

The Wallace Stevens Journal



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Guest Editor: Melita Schaum

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Cover by Richard Bauer, “Saint Christine”—from “Things of August”:
“the archaic form / Of a woman with a cloud on her shoulder . . .”
Drawing by Kathy Jacobi, from “Another Weeping Woman”

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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Wallace Stevens: The Concealed Self

C. ROLAND WAGNER

What more is there to love than I have loved?
"Montrachet-le-Jardin"

EVERYBODY HAS ALWAYS BEEN fascinated by what Helen Vendler terms "Stevens' Secreties."¹ Now that the secrets are coming out there are differences of opinion about what to do with them. Traditional literary critics try to keep their eyes averted from the merely "personal" elements in Stevens' poetry, or at least keep them from corrupting the pure act of literary understanding. Both Vendler and Milton J. Bates² take a position approximately midway between a psychoanalytic approach to Stevens' poetry and a purely literary one, keeping their fascination with Stevens' secrets in check by an avoidance of psychoanalytic interpretation, although Vendler has lately shown unusual responsiveness to the person as well as the poet. Their caution, however, admirable as it is in some respects, can interfere with adequate understanding of Stevens' life and work.³ For example, an extraordinary instance of a secret needing investigation is Stevens' supposed conversion to Roman Catholicism during the last months of his illness.⁴ Bates, who believes it did occur (rendered "plausible" by the late poems), sees it as a mature act, an "adult accommodation with religion" which "affirmed his belief in the church as an institution, though probably not in his childhood God."⁵ Vendler, who is severely skeptical of the conversion, argues that, even if it occurred, "the life work had been brought to a close before Stevens's last days . . . and any judgment on [his] work must find those irrelevant events occurring after it was complete."⁶ But if the late poetry, and perhaps all the poetry, makes the conversion plausible, as I strongly believe it does, it is insufficient to explore the merely adult reasons for that highly significant act. We need to uncover its infantile roots as well as the roots of Stevens' more complex acts of poetic creation. We need to understand better Stevens' susceptibility to the nurturing female others of his mind—his wife, his mother, his secret childhood divinities—revealed to us imperfectly by Joan Richardson's biography so that we can reevaluate the work in the light of that (possible) conclusion to the life. Stevens' mature poetic achievement need not be threatened by our knowledge of his immaturity but should rather be enhanced by it.

I

Stevens' religious beliefs were rooted in his ambivalence, an ambivalence that was fundamental to every aspect of his life. The conversion might be perceived as the last stage in a lifetime of ambivalence. Many critics of Stevens, myself among them, have in the past seen him as a strict naturalist, one who "surrendered all residual belief in religion."⁷ But over the years there have been a variety of opinions on the subject of Stevens' beliefs, a spectrum extending from those who see him as a strict naturalist, through those who see him as

a looser naturalist yet find radical inconsistency between his naturalism and his mysticism, to those who assert that he is a pantheist of sorts, to those, finally, who see him as a Christian. Harold Bloom alone seems to grasp some of the range of Stevens' emotional beliefs. He is willing, so to speak, to place this spectrum of criticism inside Stevens' mind. But he is not willing to include Christianity in the spectrum,⁸ and Christianity is the key to the deepest layer of Stevens' mind, for it carried with it all the vital emotional ties of his childhood.⁹

There is a mixture of piety and skepticism in all his writings from 1898 to the year of his marriage in 1909 (and afterward). This was a period of shift from traditional religious beliefs to a less orthodox piety. Nature and St. Patrick's Cathedral, Emersonianism and Christianity play off against one another: the house of God provided protection as he discarded—but never completely—outworn beliefs. He hates and he loves his Bible as he throws away "the silly thing" (L 102). The "church is a mother for them [others]—and for us [his fiancée and himself]" (L 96), and yet Nature is superior to the church. Although he denied consolatory value to the Church after taking Communion in Reading one Sunday during his youth—"Love is consolation, Nature is consolation," he defiantly asserted in his journal, not "'Gloria in excelsis!'" (L 82)—he found that he was still susceptible to its magic when he attended communion in 1913—"How thrilling it was to go to the old church last Sunday!" he wrote to his wife; "I had no idea I was so susceptible" (L 181)—and perhaps again when he converted in 1955.

Even after his naturalism was intellectually established, his statements of naturalism often seem defensive. For example, what in the world is one to do with Stevens' response to what he characterizes as modernist "annihilation" of the "gods"? First he persuasively depicts the feeling of emptiness that followed their annihilation, the feeling "that in a measure, we, too, had been annihilated . . . dispossessed and alone . . . like children without parents." But then he goes on to make the astonishing claim that "no man ever muttered a petition in his heart for the restoration of those unreal shapes" (OP 207). It is precisely those "unreal shapes," even those that are out of date, that make the world go round, not least Stevens' world.

Those ghosts of the past continued to haunt Stevens even when he seemed to be saying that he was free of them. Nostalgia for his childhood beliefs is expressed in both open and hidden ways: his empathy for the exiled Jew in "Winter Bells," attracted by the glamour of a Catholic Mass, is clear (CP 141).¹⁰ More hidden is his persisting attachment to an "all-too-human" god in the Nietzschean "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit." At one level, he seems to be rejecting any kind of anthropomorphic deity and, like the Snow Man, attaching himself to nothingness:

It is the human that is the alien,
The human that has no cousin in the moon.

It is the human that demands his speech

The Concealed Self

From beasts or from the incommunicable mass.

If there must be a god in the house, let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness,

A vermilioned nothingness, any stick of the mass
Of which we are too distantly a part.

(CP 328)

But what is this god? It can be the spirit of unimagined reality or, possibly, the spirit of a Reality transformed by the imagination, but whether one or the other, it is a reality that is beyond us and our needs. (Is there a hint, also, of a Reality wholly beyond the imagination?) Yet this forceful attack on traditional religious beliefs appears to contradict itself and contains possibilities of connection with the divine object. The connection is defined by the words “too” and “a part” in the last line. The various meanings of “too” multiply the possibilities. Thus we are *also* a part of that distant, divine reality; we are, *to an excessive extent*, away from it; and we are, *more than we should be*, separated from it. And the multiplications continue if we read “a part” as “apart.”

If the god is simple, natural but irrational fact (the mass as disorderly), we are part of it, but had best keep our distance from it. Or we are part of it and cannot deny our connection with it. If, however, the god is more than irrational fact (the mass as coherent), then our distance from it is bad if we still demand salvation, but good if we assert our natural separateness from it and stay within the limits of our humanity. Finally, there is the distinct possibility that the “incommunicable mass” hints at Holy Communion in the Catholic Mass, and bears all the weight and complexity of the various meanings of distance and closeness already noted.¹¹ But this would never have occurred to me—particularly the implied wish to participate in the Mass—if not for the announcement of Stevens’ conversion. An appreciation of Stevens’ ambivalence deepens our understanding of his empathy for the Jew in “Winter Bells” as it does our response to his lively interest in Pascal’s deathbed communion, which he sees as contradicted by the philosopher’s attack throughout his life on the “deceptions” of the imagination (NA 133-36).

At the core of Stevens’ ambivalent attachment to Christianity is a mystical yearning (also ambivalent) for union, a union only achievable in moments and always accompanied by a tragic sense of separation—“the dumbfounding abyss between us and the object.” Vendler argues that Stevens is a poet of hunger, desire, and passion, not the “cold and cerebral” poet that many find.¹² She argues that he seems inhuman to many readers because his poetry is mainly “second-order” rather than “first-order” poetry, i.e., poetry that reflects on experience rather than responds directly and immediately to experience.¹³ But why is Stevens so exclusively a second-order poet? I would suggest that his primal hunger is for union with the ideal regressive and forbidden object, and that this hunger for first-order experience—or, better, for the foundation of all first-order experience—is defensively transformed into a second-order ex-

perience of meditation and poetic dialectic. But Stevens' second-order poetry is not philosophical in the sense of a Lucretius or a Dante: it is a poetry of endless struggle with the naked wishes of the first level.

What turns many readers off is not the reflective poetry in itself but its restricted subject matter, its inbred focus, its Poe-like obsessive concern with primal experience. Stevens cannot allow himself to be interested in real people in his poetry because that would distract him from the central struggle with fantasies. (It might also, perhaps, tempt him toward the forbidden object.) His difficult relations with other people, so well documented by himself and others, reflect this.¹⁴ His sense of separation from others pervaded all aspects of his life. Even his prose style and speech style reflected a certain withdrawal from reality. There was a strong component of primary process thinking in his secondary process discourse, typical certainly of the mental life of the creative artist, but also probably symptomatic of neurosis or some developmental failure.¹⁵ Elder Olson reports that

He didn't argue. He meditated . . . He spoke in sentences, not in paragraphs. There was no such thing as a connected argument. What you had instead was a series of intuitive and highly perceptive remarks . . . That was not a man who thought consecutively . . . His real style was the "Adagia," and that was very much his conversational way. (Brazeau 211)

And Harry Levin asserts that he didn't "take him very seriously as a philosopher. I think he was doing almost the converse in those critical essays, using prose discourse but making a kind of poetry out of that" (Brazeau 167-68).¹⁶ The balance between satisfying wholly inward needs and satisfying needs that had to take account of both inward and outward reality often tilted toward inwardness at the cost of adequate communication. Stevens' meditations are in no sense developed arguments but repetitions—often glorious—on his central compulsive theme. His critical-rational faculties partly withdraw when this theme takes center stage. The complaint of those who find Stevens too cerebral should rather be that he is fixated on too narrow an aspect of experience. It is not so much that reason is getting in the way of immediate experience—although this does sometimes occur—but almost the reverse: that he lacks the mature, indeed, the *rational* capacity to respond in a unified way to a variety of experiences.

The central relationship from which Stevens retreated was of course his relationship with his wife. Bates and Richardson have discussed the complexities of that somewhat strange affair and its details need not be gone into here. The essence of it, as Bates writes, is that Stevens was deeply uncomfortable with the Elsie of flesh and blood, and so transformed her into an ideal fantasy, the inspiration of his early poetry and his imaginative life.¹⁷ As Stevens himself explained to Elsie well before their marriage why they were "easier in [their] letters" than "when [they] are together":

It must be because you are more perfectly yourself to me when I am writing to you, and that makes me more perfectly myself to you. You know that I do with you as I like in my thoughts . . . You are my Elsie there.—Yet it is the real Elsie, all the time. (L 96)

The “real” Elsie is the interior Elsie: the idealized object of desire is already beginning to separate from the Elsie of flesh and blood and to be preferable to her. But not until the terrible clash between Stevens and his wife after they began to live together did the split widen between the inner and the outer Elsie. The center of gravity shifted from the wife in the apartment to the illicit lover (the “interior paramour”) in the mind. Finding his subject and his voice as a poet meant for Stevens spiritually separating from his wife. As Bates shrewdly observes, she felt that “she had been supplanted” by her husband’s poetry and perhaps poetry itself might have qualified in her eyes as “metaphysical adultery.”¹⁸

Bates goes on to argue, however, that the incompatibility between Stevens and his wife was the result more of fate than of will. “He was betrayed less by Elsie than by his own imagination; she was betrayed more by insecurity than by her spouse.”¹⁹ With all due regard to whatever inadequacies Elsie herself brought to the marriage, Stevens’ need to idealize is not sufficient to explain his share in the failure. Of course, Bates is aware of Stevens’ “Doubts and Fears,” his need for disguises and his preference for fantasy over reality, which he discusses in great detail. But curiously he never plainly asserts that Stevens was *afraid* of Elsie. He perhaps prefers to have the reader come to this obvious conclusion himself. But the indirect approach creates an atmosphere of thinness in his interpretation of Stevens’ motives. For example, Bates’s explanation of Stevens’ encouragement of his wife’s desire to escape from the city in the early years of their marriage seems superficial. He attributes it to the husband’s concern for his wife’s welfare: her distaste for the crowded city and the lack of the family and social life she was accustomed to in Reading.²⁰ In his understated way, Bates remarks that Stevens “also appreciated the solitude—as opposed to the loneliness—of these summers,” and even “suggested that Elsie prolong her vacation in the country.” That he was “having an affair with her rival,” the “interior paramour,” is poetic and accurate but incomplete.²¹ It says nothing about Stevens’ terrible fear of intimacy. But *that* motive was not completely hidden. Stevens himself understood it to an extent. A more important motive, because more repressed and therefore more the critical cause of the failure of the marriage, was Stevens’ unacknowledged anger.

Richardson’s study is quite helpful in its understanding of the various shapes and forms of Stevens’ anger—especially in the forms of irony and skepticism. She postulates a “deep pool of violence from which he drew his periodic indirect attacks on [Elsie],” and particularly his attacks on (her) orthodox religious beliefs.²² Yet he had also praised the church as a “mother for them—and for us” (L96) and had “strongly urged” Elsie to “join a church,” thus revealing his ambivalence towards both Christianity and his wife. And Richardson intelligently guesses that Stevens might well have unconsciously seen his

relationship with Elsie spelled out in James's *Washington Square*, in the sadistic, manipulating egotists and the vulnerable Catherine. He had hoped to send her the book "if it [was] any good," but found it disappointing because he could only allow himself to respond to its externals and avoided its deeper implications.²³ Richardson, however, misses or downplays Elsie's ability to recognize her husband's hostility. Certainly she sometimes realized that his irony—what she called the "mocking" and "affected" manner of his poetry (Brazeau 10)²⁴—was directed against her. Perhaps, among the sophisticated modernists in Walter Arensberg's apartment, she "could not see what others saw,"²⁵ but she could perhaps see what they could *not* see—that the need in her husband to tear down established structures of belief had a personal and prejudiced edge to it.

I wonder too if Richardson is correct when she asserts that Elsie did not appreciate that her husband's concern with food (at the time he was visiting his dying mother) was a sign of his deep wish for his own home and his wife's cooking? Even if it is true that Elsie "probably found this preoccupation annoying," because no direct expression of intimacy was joined to it, she knew how important food was to Stevens and would intuitively recognize it without needing to "remember what he had once written her about how[,] ever since he had left Reading for Harvard, thoughts of home were always associated with food."²⁶

II

Ambivalent attachment to the nurturing, pre-Oedipal mother is central to our understanding of Stevens. It helps to explain his marriage, his religious beliefs and the roots—the strength and weaknesses—of his poetry. Let us begin with the image and the concept of the "face." In elucidating for a correspondent in 1943 a section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" ("It Must Give Pleasure," III), Stevens interprets the face as the "elementary idea of God . . . We struggle with the face, see it everywhere & try to express the changes" (L 438). The image is found in a number of places in the poetry and can be traced back to an earlier period in Stevens' life (1907), when he describes to his fiancée a romantic face in nature that he saw during one of his walks in the woods in the rain:

Once I stopped and smelled the earth and the rain and looked around me—and recognized it all, as if I had seen the face of my dearest friend. I said to myself, "It is like seeing the face of a friend" . . . the little wilderness all my own, shared with nobody, not even with you—it made me myself. It was friendly so much deeper than anything else could be.—You are different. I play a silver lute for you, when I am good, and Elsie is a soft name to sing, and you make a lover of me, so that I can be nothing else. —But to-day I escaped and enjoyed every breath of liberty. . . . To-day was so much of an Odyssey for me that you must forgive my truancy and, also, because I am penitent now. (L 99)

Clearly Stevens here recognized the face as competing with his feeling for Elsie (although at this point she, not the face, is his poetic muse). He even implies that his feeling for the face is deeper than his feeling for Elsie. Thus well before the actual disappointments of the marriage, he was already anticipating trouble and even providing a path of retreat for himself. The "interior paramour," his "inamorata," was preparing him for "metaphysical adultery."

The romantic object was apparently recognized by Stevens later in life as stemming from attachment to the ideal mother, perhaps to his actual mother. Harold Bloom in fact argues that Stevens moved from an early indirect naming of "his own mother as the origin and purpose of his poetry" (as in "To the One of Fictive Music" [CP 87-88]) to the "startling epiphany" of "Auroras of Autumn" (Section III), where he "takes the Oedipal risk, as Keats and Whitman did, and invokes his muse as his actual mother and the other women of his family."²⁷ But although he must have linked the face of his mother with the divine face, it does not seem likely that Stevens saw her image as the source of his marital difficulties. If anything he saw its persistence as the consequence of those difficulties. The logic of equivalence between the ideal and the real mother was surely there but not all of its implications were conscious:

Farewell to an idea . . . The mother's face,
The purpose of the poem, fills the room.
They are together, here, and it is warm,

With none of the prescience of oncoming dreams,
It is evening. The house is evening, half dissolved.
Only the half they can never possess remains,

Still-starred. It is the mother they possess,
Who gives transparence to their present peace.
She makes that gentler that can gentle be.

And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed.
She gives transparence. But she has grown old.
The necklace is a carving not a kiss.

The soft hands are a motion not a touch.
The house will crumble and the books will burn.
They are at ease in a shelter of the mind . . .

(CP 413)

The farewell is complex. It stands for many farewells, many "forms of farewell" (CP 482). In part it is seasonal and cyclical, in part related to old age, in part it continues Stevens' farewells to traditional religion, that "cemetery of forms" that no longer works for modernists. It expresses the perpetual and necessary movement from imagination to reality. Stevens is thus saying farewell to his own mother as a permanent nurturer and turning to adult satisfactions. He speaks for all of us as we move, or ought to move, from childhood

to maturity. But he is also, narrowly, within the special limits of his own life, continuing to say farewell to a wife and a marriage and a home. He is saying farewell to normal love, a normal central relationship; he is attempting to adapt himself to what Bates calls a life of "emotional deprivation."²⁸ As he declares in the very late poem, "Local Objects":

He knew that he was a spirit without a foyer
And that, in his knowledge, local objects become
More precious than the most precious objects of home:

The local objects of a world without a foyer,
Without a remembered past, a present past,
Or a present future, hoped for in present hope . . .
(OP 111)

Thus when Stevens endlessly writes of his loss of the comforts of the religious past, he is also alluding to his loss of a nurturing family past, his family of orientation, and alluding to his failed family of procreation, which surely provided some pleasures and compensations, but not the "absolute foyer beyond romance," the "mystic marriage" that would replace his own marriage—"love's characters come face to face" (CP 401).²⁹

In the above quoted section (III) from "Auroras" the verbal accent is on reconciliation, not on the unending quest, but does the tone of lonely sadness suggest the opposite, the pressure of the unreconciled wish? Certainly accepting mother as an old woman, as an inappropriate object of adult love, is the key to Oedipal (and pre-Oedipal) resolution, but the question remains: is that reality accepted? Before we turn to other late poems for evidence of unresolved yearnings, let us look again at this poem and consider whether *Stevens' wife* might be seen as the mother who "has grown old," whose "soft hands are a motion not a touch," "a carving not a kiss." Is it possible that Elsie stood in Stevens' mind for the *unavailable mother*, she who supplied him with the food of love, but not with love? This becomes more likely once we appreciate the fluidity of Stevens' conception of the mother figure. We are never entirely certain which he is speaking of: the mother inside himself—"a mother fierce / In his body" (CP 321)—the real mother that once lived and died and nourished him, or the mother that his wife represented to him.

