos derivados del Platonismo contribuyeron a lo largo de la historia a una evolución de este pensamiento, incluyendo la posibilidad de que existiese una evidencia de verdad derivada de una experiencia mística como parte del contenido de discusiones filosóficas. La intuición pasaría a ser entendida con el tiempo como el sentido moral de una verdad más profunda, como sucedería en América tras la línea del pensamiento transcendentalista introducida por Emerson.

Junto con los principios filosóficos y religiosos del período clásico y durante la Edad Media, la mística, y con ella la figura del místico guiado por la intuición, contribuyeron a la comprensión de ese deseo innato en el individuo por ahondar en ese misterio que suponía la posibilidad de su identidad espiritual. Hasta el siglo XV la tradición platónica fue transmitida y preservada a través de la Universidad. Las enseñanzas derivadas del Platonismo serían incorporadas al Cristianismo a través del Neoplatonismo durante el Renacimiento y durante la expansión del Romanticismo en Europa y en América. Durante el siglo XVII la creencia de la compatibilidad entre fe y razón sería mantenida y defendida por un grupo de intelectuales de Cambridge, los Platónicos de Cambridge, pasando esta corriente neoplatónica a ser parte fundamental de la herencia cultural y filosófica que encontró su continuidad en el Nuevo Mundo. Sería en el siglo XIX cuando los Transcendentalistas en los Estados Unidos, como herederos directos de esta doctrina neoplatónica, lograrían combinar temas de índole moral y religiosa al plantear y defender su idea de Dios como la de un Ser inmanente, un modelo de divinidad accesible e inmanente en la naturaleza propia del ser humano. Con ello, el místico pasa a ser el intérprete de esta visión del mundo: su actitud contemplativa le conduce a una interpretación intuitiva del mundo sensual, el cual se convierte en símbolo de identidad espiritual. El deseo innato por conocer más sobre la condición física y espiritual del individuo evoluciona dentro del mismo contexto intelectual en el que la mística y la imaginación interactúan.

Del mismo modo en que la mística había ido adquiriendo progresivamente un papel relevante para el individuo en el proceso de conocimiento de sí mismo, la imaginación, como habilidad innata y fuente subjetiva de potencial creativo, se convierte en un recurso técnico para el conocimiento de la naturaleza humana. La filosofía medieval recogió y contribuyó a la difusión y continuidad de la idea del pensamiento aristotélico que consideraba que el conocimiento se origina a partir de los sentidos y llega al intelecto a través de la imagen. La imaginación transforma el conocimiento sensorial en aprendizaje intelectual, es decir, construye ese necesario puente entre los sentidos y la razón. Todas las reminiscencias procedentes de la influencia clásica y neoclásica en las que los conceptos de mística e imaginación adquirieron progresivamente una gran relevancia intelectual serían adaptadas por el pensamiento y obras románticos y trascendentalistas.

Dentro de este contexto, tanto el místico, como visionario que necesita transmitir su percepción interna y pensamiento del mundo como una experiencia de conocimiento a partir de la intuición, al igual que el poeta, cuyo dominio del lenguaje da forma a dicha visión interna de lo externo a partir de la imaginación, se convertirán en figuras representativas de una nueva filosofía de vida. Si el místico es guiado por una comprensión intuitiva de la realidad, la imaginación proporciona expresión artística a dicha experiencia de conocimiento, como respuesta creativa a la interacción entre mundo y pensamiento. El contexto romántico y transcendentalista de esta filosofía de vida que emerge en Europa y evoluciona en Estados Unidos proporciona un marco intelectual referente para la expresión de esa condición íntima de existencia en la relación mundo-pensamiento. Los tres autores mencionados Jones Very, Wallace Stevens y Stanley Cavell, representantes de esta línea de pensamiento, entienden y abordan la condición humana a través de la experiencia de vida del individuo y de su relación con el mundo, junto con el relevante papel de la respuesta creativa derivada de dicha experiencia, todo lo cual resulta en una visión interior y en una respuesta filosófica y literaria que tanto la mística como la imaginación facilitan.

En lo que respecta a Very, su acercamiento a la poesía se alinea con las sensibilidades transcendentalistas, junto con una visión cristiana del mundo dado su personal fervor religioso. El pragmatismo moral defendido por el Transcendentalismo domina el argumento de Very sobre la evolución de la poesía, en su caso particular la poesía épica, a lo largo del tiempo junto con la teología del momento. La suya es una visión conciliadora entre las filosofías transcendentalista y cristiana. Los conflictos humanos representados en la actuación del héroe épico ya no eran el reflejo de unos conflictos de acción, sino de conflictos morales. Very comparte con los Transcendentalistas su énfasis por la interpretación de la naturaleza y de sus elementos como metáfora del espíritu. Para ellos la mente y el espíritu, o el alma, hablan el mismo lenguaje que la naturaleza. Esta misma idea de armonía entre la naturaleza exterior y la naturaleza interna del individuo la encontramos en la producción creativa de Wallace Stevens. Very y Stevens comparten el rechazo hacia la corrupción que afecta a los elementos naturales del mundo y a la propia humanidad, como son los intereses económicos, políticos y sociales de una creciente era industrial.

Ambos entienden el discurso del poeta como el modo de empatizar con la naturaleza y como medio de recuperar esa correspondencia y existencia en armonía con ella. La poesía de Very y de Stevens es una poesía de introspección que busca la expresión del deseo interno y de la voluntad del individuo por regresar a esa condición innata de libertad, condición que ambos poetas encuentran en los elementos de la vida ordinaria y en el mundo natural. En el caso de Very, un sentimiento religioso subyace siempre en su visión pragmática de los valores morales y en su interpretación de los símbolos de la naturaleza. Para el propósito de este estudio, la elección de su ensayo sobre poesía épica y la selección de tres de sus poemas entre los muchos de su producción es debida a que estos trabajos reflejan y comparten en su contenido la línea filosófica trascendentalista que entiende el cambio de pensamiento y de percepción como claves necesarias para el desarrollo del conocimiento, y en nuestro caso en concreto, del autoconocimiento. En su ensayo, Very se centra en la actuación épica de un héroe cuyo cambio en la percepción del mundo le lleva a estar cada vez más comprometido con valores internos y morales; en sus poemas, la expresión del sentimiento común de una existencia en armonía con la naturaleza, como la que le inspira el regalo de un extraño, el acercamiento espiritual de Very hacia el mundo natural en su visión onírica de la realidad compartida entre el poeta y el alma, al igual que la comprensión del sentimiento del amor como una fuente de inspiración humana y divina, le hacen merecer ser elogiado como un místico americano representativo. No solo estuvo influenciado por el pensamiento de Ralph Waldo Emerson, sino que él mismo y su trabajo tuvieron influencia en Emerson. Very se convirtió en un precursor clave de una línea de crítica literaria histórica basada en el principio poético y romántico que consideraba el papel de la vida interior del individuo enormemente relevante para su crecimiento intelectual. Very fue vivo ejemplo del deseo interno humano por compartir todo lo que el mundo natural encierra y en el que Dios se manifiesta. Su figura merece seria consideración como pionero representante del sentimiento místico dentro del contexto trascendentalista americano del siglo XIX.

Por lo que respecta a Wallace Stevens, el sentimiento que subyace en su visión de la vida ordinaria y en el debate interno del poeta esconde su concepción de la poesía como medio de búsqueda y de aproximación a lo bueno, como sinónimo de Dios, en todo aquello que es armonioso y manifiesta un orden.

A través de una visión introspectiva de los elementos del mundo, Stevens encuentra este sentido del orden y la posibilidad de una coexistencia en armonía. Tal y como se verá en el análisis de los cuatro poemas seleccionados para este propósito, la contemplación del mundo exterior se convierte en un ejercicio interpretativo de meditación: la visión del poeta de los elementos del mundo que le rodean transmite una sensación de incertidumbre que incita al lector a cuestionarse sobre sí mismo y sobre su condición de existencia a través de la naturaleza. La mirada más allá de la dimensión física del mundo contrarresta el sentido de ruptura para con el mundo que invade al poeta. Stevens busca un sentido de continuidad entre mente y materia. Para Stevens, el acto de la imaginación, es decir, la actividad constructiva a través de la cual el artista puede elaborar sus creaciones, permite aglomerar pensamiento y sentimiento, y así lo manifiesta en su ensayo sobre las relaciones entre la poesía y la pintura. El poder de lo estético presente en la poesía y en la pintura transfiere la percepción de una existencia en armonía en una respuesta creativa, como resultado de la búsqueda del artista de la perfección y como reflejo del espíritu artístico.

A diferencia de Very y de Stevens, Stanley Cavell no fue poeta, pero su agudo análisis crítico de textos literarios y del discurso poético se alinea con el principio básico romántico y trascendentalista que comparten los tres autores: la necesidad del individuo de recuperarse de una pérdida de identidad la cual le lleva hacia lo inhumano. Cavell aborda el hecho de cuan negativamente los valores por los cuales se rige nuestra vida diaria se ven afectados por el anonimato que domina la vida urbana industrial de mediados del siglo XX y analiza de qué manera estos hechos han conducido a una crisis de identidad y a un escepticismo en el contexto socio-cultural de los Estados Unidos del momento. Con el término escepticismo, Cavell alude a un modo de cuestionarnos a nosotros mismos y de seguir dudando, una manera potencial de cultivar así la autoreflexión y la subjetividad. Para Very y Stevens, el papel del lenguaje, el poder del sonido de las palabras, favorece la transmisión de los valores morales necesarios que le confieren al individuo fuerza intelectual y autoconfianza, como el valor de la nobleza transmitido en la descripción de la actuación del héroe épico y en la del jinete, tal y como Very y Stevens analizan en sus respectivos ensayos. Cavell defiende la idea de que el individuo reconoce su humanidad y reafirma su identidad a través del discurso literario.