Stevens' supreme self-consciousness, his apparent awareness of the extent and variousness and even some of the depth of his projections, can mislead us into assuming that he had effective understanding of them. Self-consciousness is not the same as self-understanding or self-control. Because he asserts that the mother "has grown old," we may assume that he has stopped reaching for her as a young woman. Because he asserts that "the necklace is a carving not a kiss," we may assume that he accepts the limits that adult vision imposes on infantile longings. Because he asserts that "the soft hands are a motion not a touch," we may assume that he has reconciled himself to the tragic limitations that symbolic truth imposes. But adult recognition of symbolic truth does not

cancel the persistent infantile need for literal truth. There is a dimension of literalness in Stevens, a yearning for romantic communion, finally expressed perhaps in his conversion, that prevents us from taking his reference to the "touch" of the "inamorata," she that "Touches, as one hand touches another hand" (CP 484), in only a vague symbolic sense. He means that touch to be literal, to be concrete. It is nevertheless the touch of a fantasy: in reality Stevens must settle for sight, for sound, for symbolic distance.³⁰ In his real world, "she that he loved turns cold at his light touch"; in his bare world, the only object he can "touch, touch every way" is the snow (OP 117).

The two explicit references to his wife in the later poetry imply, through the fluidity of the imagery, that wife and mother were joined in Stevens' unconscious and that the wife as bad mother was the reverse of the ideal, interior paramour—but she was still the mother, still deeply needed. "She that he loved," she who "turns cold at his light touch," of "World Without Peculiarity" (CP 453), is really similar to the responsive mother of "Auroras" and of so many other poems "who gives transparence to their present peace" (CP 413). In the other positive poems the mother is somehow always unavailable (or available only for a moment), but the emphasis is not on harsh and cold rejection but on realistic limitation. In this poem the wife (the "hating woman") is the bad mother and represents the terrible negation, the incompleteness that spoils the perfection of the earth. But the actual mother and the father are also at odds with perfection, perhaps because of the wife. The father "lies now in the poverty of dirt," the dissatisfied mother "cries on his breast," and he, the alienated spirit, fails to find his center. But sometimes negativity is overcome ("difference disappears") and father, mother and wife come together in harmony:

And the poverty of dirt, the thing upon his breast,
The hating woman, the meaningless place,
Become a single being, sure and true.

(CP 454)

Although this Hegelian synthesis seems forced, it does reveal Stevens' urge to join the bad with the good mother as his ultimate object of love. He could only succeed in this when the figure of the bad mother was more hidden—more adequately defended against.

She is certainly not adequately defended against in "Madame La Fleurie," even with her strange disguise, for he insists on the difference between the good and bad mother and tries to keep them further apart than in "World Without Peculiarity." Unlike most of Stevens' poems this one does not even aim at a synthesis. It sets the good "parent" of the "earth" side by side and at odds with the bad, the hating wife (the "bearded queen") at the other end of the house ("that distant chamber")—although the aspect of the good mother featured is the devouring figure of death. The poet's grief is not over the fact that mother death will devour him but that she will be sullied by ingesting the

behavior in Stevens' treatment of his wife: some saw contempt or at least arrogance and authoritarianism (Brazeau 133, 187) (which probably contributed to Elsie's infantilization); others saw fearful submission to her wishes and jealous protectiveness (Brazeau 21, 250). Even when she became the "hating woman," he remained in awe of Elsie and overrated her, as he had before they were married—and yet, at the same time, he underrated her.

As negative feelings replaced positive ones, the angel became a sort of witch in his mind:

If she is like the moon, she never clears
But spreads an evil lustre whose increase
Is evil, crisply bright, disclosing you
Stooped in a night of vast inquietude.
Observe her shining in the deady trees.

(OP 34)

But now the real Elsie became more and more like the fantasized Elsie. "She insults everybody," Stevens complained, after an outburst of hers at Robert Frost (Brazeau 246). He felt that he had to keep her hidden from view because of her dangerous impulses. Was she part of the "violence [from] without" that he had to protect himself from with "a violence from within" (NA 36)? Stevens' view of his wife was now much like that of some children in their Hartford neighborhood, who would cry out at Elsie's strange appearance, "There's the witch!" She was "never nasty," but she was odd. "Don't come near me" was implied in her behavior (Brazeau 238). Her transformation from the "most beautiful girl in Reading" into the witch of Hartford made it all the more difficult for Stevens to see and understand her as a real person. He could not recognize *what she was* before he married her; *what she became* because of him; and *what she would have become* with almost any other partner. Increasingly she became what he most dreaded, and society at large collaborated in maintaining his distortions—yet he continued to insist that she was a "damn good cook and a faithful wife."

That offhand remark neatly compresses the whole of Stevens' ambivalence towards his wife. It comes at the end of a conversation with his nephew John Sauer, who remembers that it took place in a "very fine little French restaurant" in New York. Stevens ordered for his nephew in French and they discussed "how fond he [Stevens] was of good music,"

that he had quite a collection of records. I told him that I had some good records, too—the Philadelphia Orchestra and some light operatic music. "Oh, good lord, John, I'm not speaking of that." It was all this heavy stuff. He was very proud of his record collection; it must have been quite something. He said it thoroughly relaxed him. Elsie didn't appreciate the music. Elsie was a good cook. "That's why I've got this obese look about me." Very conscious of his big belly, very conscious. He said Elsie couldn't appreciate the

things he does. "She's a damn good cook and a faithful wife."
(Brazeau 276)

Superficially this is a compliment to Elsie, even with the complaint; less obviously, and semi-consciously, it suggests the edge of contempt for the domestic woman, unable to appreciate the finer things; most deeply, and unconsciously, it perhaps intimates something dimly remembered from an earlier life, Stevens' strong, latent attachment to the nurturing, yet dangerous mother—was she poisoning him?—the bond stronger than steel preserved by a failed marriage.³³

III

Stevens' poetry moves from the various disguises of *Harmonium*, through the more direct language of the '30s and early '40s, to the elastic, fluent and naked style of his old age. Did he resolve some of the conflicts? He had always believed in the necessity of "a kind of secrecy between the poet and his poem which, once violated, affects the integrity of the poet" (L 361). The poem as defense stops functioning as defense if it is too clearly understood by others (and by the poet). In this sense the later poems are less secretive, less defensive, and hint at a major resolution of conflicts, at least regarding artistic creation. They even suggest some reduction in ambivalence in Stevens' marriage and in his religious beliefs, though here we must be cautious. Certainly the great late poems are less ironical, less "mocking." Bates calls them more "innocent";³⁴ and this implies that the underlying anger has been reduced. In the early poems Stevens contained his anger with difficulty (see the rejected lines from "Le Monocle" [OP 19]) as he laboriously reconstructed the ideal object. The best of the late poems speak with increased maturity; the poorer ones the opposite. If we examine some of the former, with their characteristic boundaries, we may be able to appreciate how their sources both nourished and limited their greatness.

At his worst Stevens gets bogged down by tortuous symbolism and heavy diction that give delight only to selected graduate students (including myself years ago). I find some of this in all the long poems, even the greatest, as well as in too many of the shorter poems.³⁵ Let us bury the Canon Aspirin (despite Harold Bloom) together with the MacCullough and perhaps even Professor Eucalyptus. Let us turn away from the "mythology of modern death" in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," although the symbolism may be helpful for understanding other, better poems by Stevens. I have already mentioned the failure of the intended synthesis in "World without Peculiarity" and the lack of clarity of the unresolved feelings towards mother and wife in "Madame La Fleurie." Other failures from the later poems are "Two Versions of the Same Poem" (especially section I), "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," "Of Ideal Time and Choice," and "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract."

The "daily majesty of meditation" is at its height in a number of sections of each of the long poems, for example, the intensely moving section IX and the fine sections XI and XII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." The limpid

perfection of "The House was Quiet and the World was Calm" and "The Course of a Particular" have been celebrated by many readers. The nobility and intensity of feeling of "Large Red Man Reading" and section I of "Two Letters" ("A Letter From") should be mentioned, as well as the unusual power and control of "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination" and "Of Mere Being." Finally there is the exquisite plainness of "The World as Meditation" and the culminating glory of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome."

Of what are these successes composed? I should like to say a few words about the last two without pretending to completeness of understanding. The Santayana poem succeeds for some of the same reasons that the others do, but goes beyond them in a direction that Stevens was normally not inclined to go. Its balance between thought and physical reality; its meditative music, flowing from the accumulated wisdom of old age, is like the other successful poems—but even better. It is better, I think, because Stevens forgets himself in doing what he never does elsewhere: he addresses and gives character to *another real person*. It is certainly true that Stevens identified with the old philosopher ready to die in the Convent of the Blue Nuns, that he is celebrating the best in himself in celebrating Santayana. But he does not seem to me to be consciously thinking of himself. This is a poem of love, the love of another human being, such as Stevens never wrote before. Although he had no present real relationship with the philosopher, the extra dimension of objectivity comes from the fact that Santayana was a real person whom he once knew (and exchanged poems with) and that subjectivity and objectivity are here in perfect balance. In contrast, for example, to the vague object of love in the dedicatory section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"—"And for what, except for you, do I feel love?" (CP 380)—that is often confused by new readers with Henry Church, there is a clearly defined object in "To an Old Philosopher," a poem of adult love of a real person living in a real time and place:

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle as it evades the sight, these are
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome . . .
(CP 508)

It is a celebration of Santayana's commitment, even in the face of death, to the naturalistic imagination. Stevens is honoring the life of a philosopher who he believed lived wholly within the imagination and wholly within the natural world:

With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns . . .
(CP 510)

But did the picture of Santayana near death, surrounded by the Blue Nuns, arouse in Stevens some concern about his own end, about a death without *viaticum*? There is nothing in the poem that would make one think so. Its serenity is complete, its objectivity assured. Yet if we go outside the poem and con-

sider the history of Stevens' involvement with Christianity and Catholicism up to the time of the poem (1952), we might indulge in a conjecture. Was there something about the scene, the Anglican convent surrounded by Catholic Rome, the ringing bells (cf. "Winter Bells" and "The Old Lutheran Bells of Home"), the nuns themselves, so like "the sisterhood of the living dead" and the "fragrant mothers" of "To the One of Fictive Music" (CP 87), that stirred Stevens' latent ambivalence toward naturalistic purity, that touched his need to believe in more than the human imagination? Consciously the scene served to reaffirm his humanistic naturalism; unconsciously it may have helped him turn slowly from that naturalism.³⁶

"The World as Meditation" is also clear and concrete and a love poem. But it is neither addressed to nor is it about a real person. It projects Stevens' ideas and feelings about love onto the tale of Ulysses and Penelope, who also represent (and are represented by) the reality of sun and earth. It transcends the soliloquizing of "The Sail of Ulysses" by dramatizing the poet's conception of imaginative love. It is a more successful embodiment of Stevens' dream of an alternative to his failed marriage because his primary identification is with Penelope rather than with Ulysses. His customary stance is taken from the male perspective, with the female as imagined object—the mind's eye and its "fluent mundo"—but in this poem Stevens makes delicate use of his own femininity, his passivity, in a way that achieves fuller actuality and a more convincing balance between lover and loved one. Instead of expressing the longing of the subject to reach an unattainable object, Penelope expresses "the longing of the object to be reached by the subject."³⁷

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.
(CP 521)

Although Ulysses never arrives, the incompleteness is kept in tender yet firm control in this classic statement of Romantic feeling.

But what kind of love is this? Is it like the adult love glimpsed in the Santayana poem? I don't think so. Lucy Beckett writes of a love beyond the ordinary here.³⁸ But is it not less? Its serenity, as in almost every Stevens poem, is the serenity of a single mind in relation to itself, not of a mind in relation to another mind. It is the quiet acceptance of separation, of not having, of loneliness:

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day.

It was Ulysses and it was not.
(CP 521)

The epigraph from Georges Enesco interprets Stevens' meaning in a more general way than the poem itself does:

The Concealed Self

J'ai passé trop de temps à travailler mon violon, à voyager. Mais l'exercice essentiel du compositeur—la méditation—rien ne l'a jamais suspendu en moi . . . Je vis un rêve permanent, qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour. (CP 520)

When Stevens was asked why he never travelled outside the country, he usually replied that Mrs. Stevens was a poor traveller. In addition, for Stevens foreign lands were unspoiled places of the imagination ("Bergamo on a postcard"), parts of that perpetual "meditation" which sustained him in the face of an unsatisfying reality. But the epigraph may suggest another, opposite reason, not inconsistent with the first two. Foreign travel might have represented not only a fantasy to be indulged in but a dangerous reality to be avoided. Travel perhaps stood for an external danger situation symbolic of breaking from both the exterior wife-mother and the interior Mother.

Whether Stevens, then, identified with Ulysses, "the interminable adventurer" of the mind, as in "The Sail of Ulysses," or with Penelope, "Companion to his self for her," the outcome is the same:

His mind presents the world
And in his mind the world revolves.

(OP 102)

Penelope, as representative of the world—indeed, as the world itself—is finally seen to be revolving inside the mind, if not inside the mind of Ulysses then inside the mind of Wallace Stevens. Stevens, however, could not be satisfied with such an image. He needed more. He wanted to break out of his permanent dream, out of the solitariness of his life and into a marriage and everything symbolized by marriage. That is part of what he meant, I think, by his repeated demand, in both his poetry and his prose, for normality and centrality in great poetry. He distinguished extreme and abnormal poetry—which he also equated with explorations into the mystical—from central poetry, a poetry that may begin with the mystical and the abnormal but whose "desire" and ambition is "to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization" (NA 115-16, 153-56).

Stevens seems to have recognized within himself an inherent solitariness, a detachment from other human beings, and longed to overcome this with a true marriage. Perhaps he realized that his mystical yearnings were too intense to be "normal," and poetry became a dialectical struggle to regain centrality. But full centrality was beyond him, the idea of marriage was only a symbolic one, a marriage of self and the world, not a literal relationship with any human being. In "The World as Meditation," he attempts to leap over the gap between subject and object and achieve by identification love what he failed to achieve by object love. (In a sense his mysticism was too literal, his marriage, and his idea of marriage, too symbolic.) In the guise of Penelope he could wait indefinitely for a consummation devoutly to be avoided, resigning himself to incompleteness, and "Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so

near." Certainly there is a delicate sense of intimacy here but it is all inside the mind.

This is a poet *inherently* lonely, not lonely because of specific and later losses or rejections imposed by the "undulations" of time. ("Let the place of the solitaires / Be a place of perpetual undulation" [CP 60]). The loneliness is intrinsic to Stevens' identity: a sense of separateness that goes back to the roots of life, to the original separation from ("apart from"?) the maternal wellspring. Only one sort of marriage can correct, or seem to correct, that fundamental "solitude of the self" (CP 494): the marriage of the self with the source of its being. And that is not really marriage at all but symbiosis, a blotting out of all distinct identity, a return to a time when "differences lost / Difference and were one . . . / A zone of time without the ticking of clocks" (CP 494).

Paul Weiss's remarks on Stevens to Peter Brazeau bring out the problem simply and beautifully, with sympathetic clear-mindedness and without any depth psychology. He told Brazeau that Stevens' "ultimate passion was to try to get to the clean, clear ultimate reality, which required a thrust through everything that we are thinking, naming, using, saying. What I'm not clear about is what he saw when he got there" (Brazeau 213). Weiss, I think, is puzzled by the nature of the reality beyond the intimations of it in each individual poem. The reason for the uncertainty may be that, like the Romantic he still remained, Stevens' quest for the ultimate object is so powerful that it often refuses to remain in touch with the specific set of compromises that we term the poem. It often partly succeeds and always partly fails to reveal itself in the poem. Whatever may be the favorable or unfavorable balance of forces in each work, the totality of Stevens' output does not add up to the sought-for reality. It does not in fact add up to a real world. It is precisely *untrue* that Stevens' corpus, as Bates concludes, "explores all ramifications of the self, ranging freely between the sphere of the *paysan* and that of the visionary."³⁹ It is only the sphere of the visionary that Stevens explores. Contemplation is his subject and only those aspects of reality that feed a narrowly focused if tough-minded contemplation. Family, social (whether narrowly or widely conceived), and political realities are mainly excluded, and even when these are represented in the poetry, it need hardly be emphasized, they are generally denuded of their actuality and abundance.

Stevens' spirituality is not the by-product of a rich and complex life, the crown of human existence, but rather its narrow, single purpose, to the exclusion of all else. His greatness lies in his ability to make us believe that he has encompassed everything that matters in the moment of vision, and that the moment of vision is the moment of truth. But the contradictory and obscure hints of the poetry and prose make it likely that we have been misled. We have been persuaded by the same fantasy, the same need for fusion with the ideal object, and by the poet's mastery of language.

His conversion on his death bed, if it took place, was the remarkable conclusion to an ambiguous, contradictory, and secretive life. The fact that his own family knew nothing about it does not suggest to me the unlikelihood of the

event but rather that it was one more example of that ambiguity, that contradictoriness, and that secretiveness. At the same time the conversion implies a strong need on Stevens' part to end the ambiguity, to eliminate the frustration of doubt, and to repossess in fantasy the childhood "mother . . . for us" all. It suggests indeed an abandonment of the conditions of modern reality. Although the poetry, to the last, appears to accept those conditions and remains dialectical and modern, the acceptance is far from wholehearted; the late poems are often betrayed by a painful accommodation, a secret dissatisfaction, a residual yearning for the unattainable. There remains a tantalizing obscurity even in Stevens' best poems, a sense that all that wisdom, that joyous celebration joined with hard acceptance, "the grandeur . . . In so much misery . . . the afflatus of ruin" (CP 509), is not enough.

Still, the disciplined force of some of his greatest poems masters us so effectively that we only discover the incompleteness—"the fragments found in the grass" (CP 515)—afterward, when we are no longer under its sway. "We reason of these things with later reason" (CP 401). We learn that the creator of the poems was more complex than the most complex of his poems.

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Notes

¹Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), ch. 3.

²See Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

³Both critics are fundamentally at odds with Joan Richardson's recent attempt at psycho-biography. See *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (New York: William Morrow, 1986). Vendler fiercely attacks it (see *The New York Review of Books* [November 20, 1986]: 42-47) while Bates keeps his distance, praising it where he can, but not really sympathizing with Richardson's approach (see *The Wallace Stevens Journal* [Fall, 1986]: 113-16). I found the biography an unholy chore to work through because it is not well written and is overly long. Its insensitivities and heavy-handedness are bound to give applied psychoanalysis another black eye. But there is much gold in the forbidding landscape, much to learn about the unconscious dimension of Stevens' life and art. Yet one must work at it and be very selective.