Para Cavell, el discurso literario transmite y permite compartir un conjunto de valores presentes en la cotidianidad, del mismo modo en que Very encuentra la voluntad del héroe por compartir los valores morales con su pueblo reflejada en ese cambio hacia la introspección que experimenta el discurso épico. Igualmente, Stevens cree que en el poder estético de las palabras se halla la clave para comprender el modo en que el lenguaje da forma al pensamiento y a valores tan necesarios como la nobleza y la imaginación, y da acceso a una comprensión interna de la vida ordinaria. En sus “Texts of Recovery”, Cavell propone realizar una segunda lectura filosófica y literaria del mundo, invitándonos a buscar el significado de las palabras mediante la imaginación. Para Cavell, esto implica primeramente conocer su significado ordinario para, posteriormente, y parafraseando el sentido metafórico de las mismas, descubrir cómo las palabras pueden reconstruir de forma alegórica una relación de cercanía e intimidad entre el individuo y el mundo, dibujando así y dando forma al sentido moral que el ser humano necesita para recuperarse de esa pérdida de criterios, o de afirmaciones verdaderas, en las cuales se fundamenta la condición de su existencia. Planteando interrogantes, el original acercamiento de Cavell hacia los textos de Coleridge, Heidegger, Wisdom y Wordsworth revela la importancia del discurso poético y filosófico para la comprensión de la interacción entre la condición humana y la de los elementos del mundo.

Jones Very, Wallace Stevens y Stanley Cavell fueron capaces de ver lo extraordinario dentro de lo ordinario. Su poesía, sus ensayos y su análisis del discurso poético ofrecen una respuesta a aquellas preocupaciones existenciales relacionadas con la identidad y el autoconocimiento, las cuales siguen siendo clave en la América del siglo XXI. Para ellos, en el lenguaje fluye de forma espontánea ese estado de intimidad entre mundo y pensamiento. Inmersos en una experiencia mística y como herederos del pensamiento romántico, persiguieron enlazar el emblemático poder del lenguaje y la percepción de la condición espiritual del mundo sensual a partir de una visión intuitiva de la realidad y a partir de la respuesta creativa que la imaginación facilita. La mística y la imaginación se convierten así en instrumentos intelectuales clave de un discurso dirigido hacia el autoconocimiento y que ha seguido renovándose a sí mismo a lo largo de los siglos.

Siguen siendo recursos intelectuales fundamentales en nuestro pensamiento actual, en el cual los excesos de la vida social y política exigen una llamada hacia la auto-reflexión, como medio para reaccionar ante aquellos elementos externos en los que la interioridad del ser y los valores morales sobre los que se fundamenta se están viendo seriamente afectados. Con todo, la autoevaluación o valoración de su condición como ser físico y espiritual y un cambio en la orientación estética redirigen la mirada del poeta hacia la vida diaria y enfatizan así la subjetividad. El uso de la voz del poeta en América hoy debe ser entendido como ventana hacia el autoconocimiento y hacia una renovada identidad nacional, a través de la cual y como fuentes intelectuales se filtran reminiscencias de elementos místicos junto al poder interpretativo que la imaginación aporta a la visión del poeta del mundo. El discurso poético se convierte en un medio para restablecer esa conexión e intimidad perdida, o intimidad con la existencia, parafraseando a Cavell. Los autores seleccionados en este estudio combinan el discurso místico, transcendentalista y romántico para recuperar un poderoso conjunto de valores perdidos (valores tales como el de la nobleza, los derivados del sentimiento épico y los que son resultado de la auto-reflexión) como respuesta a las crisis de identidad y conocimiento acontecidas a mediados del siglo XIX (Jones Very), a principios del siglo XX (Wallace Stevens) y en el contexto postmoderno tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial (Stanley Cavell). El papel de la autoconciencia en el individuo, o conciencia de su ser, dentro del contexto de una experiencia mística, así como el uso de la imaginación implicado en la interpretación y expresión de dicha experiencia, confieren el valor intelectual necesario para la definición de la condición existencial del individuo y para la expresión de su identidad en relación con el mundo.

Resumen de las secciones contextuales y analíticas

Este estudio está dividido en siete secciones en las cuales la argumentación filosófica y un análisis en profundidad de trabajos literarios seleccionados proporcionan la evidencia de la evolución en el autoconocimiento favorecida por la actitud mística del individuo y la imaginación.

Las secciones I y II abordan, junto con una revisión literaria detallada, la evolución del término misticismo desde sus orígenes en la época clásica, aún no enteramente aceptado como actividad intelectual en la tradición occidental, hasta el desarrollo de su concepción como una actitud de vida basada en la intuición del individuo dentro del contexto intelectual americano del siglo XIX. La sección I recoge importantes datos etimológicos e históricos que permiten comprender el amplio significado que abarca el término misticismo. La mística surge de la tradición filosófica clásica europea y de los principios religiosos y eventualmente se expande como parte de la herencia cultural en el Nuevo Mundo, donde sería entendida como un concepto de vida. La experiencia mística ligada a contenidos filosóficos y religiosos tenía como consecuencia que los conceptos de razón y fe, sobre los cuales dichos contenidos se encontraban respectivamente fundamentados, interactuasen entre sí. La evidencia de verdad debería encontrarse así pues en la interacción entre el razonamiento empírico y la percepción espiritual. Este trasfondo intelectual encontró una continuidad en el contexto del Nuevo Mundo con una interpretación genuina y renovada. La sección II introduce el concepto de la mística y de la figura del místico dentro del moderno contexto que el pensamiento americano facilita. Durante los siglos XVII y XVIII se le dio a la experiencia mística una más amplia transmisión literaria bajo la influencia de las convicciones profundamente religiosas del momento, adquiridas a través del pensamiento religioso puritano, que tendía a leer e interpretar la experiencia cotidiana mediante un simbolismo basado en la visión de América y en su belleza natural como escenario perfecto para la realización de los planes divinos. A través de la meditación religiosa, entendida como un auto-examen hacia la perfección, como el camino del alma hacia Dios, los Puritanos utilizaban el mundo en su búsqueda del Paraíso.