⁴See Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983), 294-96. In addition to the oral biography (Brazeau), all further references to Stevens' poetry and prose are abbreviated as follows in the text:

CP—*Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954).

L—*Letters*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966).

NA—*The Necessary Angel* (New York: Knopf, 1951).

OP—*Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957).

SP—*Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1977).

⁵For Bates's remarks on the conversion, see 296-97 and 208.

⁶Vendler, *The New York Review*, 43.

⁷C. Roland Wagner, "A Central Poetry," In *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 73.

⁸See Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 28 and 45-46.

⁹Adelaide Kirby Morris' valuable study, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), discusses the enormous number of Christian symbols in Stevens' work. She comes close to seeing Stevens as a latent Christian. She cites James Benzinger as explicitly affirming Stevens to be a believer (see 113-15).

¹⁰See Morris, 10-11.

¹¹A few days after Stevens married, he and his wife sent a picture postcard to his parents displaying the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at General Theological Seminary, Chelsea Square, which was near the apartment they were living in on West Twenty-first Street. Stevens' message was:

Our floor is next to the top. Therefore we face the chapel, which is only across the street. Chimes every evening. *We are not a part of the chapel*—but apart from it. Hence, the word apartment. Hope this is clear. (*SP* 246)

The poem "Less and Less Human" was written about thirty-five years later.

¹²See Vendler, *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, 32.

¹³See Vendler, *The New York Review*, 42.

¹⁴As Stevens wrote to his fiancée: "I do not get on well with my equals, not at all with my superiors. Ergo, I have no friends." (Quoted in Richardson, 289). He also wrote to her that "most people are a great nuisance . . . Perhaps that is why my own likes are more often for things than for people: because of intolerance" (L 107). Later on, after he was established, he got along rather well with his "inferiors," mostly male, where he was always in control, but continued to have minor difficulties with superiors and equals. His greatest problem, of course, was with young, unmarried women. He was often hostile to them at work, especially during the difficult middle period of his marriage. One of his favorite occupations was embarrassing new female employees at the office (Brazeau 30 and n.). Considering his exquisitely civilized sensibility and his customary kindness and courtesy, his occasional boorishness is noteworthy and suggests a need to strike at what threatened him.

¹⁵See Phyllis Greenacre, M.D., *The Quest for the Father* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1963), 16. Although Greenacre judges that the "diminished firmness of the barrier between primary-process and secondary-process thinking" is part of the normal character structure of the artist, she sees a danger in this and in the strong element of orality and passivity in the artist's character (22).

¹⁶Richardson aptly describes Stevens' avoidance of dialogue as "the impossibility of truly *speaking* his mind." She writes that he "either yielded wholly to the one who 'always [had] reason on his side [his father]' . . . or he totally ignored that voice instead of attempting to engage it in open dialogue" (355). But Richardson dissipates the force of these insights by failing to apply them to Stevens' work as a whole. For example, she naively writes of "the fluent ease Stevens developed in integrating even the most complex philosophical and scientific ideas into his poetry" (43). The fact is that although Stevens shows a profound feeling for certain of the problems of epistemology ("our knowledge of the external world") and phenomenology, his philosophical, even his ordinary analytical abilities are quite limited. And this limitation is particularly evident in those areas that encroach on primal experience, the pursuit of the ultimate object.

¹⁷See Bates, 49-82.

¹⁸See Bates, 75-77.

¹⁹Bates, 80-81.

²⁰See Bates, 65.

²¹Bates, 67.

²²See Richardson, 450-51.

²³See Richardson, 318-19.

²⁴See also Bates, 71.

²⁵Richardson, 441.

²⁶Richardson, 392.

²⁷Bloom, *Poems of Our Climate*, 45-46. Bloom does not place any special emphasis on the pre-Oedipal as distinct from the Oedipal mother. But the imagery of the face and other oral images in Stevens' poetry, as well as his intense mystical yearnings, suggest the primacy of the pre-Oedipal object in his unconscious.

²⁸Bates, 82.

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²⁹The English word “foyer” derives from the French word for fireplace or hearth. It once referred to the room to which theater audiences went for warmth between the acts.

³⁰Cf. Vendler (in her discussion of “Of Mere Being”): “There is something in [the desired world of the ‘higher’ or ‘theoretical’ senses, eye and ear] for seeing and hearing alike, though not for those ‘lower’ senses, taste and touch” (*Words Chosen Out of Desire*, 42).

³¹See Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1945), 330. See also Géza Róheim, “Aphrodite, or the Woman With a Penis,” in *The Panic of the Gods and Other Essays*, ed. W. Muensterberger (New York: Harper, 1972), 169-05. Róheim writes that the statue of Aphrodite “on Cyprus is bearded, but wears a woman’s dress, holds a scepter, and has a masculine build” (169). Another form of the phallic mother in the Western tradition is the witch (179) and “Serbian witches have a beard” (180). In the light of what has been said (and will be said below) about Stevens’ relationship with his wife, it is interesting that Róheim states that, according to sixteenth centuries writers, “one natural function interfered with by the witch is coitus—but never eating” (187).

³²Frank Doggett, in *Stevens’ Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 42, does not separate the earth mother from the “bearded queen.” Madame La Fleurie is not only *linked with* the bearded queen: for Doggett she *is* the queen. Although I think this is incorrect—the grammar alone of the last two lines makes this reading unlikely—it does support my sense of the fluidity of Stevens’ mother image and its two-sided character. Doggett argues that there is “an accentuation of the animus, the male element, latent and hidden within the woman now emerging in the beard of Madame La Fleurie and in the innate ‘animosity’ of this image (the pun is from Jung).” What Doggett most loses is the initial distinction between bad (real) wife and good (mythical) mother.

³³Richardson writes that, on the eve of his marriage, apart from travel fantasies, books and work, Stevens’ “most important” concern was his “stomach. He repeated his culinary orders to Elsie so many times that she finally made him promise neither to speak of ‘grub’ again when they were together nor to mention it in his letters.” He apologized but explained that “ever since he had been at college, the thought of being home had always been associated with food” (356). Richardson has much to report about Stevens’ passion for desserts.

³⁴Bates, 276.

³⁵Cf. William Pritchard, “Poet of the Academy,” *Southern Review* (Autumn 1979): 851-76. See especially 865.

³⁶Lucy Beckett, in *Wallace Stevens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 193, argues that the sense of religious, not merely human otherness, lies at the heart of the poem. I don’t feel this, but it may be so.

³⁷See Doggett, 172, n. 3.

³⁸See Beckett, 199.

³⁹Bates, 292.

“Sister of the Minotaur”: Sexism and Stevens

JACQUELINE VAUGHT BROGAN

IT WOULD BE EASY TO OVERSIMPLIFY the subject of sexism and Stevens as sexism *in* Stevens. The various biographies devoted to Wallace Stevens over the last decade have all, individually and collectively, given us information about his private life, especially in relation to his wife, that make it increasingly difficult to think of Stevens as that innocent, cherub-like person that Randall Jarrell once described him as being.¹ I have in mind, for example, Stevens' effective silencing of Elsie (as described by the family chauffeur to Peter Brazeau), or the disturbing way in which he “scripted” her—literally made her an object of his pen, renaming her according to his needs—as seen in the previously unpublished letters to his wife included in Joan Richardson's biography.² In light of these new facts about Stevens' personal life, it is perhaps not surprising to find a recent and almost scathing indictment of Stevens' irresponsibility, if not moral failure, in his relationship with and to women.³ Yet my subject here is not sexism *in* Stevens, in the sense of Stevens' being a sexist individual, nor is it trying to psychoanalyze what in Stevens' life might or might not have led to a troubled psyche, particularly concerning women. It seems almost too easy to point to Stevens' mother as a figure for the imagination, in continual conflict with his father as a figure for pragmatic action and reason. I think, too, that one could exploit the fact that Elsie Moll Stevens, who was so clearly perceived by Stevens in the early years as his muse, should be at once the girl from the wrong side of the tracks, possibly illegitimate, and the model for the goddess on the liberty coin,⁴ the two archetypal—and equally dehumanizing—ways of viewing women in our culture thus both being accidentally inscribed in Elsie's life. Although these various facts may suggest, once again, that the personal *is* political, I want to distinguish as much as possible the subject of sexism *in* Stevens from sexism *and* Stevens, even if finally the two topics prove inseparable. What interests me here, therefore, is what happens to Stevens' poetry as he engages in the (perhaps conscious) suppression of what *he* perceives to be his feminine voice or, more accurately, that part of his poetic voice which is feminine metaphorically in the way that the idea of “feminine” itself is metaphorical. My conclusion is that while Stevens would always suffer from a schism within himself, one which was ultimately derived from cultural biases against women (and which would affect his poetry in a number of important ways), he would also come as close as it was possible for a person in his time and circumstance to “curing” himself of the “infection in the sentence” that the dominant, phallogentric structures in our culture inevitably breed.⁵

I

The distinction I am making between sexism *in* Stevens and sexism *and* Stevens is not meant to deny the fact that there are sexist innuendoes in Stevens' poetry. Certain sexist assumptions, including the one that denigrating

women is humorous, account for a number of his poems, including "To a High-Toned Old Christian Woman."⁶ It is not merely institutionalized religion which Stevens is mocking there. "To a High-Toned Old Christian Man" does not seem nearly as funny, and I speculate that trying to make "widowers wince" would not be perceived as being especially witty either. Similar attitudes also inform "Lulu Gay" (OP 26) and "Lulu Morose" (OP 27), although the first of these, in which Lulu tells the eunuchs what the barbarians have done to her, is immediately more problematic. It is probably right to the point that the males who have been castrated have lost their "voice" as well—they cannot talk (but only ululate). Certainly, we find an archetypal expression of sexism in that poem with the wonderful title, "Good Man, Bad Woman" (OP 33). In fact, such basic sexist attitudes—even if we are charitable and conclude that Stevens intends to poke fun at such attitudes—govern a variety of poems. There is no character in all of Stevens' poetry, for example, with quite the same sense of grotesque humor as the woman of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"—dead, lying on a deal dresser with her "horned feet" protruding (CP 64)—unless it is the "lady dying of diabetes" in "A Thought Revolved" (CP 184).

When we find instances of such blatant sexism *in* Stevens, it is useful to remember the cultural context within which he produced his work. When Stevens began publishing in earnest, the women's suffrage movement was well under way and frequently was the subject of essays in the magazines in which Stevens was publishing (and which he was presumably reading himself). Many of these essays are surprisingly sophisticated. As early as 1914 Edna Kenton was distinguishing between different *kinds* of feminisms—i.e., the largely Anglo-American drive for identical rights vs. the German feminists' fight for "different" but equal rights for women.⁷ Yet even in such magazines as *The Trend*, which seems far more sympathetic to the women's movement than most since it kept a running tally on which states were supporting women's suffrage, we find some rather appallingly sexist essays, among them "The Land of the Hen-Pecked" or "Rule the Women or They'll Rule You."⁸ The title of this last one sounds much like Stevens in "Good Man, Bad Woman" when he says, "She can corrode your world, if never you" (OP 33).

In fact, as Joan Kelly and Sandra Gilbert (among others) have pointed out, what strides women have made in gaining civic and political rights have also historically been accompanied by periods of increased hostility toward women.⁹ This conflict—i.e., the liberation of woman politically and the increased resentment toward, if not repression of, her personally—accounts for the overwhelming number of poems written during Stevens' early period that expose women's status (or lack of status) in the early part of this century. For example, we find in magazines to which Stevens himself was contributing H. D.'s "Priapus" and "Acon," Alice Groff's "Herm-Aphrodite-Us," the five poems about women that Pound published in a 1915 issue of *Others*, Skipwith Cannell's "Ikons," published the following year, or Kenneth Burke's "Adam's Song, and Mine."¹⁰ The overt tension in this phase of the battle of the sexes

toward which all of these poems point is made explicit in Helen Hoyt's "Homage,"¹¹ cited in part below:

Not as a man I felt you in my brooding,
But merely a babe. . . .

.....
Sometimes I wished to feed you at my breast.

Not to myself, I knew, belonged your homage;
I but the vessel of your holy drinking,
The channel to you of that olden wonder
Of love and womanhood,—I, but a woman.

.....
Do you think I did not kneel when you were kneeling?
Even lowlier bowed my head, and bowed my heart.

What makes this poem particularly interesting is the difficulty in assessing how much irony may or may not have been intended here, although it is important to note, both for her own work and for a sense of the times in which Stevens first began publishing, that Helen Hoyt would edit a special issue of women poets for *Others* one year after publishing this poem.¹² Nevertheless, when we do find sexist assumptions or innuendoes in Stevens' work, we face a similar dilemma in frequently being unable to determine precisely how much Stevens is reflecting cultural biases or just how much he is "revising" such biases through ironic reflections.

Yet despite this very complicated context, it is possible to see the ways in which Stevens' perhaps conscious, perhaps unconscious "phallogocentric" perspective manifests itself in the dynamics, even the problematics of his poetry. That problematic may not be the conflict between imagination and reality (as has been traditionally assumed), nor even the battle between competing theories of language, but rather a problematic between feminine and masculine expression—i.e., between the male authorial voice that strives to achieve significance and the culturally delineated suppression or silencing of feminine voice that struggles, nonetheless, precisely for expression in Stevens' works. Put differently, in Stevens' work we can see the ways in which our culturally inscribed notions of male/author/authority and our culturally inscribed repression of the rest of our human voice (even within ourselves, and within Stevens as well) frustrate the attempt at poetic expression itself, while informing what expressions are achieved in the individual poems.

To understand this critical facet of Stevens' work, it is important first to stress the fact that from the rejection of the feminine figure in "Farewell to Florida" to her reception in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," Stevens' poetry remains highly self-conscious about the fact that it is wrestling with the feminine figure and, usually in a rather Jungian fashion, specifically with the feminine figure within. I offer four texts, taken variously from his es-

These “other mothers,” immediately troped in the text to the monstrous “she-wolves” and “tigresses”—are the “fantastic” manifestations of his own feminine voice, or anima, repressed throughout most of his poetic career. Thus, one effect of his conscious repression of the feminine principle in “Farewell to Florida” (though there is ample evidence of unconscious repression before that poem appeared in 1936) manifests itself in the extreme attention to “man number one” in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937) with, however, a concurrent monstrous version of his poetic self which he has largely tried to subjugate. It is both culturally and poetically predictable that whereas this “monster” in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (the “lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone”—CP 175) *may* be male, in general the uncomposed and, therefore, potentially destructive aspect of his creative energy is perceived by—or figured by—Stevens as a (threatening) woman.

This fact leads to a third text, a passage from “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet.” After making the rather remarkable statement that “The centuries have a way of being male” (NA 52), and before insisting that the “character of [the] poet” must be seen as “*virile*”—otherwise “the masculine nature that we propose for one that must be the master of our lives will be lost” (NA 66; italics mine)¹³—Stevens says:

When we look back at the face of the seventeenth century, it is at the rigorous face of the rigorous thinker and, say, the Miltonic image of a poet, severe and determined. In effect, what we are remembering is the rather haggard background of the incredible, the imagination without intelligence, from which a younger figure is emerging, stepping forward in the company of a muse of its own, *still half-beast and somehow more than human, a kind of sister of the Minotaur*. The younger figure is the intelligence that endures. It is the imagination of the son still bearing the antique imagination of the father. (NA 52-53; italics mine)

The essentially androgynous character of this figure (since the “sister” is also the “son”), together with the one cited above, bears further study—particularly in the context of the often frustrated quest for androgynous union traced in much of the romantic poetry preceding (and anticipating) Jungian theory. Nevertheless, as I read this particular essay, Stevens is seriously engaged here in a deliberate battle to overcome the kind of schism within himself that would give rise precisely to this kind of distortion, in which the feminine aspect is marked and perpetually marred by “monstrous” displacement.¹⁴ Yet at least in 1942 when this essay was written, Stevens’ own language gets in the way of such a cure. Not only does he still think of the poet as someone who must *master* our lives (and who must be male), he also writes these ironically self-defeating words at the very point the “figure of the youth as virile poet” supposedly speaks or finds his *own* voice:

No longer do I believe that there is a mystic muse, sister of the Minotaur.
This is another of the monsters I had for nurse, whom I have wasted. I am
myself a part of what is real, and it is my own speech and the strength of it,
this only, that I hear or ever shall. (NA 60)

What is the most provocative about this passage, especially since it is in such conflict with the semantic intent, is that even as he rejects the “sister of the Minotaur” at the supposed moment of self-identification, he reinstates the *figure of the monster* as a (presumably female) nurse.

The last text is simply the letter which followed Howard Baker’s analysis of Wallace Stevens in *Southern Review* (“Wallace Stevens and Other Poets”)¹⁵ in which Baker describes Stevens’ poetry in Jungian terms. In a letter to Ronald Latimer in 1935, Stevens writes:

There is in the last number of the SOUTHERN REVIEW, or QUARTERLY, an extremely intelligent analysis of my work by Howard Baker. No one before has ever come as close to me as Mr. Baker does in that article. (L 292)

This letter is important to the subject because it clarifies that Stevens thought of his own poetry, even at an early point, in somewhat Jungian terms and that, therefore, attention to the male and female figures (and hence to their voices or lack of voices) in Stevens’ work is central to our understanding of it.

Clearly, Stevens does engage in the repression of the “feminine” aspect of his own creativity or creative voice in a variety of ways. It may well be that the culturally-encouraged suppression of women—specifically the silencing of women—is internalized in Stevens,¹⁶ so that his psyche feels at once a longing for this displaced self (hence, the omnipresent “she,” the “other and her desire”) and, simultaneously, feels threatened by what might be chaos, uncontrollable, if he abandons his “rage for order” by allowing her to speak. But, whatever the reasons, “a kind of sister of the Minotaur” is the uncanny, and uncomfortable, figure repressed—ambivalently and ambiguously held—in the white space of Stevens’ texts.

II

This repression manifests itself ironically, if not subversively, in Stevens’ work throughout his poetic career. Most obviously, Stevens rejects the feminine figures of *Harmonium*, especially the figures of female, fecund nature in the 1936 “Farewell to Florida” (the poem, notably, with which he opened the *second* version of *Ideas of Order*).¹⁷ There he accuses “her” of having bound “[him] round” and says that he will return to the land of the “violent mind,” which is equivalent to the land of the violent men (CP 117-18). Yet repression of the feminine figure occurs in Stevens in more subtle and ultimately more significant ways, although the particular, conscious rejection of the feminine seen in “Farewell to Florida” encouraged the more abstract, philosophical poetry of the next many years to come.

Ironically, one of the most “telling” marks of Stevens’ repression of the feminine is that in his poetry female figures almost never speak. If any voice is heard at all (and that itself is a subject to take up below), it is that of a male, as in “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night”:¹⁸

Be the voice of night and Florida in my ear.
Use dusky words and dusky images.
Darken your speech.

Speak, even, as if I did not hear you speaking,
But spoke for you perfectly in my thoughts,
Conceiving words,

As the night conceives the sea-sounds in silence,
And out of their droning sibilants makes
A serenade.

(CP 86)

One exception to this generalization is the woman in “Metropolitan Melancholy,” the “purple woman” with the “lavender tongue” who “Said hic, said hac / Said ha” (OP 32). Another is the quoted “*Encore un instant de bonheur*,” words that Stevens immediately dismisses: “The words / Are a woman’s words, unlikely to satisfy / The taste of even a country connoisseur” (CP 157). Here, it is admittedly difficult to distinguish the repression of the feminine voice from basic sexism. Nevertheless, a glance at the *Concordance* to Stevens’ poetry reveals that, surprisingly, “words” are not Stevens’ most popular theme, but “man” or “men” (appearing 507 times) and, especially, man speaking.¹⁹ Women appear in Stevens’ poetry about one fifth as frequently—a total of 106 times in comparison to the 507 for men. But in contrast to the men, they almost never have a voice. From the early “All Over Minnesota,” where the “voice of the wind is male,”²⁰ through “A Thought Revolved,” to *The Necessary Angel*, the idea of “voice” itself is perceived by Stevens as exclusively masculine. But then, I think we can say, he protests too much.

One extension of this verbal “repression” is the fact that not only do the female figures in Stevens’ poetry rarely speak, they rarely move. Consider the difference between his earliest and most famous male and female characters, “The Comedian as the Letter C” and the complacent woman of “Sunday Morning.” In a very disturbing way, women in his poetry remain too obviously figures—empty ciphers for masculine rumination and scripting, even de-description.²¹ The woman of “Sunday Morning” has several sisters, among them “So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch” and “Romance for a Demoiselle Lying in the Grass,” in which Stevens writes that

The monotony
Is like your port which conceals
All your characters
And their desires.

(OP 23)

In the course of the poem this female figure is either troped to or revealed to be a guitar—Stevens closes the poem with “Clasp me, / Delicatest machine.” But this revelation, if we can call it that, further “objectifies” the feminine, even if metaphorically, “concealing” her behind a phallogentric and concomitantly erotic perspective that is reminiscent of the elders’ view of Susanna in “Peter Quince at the Clavier” (CP 89-92).

Nonetheless, precisely because he still retains the idea of a feminine muse (even if she may be figured as a “kind of sister of the Minotaur”), Stevens’ attempts to repress or silence the feminine leaves *him* in the position of never being able to speak. Almost without exception, Stevens’ greatest attempts at poetic expression, the words of that “virile poet,” are instances of failures of speech—words about the words he *would* say, if he could—signs, shall we say, of the failure of both logocentric and phallogentric ordering. For example, Stevens says in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” that it is

As if the waves at last were never broken,
As if the language suddenly, with ease,
Said things it had laboriously spoken.

(CP 387)

Again in “A Primitive Like an Orb,” Stevens writes with an implicit pathos that “It is / As if the central poem became the world, / And the world the central poem, each one the mate / Of the other, as if summer was a spouse, / Espoused each morning” (CP 441). Thus, despite his sustained attempt to evoke—or to become—the “virile” poet, one whose words both “master” and are “a part” of what is real, that which he cannot order or “master” insists upon being heard, however ironically, in the very silence of the gap between “as” and “if,” that is, between “order” and the “abyss,” as these terms are metaphorically and sexually conceived. The white writing of such texts is perversely and subversively the trace of the repressed voice that refuses to (or cannot) coincide with the phallic and verbal structures Stevens professes to order in his words. Hence Stevens’ lifelong frustration about his inability to get “straight to the word, / Straight to the transfixing object” (CP 471)—and hence, also, his desire.

From this perspective, “The Idea of Order at Key West” can be seen to reiterate this basic problematic in Stevens’ verse, rather than embodying one of his more successful figurations of women, as many critics have assumed.²² In contrast to the other women figures mentioned so far, the celebrated female figure of this poem is, superficially, neither mocked or denigrated; she is also supposedly vocal and dynamic, walking and singing by the shore:

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.

(CP 129-30)

However alluring this poem may be, we run the risk of being ruled by rhetoric if we fail to note that ultimately—and even in the narrative development of the text itself—this “woman” is simply a figure for (and thus a sign or empty cipher for) Stevens himself and the way *he* sings. The clearest sign of this fact is found in the very next line, where he abruptly breaks in with, “Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know . . .” This rupture is the most overt sign in the poem of the nature of the poetic “order” (even “rage for order”) that Stevens has in mind. This thematic is inscribed throughout the poem: lights “master” the night, “portion” out the sea, “arrange” and “deepen” night, so that the words, in a kind of phallic “mastering,” ironically create the “fragrant portals,” essentially create the feminine. But what do we hear from this feminine voice which is simultaneously created, disclosed in the portals, and repressed, silenced by the “mastering” and by the actual appropriation of the unheard feminine voice to Stevens’ own? From the opening stanza, that other voice remains literally “beyond” us and ourselves:

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.

(CP 128)

The need for this control—the imperative to create and to control a world in words—can in part be explained historically and culturally. The Great Depression, the Great War, the felt menace of a second world war to come would easily give rise to the need to defend oneself against looming chaos, a fact which is amply demonstrated by the poems of Stevens’ middle period.²³ But I think at least part of the explanation for Stevens’ apparent need to break into the text—to silence this feminine figure, however lovely we may feel she may be—lies in her uncanny reflection, that “sister of the Minotaur.” The lovely, virtually “inhuman” woman by the sea and the somewhat unsettling “half-beast” who is “yet more than human” are two faces, as it were, of the same *figure* which, as figure, also means absence and repression. Instead of the madwoman in the attic, this is a (potentially) mad woman in a maze, specifically a linguistic maze.

The idealized version of the figure, the one who remains beyond speech, desired but controlled, together with her monstrous counterpart account for many of Stevens’ more “fantastic” female characters. The idealized figure is found in “To the One of Fictive Music,” where, for example, Stevens creates a feminine trilogy of sister, mother, and diviner love (CP 87-88), in “Infanta

Marina," where "She" can make "of the motions of her wrist / The grandiose gestures / Of her thought" (CP 7), as well as in "Apostrophe to Vincentine" and "Bouquet of Belle Scavoit." Yet her monstrous counterpart is found in "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard," where "she never clears / But spreads an evil lustre whose increase / Is evil" (OP 34), in the fifth of "Five Grotesque Pieces" (entitled "Outside of Wedlock"), where she is figured as "an old bitch, an old drunk, / That has been yelling in the dark" (OP 77), even in "The Common Life," where quite significantly, given the title, "The women have only one side" (CP 221). In "The Old Woman and the Statue," she has all the attributes of a witch:

But her he had not foreseen: the bitter mind
In a flapping cloak. She walked along the paths
Of the park with chalky brow scratched over black
And black by thought that could not understand
Or, if it understood, repressed itself
Without any pity in a somnolent dream.

(OP 44)

Still, it would not be accurate to reduce Stevens' poetry to reiterating endlessly this conflict within himself. If Stevens suffered (and I think he did suffer) from a schism within himself, he also seems not only to have been aware of that but to have tried to "cure" himself. Even as early as "Last Look at the Lilacs," he is contemptuous of that rational "caliper," that "arrogantly male, / Patron and imager" (CP 48-49). And he also condemns, albeit playfully, that "Damned universal cock" in "Bantams in Pine-Woods" who, in a quintessentially phallogocentric way, thinks that he is the center of the universe (CP 75-76). To this end I see an important development between "The Idea of Order at Key West" and his well-known "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (CP 524).

III

In contrast to the earlier poem of 1934, in Stevens' 1950 lyric divisiveness in voice and in self is recognized rather than being "written over" or suppressed. The divisiveness is even explicitly held within the interior (rather than being fallaciously described as a split between a dominating male poet/author/authority and a submitting, potentially chaotic feminine world). As the word "paramour" suggests, there is a romance, even an intimacy/communion/communication in this poem that is dependent upon "difference" (to use Heidegger's term). The most telling sign of this is the plural pronoun "we" and that most feminine of articles, the "shawl," wrapped tightly round them since they "are poor":

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor . . .
(CP 524)

Even though Stevens' characteristic tone of dominance is absent in this poem, the recognition and recovery of the feminine voice does not undermine the poetic authorship as Stevens obviously feared it would in "Farewell to Florida." Instead, the recovery of this voice gives expression to what is beyond control, beyond order, beyond dominance in our actual lives and *thereby endows with significance* that little which we can order in words:

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.
(CP 524)

In this poem the phallogentric "central mind" is consciously exposed *as a fiction*—not in any way heralded as the "ideal realm" where the "new bourgeois man feels historically untouchable," as Frank Lentricchia has recently argued.²⁴ From the opening stanza, there is only "small reason" to "think / The world imagined is the ultimate good," a delicate disclaimer which quietly but continually dismantles the covert assumptions about and equations of reason, thinking, imagination, and essentially all Western (or at least Platonic) idealizations. But in submitting to the realization of the fictionality of our orderings—including the largely phallogentric privileging of the idea of order itself—*this* poem manages finally to be heard as fully human and humane. In essence, the recovery here of the feminine voice, which is so silenced in his early poems, especially after *Harmonium*, opens up the space in Stevens for the magnificent voice of his later years, one heard, for example, in "The Planet on the Table" and "Lebensweisheitspielerei," where he admits, in opposition to the "portentous enunciation" (CP 43) of his earlier work, that

The proud and the strong
Have departed.

Those that are left are the unaccomplished,
The finally human,
Natives of a dwindled sphere

—but a sphere in which "Each person completely touches *us*" (CP 504-05; italics mine).

We should note that such a development as I have sketched here is itself reductive in a way. Certainly in "Madame La Fleurie," also a very late poem, we see the monstrous and bearded inversion of mother earth in the "bearded

queen" who is devouring him (CP 507). Similarly, the mother in "World Without Peculiarity" becomes a hating "thing upon his breast" (CP 454). Yet, in general, the development I have described is accurate. As he says in "Artificial Populations," a poem written the year he died, "This artificial population [rosy men and women of the rose] is like / A healing-point in the sickness of the mind" (OP 112).

How this "cure" was accomplished is itself a topic for another lengthy study, but I would like to offer a brief summary of certain touchstones in this process. After his obvious attempt to gain total voice in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens becomes increasingly obsessed with "the sound / Of right joining," "The final relation, the marriage of the rest" (CP 464-65). We see this desire thematized in his letters when he, perhaps surprisingly given his personal life, uses the pleasure that "a man and woman find in each other's company" as an illustration of the "pleasure" of "Cross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, . . . giving and taking" of the "various faculties of the mind" (L 368); and it is repeated two years later in the seventh section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,

As when the cock crows on the left and all
Is well, incalculable balances . . .

.....

not balances

That we achieve but balances that happen,

As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.

(CP 386)

Yet despite his efforts to achieve this balance in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Nanzia Nunzio, for example, fails to achieve this promise, her erotic power being so contingent upon her willingness to be scripted or subjugated:

Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
In its own only precious ornament.

.....

Clothe me entire in the final filament,
So that I tremble with such love so known
And myself am precious for your perfecting.

(CP 396)

The maiden Bawda and her captain perhaps fare better: at least they are both "love's characters come face to face" (CP 401). Yet the last numbered section of the poem names the "Fat girl" as the "irrational . . . the more than rational distortion" (CP 406), phrases reminiscent of those used in the same year to describe the "sister of the Minotaur." Certainly Stevens has not achieved communion with his interior paramour at this point, despite his desire to do so.

But in "Of Modern Poetry," written two years before, and later in "Burghers of Petty Death," we find men and women together, more successfully figured as equal representatives of humanity. "Modern Poetry," Stevens says, "has to be living, to learn the speech of the place. / It has to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time" (CP 240). In the second poem, written in 1946, Stevens says:

These are the small townsmen of death,
A man and a woman, like two leaves
That keep clinging to a tree,
Before winter freezes and grows black—
(CP 362)

This "woman," equal in her humanness to the "man," marks a new moment in Stevens in which "she" is not only validated but recognized both as a presence and as a human being rather than tracing, in either idealized or "monstrous" discourse, the path of failed signification and signifiers.²⁵ If I were to indulge in psychological explanations, I would consider the possibility that the sheer, overwhelming and uncontrollable violence of the Second World War reduced all human beings in Stevens' eyes to the position of "women" in the ironically-realized, metaphorical sense of the word. We are all without power, not just women, in this modern world, unable to control the world and possibly our own lives.

Between "Of Modern Poetry" and "Burghers of Petty Death," we see Stevens dismiss a figure of a "bright red woman" for (presumably) a real one in a poem intriguingly called "Debris of Life and Mind":

She will think about them not quite able to sing.
Besides, when the sky is so blue, things sing themselves,

Even for her, already for her. She will listen
And feel that her color is a meditation,

The most gay and yet not so gay as it was.
Stay here. Speak of familiar things a while.
(CP 338)

The unexpected turn in the last line toward domestic intimacy, especially for such a previously "exotic" poet, enacts what is both a personal and poetic passage, a "fall," we might say, into the more fully human. Certainly his request, open to rejection, vulnerable, and wistful, is quite different in tone from the whole panoply of "hero" poems that preceded this poem and the earlier "rage for order."

In "Auroras of Autumn," published in 1947, Stevens implies, at least, that he meets his anima in an intense "rendezvous" that prepares the way for "Final Soliloquy":

This sense of the activity of fate—

The rendezvous, when she came alone,
By her coming became a freedom of the two,
An isolation which only the two could share.

(CP 419)

As Frank Doggett and Dorothy Emerson have rightly suggested, this “isolation” is an isolation because it is a rendezvous within himself, between his masculine and feminine selves.²⁶ What is most revealing about this description, however, is that it is specifically a “freedom of the two,” a phrase which claims at least to have finally achieved what Stevens desired as early as “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: reduction of the “monster to / Myself” so that he can “be, / Two things, the two together as one” (CP 175). It is also much to the point here that the “mother” who “invites humanity to her house” (CP 415) in this poem “has grown old” (CP 413). Ultimately, she too is more vulnerable (and, therefore, human) than mythic—as is the woman in “Things of August” (1949), where “She is exhausted and a little old” (CP 496). In addition, as Milton J. Bates has already pointed out, it is at this moment in his career that Stevens begins so frequently to characterize himself as a child,²⁷ but, I would add, usually as a child of both parents, or both sexes, rather than being strictly the son “only of man” (CP 185) as in the earlier “A Thought Revolved.”

Finally, in “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” (1949), we come across a supposedly masculine character, “a man / Of the mind” (CP 497), who finally *speaks* with what I see as Stevens’ previously repressed feminine voice. There is no control, no mastering, no portioning of the night:

Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in
Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?
(CP 497)

The angel is, in fact, a “necessary angel,” but one who is questioning rather than “ordering,” one who is, admittedly, too easily gone, subject to change—a sign of the mutability of our best linguistic orderings. But he—she—is also finally heard *through* the door (instead of being held off beyond the portals), heard, even if only whispering. This poem, which ends the last volume of poetry that Stevens wrote before *The Rock*, achieves something of a resolution (emphasizing far more the “solution” or mixing than the earlier tone of “resolve”) that finds a final plenitude in the great lyrics of his last volume, including “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.”

I think, then, that there is real growth in Stevens and that this is why, despite poems like “O Florida, Venereal Soil” or “Good Man, Bad Woman,” Stevens touches so many women. I have it on good authority, for example, that a leading feminist poet secretly reads Stevens, and Helen Vendler, as we know, has

said Stevens has written the poems she would have written if she were a poet.²⁸ I think this growth also accounts for why, despite what seems to have been a very unhappy personal life, most of us still feel a certain health—humanity in its fullest sense—in reading Wallace Stevens.

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Notes

¹See Randall Jarrell, "The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens," *The Third Book of Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 55-73; first published in *The Yale Review* 44 (March 1955): 340-53. There he says of Stevens:

There is about him, under the translucent glazes, a Dutch solidity and weight; he sits surrounded by all the good things of this earth, with rosy cheeks and fresh clear blue eyes, eyes not going out at you but shining in their place, like fixed stars. (67)

A similar sense of Stevens' magnanimity is found in Marianne Moore's review of *Harmonium*, "Well Moused, Lion," *Dial* 76 (January, 1924): 84-91; and Harriet Monroe's review of the same volume, "A Cavalier of Beauty," *Poetry* 23, 6 (March 1924): 322-27.

²See Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983), in which Naaman Corn says not only that "Mr. Stevens was very dominating" and that "No one dictated anything else but Mr. Stevens," but that he also caused his wife to "quit talking" by "snapping" at her whenever she spoke (248). With regard to Stevens' "scripting" of Elsie, see Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), especially Chapter Five.

³Mark Halliday, "Stevens and Heterosexual Love," *Essays in Literature* 13 (Spring 1986): 135-55.

⁴Milton Bates has handled these, and other facts about Stevens' relationship with his wife, with great tact in *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and "Stevens in Love: The Woman Won, the Woman Lost," *ELH* 48 (Spring 1981): 231-55.

⁵This phrase is taken from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). See all of Chapter Two, "Infection in the Sentence," for a lengthy discussion of the literally "ill" consequences of our largely phallogocentric language (45-92).

⁶This poem is found in Stevens' *Collected Poems*, 59. Subsequent references to Stevens' works will include the abbreviations CP, OP, L, and NA for the standard editions of his poetry, letters, and essays. With regard to Stevens' attitude toward the "High-Toned Old Christian Woman," see George Lensing's remark that "She is never permitted to present her side in the poem, though the speaker ironically pretends to represent that side for her," "'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman': Wallace Stevens' Parable of the Supreme Fiction," *Notre Dame English Journal* 8 (Fall 1972): 46.

⁷Edna Kenton, "German Women and Feminism," *The Trend* 7, 2 (May 1914): 147-52. See also "War and the French Working Woman," *New Republic* (June 1, 1918): 145-47; or "War and the Woman's College," *New Republic* 15, 192 (July 6, 1918): 285-87.

⁸Louis Sherwin, "The Land of the Hen-Pecked," *The Trend* 7, 4 (July 1914): 437-41; Cato Major, "Rule the Women or They'll Rule You," *The Trend* 1, 2 (May 1911): 233-34.

⁹Joan Kelly, *Women, History & Theory* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), xix; and Sandra Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," *Signs* 8 (1983): 422-50.