En América durante el siglo XVIII y como consecuencia de la influencia de los principios heredados de la Ilustración en Europa, tal visión de la vida evolucionaría con los Unitarios, herederos directos del pensamiento puritano, hacia una interpretación de las escrituras en la que se reafirmaba el uso de la razón y de la libertad de conciencia. Pero las nuevas interpretaciones de la fe harían mucho mayor hincapié en aquellos contenidos de carácter intelectual relacionados con una necesidad de resolver cuestiones filosóficas sobre la naturaleza y fundamentos del conocimiento humano, cuestiones que los modelos teológicos nativos no conseguían resolver. Esta labor intelectual sería llevada a cabo durante el siglo XIX fundamentalmente por los Transcendentalistas y por su mayor representante, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Los Transcendentalistas se convierten en un punto de referencia crucial. Su pensamiento fue ampliamente compartido, manifestándose en la producción creativa del momento y estando presente incluso en la actualidad. Su filosofía de vida defendía las interpretaciones filosóficas de temas religiosos, así como la intuición individual, la razón y la imaginación como premisas necesarias para definir la identidad americana y como formas de conocimiento del mundo. Fueron promotores de una nueva conciencia que adaptaba la mayoría de sus creencias heredadas en forma de desafío a la visión del mundo planteada por la Ilustración. Introdujeron una visión novel del concepto de conocimiento del ser que resultaba transformadora. La experiencia de la naturaleza junto con la importancia de la autoconciencia como modos de conocimiento fueron puntos clave impulsados dentro del pensamiento romántico americano como resultado de la influencia del idealismo alemán y de relevantes autores ingleses como Wordsworth y Coleridge. Como nombres representativos y fuente importante de transmisión e introducción de la filosofía alemana y de los escritos ingleses relacionados con ella, cabría mencionar a Frederic Henry Hedge, Germaine de Stäel, James Marsh y Thomas Carlyle entre otros. El período transcendentalista americano significó una transición hacia una visión moral y pragmática de la fe, que derivaría en un concepto renovado de la mística, como una actitud de vida.

En la sección III se aborda el concepto de imaginación – desde sus orígenes etimológicos necesariamente vinculado al concepto de imagen y fantasía, como medio que hace al alma accesible en la tradición aristotélica y como medio de conocimiento de cómo funciona el pensamiento – y el concepto de realidad.

En la visión moral y el pragmatismo presentes en la interpretación del mundo transmitida por Emerson, el uso intuitivo de la razón y de la imaginación se convierten en dos de los principales recursos para la comprensión de la realidad, entendida como la experiencia que el ser humano tiene de los elementos del mundo que le rodea. La razón, como poder intuitivo a través del cual el individuo alcanza conocimiento espiritual, y la imaginación, como la facultad que interpreta los símbolos de la naturaleza a través de la razón, se convierten en valores que guían al ser humano en su conocimiento del mundo y de sí mismo. Este acercamiento interno y pragmático hacia la realidad hizo de la imaginación y del poder creativo derivado de ella el instrumento para la expresión de dicha visión introspectiva. La percepción del ser humano del mundo exterior se transforma en visión subjetiva, en una imagen mental que le proporciona el acceso a los elementos del mundo. La capacidad de conocimiento queda así vinculada al uso simbólico de imágenes mentales, hecho el cual conecta el afecto o sentimiento, la subjetividad, con el intelecto. La producción de imágenes en la mente junto con su expresión a través de las palabras implica a la facultad de la imaginación y del lenguaje en la mediación de ese proceso de conocimiento del mundo. Su uso técnico hace de la imaginación el soporte para la creatividad y para el desarrollo intelectual y contribuye asimismo al diseño de la interacción entre el ser humano y los elementos del mundo. Los herederos del pensamiento romántico europeo en América a mediados del siglo XIX, los Transcendentalistas, fomentaron el papel de la imaginación como vehículo de transmisión de uno de sus principales postulados: el auto-conocimiento. La capacidad imaginativa facilitaba la interpretación simbólica de los elementos naturales, del esplendor natural de la tierra del Nuevo Mundo, de un paisaje sobre el cual la visión romántica de continuidad mundo-pensamiento podía proyectarse. Los Transcendentalistas buscaban certeza a través de la intuición, de la visión interiorizada del místico y del poeta y de la creencia en la existencia de un espíritu universal en el ser humano y en los elementos del mundo. Igualmente defensores de la mente libre del individuo y del escepticismo como necesidad innata de cuestionar todo lo impuesto o establecido, encontraron en la imaginación la posibilidad de expansión del autoconocimiento. Para los tres autores seleccionados en este estudio como referentes en la interpretación de esta filosofía de vida, la imaginación aporta al debate intelectual sobre la condición física y espiritual del individuo la comprensión de la realidad en forma de respuesta creativa y artística.

Las principales características místicas focalizadas por los Transcendentalistas, particularmente una visión mística y espiritual del poeta, encuentran su expresión literaria en el trabajo de uno de sus miembros, Jones Very, ejemplo de creatividad literaria mística como resultado de una experiencia de vida fiel reflejo de este renovado concepto del misticismo. Con una orientación filosófica y religiosa, su trabajo en prosa y su poesía son testimonio y ejemplo de la confianza transcendentalista en el poder intuitivo del individuo y en la imaginación como fuentes de conocimiento. En la sección IV el análisis de su ensayo sobre la poesía épica nos proporciona una visión de la importancia del poeta y del héroe épico. Si la mística facilitaba al ser humano la posibilidad de una experiencia de unidad entre lo espiritual y lo físico, la búsqueda épica del héroe se convertía en una experiencia de afinidad con el espíritu representado por sus acciones externas y sus conflictos internos. La interpretación de Jones Very sobre la evolución en el tratamiento de la épica reflejaba su convicción de que se había producido un cambio en la conciencia del individuo. El comportamiento del héroe épico, así como el del poeta, venían determinados por una necesidad de implicación espiritual. El héroe de acciones externas oculta un héroe de profundos pensamientos internos. En su ensayo sobre la poesía épica “Epic Poetry” estudia cómo la evolución en la mente del hombre plasma una evolución en su percepción del mundo. Very veía una necesidad de preservar la grandeza del espíritu del héroe y del poeta épico como medio de preservar la grandeza de un sentimiento universal que él vincula con la existencia de un espíritu universal.

Asimismo, la poesía de Very está fundamentalmente relacionada con la religión, la naturaleza y su vida personal. Se han seleccionado tres de sus poemas con el fin de reflejar con precisión estos tres temas principales, los cuales reflejan el sentimiento que invadió su desarrollo personal y poético y constituyen el contenido central de su producción poética. Un acercamiento espiritual al mundo sensual subyace en su poesía, particularmente en el uso de los elementos naturales como símbolo de su intuición de una existencia espiritual. El estudio de estos tres poemas es un claro ejemplo de la percepción intuitiva de la realidad, lo cual le convirtió en intérprete de su tiempo y en representante del sentimiento místico que formaba parte del pensamiento transcendentalista.

La importancia del pensamiento místico se hizo cada vez más patente a través de su influencia literaria. La relevancia de la interpretación del individuo de su existencia como ser espiritual como consecuencia de esa visión introspectiva de las experiencias sensoriales estaba siendo en gran parte estimulada por el misticismo. La respuesta literaria mística a esa visión introspectiva iba constituyéndose en parte esencial de la expresión creativa de la conciencia del individuo sobre cuál era la condición de su naturaleza. Una preocupación intelectual creciente por un deseo de conocimiento espiritual se basaba en esta percepción intuitiva del mundo. El desarrollo de la conciencia que el individuo tiene de sí mismo a lo largo de la historia se ha producido mayormente dentro del contexto de dualidad que plantea un conocimiento subjetivo y objetivo de la realidad. La realidad no sólo podía entenderse como una experiencia producto de los sentidos, sino como un acercamiento subjetivo en tanto en cuanto concierne al pensamiento del individuo y a su interpretación interna del mundo. El individuo toma conciencia y adquiere conocimiento dentro de este contexto de dualidad. La búsqueda de una auto-realización en la percepción de afinidad entre lo espiritual y lo sensorial en la experiencia mística quedada integrada dentro de un contexto filosófico que intentaba buscar la evidencia de continuidad entre el pensamiento del hombre y el mundo. El debate sobre la conciencia del individuo en cuanto a la naturaleza de su ser había encontrado una respuesta literaria en los escritos místicos. Los trascendentalistas consiguieron reinventar el dominio del concepto espiritual y escaparon de la problemática planteada por el empirismo que la epistemología unitaria no había sabido resolver. Considerado religión o filosofía, el pensamiento trascendentalista con su carácter importado y al mismo tiempo marcadamente nativo, construyó el puente intelectual hacia una actitud de vida que ofrecía un enorme abanico de posibilidades para el crecimiento intelectual del individuo.

Han sido muchos los pensadores y artistas europeos y americanos, hombres y mujeres, quienes a través de su trabajo han contribuido a la transmisión de una serie de valores que permitirían la continuidad de este crecimiento intelectual vinculado a la auto-realización del individuo. En particular, la contribución literaria de mujeres representativas del momento (Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Catharine Sedgwick, Eliza Thayer Clapp, Sophia Ripley, Caroline Dall, Ellen Sturgis Hooper entre muchas otras) fue ante todo un auténtico testimonio de auto-confianza.

Demostraron su potencial y su importante papel activo en una época de cambio y de búsqueda de la verdadera identidad americana. Crearon una producción literaria preocupada por reflejar la moral, las clases y los valores sociales del momento que les tocó vivir. Muchos son los escritores, hombres y mujeres, cuya aportación intelectual podría haber servido de fuente en este estudio, pero una particular y genuina implicación con los principios vinculados al pensamiento romántico que cuestionan la condición del ser está presente en los contenidos filosóficos y en la expresión literaria de la producción creativa de Wallace Stevens y Stanley Cavell. Las secciones V y VI se centran en la contribución intelectual de ambos autores para la continuidad de esta filosofía de vida: a través de su pensamiento y creatividad defienden una comprensión de la relación del ser humano con el mundo que le rodea desde una visión interiorizada de la condición de existencia del individuo, dentro del contexto que facilita la respuesta artística creativa como su medio idóneo de expresión.