¹⁰The first of these by H. D. is an especially anti-erotic poem; the second seems essentially a poem about rape; both are printed in *Glebe* 1, 5 (1914); Groff's poem appears in *Others* 2, 1 (1916): 121-22; Pound's are in *Others* 1, 5 (1915): 84-85; in Cannell's "Ikons," *Others* 2, 2 (1916): 149, women's sexuality essentially equals man's *value* and *violence*; finally Burke's poem, addressed to a "Virgin," essentially enacts a verbal rape, *Others* 2, 3 (1916): 174.

¹¹Helen Hoyt, *Others* 1, 5 (1917): 79.

¹²Titled the "Woman's Number," *Others* 3, 3 (1916).

¹³An interesting point of comparison here is William Carlos Williams' essay, "For a New Magazine," in which he says that new literature should be "the machine of women and men" (thereby not only mentioning women as authors, but putting them first). However, he goes on, much like Stevens, to say that "Poetry is thus everything that a man of the greatest power could wish to encompass," *Blues* 1, 2 (March, 1929): 30-32. Similarly, George Oppen asserts that Ezra Pound was, at least in the early years, "caught in the idea of being 'macho' though the word didn't exist at that time. He was going to be the pounding poet, the masculine poet"; see Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, "Poetry and Politics: A Conversation with George and Mary Oppen" in *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, ed. Burton Hatlen (Orono: University of Maine, 1981), 27.

¹⁴In this regard, see Edward Kessler, *Images of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Gordian Press, 1983), who finds that Crispin of "The Comedian as the Letter C" accepts his "masculine and feminine natures" late in the poem (66), and who also argues that the androgynous nature of the "creative imagination" also informs the invocation of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (238 n. 15). In contrast, Frank Lentricchia interprets the possibly androgynous nature of the speaker in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" as something much more suspect—"a self-sustaining bisexual unity" which is specifically *not* an "enchanted" individuation; see *Ariel and the Police* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 222-23.

¹⁵Howard Baker, "Wallace Stevens and Other Poets," *Southern Review* 1 (Autumn 1935): 373-96. Frank Doggett and Susan Weston have both called attention to the influence of Jung on Stevens: see Doggett, *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 38-45; and Susan B. Weston, *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

¹⁶Although Lentricchia suggests that such disturbing dislocations are largely a modernist malaise (see in particular 168), Kelly describes a similar pattern in the poetry of Dante: "She [Beatrice] remains shadowy and remote, for the focus of his poetry has shifted entirely to the subjective pole of love. It is the inner life, *his* inner life, that Dante objectifies," 37. It may well be that such division of masculine identity, in particular the "divestment" of that which is perceived as the feminine, forms part of a larger pattern of poetic experience throughout Western history.

¹⁷The first edition of *Ideas of Order* opened with "Sailing After Lunch," a poem which makes the possible spiritual content and intent of the first edition much more obvious. However, just as the first edition (1935) was being published, Stevens suffered several well-known critical attacks, most of which condemned his lack of social awareness. (The most famous of these is Stanley Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order* in *New Masses* 17 [October 1, 1935]: 41-42.) The second edition, which begins with a new poem written after these reviews—i.e., "Farewell to Florida"—might correctly be seen as Stevens' attempt to make his poetry somewhat more socially relevant.

¹⁸Although the speaker of this poem might be female, it seems more consistent to me that the speaker would be male. As an interesting parallel, consider Lentricchia's (I think) faulty analysis of Stevens' early sketch in which a young man opens a picture of his sweetheart only to find it is an image of himself as an act in which the feminine image is "emphatically assumed," not "trivialized in macho perspective," 222. Despite Lentricchia's dismissal of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, I do not think that these critics would interpret this sketch in such a sympathetic way. The replacement of the female with the male image would rightly, I believe, signal an instance of total phallogocentric mastery. Similarly, if the speaker of "Two Figures" were a female, we would have a poem of extreme empathy rather than of male mastering. However, the latter possibility, in which the female presence is silenced by masculine ruminations, seems much more consistent with the poetry of Stevens discussed thus far.

¹⁹Thomas Walsh, *Concordance to Wallace Stevens* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963). It is also interesting that, combined, forms of speaking and forms of voice appear 285 times in Stevens' corpus. Conversely, and very curiously, words for Stevens are almost never "written"—a mere 20 times, in fact.

²⁰"All Over Minnesota" appeared as the first section of "Primordia," published in *Soil* 1, 2 (January 1917): 76-78.

²¹As a point of comparison for the climate of the times, see *Others: The Spectric School*, which contains a number of poems by Elizah Hay, including "Spectrum of Mrs. X," "Of Mrs. Y," "Of Mrs. Z,"

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and "Of Mrs. & So Forth," that are similar in tone to those by Stevens I am discussing here; *Others* 3, 5 (1917): 10-11.

²²While there are many critics who have discussed "The Idea of Order at Key West" in such positive terms, see in particular, Marie Borroff, "Wallace Stevens: The World and the Poet," in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 9; and Linda Mizejewski, "Images of Woman in Wallace Stevens," *Thoth* 14 (1973-1974): 13-21.

²³I have discussed this aspect of Stevens' poetry at length in "Wallace Stevens: Poems Against His Climate," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 11, 2 (1987): 75-92.

²⁴See Lentricchia, 217.

²⁵In this regard, see Mary Arensberg, "'Golden Vacancies': Wallace Stevens' Problematics of Place and Presence," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 10, 1 (1986): 36-41, in which she discusses the usual figuration of the female in Stevens as an *absence*.

²⁶I am indebted to Frank Doggett and Dorothy Emerson for this observation, which will be forthcoming in their recent essay on this poem in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.

²⁷See Bates's *Mythology*, 277-79.

²⁸Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Spoken Out of Desire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 3: "Though there are poets undeniably greater than Stevens, and poets whom I love as well, he is the poet whose poems I would have written had I been the poet he was."

The Feminine Principle in Stevens' Poetry: "Esthétique du Mal"

MARY DOYLE SPRINGER

I

THERE EXISTS IN WALLACE STEVENS' poetry a developing feminine principle to which the poet aspires as to the good. It is "feminine" only because it is with certain of the traditionally recognized female values and attributes that the poet initially wishes to identify. The ultimate aim, consciously achieved in the late poems, is a relatively genderless poetic apprehension of the real. It is possible even to call it androgynous, if by that term we understand a "full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements."¹ One purpose in this essay is to show something of the working out of this feminine principle in a major poem, "Esthétique du Mal." But first the principle and its masculine opposite require description and verification. These principles are not critical constructs of my own but rather, the evidence suggests, principles consciously elaborated by Stevens himself as the very foundation of his work.

From the earliest poems to the latest, he is reaching for poetic principles where he always sought them, in "The glare of revelations going by" (*OP* 10).² In this series of ever-moving revelations there is a continual study of the proper relations between reality and the imagination. Far from an intellectualization, however, the study is a non-logical, fluctuating, extended poem which resists the intelligence "Almost successfully" (*CP* 350), and yet leaves us with a feeling of victory for the seeker who is at the center of all the poems, often in his own voice, sometimes in the "fictive covering" (*CP* 396) of metaphor.³

It is a commonplace of Stevens criticism to speak of his extended search for a satisfying relation between imagination and reality. It seems to me, however, increasingly important—in a critical hour of increasing indifference to the difference between the metaphorical and the real in the work of modern poets—to note, first, the solid commitment of nearly all of Stevens' poems to this single subject and second, to its constant expression in metaphors and images of the masculine and feminine. The journey the poems form is all compact in lines from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.

(*CP* 406-07)

This green is the same as that of the "queen" in "Depression Before Spring," whom one longed to see in "slipper green" (*CP* 63), and it images a fresher, fluent, long-desired world (the Spanish, unlike Latin, in Stevens tends toward

the affectionate), the rational "lecture" world of the masculine streaked with a joyful irrationality, "flicked by feeling" (CP 406-07).

Very early, the poems begin to eschew the singularly masculine as the world has known it, with its virtues of "Fides," "Justitia," and "Fortitudo," inscribed in Latin because such abstracts look so finished and fine on the walls of "savings banks" (CP 124). The masculine resides in the "Dominion of the blood and sepulchre," the "old catastrophe" (CP 67) of established religion, the cathedral and the mountain as images of stern and impossible heights, mythology, reason, truth ("There is no such thing as the truth" [CP 203]), dreams and the past they reflect, history and old knowledge derived from "compass, curriculum" (CP 15) and the namers and lecturers, "Politic man" (CP 143) ("Go, mouse, go nibble at Lenin in his tomb" [CP 217]), soldiers, lines of demarcation that are "much too dark and much too sharp" (CP 71), the preordination of "passion's permit, hang of coat, degree / Of buttons" ("Such trash" [CP 39]), books, annotators, heroes ("The hero is not a person" [CP 276]), and rabbis—unless, of course, they are "rose rabbi[s]" (CP 17; cf. L 251, 348). Symbols and metaphors are suspect even to the poet who employs them, as are all the other salty fixities of "lex, rex, and principium"—the "whole / Shebang." Added up in this manner, "veracious page on page, exact" (CP 37-40), the masculine principle appears harsher than we are made to feel it, poem by poem, and we understand it to be masculine sometimes only by intuition, oftener because feminine opposites are set up against it. For the poet/speaker the masculine principle is not simply the way the world goes at its worst. Rather, wryly and humorously, he sometimes takes it humbly unto himself. He can afford to be wry and humorous, for he looks at this gendered, socially structured world always with one foot forward on the journey out and away from the exclusively masculine, toward that more "fluent mundo."

What lights his journey is, however, an ongoing male image of the sun, that "brave man" (CP 138) of daylight and uncomplicated straight looks at things. The sun is almost invariably a positive image, but it is only "half the world" (CP 393) and requires modification by the moon, by shadows, and by movement. From the earliest poems we find hope for a release from "square rooms," the release that would come if "Rationalists would wear sombreros" (CP 75) (the literal Spanish meaning, of "shadow-makers," reverberates here if we let it). The poet is himself Crispin the voyager, and Ulysses, "Symbol of the seeker, crossing by night / The giant sea" (OP 99).

He knows and seeks and endlessly traverses the sea, an entirely female image to which he is devoted for its undulations and its "dark voice," for its unreasoning and "meaningless plungings of water and the wind" (CP 129). On the "exact rock" of the male mountain, where he "Would discover, at last, the view toward which [his inexactnesses] had edged," he nevertheless finds a place

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

(CP 512)

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It is not the rock alone that is important in securing his poems, but “the outlook that would be right” (CP 512), an outlook in sight of the sea. To gaze at the sea is not only to claim sympathy with an elaboration of the female principle (as the sea has always been in literature) but to adopt one of the great media of flux, of change, of the never-ending voyage into the immeasurable.⁴ His villains never cease to be those who square the world and plot the mind. As Helen Vendler puts it, “Geographers and philosophers, in Stevens’ metaphor, are demons that cannot be themselves, that cannot let a landscape alone, but tour the world trying to rearrange it in an orderly way.”⁵ The world of the masculine is the world of cities and machines, and it is not nostalgia for the past (itself entirely suspect) but fear for the death of the natural that inspires one of the “New England Verses”:

Scaffolds and derricks rise from the reeds to the clouds
Meditating the will of men in formless crowds.
(CP 105)

The feminine, while not contrasted to the masculine by any sense of disorder set against his order, is yet deeply connected to all the forces in the world that resist containment, such as the sea with its undulations and “sleights of sails” (CP 7), a sea whose presiding goddess is “ceaselessly, / Upon her irretrievable way” (CP 6). Sometimes connected to the poetic imagination (the one of “fictive music” [CP 87]) and sometimes to a stripped-down reality (both of them goods for the male poet), the “she” moves from a discontented “paltry nude,” who is “Tired of the salty harbors” and “Eager for the brine and bellowing” of the unconfined sea, toward a “goldener nude / Of a later day” who will be “the centre of sea-green pomp, / In an intenser calm” (CP 5-6). Elsewhere there are the expected and pervasive connections to motherliness (“the goodness of lying in a maternal sound” at evening, “Unfretted” by the city’s “half sun”— [CP 482]), to children, to noise, “chatter,” music, and the brightly failed language of nonsense sounds,⁶ to the particular and to the refusal to generalize, to the reluctance to name things, to motion, to shadows and usually to the moon, to colors of rose and green, to the “sleepy bosom of the real” (CP 481). Above all, she is the earth:

Seen as inamorata, of loving fame
Added and added out of a fame-full heart . . .
(CP 484)

(Obviously, “she” is also the she of “ellipses and deviations” [CP 493] and of inconclusion.)

Here one is bound to stop and examine this list of similes and connections for a dangerous traditionalism. One thinks of Annette Kolodny objecting to the earth-mother as a suspect, limiting, male-induced metaphor in American literature.⁷ Harder to answer to is what Cynthia Ozick calls the “Great Multiple Lie” which is applied to all women, whether they are writing or being written about, a lie whose premise is that “there is a ‘female nature’ which is made

manifest" in art. Its assumptions are "a psychology and an emotional temper peculiar to women," a style characteristic of women, a "set of preoccupations appropriate, by nature" to women. They include "female friendship, female madness, motherhood, love and romance," but they also include "duty, religiosity, etc." (In these last two I note already Stevens' complication of categories of masculine and feminine.) "The lie assumes a natural social community grounded in biology and reproductive characteristics . . . rather than in intellect or temperament or derivations or societal experience." At its worst it "posits for intellect and imagination a purely sexual base."⁸

Ozick's fire certainly seems as though it might direct itself at Stevens' initial categories. What it cannot discriminate, however, is what is to be taken as direct "multiple lie" and what is to be taken as Stevens' apparent recognition that it is society that tells that lie, in gendered conventions that become shorthand for the poet, but which he can choose among for their truth and worth and even transfer to males. It seems clear that Stevens, as poet and speaker in his descriptions and applications, takes a dialogic position among the conventions, and thus they cease to be categorical. For example, even the female metaphor of the sea can turn "mechanical, muscular," repetitive. He sees that "There is a woman has had / More babies than that" and that "She is not the mother of landscapes but of those / That question the repetition on the shore" and desire a more "fiery lullaby" (OP 81-82).

As he says in "A Collect of Philosophy": "we come, in the end, to a man who is not only a man but sea and mountain, too" (OP 185). Not only is there dialogue between the conventions that bind each gender, but an "embrace" between them that is

like weather after it has cleared—

.....
And the Orient and the Occident embrace
To form that weather's appropriate people,
The rosy men and the women of the rose . . .

(OP 112)

Conventional feminine attributes are conventional for reasons that Stevens obviously did not invent, and they are not all equally good in his lexicon. And his shifts accompany his voyagings. Among the undesirable are the women of "primrose and purl" (CP 54); and the "englistered" (OP 104) ones are attractive to the poet/speaker only until, in his passionate search for understanding, he begins firmly to prefer a "bare" (CP 137) (better than "nude") reality to the merely exotic, primitive, and artificial that are suggested by the "englistered" feminine. He increasingly draws a distinction between the merely artificial and the art he seeks, an art produced by the imagination's apprehensions of bare reality. Beware of the women to whom he gives names (names, for him, are "rotted" [CP 183]), for they are not members of the feminine principle he cherishes. A woman like Lady Lowzen ("Oak Leaves Are Hands") is fixed and named because of her artificiality and sterility—she is "A bachelor of feen

masquerie" (stricken thus with an unfecund masculine image) and constitutes a fixed falsity which "Skims the real for its unreal" (CP 272)—one of the ways the imagination can go wrong.

Ultimately the poet's whole story is unfolded in that return of Ulysses to Penelope in "The World As Meditation," the return of the purified male principle to the restorative female principle, not in a marriage that drowns the qualities of either, but in a friendship composed of the best of each ("Supremely true each to its separate self" [CP 146]), and highly susceptible to growth and change. That it was a voyage of mishaps and deviations is suggested not only by the figure of Ulysses ("But was it Ulysses?"—he both is and is not the man of the myth) but by the evidence of trials in many poems in which he has managed to escape the "beautiful tableau," the statues, heroic moonlight heights, the "heavy historical sail" (CP 120) that malevolently keeps us from going "round and round" (CP 123; cf. 149, 235, 405) (vertigo is a good), the jungle heat of all that Florida represents, and the ambiguity of all these leave-takings.

Penelope is a figure of earthbound, expectant reality:

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.
(CP 521)

When the masculine figure, the poet who has been "the interminable adventurer," finally reaches this "deep-founded sheltering" of friend with friend, he must come to it without old baggage:

She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone.
She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace
And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.

He must come without baggage from the traditional masculine world of values, so thoroughly the past realm of the voyaging Ulysses. But he comes not without his own value as a bringer of a "form of fire." Not at all akin to "fetchings," he is a "mere savage presence" arising from his sunstruck world which "awakens the world in which she dwells." Hers is a housewifely world of "cretonnes," but I think we are not to take that likeness amiss, for it is the world we all inhabit prior to the arrival of a poetic "force," a force which the world can somehow imagine even before it arrives.

What we have here (and all that I am saying is confirmed in the later poem, "The Sail of Ulysses") begins to be no longer narrowly gendered principles of difference, but rather a coming together of equals: the poet, after long voyaging, in touch with the poetic imagination, returned to the receptive and real world which keeps "Repeating his name with its patient syllables." The poet does not come to the world as a force alien to it; there is a mutual reflectiveness in which "Penelope" has her own whisperings, like the wind in an earlier

poem: "What syllable are you seeking, / Vocalissimus . . . ?" (CP 113). All was predicted in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" where he finds that

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real.

(CP 392)

This dependency is nothing the masculine poet imposes, but a joyful discovery earned by the Ulysses-like voyage. The poet, in Stevens' work, is a kind of stripped down figure who must earn both imagination and reality. Both muse and its object, reality, are feminine in attributes, a dual prize of which Penelope represents one part. Already lit now with imagination, the "form of fire" (CP 520), he is beginning to be ready for the climax which will compose the single self of the ultimate poet in an interaction of male and female. This is the triumph of all previous effort:

Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible.

(CP 404)

What was "possible" in "Notes" is there in the return to Penelope. She has endured and waited, as earth-centered reality always waits for the imaginative apprehension of it. Though she has endured and waited, she is entirely self-possessed and not needy, since "The barbarous strength within her would never fail." It is to her fullness, then, that he brings that "form of fire," the imagination that empowers them to be ideally together, not as a husband who completes his wife (he has overthrown the Homeric myth by his disruption of it), but as "friend and dear friend." Ulysses is the poet who, as the Enesco epigraph suggests, has spent too much time wandering and fingering his violin, without perception of a sublime unity that is "possible, possible" between himself and the world. It is not that they are halves (always a denigrated concept in Stevens). It is that they are two different wholes arrived together to create the "inhuman meditation" (above-human?) that mends the noise of tree and tree, of sex and sex. The unity has wholeness and creates form but not fixity: since "[the mind] can never be satisfied" (CP 247) and since the imagination has an "incalculable expanse" (OP 246), the world is forever in flux. Under these conditions (and are they not conditions of open-endedness to please the most ardent feminist?) differences are respected even in an androgyny, again predicted in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where the partaker partakes of that which is different from him, and which changes him:

the sailor and the sea are one.
Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,

Sister and solace, brother and delight.

(CP 392)

Not only are the imagination-fired poet and the real world “friend and dear friend,” but they are companions within a single self that contains both sister and brother. (We will see this again in “Esthétique du Mal.”)

II

Stevens’ whole figurative and expressive mode—as well as his thought—as I describe it in this essay, seems to me related to what Hélène Cixous has dubbed “l’écriture féminine,” a mode increasingly understood not to be limited to women. Rather such writing is, as Julia Kristeva has seen, ultimately an attempt to broaden the scope of the signifiable, producing a “woman-effect” in that it ruptures the traditional male symbolic chain and presents “symptoms of the breakdown of the paternal metaphor.” This breakdown is obviously possible to male poets who can feel the need for it, from Walt Whitman to Wallace Stevens.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, also seeks a “heteroglossia” which might “wash over culture’s awareness of itself” and “relativize the primary language system underlying its ideology.”⁹ This is not merely a desideratum since already, as Alice Jardine affirms, “Writing by women and some men differs from traditional writing.”¹⁰ In its conscious or unconscious attention to the semiotic internal of language it attacks traditional writing and ideas, as Stevens does, implicitly when not overtly. Thus Bakhtin claims too much when he claims that poetry (unlike the novel) “works in its own language as if that language were unitary . . . as if there were no heteroglossia.”¹¹

Bakhtin might have done well to look to one of his own poets and consider Mayakovsky’s struggle with the sun, his metaphor for the paternal light of enunciation, set up in opposition to the “whistle of a high wind,” “the sound of the sea,” “noises,” and “rocking motions” which he discovered in his own poems. Does not this sound like a precise description of Stevens’ male and female metaphors for the speakable and the non-speakable? Perhaps the sun, “that brave man,” is brave for Stevens by very reason of the attempt to bring the “man”-light of poetic enunciation to the heteroglossia achieved by the strong presence of feminine elements.¹²

So far I have been constructing and evidencing a gradual coming together of masculine and feminine principles which are plainly metaphors, a kind of language for expressing the several elements the poet works with in his ideal movement toward the “supreme” poem which, in Stevens’ own overt simile, is like the coming together I have described between Ulysses and Penelope. In “Two or Three Ideas” he develops the proposition that “the style of a poem and the poem itself are one” (OP 202). And he employs the very metaphor I have been tracing: “For the style of the poem and the poem itself to be one there must be a mating and a marriage, not an arid love-song” (OP 212). Quoting the lines in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” about the coming together of the “hen-cock” and the “cock-hen” (CP 155), Vendler reads the sexual

connotations as poetic "creation" requiring the "separation of genders" so as to be productive of the "final fertility . . . in the journey back and forth between the antithetical states," with "interpenetration but no identification." Her entire discussion is, very properly in my view, of "metaphorical spheres of reference."¹³

I feel bound to make these points in order to stress that the male and female principles described *cannot* be seen to have their existence in our world, that they are entirely of a rhetorical world. Thus I find myself totally without permission to set foot in Hartford, Connecticut, where contextual critics have lately been trampling the lawn.¹⁴ I am myself a contextualist in the limited sense of one who follows Stevens' clear lead in examining the whole body of his poems for illumination of the developing aesthetic principles that appear not only in the poems but are supported in his essays. As to his personal life and its political implications, I see valid reasons, in terms of reading as accurately as possible these difficult poems, to meet the man, Wallace Stevens, initially where he asked to be met, in his contention that "Poetry is not personal" (*OP* 159), in his invariably *figurative employment of the female* (which we override with jack boots when we bring into the poems his actual wife, or what Vendler terms his "depleted marriage"). If it is intentionality in the poems that we seek, let us not ignore his desire that "Personality must be kept secret before the world" (*L* 44), reason enough for his career-long "Ariel" (*CP* 532) mask, the artifice resorted to even by poets as confessional as Yeats and Plath. Stevens was very young when he first complained, "People look at one so intimately, so stupidly" (*L* 86).

In my attempt thus to clear pluralistic ground from which to speak in a different voice from the contextualists, I return to Robert Pack, one of Stevens' most careful and sympathetic critics, saying of the poems:

All men as individuals are 'secondary characters,' for it is only the full reality of the two worlds [reality and imagination] in one, that is primary . . .

and he further says:

It is . . . true that he does not present to his reader personal problems that consume his thought, yet to call him impersonal is misleading. Stevens' imagination is his most personal possession, and he presents its activity to us with vivid directness; we come to know the adroitness of his mind, touch what he touches, and see what he sees. . . . The love poems are not passionate or intimate, since, for the most part they are written to the world, and to the reader. . . . There are no moments of rage, despair, humiliation, grief, desperation or hatred.¹⁵

As Stevens himself put it, "there is nothing that kills an idea like expressing it in personal terms. . . . [A]ll egotisms are voluntarily antipathetic" (*L* 292). I would add that there is a sense in which those "moments" of passion in the

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work of other poets, those “egotisms,” only serve to remind us of the distance that divides one human being from another. It is because of the impersonal voice of this poet that we are all invited to participate in the world he presents, to feel what he feels without obstruction by the personal, to laugh when he laughs (that delightful Comedian with a capital letter), to see what he tries to see, of generalities that bind us.

III

It is with the sound, then, of that kind of voice, that kind of poet, that kind of metaphorical dialogue between the masculine and feminine principles, that we may approach an understanding of “*Esthétique du Mal*,” that “great poem of the earth” (NA 142), written at the focal age of sixty-five by a poet ever “richer, more fecund, sportive and alive” (CP 469).¹⁶

The poem begins sturdily with a male figure (the “He” that is often the poet) in a masculine pose and setting. He is in Naples, for Stevens here as elsewhere a figure of all that cities can be in terms of the past and of the mechanically composed, as in “*Variations on a Summer Day*”:

Hurroo, the man-boat comes,
In a man-makenesse, neater than Naples.
(CP 235)

He is studying the “sublime” in a book, a book which “Made sure of the most correct catastrophe,” and though Vesuvius groans with the first sounds of pain—which will be the study of the whole poem—the book-reader can tame it with description because it arises from the past (“The centuries have a way of being male” [NA 52], Stevens writes) with which he feels comfortably in touch:

He could describe
The terror of the sound because the sound
Was ancient.
(CP 314)

The second verse introduces the first, slightly disturbing, feminine elements:

It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human.
There were roses in the cool café.
(CP 314)

What is the connection between lunchtime and “Pain is human”? The reality of the here and now, of roses, of the feminine that is there because of roses and of the present, all defy any bookish conclusion on the “correct catastrophe” and, in those realities, we get our first understanding of pain—that it is “human” and exists only in our perception. Already the assumptions of this masculine knower are confounded: it develops that pain does not exist except in the say-so of his books, in phrases from the past. This is knowledge of the sublime which, like God’s quivering after Ursula, “is not writ / In any book”

(CP 22). We are left with the amazing consideration that “except for us, / The total past felt nothing when destroyed” (CP 314). Already all that the masculine reader can get from the past with its books, phrases, and paragraphs (as against the roses that are simply there) is seriously shaken. It is important to note that the earlier assumptions are shaken because of the openness of the speaker to the feminine elements that surround him.

In the next canto the central figure is still caught in time, even though his place is now “a town in which acacias grew.” Bird sounds form, for him, what he recognizes to be “too much the syllables / That would form themselves, in time, and communicate / The intelligence of his despair.” But the moon rises—here an “it” but so often a maternal presence in his poems—and becomes part of a supremacy of the imagination that “was always free from him, / As night was free from him” (CP 314-15). There is no cold separation; rather her shadow seems to touch him with another form of understanding; that pain, despite the floral, “hoary-hanging night,” is not to be perceived in the moon, that the supremacy and freedom of the moon reject pain and thus she is a savior.

In Canto III, the masculine figure emerges in his own voice with “firm stanzas” that result from his new learning, which constitutes a Blakeian marriage of heaven and hell, which “Are one, and here” on earth. In this movingly brave canto, we are asked to reject even Christ because he is an “over-human god,” the “reddest lord” (the color of assurance and conviction, often overly-confident of itself) who has “gone before us in experience,” robbed us of our own experience by his pity, “Weaken[ed] our fate” because we do not confront our destiny alone but with his pity as our “constant fellow.” Gods should keep their distance,¹⁷ and if they only would,

It seems
As if the health of the world might be enough.

It seems as if the honey of common summer
Might be enough, as if the golden combs
Were part of a sustenance itself enough,

As if hell, so modified, had disappeared,
As if pain, no longer satanic mimicry,
Could be borne, as if we were sure to find our way.
(CP 315-16)

All the rest of the poem provides an elaboration of these lovely and courageous lines. The speaker has divested himself of the masculine “fetchings” of the past, its books and even its most human and consoling gods in order to make love, and invite us (tentatively: “It seems / As if”) to make love to the earth and its “honey of common summer.” The vast images of heaven and hell are nothing to this—heaven is a weakness and hell is modified by earth. Our pain is our own, no longer “satanic mimicry” and therefore to be borne as part of *our* experience. Here is the real sublime, the doughty and most

acutely human spirit, and it arises from an understanding between the masculine and feminine principles. What this poet knows is that we all, female and male, live in the masculine world figured by the past and its religions (those “cocks that crow us up / To die” [CP 314] and then predict the pain and pity of that), its fixities and densities, its evasions of “the being’s deepest darling” (CP 317).

Stevens called this poem a series of “*apérçus*” (L 469) and critics have taken this, and the poem’s variant structures, as permission to evade its connectedness. The poem’s perceptions are indeed *seriatum* and they take form as profoundly and meaningfully as any of the better-understood long poems.¹⁸ The speaker articulates this conception of form overtly in Canto IV and bows to it as a “mistress” (CP 316). Before our era of skeptical criticism, much was said by poets and critics about the pleasure available to us in the making and perception of form. Stevens amounts sometimes to a deconstructionist or, more properly, a “decreationist” in his own term, in the “wink” with which he dismisses the notion of magisterial form in the world that speeds past us in nonsense sounds and shifting lights (though one may make poetic form of the very dismissal, as in “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman”).¹⁹ However, when it comes to ponderous traditional and religious assumptions on which we base our ideas of pain, evil, and punishment, he brings to our rescue new forms, more implicitly feminine forms, for the amelioration of such ideas. What is interesting in this canto is that the figure that represents the forming imagination is male, but a “Spaniard” and “of the rose,” a color connected in all the poems to that which is most valuable in the feminine, here the “hot-hooded and dark-blooded” contrasted to the pallid fanciness of “Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs” (CP 316). We have advanced far from the pedantic student of the sublime in the opening canto—he is becoming one of the “rosy men” (OP 112).

The next task of the speaker, in Canto V, is to establish the difference between the “sentimentalist” in regard to pain and the “true sympathizers” (CP 316-17). The sentimentalist, we infer, casts about among the “inventions of sorrow” (as among the various sorts of flowers in the preceding canto) and “parades in the obscurer selvages,” fussing with the various manifestations of pain in “false engagements of the mind,” in “clouds, benevolences, distant heads.” The “true sympathizer[,]” by contrast, engages with “the actual, the warm, the near,” sensing its unity in “the being’s deepest darling” (surely a female image) with whom he achieves “a dear relation.” These are “in-bar” phrases, phrases of the intimately human, and how different they are from the “phrases” of the opening canto. There, forms arose from the falsely sublime of “ex-bar,” from the “damasked memory of the golden forms” that we cherished “Before we were wholly human and knew ourselves.” Not only have we come a distance in a better direction from the first canto, but it is progress on the same subject as in earlier poems wherein he denigrated “Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns” (CP 55). Here begins the triumph of the “familiar,” the “dear relation,” the androgynous relation from which the later poems will not depart, an advance upon “Sunday Morning” (written several decades earlier).

Though the vision of the near and familiar partly began there, it lost itself in a mere pagan and masculine substitute for the Christian. How very much greater is the vision here over that pagan "ring of men" (CP 69). There, there was a woman to be taught. Here, "So great a unity, that it is bliss, / Ties us to those we love"—and, very importantly, it is now a unity which is "disclosed" as a "brother even in the father's eye, / This brother half-spoken in the mother's throat." For such disclosures who would not "forego / Lament"? It is the grand "aperçu" of the whole "esthétique." (Just as in "Livre de Toutes Sortes," the French title of the whole poem mocks the rational and cool aesthetic approach, like the "mauve / Maman" [CP 321] whom we shall encounter later.) Value is set entirely on the disclosures of "central sense," disclosures of the form and unity available in the invitation called out to us by "being's deepest darling," to "Be near me, come closer, touch my hand."

Canto VI appears curiously to lie outside the province of the study of pain and evil. However, if the ultimate resolution of the whole poem is to be an absorption of all that is metaphysical into the joy of earth, of "Merely in living as and where we live" (CP 326), we can see that again there is a "consummation" of opposing principles that must happen. The sun, that early male force to whom the poet is always connected to one degree or another, is seen here as that seeker we recognized earlier, making the "tenderest research" into the world and "intent / On a transmutation." A "big bird" with "bony appetite" (aptly called the "mind-bird" by James Luguri) is pecking at a sun figure who is not unlike the "Bellissimo, pomposo" of an earlier poem, who sings "in clownish boots / Strapped and buckled bright" (CP 103). It is with sun imagery that so much of Stevens' poetry shines for us; but pecking away at that brightness is always a Northern light which he recognized as his climate (CP 34, 117), and we can identify the moon with a subdued, mothering light of the imagination. Much of the time the sun is, as here, a boisterous bright male figure that both casts and perceives a sharp, bright, "flame-freaked" (CP 125) light on the world, a jollier light than the moon, connected to "warblings early in the hilarious trees / Of summer, the drunken mother" (CP 124) as against the "mother of pathos and pity" (CP 107). The sun is the light of the earthier, more intense imagination than the pale and more spiritual light of the moon, and both are necessary to the understanding the poet seeks of a reality that is basic but discoverable only in shifting lights.

The exchange back and forth of these male and female powers is really the thing. In "The Sun This March,"

The exceeding brightness of this early sun
Makes me conceive how dark I have become . . .
(CP 133)

We get a properly dusty answer from this poet when we hunger after certainties. Things which take themselves seriously, as "The crosses on the convent roofs," turn swiftly into a "glittering" and "A mirror of a mere delight" (CP 135-36), in the light of the sun, this "clownish" comedian. Conversely, "desire

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for day" (given that "we are men of sun / And men of day and never of pointed night" [CP 137]) in the swiftly "turning spirit" (CP 134) of the poet becomes as easily

Desire for rest, in that descending sea
Of dark, which in its very darkening
Is rest and silence spreading into sleep.

(CP 137)

"Life is an old casino" (CP 142), but there is a bright slant on pain, and "The yellow grassman's mind is still immense" (CP 318) though it does not possess the world alone.

Canto VII has been the least favored part of the poem by critics, including Vendler, who find the opening image of the red rose "that is the soldier's wound" a sentimentality that ignores the pain of war by covering it over with a conventional metaphor and then generalizing it away. If one were to patch together Stevens' whole position against the great masculine solution of war as it gathers across the poems (and one should), I believe she would find a characteristic acceptance of "things as they are" (CP 165), but through the eyes of the realist. War for him is a "mob" action, but also a "seasonal" recurrence: "Everywhere the spruce trees bury soldiers," just as "spruce trees bury spruce trees" (CP 234). For better or worse, he is a "man without a doctrine" (CP 205), like the star that has nothing to do

with the world it lit,
With the blank skies over England, over France
And above the German camps

(CP 238)

but which endures beyond them. However, he knows well enough that "the fault is with the soul" that hankers after "sovereign images" (CP 125) and he takes a highly ironic view of the bronze statues with their pointed swords. There is a kind of motto in his "No large white horses" (CP 229).

Stevens does perhaps the little the poet can do, given the vacancy of war protest poetry. The pain of what is real and "red in blood," the uncommon disaster of war as the greatest "*mal*," is mitigated here as elsewhere in his poems by a discovery metaphorical and in the large: "The wounds of many soldiers" are all "grown deathless in great size" under the fostering imagination.²⁰ The red rose metaphor, clearly not pleasant here, is disruptive of its own sentimentally feminine convention, since "red" has that special (masculine) meaning for Stevens which Vendler has expressed very well as a sign of "over-athletic postures" and the "desire to assert boldly," remote from the feminine subtleties of "rose" in so many of the poems.²¹ In Luguri's fine phrase, the poet "undermines his reader's tendencies," with his resistance to fixed metaphors and to what Whitehead called "misplaced concreteness." A fixed metaphor is not the metaphor for the poet of chaos and change. Nor is there any likelihood of a

sentimental image from a poet who was deeply conscious that "Sentimentality is a failure of feeling" (*OP* 162).

In the very worst of the "red" evil which is war—assertive, brazen, bringer of death—we have need for that previously introduced "Spaniard of the rose," the abstractionist who will make bearable form of the wound of war. By the benign indifference of nature, and the universal touch of a woman, the "soldier of time" is reminded that he arises from out of life and "No part of him was ever part of death." The indifference of the mountain, shadows on the wind, the shadows of his fellows, all earth images, "ring him round" and this fragrance of earth breathes for the soldier of time a "summer sleep" in which even "his wound is good because life was." It is an extraordinary image in which life and the earth cast back their beneficence on death and remove not only its sting but death itself. In a final image of supreme gentleness, "A woman smooths her forehead with her hand," a feminine gesture of such universal grace that it causes that "soldier of time" to at last lie calm. War is the worst horror that reality offers to the unwilling poetic imagination and Stevens, though he has no heaven for the hope of the wounded and the dead, emulates Homer and Chaucer in figurative and compassionate attempts to lift the sufferers out of the horror and restore them to the universe of which they are part. In Stevens' outlook, the female is an indispensable component of that compassion and universe.

Satan was the metaphor we once had for evil, and his "death," in our disbelief, has thrown us off-center ("eccentric") and robbed us of a good many dramas of "filial / Revenges," Satan's gift to our imagination. In the poet's mind (Canto VIII), so to be robbed is to be robbed of the imagination itself and left alone with reality:

How cold the vacancy
When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist
First sees reality.