En Wallace Stevens encontramos a un autor cuyo pensamiento transmite esa necesidad de búsqueda por la afinidad entre lo sensual y lo espiritual. La expresión literaria de su filosofía de vida (sección V) revela importantes claves que aportan continuidad a esa idea que entiende el autoconocimiento del individuo en la interdependencia entre su pensamiento y aquellos elementos que componen el entorno de su existencia. Para Stevens el poder del pensamiento se expande a través de las múltiples posibilidades que las palabras y los valores que éstas simbolizan encierran. Para el autor, el poder del sonido de las palabras está estrechamente vinculado al valor que confieren. En el ejercicio de la poesía queda patente el poder del sonido. A través de su producción, Stevens busca las posibilidades de encontrar dichos valores mediante el diálogo con la naturaleza y los elementos de la vida ordinaria. Analiza cómo el conocimiento de dichos valores ayuda al individuo a saber más sobre la condición de su ser. Al igual que los trascendentalistas, adaptó los valores heredados del pasado a un contexto contemporáneo. En el análisis de uno de sus ensayos “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” y a través de una selección de cinco de sus poemas podemos apreciar cómo aborda sus preocupaciones filosóficas y literarias dentro de un contexto artístico y de aquél que el entorno de la naturaleza facilita, como principales motores de su trabajo creativo.

En el estudio de algunos de sus ensayos más representativos queda patente su personal visión filosófico-literaria sobre los conceptos de realidad e imaginación. Stevens se sentía fuertemente atraído por las alternativas que el poder de la imaginación podía aportar al individuo en su comprensión de la realidad. Stevens entiende el concepto de realidad como una duplicidad existente entre el mundo material o físico y el mundo del pensamiento y de la imaginación.

Sus poemas se convierten en el medio de acceso al mundo a través de la expresión de valores morales y estéticos simultáneamente. Stevens encuentra en la poesía un instrumento de orden superior, que permite llegar a un verdadero orden del mundo. La suya podría definirse como una poesía dialéctica, en la que el uso abstracto de las metáforas conduce a una comprensión filosófica de la conexión entre las palabras y el mundo. La suya fue una visión modernista con una finalidad estética y un propósito intelectual. Para Stevens la importancia estética estaba estrechamente vinculada a la relevancia del pensamiento. Con su trabajo creativo buscaba la consecución de una dialéctica entre materia y pensamiento, una composición integrada de lo ideal y lo real. A través de la actividad artística, se centró en la experiencia de la identidad del ser con aquellos elementos del mundo presentes en la vida ordinaria. Para Stevens el vacío de identidad y la pérdida de auto-confianza en el ser humano debido a las circunstancias contemporáneas podían despertar en el individuo una actitud escéptica ante la vida. El escepticismo aparecía como consecuencia de un sentimiento de pérdida de los valores necesarios que aportaban al ser humano ese sentido de existencia en armonía con el mundo. Ante ello, el individuo podría encontrar en el arte un valor de referencia y un recurso para la recuperación del ser.

En la interpretación del trabajo artístico de Stevens se observa cómo su base moral y pragmática fundamentada en la experiencia de vida, al igual que en el pensamiento transcendentalista impulsado por Emerson, se avanza hacia un mayor papel interactivo del individuo con el mundo. Tanto Emerson como Stevens encontraban la presencia del individuo en la naturaleza, la reflexión y admiración por los elementos naturales y los acontecimientos diarios como recursos fundamentales para la recuperación de la identidad del ser. En Stevens es patente, al igual que en Emerson, una visión de la conexión directa entre lenguaje y naturaleza.