(*CP* 320)

Much, much of the struggle that governs so many of the poems that preceded this one is lodged in these lines. Satan, in his filial revenges, was a grand, lonely masculine figure of the imagination, but to simply substitute reality for all he had to offer is itself a tragic new beginning for the imagination. The "mortal no" that we say to phantoms like Satan leaves us with the dangers of "yes" which, bereft of imagination, may leave us with "one meaning alone," as the next canto warns us, and thus "destitute." Always we are pressing forward to a coming together, a mutual governance of imagination and reality.

In Canto IX we have an almost feverish defense of the moon, earlier seen as the "mother of pathos and pity." S(he) is a defense now (in that expanding aesthetic that will conquer pain) against panic, against ugliness and "a lusted nothingness." No "yellow grassman" in clown suit cheers us now. In the "west," after this jovial clown has fallen and removed the daylight real, "we require / Another chant," that other side of the sun that is the moon, for

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Effendi, he
That has lost the folly of the moon becomes
The prince of the proverbs of pure poverty.

In our advances against the evil of nothingness, having divested ourselves of self-pity's genesis, we must have now "Another and later genesis," the "music" of the imagination discovering "shapes" against the "haggardie," the teeming void. The destitution of the void is the very reverse of the "paradise of meaning" in the moon's "incantation" of the many things we hear in what we hear, the many things we see in what we see.

The "He," the aesthete, the seeker, returns in Canto X, in a study of the "nostalgias." Nostalgias are not the demons to the poet/speaker that they are, for example, to current feminist critics,²² for he trusts himself to differentiate among them, and further to differentiate among the feminine qualities that are so often attached to the nostalgias. It is a choice, finally, among mothers, those prime figures of nostalgia. He will not have the "mauve / *Maman*" of the "sleek ensolacings" but rather the "most grossly maternal," the one most "fecundly" assuaging, the most animal and unsubjected. With such a mother the return home is not a return to some nostalgic past, but a "return to birth," a "being born / Again in the savagest severity,"

Desiring fiercely, the child of a mother fierce
In his body, fiercer in his mind, merciless
To accomplish the truth in his intelligence.

There are other mothers, metaphorical ones ("singular / In form"), connected to the primitive ("she-wolves / And forest tigresses") and to the sea. They are rejected now in favor of

The softest woman,
Because she is as she was, reality,
The gross, the fecund, [and] proved him against the touch
Of impersonal pain. Reality explained.

Devoted to her, he chooses "the last nostalgia: that he / Should understand"—not the sentimental nostalgia of the rational epistemologist, and finally not a nostalgia at all, in that the speaker becomes content with only such present understanding as an ever-shifting reality affords. Everywhere connected to this reality is the innocence of life. As in the case of the "soldier of time," it seems

That he might suffer or that
He might die was the innocence of living, if life
Itself was innocent.

In the ensuing canto, again coming directly from the poet/speaker, the bitterness of war is returned to as a major evil, as is the indifference of disaster to its victims. There is no comforting female image here, even in the sentimental feminine use of violets springing up from buried houses in a "well-made

scene," for well-made scenes are as structured and false as the well-made plays in which they occur. Here a kind of stereotypical masculine firmness is seen as a good, in that its "bitter appetite" is not now to escape pain in a "confectured ocean" and "pink" weather (very different from rose), but to confront pain for "its essential savor." What is interesting here is that the poet could so easily have attached the images of the prissily "well-made" and the sentimental "pink" and "confectured" to the feminine, but he does not. There is another and better kind of "ocean" that we know of, and he chooses between softnesses as acutely as he did between nostalgias.

In the next two cantos we watch the "He," and then the back-standing commentator, survey an error that is totally connected to the worst of the masculine principle. The error is to dispose the world into categories, from which he then escapes alone, thus creating a "third world without knowledge," accepting whatever *is* as true, and destroying all question of the flux in truth. "Is it himself in them that he knows or they / In him?"—it is better never to answer, never to "escape[]" into final answers. In the world of "knowledge" to which one escapes, there is no challenge, no suggestion of flux, and therefore no pain. Avoid the flux, structure the "knowledge," avoid the pain. But that only brings on the worst pain the mechanics of evasion can offer:

What lover has one in such rocks, what woman,
However known, at the centre of the heart?

To have lost that "woman" is to have lost all.

Yet there is a complication. If we do not fix our knowledge and unperplex our destiny, nature will, in that each man has the "unalterable necessity" of being the "unalterable animal" designated by the "assassin" that cuts off other possibilities. Yet here, as so much earlier, death is the mother of beauty. The disclosure of the assassin is "an adventure to be endured / With the politest helplessness," but it, the one certainty, makes possible its own kind of ease, an easing of desire:

And it may be
That in his Mediterranean cloister a man,
Reclining, eased of desire, establishes
The visible, a zone of blue and orange
Versicolorings, establishes a time
To watch the fire-feinting sea and calls it good,
The ultimate good . . .

Among the twistings and turnings of these many "yets," there are always further "yets." The poem of life and its agonies is not complete only in a "Mediterranean" contemplation of the "Versicolorings" of a "fire-feinting sea"—those more maternal comforts. The northern places are always there, and male, and are part of the scene, as in Canto XIV, which is set in Geneva, "By a lake, with clouds like lights among great tombs." We suffer now a "blank uneasiness" caused by our logical "lunacy," represented in this more mature

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“esthétique” by Konstantinov and other political revolutionaries. These revolutionaries do not “stop for orangeade” (CP 102), nor do they notice the lake by which they might walk and its “clouds,” even though “Lakes are more reasonable than oceans.” Rather, they choose one self to be against, one narrow world to fight for, in a “politics of emotion” which they have converted into an “intellectual structure.” Shades of all the evils we have known throughout the poems—the “rationalists in square hats,” the “high-toned old Christian woman,” “the muscular poses of the museums” and their statues, all gathered into “Politician” (CP 143).

The choice of choices is never to choose, is never to end the journey, but to commit oneself to the flux of the “physical world” where the “green corn gleams” for the “adventurer / In humanity.” In that world as the poem comes to an end, there are no divisionary principles but only “So many selves, so many sensuous worlds” made possible when the constraints are eased. What causes the feminine principle so often to dominate is the poet’s recognition that in the *female* qualities he has selected lie our best hope of remaining in the “physical world,” winking and changing in the light of the poetic imagination (that “capable” man who rang bells and produced “elegance” for the reality of “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay”).²³ The sight of that world with this poet in it, is a sight on which the metaphysicals can only look down enviously. The sight is of a sunstruck “brave man,” moonlit too with imagination, moving in a world where male and female qualities co-exist in a “paradise unknown” (CP 325) hitherto. This is a thesis worked out across a lifetime of poems, now “scrivened in delight.”

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Notes

¹I owe the definition of androgyny to Elaine Showalter, but I shall obviously not be adopting her suspicion of the concept itself (as when she accuses Virginia Woolf of a “flight into androgyny”). See *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 263.

²Quotations from Wallace Stevens’ works will be from the following sources:

CP—*Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954).

L—*Letters*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966).

NA—*The Necessary Angel* (New York: Knopf, 1951).

OP—*Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957).

³Jacqueline Brogan very usefully notes that the terms metaphor and simile are employed interchangeably by Stevens, and she argues cogently that the radical form of metaphor, “A is b,” is not suited to Stevens’ purpose, which seems to me to “give a new account of everything old,” as I shall try to show in “Esthétique du Mal.” Brogan quotes him saying, “The ambiguity that is so favorable to the poetic mind is precisely the ambiguity favorable to resemblance” (NA 79), rather than the fixity of metaphors. Brogan’s essay is “Wallace Stevens’ ‘Vacancy in the Park’ and the Concept of Similitude,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* (Spring 1986): 9-17.

⁴In my stress on such terms as “immeasurable,” “meaningless,” and “unreasoning,” I wish to express sympathy with Alan Perlis’ conception of Stevens’ work as representing a highly positive “descent into unreason.” Perlis charts this (an ascent, in my view) as a career-long journey, moving beyond Nietzsche to the “gay babble of androgyny.” The babble is not unimportant, for it is the “babble of poetry.” Perlis comments: “Here, sexual difference vanishes; inhuman cries and incom-

prehensible syllables fill the unfamiliar air as 'major weather' in Stevens' late poetry" ("Birds at the Edge of Space: Stevens and the Descent into Unreason," essay presented at the MLA meeting in San Francisco, December 1987).

⁵*On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 129.

⁶Joan Richardson, in her introduction to her biography, writes that "Stevens realized that there is always a point at which any reasoned fiction turns on itself to become self-reflexive and paradoxical," and she says that this is partly "detectable in the juxtaposition of discursive language and nonsense syllables" (*Wallace Stevens: The Early Years* [New York: William Morrow, 1986], 21). Clearly, the discursive is the reasoned and masculine, while the nonsense sounds arise out of the non-speakable intuitive, the feminine. They work together to make the "supreme fiction" toward which Stevens was always moving. This seems to me a better reading of Stevens' use of nonsense sounds than that of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who see it as yet one more thieving appropriation by a male poet of the "primal verbal fertility of the mother" (Gilbert and Gubar, "Sexual Linguistics, Women's Sentence, Men's Sentencing," *No Man's Land, Vol. 1, The War of the Words* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988], 263). One can surely view it this way, but to do so is to lose all sense of the skill, joy, and humor with which Stevens uses such sounds in the perfection of the given poem. May a son take nothing from a mother except by stealing from her? Should we not be glad for a poet who can hear the inconclusive sound of the dove as clearly as the masculine clatter of a bantam in pine woods? Walt Whitman was not merely hiding a debt when he said that "The masters know the earth's words and use them more than audible words" ("A Song of the Rolling Earth").

⁷In *The Lay of the Land*, Nina Baym, in her review of the book, points out that American literature contains equally as many metaphors from nature for the masculine (*Signs* [Spring 1976]: 737).

⁸"Literature and the Politics of Sex: A Dissent," in *Art and Ardor* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), 284-90.

⁹M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 368.

¹⁰Alice A. Jardine, "Theories of the Feminine: Kristeva," *Enclitic*, Special Feminist Issue (Fall 1980): 15. I have paraphrased as well as quoted some of Jardine's analysis of Kristeva.

¹¹Bakhtin, 399.

¹²For a discussion of "The Struggle Between the Poet and the Sun" in Mayakovsky, see Julia Kristeva's "The Ethics of Linguistics" in *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 28-30.

¹³Vendler, 73 and 74.

¹⁴A number of these have to do with Stevens and women. At present the most boisterous and cynical is Frank Lentricchia, in his new book, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). His Chapter 3 is the final version of the controversy that raged in the Summer 1987 and Winter 1987 issues of *Critical Inquiry*. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, though their response to Lentricchia's attack on them as "essentialist" feminists is measured and thoughtful, seem to know no way to respond to his attacks on Stevens for his supposed "sexual and literary self-depreciation" except to try to go Lentricchia one better with their own isolated readings of such works as "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" and "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay." To isolate any of Stevens' works is to misconstrue the ongoing exploratory and shifting journey which governs all his writings, and which I am at pains to describe in this essay, making sense of early works by means of later works, as Stevens himself did. The pity of the work of all three critics, as of Helen Vendler's, is the dour aspect in which they present the one considerably "happy" poet we have seen after Whitman—the one for whom "earth was like a jostling festival," and who enjoyed a male and female "liaison, the blissful liaison, / Between himself and his environment" (*CP* 32, 34). Thus I am relieved to have written my present account of "The World As Meditation" before coming under the influence of Lentricchia's harsh reading of it as a war between the sexes, wherein Stevens' "friend and dear friend" is reduced to a "greeting-card sentiment" (*Ariel*, 239-44).

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Helen Vendler, whom Lentricchia derisively calls the “Queen of Formalism” (*Ariel*, 204), yet takes a curious stumble into a demonstrably unwarranted contextualism when—missing the humor, as seems to be the habit of those who roam back and forth between poetry and real life—she connects the opening lines of “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” with Stevens’ “depleted marriage” (59). One wants simply to comment: “zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay” (CP 11). Or, more soberly, to ask once more that critics make the illuminating connection between these slightly mocking first lines and the affectionate opening lines of “To the One of Fictive Music.” Both figures are the same, addressed as a muse, beloved “fragrant mothers” (CP 87). In “Le Monocle” the problem is resolved when the speaker makes clear that “you” refers to the imagination and recalls its “first imagery” which “Found inklings of your bond to all that dust” (CP 15).

¹⁵Wallace Stevens: *An Approach to His Poetry and Thought* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 46, 6, 196.

¹⁶My general understanding of “Esthétique du Mal” (though not my particular tracing of the feminine principle in it) owes a great deal to year-long weekly conversations with my colleague, Phyllis Stowell, herself a poet, and also to the extraordinary unpublished analysis of the poem by James Luguri, a colleague whose early death was a severe loss to Stevens studies. Further references to Luguri will be to this unpublished source.

¹⁷Luguri valuably connects these lines with “Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit”:

If there must be a god in the house, let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness,
A vermilioned nothingness . . .

(CP 328)

¹⁸Vendler has employed Stevens’ modest phrase to justify indulging numerous partial and loose judgments of the poem, including what seems to me (as well as to Harold Bloom) insupportable notions of “comparative shapelessness,” of Stevens himself as self-pitying in the poem, and that the dark underbelly of the final lines belies the triumph of “the right chorale.” Stevens, as a maker of poems, was certainly in love with the “nebulous brilliancies” (apérçus) which he found in looking at the world, but as poet/speaker in this poem and so many others, he never relents in his belief that among “all sorts of flowers” one might, and should, discover form, the genius of the flower, never “muffing the mistress for her several maids” (CP 316) (cf. Vendler, 206-17). The Bloom reference is to *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Cornell University Press, 1976), 229-30).

¹⁹For an enlightening discussion of the distinctions between the two terms as they apply to Stevens, see Melita Schaum’s “‘Preferring Text to Gloss’: From Decreation to Deconstruction in Wallace Stevens Criticism,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* (Fall 1986): 84-99. In view of the current discussions of the political consequences of deconstructionism, it seems important to specify the high degree to which Stevens’ poetry and thought is responsible to a genuine search for reality, however perspectival. That his mind was constantly “decreating” did not make him less responsible to the dialectical understanding that occurred thereby. For Stevens, in his “final soliloquy,” there is not only “an order” and “a whole” (CP 524) in poetry, but it is a sufficient light and order “to help [us] live [our] lives” (NA 30).

²⁰Elder Olson, in his splendid brief appreciation of Stevens, makes the point that the poet sees always “not individuals, but the collective soldier, the collective hero, the collective man.” “The Poetry of Wallace Stevens,” *College English* (April 1955): 399.

²¹Vendler, 105.

²²An excellent current account of the nostalgia problem appears in the work of Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

²³I am ultimately making a careful distinction between the terms “feminine,” the pejorative term for conventionally assigned attributes of women, and “female” attributes selected by the poet who interests himself in an androgynous relation between the simply male and female, both stripped of conventionality. The feminine principle that pervades Stevens’ work is under his control: the *female* qualities he has selected approvingly as true to nature are differentiated from the *feminine* qualities he employs in full knowledge of their dangerous conventionality.

Getting Wisdom: The “Rabbi’s” Devotion to *Weisheit* and its Implications for Feminists

ROSAMOND ROSENMEIER

The house is empty. But here is where she sat
To comb her dewy hair . . .

(CP 427)

I

THE 1930s WERE A PERSONALLY turbulent decade for Wallace Stevens.¹ “The Sun This March” (1930), which appeared after a six-year silence, suggests “how dark” the poet “ha[d] become.” Stevens locates his means of recovering from this darkness in the sun’s “exceeding brightness.” This brightness, he explains, used to be “a part / Of a turning spirit in an earlier self” (CP 134). Similarly, in “Owl’s Clover” (1936), an unwieldy poem played on the scale of cosmic history, something “within us” as a “second self” returns out of the past to restore the poet to poetry and momentum to history. “Voices” in the earlier poem “com[e] down” and in “Owl’s Clover,” the lives “of parents who had never died . . . return”; they “return, simply, upon our lips, / Their words and ours” (OP 67). The word “parents” here, Stevens later explained, refers to “all the generations of ancestors” (L 374). The ancestors are integrated, somehow, into the poet’s newly empowered language.

The Depression, Stevens said, was the impetus for the writing of “Owl’s Clover.” But the worldwide economic and social crisis coincided with a personal depression of the kind Stevens seems to have suffered periodically.² Relief for this condition comes as light—a light that “re-illuminates things that used to turn” (CP 133). “Needs” that are at once psychological, cultural and poetic have led the poet into an exercise in retrieval. In both poems he summons the “rabbi” to preside over things: in the first instance, to be the “true savant” of his “dark nature,” and in “Owl’s Clover” to be a similar and quasi-political figure, a “Metropolitan Rabbi,” as he explained to Ronald Latimer (L 292-93). The rabbi was to bring about change and to “fend” the poet’s “soul” as change occurred.

With the ever-elaborating consistency that is his hallmark, Stevens continued to assume the identity of rabbi. In “Things of August” Stevens declares, “We’ll give the week-end to wisdom, to *Weisheit*” (CP 492). The re-naming of poetry as Wisdom, and, in particular as the German *Weisheit* tells us the analogue Stevens had in mind. The devotional study of Wisdom was the occupation of those pietistic German groups in Pennsylvania which Stevens considered to be, particularly, his mother’s forbears.³ Stevens suggests that week-ends spent with *Weisheit* / poetry transform the rabbi / poet into light and joy; the rabbi / poet becomes the “lucidity of his city,” and the “joy of his nation” (or in effect, again, “metropolitan”). The staginess of this theosophical stanza should not distract us from noting the deliberateness of Stevens’ basic strategy here: the poet is being likened to the alchemist / sorcerer of Pennsylvania Ger-

man culture. He is clothed in the insignia of the deuterocanonical Dame Wisdom: in diamonds, red garments to the floor, and a "ring" that guides him. Ecclesiasticus counsels the "son" to "put [Wisdom] on like a gorgeous robe / and wear her like a splendid gown" (Ecclus. 4). The poet/rabbi of "Things of August" does just that.

Stevens, in 1952, explains to Bernard Heringman that he has "never referred to rabbis as religious figures but always as scholars." He also says, "In view of Mr. [C. Roland] Wagner's very philosophical papers on my things, I am beginning to feel like a rabbi myself." Stevens stresses here not only the identification he feels with rabbis, but the fact that his childhood upbringing provided his education on this subject: "When I was a boy I was brought up to think that rabbis were men who spent their time getting wisdom" (L 751). In Stevens' mind, then, these rabbis, these ancestral scholars, are larger than life, and in comparison, the modern poet gives voice to a lesser Wisdom ditty, a "Lebensweisheitspielerei," played by those who are "left," since the "proud and the strong / Have departed" (CP 504).