Asimismo, el misticismo en Stevens quedaría reflejado en una visión estética interna de la realidad como respuesta al escepticismo y como medio para la recuperación del ser. La necesidad de búsqueda en el místico de un sentido de equilibrio y continuidad entre su interpretación interna y su experiencia externa del mundo está presente en la voluntad de Stevens por encontrar la integración entre imaginación y realidad a través del uso de un lenguaje ordinario. En él, la intensidad de una experiencia mística podría equipararse a la intensidad de la experiencia poética, siendo ambas reflejo de esa renovada visión romántica de la vida, en la cual contenidos de carácter propiamente filosófico y su discurso interactúan necesariamente para preservar el concepto de identidad del ser humano. Esta necesidad de reinterpretación de dicha visión romántica de la vida encuentra su expresión en el trabajo de uno de los filósofos actuales más influyentes, Stanley Cavell. Cavell aborda la tradición americana del pensamiento que Emerson representa, proporcionando una continuidad a una filosofía de vida que focaliza la relevancia de la expresión del individuo en su relación con el mundo como recurso necesario para la recuperación del ser. De igual manera en que la épica y el discurso poético revelaron un cambio hacia la necesidad de introspección en el individuo como camino hacia el auto-conocimiento, un cambio que denotaba el avance en la conciencia y conocimiento que el propio individuo iba adquiriendo sobre la naturaleza de su ser, así pues ¿sería posible la recuperación del ser si el individuo cuestionase su condición a través de una nueva lectura y de una visión desafiante del discurso literario? La sección VI introduce el modo revelador en que Stanley Cavell, como filósofo con una genuina visión del Romanticismo, nos muestra mediante su interpretación filosófica de textos literarios que existe esa posibilidad de recuperación de la identidad del ser dentro del desafío que el escepticismo, como una condición existencial de alienación en sí, nos plantea. Asimismo, la imaginación desempeña un importante papel en la aplicación práctica de sus argumentos filosóficos. Cavell reevalúa positivamente la idea del escepticismo como estímulo de una actitud filosófica crítica en el individuo que le lleva a cuestionarse sobre la condición de su naturaleza a través de su relación con los elementos ordinarios del mundo que le rodea. Todo aquello vinculado con lo ordinario nos mantiene cercanos a nuestra existencia. Su pensamiento une la tarea del filósofo, heredada de Emerson y Thoreau en su distintiva visión americana de hacer filosofía, a la de la posibilidad de expresión de la idea de continuidad entre mundo y pensamiento.

Para Cavell el sentimiento y el pensamiento aportan significado existencial a la identidad del individuo. En “Texts of Recovery”, la lectura que Cavell realiza de una selección de textos aporta una nueva luz al discurso filosófico y literario. Es en las palabras y en nuestro modo de interpretarlas donde Cavell sugiere que el individuo puede aprender el modo de recuperar la identidad de su ser. Del mismo modo en que el místico inicia un acercamiento distinto que le permita interpretar el mundo externo mediante una experiencia interna del mismo, Cavell nos muestra cómo leer y encontrar por mediación de las palabras la intimidad perdida entre el individuo y los elementos ordinarios que le confieren su significado existencial e identidad. Si el místico aprende a “leer” su percepción y acercamiento al mundo desde una visión interiorizada, Cavell propone aprender cómo nos relacionamos con el mundo, con el fin de saber más sobre nosotros mismos y sobre nuestro ser a través de esa inmediatez con él (el mundo), la cual nos llega a través de lo ordinario y del lenguaje. La capacidad de la imaginación que el individuo posee le proporciona una nueva lectura de las palabras, las cuales encierran dicho estado de intimidad y proximidad con el mundo y posibles respuestas sobre su condición existencial.

La imaginación puede ayudar a recuperar esa condición de intimidad. Al igual que en el pensamiento romántico, para Cavell la imaginación puede actuar de intermediaria en la interpretación de las palabras y en el lenguaje del mundo que éstas crean. Así, la imaginación se convierte en la capacidad del individuo para proyectar nuevos sentidos y posibilidades del lenguaje en nuestra comprensión del mundo. Puede descubrir nuevos significados sobre cómo el individuo proyecta su ser sobre el mundo a través de las distintas situaciones de relación que establece con él y, de esta manera, conducir al auto-conocimiento.

Resultados y conclusiones

Como hemos visto, esta disertación tiene como objetivo demostrar que el camino hacia el auto-conocimiento se encuentra en la respuesta creativa que surge de la interacción entre el pensamiento filosófico y la producción literaria, tal y como sucede dentro del contexto intelectual americano, principalmente en el ámbito de la poesía en nuestro caso, durante los siglos XIX y XX. Los conceptos de la mística y de la imaginación tienen una profunda influencia en el desarrollo de dicha respuesta creativa. Podríamos dibujar una línea de progreso del pensamiento y del arte siguiendo el trabajo de pensadores y artistas que comparten un sentimiento común inspirado por la necesidad de conocer cuál es la condición de su existencia y estimulado por el progresivo cambio hacia la introspección en la visión que el individuo tiene del mundo. Una experiencia mística, mental y emocional, induce una actitud de reflexión y de interiorización en la contemplación del mundo. La imaginación estimula la creatividad, ya que permite al individuo la interpretación interna de lo externo mediante el simbolismo. Ambos términos, mística e imaginación, y su tratamiento a lo largo de los siglos juegan un papel clave en el proceso del individuo de recuperación de sí mismo y de su identidad como ser.

La herencia mística, ya consolidada con un carácter literario y filosófico, se ha convertido en una fuente necesaria para el acercamiento al conocimiento de la naturaleza del ser humano, cuyos límites yacen entre la imaginación y la realidad. El concepto de imaginación, como la facultad que permite interpretar los símbolos de la naturaleza, fuente relevante de valores, contribuye al desarrollo intelectual del individuo. El uso intuitivo de la razón y la imaginación, junto con el progresivo cambio hacia la introspección en el comportamiento humano – actitud estimulada en gran parte por influencia de la herencia mística – se convertirían en factores determinantes dentro del proceso de comprensión de la condición del ser humano. La imaginación implica poder creativo y transforma el pensamiento e interpretación interna que el individuo obtiene de los elementos naturales en expresión artística.

A través del arte el ser humano puede dar forma a su sentimiento de afinidad entre lo sensual y lo espiritual, a su conciencia de continuidad entre mundo y pensamiento. La realidad como resultado de esa interdependencia entre la experiencia que el individuo obtiene del mundo y su pensamiento queda representada en la visión interna del artista. La imaginación estimula el pensamiento en el místico, en el filósofo y en el artista e inspira múltiples valores religiosos, morales y artísticos. El contexto intelectual del Transcendentalismo americano facilitó un verdadero marco de referencia, en el que la combinación de una profunda fe religiosa con la sensibilidad artística dio paso a una alineación de la conciencia filosófica con la estética verbal. En el movimiento intelectual que desencadenó el pensamiento transcendentalista quedaban perfectamente integradas las figuras universales del místico, del filósofo y del poeta. Así pues, para los transcendentalistas las palabras del poeta comunicaban un sentimiento de belleza fruto de la percepción de la armonía existente entre pensamiento y mundo. La imaginación facilita la creatividad necesaria en la difícil tarea que supone la expresión del alcance por parte del individuo de la conciencia de su naturaleza como ser espiritual, e igualmente proporciona los medios necesarios para la comunicación de una serie de valores intelectuales derivados de dicha experiencia de conocimiento.

En su voluntad por dar forma mediante la palabra a sus preocupaciones existenciales el ser humano está accediendo a un nivel más amplio de conocimiento. La respuesta a la necesidad del individuo por profundizar en la condición de su ser se encuentra tanto en un discurso renovado y en su lectura como en la respuesta creativa de cualquier manifestación artística que sea capaz de adaptarse a las necesidades de cambio que surgen a lo largo de este proceso de auto-conocimiento. El denominador común existente en el estudio del pensamiento de los distintos autores seleccionados a lo largo de esta tesis y determinante en la elaboración de sus trabajos filosóficos y literarios es la evolución de un concepto de vida compartido por todos ellos, fundamentado en la creencia de la posibilidad de una existencia en armonía, de una continuidad e identidad entre la condición existencial del mundo y la del individuo. A través de su creatividad e imaginación, así como de su actitud contemplativa de lo ordinario, y como artistas y pensadores comprometidos con el poder del lenguaje, Very, Stevens y Cavell epitomizan el proceso de transformación en el crecimiento intelectual del individuo hacia el auto-conocimiento.

Desde sus orígenes en la tradición filosófica y literaria clásicas hasta su expansión por influencia de la tradición romántica europea en América, esta actitud hacia la vida junto con la evolución en el tratamiento de los conceptos de la mística y de la imaginación ha progresado y se ha expandido gracias a la mediación de una respuesta creativa latente en el discurso poético. El análisis de una selección de contribuciones filosóficas y literarias nos revela las enriquecedoras implicaciones intelectuales de un renovado y siempre cambiante discurso.

APPENDIX II: POEMS

Poems by Jones Very

The Stranger's Gift

I FOUND far culled from fragrant field and grove
Each flower that makes our Spring a welcome
 guest;
In one sweet bond of brotherhood inwove
An osier band their leafy stalks compressed;
A stranger's hand had made their bloom my own,
And fresh their fragrance rested on the air;
His gift was mine — but he who gave unknown,
And my heart sorrowed though the flowers were
 fair.

Now oft I grieve to meet them on the lawn,
As sweetly scattered round my path they grow,
By One who on their petals paints the dawn,
And gilt with sunset splendors bids them glow,
For I ne'er asked 'who steeps them in perfume?'
Nor anxious sought His love who crowns them all

with bloom. c.18 August 1838 (*Very Essays and Poems* 120)

The Soul in Dreams

The soul heeds not, though darkest night
Each object doth conceal;
In dreams it sees the noonday light,
Which all things doth reveal.

Nor doth it heed the Winter's snow,
That deep around it lies,
Nor wintry winds that piercing blow;
But in sweet dreams it flies

Where Summer clothes each vale and hill,
And plucks its fruits and flowers;
And wanders freely at its will
Amid its blooming bowers.

To gardens ever green and fair,
Where blooms the deathless rose,
Where deathless lilies scent the air,
It oft in slumber goes.

'Tis not to sense, nor Nature kin,
Nor grows it ever old;
Though dim the eye, and mind within,
It can its youth behold.

For 'tis of a celestial birth,
And casts around it here
A glory, that is not of earth,
But of its native sphere. Date unknown (*Deese Jones Very: The Complete Poems* Poem No. 569)

Beauty

I GAZED upon thy face, — and beating life
Once stilled its sleepless pulses in my breast,
And every thought whose being was a strife
Each in its silent chamber sank to rest;
I was not, save it were a thought of thee,
The world was but a spot where thou hadst trod,
From every star thy glance seemed fixed on me,
Almost I loved thee better than my God.
And still I gazed, — but 'tis a holier thought
Than that in which my spirit lived before,
Each star a purer ray of love has caught,
Earth wears a lovelier robe than then it wore,
And every lamp that burns around thy shrine
Is fed with fire whose fountain is Divine. 30 December 1837
(*Very Essays and Poems* 122)

Poems by Wallace Stevens
(in *Collected Poetry and Prose*)

Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry at daylight or before,
In the early March wind

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier mâché . . .
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.

1954

The Idea of Order at Key West

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard,
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

1936

Anecdote of the Jar

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

1923

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

1923