Portrayals of the poet in the likeness of rabbis occur throughout the *Collected Poems*, but with renewed vigor and emphasis after the 1940s. Despite its having "almost the color of comedy," this analogy has a "strength at the centre" that is "serious" (CP 477), as Stevens writes in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Wisdom as "mirror," clothed in several of her chief attributes (gold, gems, belts) and projected as "blessed beams from out a blessed bush" is the predicate of the implicit "wasted figurations" that are "saved and beholden" by the poet, "in a robe of rays." He warns us that poetry as "the serious reflection" is "composed / Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace" (CP 477-78). Elsewhere he said that the purpose of poetry was "to help people to live their lives" (NA 29). Stevens' sense of the rabbi prototype was not simply that the modern poet was a "new scholar replacing an older one" (CP 519), but that he was a commonplace, familiar figure whose purpose was to make life more livable. One aspect of proverbial wisdom is, of course, practical advice for day-to-day living. Stevens wrote to Renato Poggioli that "the figure of the rabbi has always been an exceedingly attractive one to me because it is the figure of a man devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes" (L 786).

The rabbi savant who had emerged out of an earlier self to "fend" the poet's soul is only one of many such "custodians of the glory of the scene" (CP 469). In *Harmonium* Stevens had suggested that there are different colors for rabbis. In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" the poet who began as a "dark rabbi" grew to become a "rose" one. In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" the poet is both "infant A" and "hierophant Omega"; he stands in the shoes of both of these opposite "interpreters of life" who, together, ensure an ongoing interpretation of the scene, by assuring the circularity of the dialogue. Stevens' verbs frequently indicate that the poet is doing what rabbis do: he "looks," "beholds," "expects," "sees" (often for just an instant). He "studies," "broods," "remembers" a beloved object. And although the object of his "pursuit" is fem-

inine, she nevertheless has the power to become one with the scholar, and to play a role in his androgynous creativity.⁴ When Stevens declared in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" that "I behold, in love, / An ancient aspect touching a new mind" (CP 16), he was describing the characteristic action of rabbis who study texts lovingly for the affecting wisdom hidden there. For Stevens it was not so much that wisdom hides herself, but that she has been part of all that has been forgotten. Stevens explained the phrase "disregarded plate" (from "Sunday Morning") to Harriet Monroe as a reference "to the disuse into which things fall that have been possessed for a long time" and that "the young inherit and make use of." By "plate," he said he meant "family plate" (L 183). In the later poetry, particularly, the adjectives "used-to," "waste" and "disused" describe parts of a world that had been all but lost from Stevens' memory. However "eccentric" or out of the way parts of that regional world seemed, these provided a "center" for the later work.

II

It is the purpose of this essay not only to re-assert the finding others have made that Stevens turned, particularly, to the family past in his search for a "gorging good" (CP 440), but to delineate the feminine identity of that "good." The retrieval of precious materials for poetry meant the rediscovery and the readaptation not only of the role of scholar/rabbi, but of the multiple appearances of the female figure, Wisdom, the wisdom which the rabbi "gets." For feminists, the importance of this return lies in the fact that the Palatinate German refugees to Pennsylvania with whom Stevens identified were infused with the biblical and Apocryphal Wisdom tradition.⁵ The Hermits of the Wisahickon Brotherhood, the Ephratans, and the Philadelphia Society, led by the 17th Century apocalyptic, Jane Leade, were all, in addition, followers of the "countertraditional"⁶ works of the 17th century shoemaker mystic, Jacob Boehme, whose florid reconstruction of the cosmos centered on the dialectical and sexual relationship between God and the Sophia, *die Jungfrau der Weisheit*.

Compounding the influence of the divine female on Stevens' family past is the fact that "returning" is used as a metaphor for his increasing identification with his mother and with what he called "her people." Stevens was certain that Margaretha Catherine Zeller's predecessors came to Pennsylvania in the early 18th century. The critic's task is complicated by the fact that when Stevens refers, for example, to "the goodness of lying in a maternal sound" (OP 82), or to "the origin of a mother tongue / With which to speak to her" (CP 470-71), the referents cannot easily, as he said elsewhere, be fully "disentangled" (CP 322).

I do not recommend that we attempt to disentangle one "mother" from another; I approach this complication, particularly in the poetry after *Harmonium*, with the assumption that Stevens is layering his central figures for poetry, and that the first, the original, the "mother" layer has some of the essential characteristics of the Behmenist's Sophia, and is marked as well by the quality of feeling that Stevens had for his own real mother.⁷ "A pleasure, an indulgence, an infatuation" (CP 158) were the words he used to express what he

"found" in the nostalgic poem, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." By "return" Stevens did not mean a trip to a literal place. (His actual visits to Reading in these years proved disappointing.) His voyage back rather resembled H. D.'s, and one is tempted to suggest that Stevens' female figures for poetry are composed, like H. D.'s, as a "palimpsest." But in Stevens' use of the wisdom paradigm, it is Wisdom as an ongoing androgynous process that is emphasized more than her realizable presence as a "solid" figure.⁸ Yet both poets chose as central an ever-changing goddess-mother whom they seek and expect to find "again." In H. D.'s work Athene is a Wisdom figure.⁹

It is important, I think, to focus briefly on the usefulness of the Wisdom tradition as a counter for the expression of feelings which Stevens would not express in reference to real life occasions. He denigrated autobiographical writing as "laborious reportage" (L 624). Yet, as Stevens proceeded to "make" something of the study of family history (L 457), he also developed and enlarged his sense of the suggestive power of the paradigms for poetry that were latent in that history. As both mother and bride, Stevens' female figures frequently promise or suggest renewal or reconciliation. But images of fulfillment are, as frequently, wiped away or erased by his use of verbs in the subjunctive, by his use of sentences that do not finish or that finish contrary-to-fact.¹⁰ In this most characteristic Stevens gesture (the "soldier" knocks the "table" and the "bouquet" falls on the floor), Stevens is faithful to a principal feature of Wisdom tradition. Not only is the certainty of loss suggested in Ecclesiastes' "a season to every thing and every purpose," but (particularly in Gnosticism and Behmenism) Wisdom herself regularly dies, disappears or changes. Wisdom thus provides a model for a female figure who is both the soul-destroying "mother," "Madame La Fleurie," as well as the Christ-like "Eulalia" who speaks the mystery of the incarnation to the "dark-syllabled" rabbi/poet Semiramide (CP 287). This embodiment of contrariety in Wisdom requires a longer discussion than I have space for here. But Stevens' built-in tendency to say resignedly, as he did to Delmore Schwartz, for example, that "the Drang nach den Gut is really not much different from the Drang nach den opposite" (L 693), follows tradition. The coupling of longing and loss, the repeated assurances that nothing is sure, are central to this heritage. Wisdom provides a peculiarly deconstructive undercurrent to the Torah and the Gospel, by uttering the male testament writers' feelings that the certainty of *ultimate* blessings may elude us, but that meanwhile we can "learn to hold fast" (L 558) and work to "restore the status quo ante" (L 615). Stevens' comments about the hopelessness of restoring "savor to life when life has lost it" echo the tradition. He wrote, as a true devotee of Wisdom, to Barbara Church that "these moments of despair can best be controlled by the regimen of life: exercise, sleep and a will not to see the spots in one's eyes" (a reference to his eye disease) (L 615).

These states of feeling, so vividly present (if we read through the dark glass of his persistent self-irony) are the *noeud vital* of the poetry: the crying out of needs, and then the questioning whether "*Seelensfriede* [is] something that

[can] be pursued and caught up with" (L 615). Such statements dimly embody, but are not to be understood only as references to life's real disappointments.¹¹ They are to be understood as the expressions of a layered discourse to which the poet felt native, and which he adopted and adapted because it so eloquently portrayed states of life and mind that were powerfully in him from his earliest days. "One writes about [life]," Stevens wrote to Rodríguez Feo, "when it is one's own life provided one is a good barbarian, a true Cuban, or a true Pennsylvania Dutchman, in the linguistics of that soul" (L 624-25). The amalgam of this "linguistics" had been forged early and deep. In the example of John Crowe Ransom, Stevens found a poet similarly true to the region of his birth. Stevens insists that "A Tennessean has no choice." He then adds a cry like that of the exiled Psalmist, a cry which betrays Stevens' feelings at a very deep level: "O Jerusalem. O Appalachia." Stevens says that Ransom cannot help but pursue the "legend" of his region. "This is what happens," Stevens reflects, "to things we love" (OP 261).

One implication of these findings is the recognition that Stevens' poetry was indeed grounded in *paideuma*, exactly in the way Hugh Kenner used that term to distinguish Pound's work. Stevens turned to his people's "whole congeries of patterned energies, from their 'ideas' to the things they know in their bones," precisely in the sense Frobenius intended.¹² When Stevens made reference to the Pennsylvania pietists, he did not focus on theology. He made analogies; he drew often facetious parallels between his situation and the situation of the ancestor: between, say, "waiting in New York" and waiting "in Jerusalem the Golden" (L 511). He found Sachse's two-volume study of the German Sectarians and Pietists in Pennsylvania "precious." But that finding did not send him into theological speculation; it sent him back into his personal past for sounds and sights to which he could feel connected. "When I was a boy," he wrote to Henry Church, "I met one of these sisters in Ephrata. She was then 90 and her father could very well have gone back to the time when the vital characters were still alive" (L 511). He wanted to find his way back, to feel attached. Of the "Low-German" girls of his childhood acquaintance, he wrote to Elsie Moll (apparently his wife-to-be was not among this group), "I love them, my dear. You must not think that I do nothing but poke fun at them . . . I feel my kinship, my race. To study them, is to realize one's own identity. It is subtly fascinating" (L 127). This is the self-described "common yellow dog" who found more in "our Pennsylvania Anjou" than in the "'fronts audacieux' of New-York," but who "never intended to admit" that he was a "common yellow dog" (L 181). Later he did say that "there may be something to [the] idea that my colors are the colors of my origin" (L 753). There he did not mean the color yellow. He meant to indicate that he knew things about his Pennsylvania past "in his bones" but, like a good Pennsylvania pietist, intended to keep these "hidden before the world."

The fact is that this *paideuma* has been neglected by historians in general. And, further, that "poking fun" at Pennsylvania Germans seems to have been the tradition among the educated English of that region—a practice that

Stevens shared. A more significant factor leading to neglect may be the central role given to the Divine Female by various of the leading religious sects of the Pennsylvania Germans. In this unusual emphasis the sectarians were distinguished from the mainstream Protestant Reformed churches. To Stevens' great delight these Germans and Dutch denominations made determined efforts to correct the sectarian heresies, but to little avail.¹³ The parallel Stevens was fond of speculating about—between the “fictive abstract . . . as immanent in the mind of the poet, as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian” (L 434)—has not yet been interpreted as suggesting two female figures, one on each side of that analogy. The statement that Stevens found poetry a “substitute for religion,” as he wrote to Hi Simons (L 348), has prompted much theological and epistemological interpretation. But the evidence that by religion Stevens did not mean Protestant orthodoxy but something else, something closer, perhaps, to “the sisterhood of the living dead” (CP 87) has not been fully explored. It is true that Stevens' early training in Lutheranism was a significant episode in his life. And it is true too that, as he said, “the First Presbyterian church [in Reading] was very important [to him in childhood],” but, as he also pointed out, “a [bike] ride to Ephrata was like an excursion into an unmapped country” (L 125). We should take Stevens seriously, I think, when he reports to Bernard Heringman that he is a “dried-up Presbyterian” (L 792) and when he declares in “The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air” that “Cotton Mather died when I was a boy” (CP 216). There is abundant evidence that these “dead” structures did not, finally, provide the fruitful analogues for poetry that the rabbi sought.

Stevens gives us every indication of where to travel to find what he meant by the “gods” for which his poetry was intended to substitute. When he disavows orthodoxy, he nevertheless adopts scriptural analogy to construe what he calls “a sustenance itself enough” (CP 316). In “Esthétique du Mal,” the poet's stanzas are “firm,” and they “hang like hives” (CP 315). Where they hang has changed, however, since “both heaven and hell / Are one, and here, O terra infidel” (CP 315). There is, nevertheless, a “health” in the presumably unbelieving “world,” of which the “golden combs” of the poet's hive *seem as if* “part.” The biblical figure of honey and honeycombs to express the writer's “pleasant words” is a deliberate echo here, and Stevens' claim for poetry recalls the Solomonic claim that words can be “sweet to the soul and health to the bones” (Pr. 16:24; also, Ps. 19:10, and Cant. 5:1). In Luke 24:42, Christ likens honeycomb to His promises of fulfillment.

When Stevens calls poetry the “honey-comb of the seeing man” (CP 217), he is again drawing a likeness between poetry and biblical Wisdom. The analogy provides a nourishing, life-sustaining resemblance of the kind Stevens liked to entertain, play with, indulge. Indeed, the “activity of resemblance” is, for Stevens, one of the characteristics of poetry: “Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance” (NA 77). In “The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air,” where Stevens pronounces Cotton Mather dead, the poet identifies, instead, with the mouse in the wall of Cotton Mather's “wooden” establishment. The figurative

references there to Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus fix the mouse's likeness to Wisdom-seeking rabbis and hermits. The mouse "hunt[s] for honey" in "the honey-comb," and finds heaven in the "brilliance through the lattices," in the way Wisdom is glimpsed in Proverbs 7:6. Heaven is, the poem suggests, not where Cotton Mather thought it was; "It is the honey-comb of the seeing man." Wisdom is an immanent presence in the mind of the poet and in the life of the world, not only in the walls of churches, but in Lenin's "hair," in the "light / On bed-clothes," and "in an apple on a plate." And "it is the leaf [like the olive twig] the bird [like the dove] brings back to the boat [like Noah's ark]" (CP 217). Wisdom is terrestrial, traditionally, and provides an apt analogue for Stevens' poetry. Like his "fat girl," his "fluent mundo" (CP 406-07), Wisdom is found *in* earth, not simply in heaven. In earth, wisdom is specifically called mother or matrix; she is, for Behmenists, "the signature in all things."¹⁴

In "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air," however, Stevens goes a step further in his identification of the peculiar avenue of religious tradition that he invites us to explore. He understands "Cotton Mather's" longing for something to "quiet that mouse in the wall"; he even offers comfort to "Cotton Mather" or to those he represents; the comfort is named in stanza II: "Over wooden Boston" rises the "sparkling Byzantine." In the context of the numerous Wisdom references, the great monument to the Sancta Sophia in Constantinople is evoked to assure the likes of Cotton Mather that, although the mouse decreates his churches, the overarching presence of Wisdom's/poetry's spirit still precludes or still includes everything Mather is and represents. In Proverbs 8, Wisdom gives rulers the "authority and ability to rule." And there, too, she lays claim to being "the first of God's creatures." When Stevens tapped into the Wisdom traditions of his forbears he met (probably again) the idea developed by Boehme that the "female ground of being is prior to and then coexistent with the creating, masculine deity."¹⁵

III

There are direct and indirect indications of the nature of the "maternal voice" which Stevens called "the mother's voice" still in the ears of "children and old men" (OP 82). In "Esthétique du Mal" Stevens tells us that "He had studied the nostalgias," and "In these / He sought the most grossly maternal . . . / Who most fecundly assuaged him" (CP 321). Stevens' research into his family's genealogy in the 1940s included the reading of a number of histories and biographies of early settlers to Pennsylvania. It is clear that this reading served to refresh the sound of the German his mother spoke (L 417, 521). The representative texts of the pietists and sectarians were laced with the discourse of Wisdom scriptures.¹⁶ The Wissahickon Brotherhood gave particular significance to Revelation 12, which describes the "woman in the wilderness"—the woman "clothed with sun" who brought forth a man child and then fled into the wilderness where she is said to be nourished and protected until the time of Christ's Second Coming. Millennial expectations throughout mark the writing of the pietists, so much so that the Wissahickon hermits were known as

"The Society of the Woman in the Wilderness." Wisdom is both a heavenly figure (associated with "clouds" and sun and moon) and an earthly one (with equally strong associations with "dew" and "mists," with water, fire and with flowers). Kelpius and his group emphasized the anticipated appearance of Wisdom, as well as the glimpses of Her now. The rabbi's task was to protect and study the scriptural promises of Her Coming, and, through alchemy and astronomy, try to detect the natural evidences of her "dawning redness" in the wilderness of this world. "She" is, like Stevens' figures for the supreme fiction, a now-you-see-her, now-you-don't figure.

Stevens' citations of biblical language tend to center on Wisdom texts. In addition, Stevens' poetic and prose discourse is marked by the language habits and the literary forms common to Pennsylvania German culture. The proverb is considered "the very bone and sinew of [Pennsylvania German] dialect," and is said to "play a prominent role in the speech of Pennsylvania Germans."¹⁷ Stevens' "Adagia" thus can be said to be one expression of the "mother tongue." The emergence of the epigrammatic phrasing in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" is a clear re-enforcement, in terms of style, of the remembrances of the childhood "pays" that the poem evokes. "Owl's Clover" was to have been called "Aphorisms On Society," again suggesting the rediscovery of the family voices which that poem celebrates. The change to "Owl's Clover" tells us that Stevens preferred the more expressive bird of wisdom in his title. These interrelations are again suggested in the little late poem, "Adult Epigram," a title that might be transcribed as "the poem in final or complete form." The "epigram" tells us that poetry is Wisdom's analogue: "the ever-never-changing same, / An appearance of Again, the diva-dame" (CP 353).

One aspect of the parallel Stevens drew to the German pietists served to describe the quality of the poet's devotion over time. In a review titled "Rubbings of Reality," Stevens focuses his comments, ostensibly about William Carlos Williams' *Collected Poems*, on the man who "writes a little every day." This man writes, Stevens says, because (again) "he needs to." And, Stevens explains, "what he really does is to bring, or try to bring, his subject into that degree of focus at which he sees it, for a moment, as it is and at which he is able to represent it in exact definition." Writing like a true pietist astronomer watching from his watch-tower, Stevens describes writing as "the grinding of a glass, the polishing of a lens by means of which he hopes to be able to see clearly." Stevens' modern example of such an artist is Picasso, but then he asserts, "the world of the past was equally the result of such activity." He then cites the Wisahickon hermits as his example of artists out of the past: "Thus the German pietists of the early 1700's who came to Pennsylvania to live in the caves of the Wisahickon and to dwell in solitude and meditation were proceeding in their way, from the chromatic to the clear." Stevens then asks, "Is not Williams in a sense a literary pietist, chastening himself, incessantly, along the Passaic?" (OP 257-59). To this rhetorical question, the answer is surely only a qualified "yes." The truer "literary pietist" is Stevens himself.

Stevens here falls into a discourse that bears the mark of the “linguistics of the soul” of the true Pennsylvania German. The phrase “who came to dwell in solitude and meditation” and the description of the poet’s “chastening himself, incessantly” bear that stamp. Similarly, the prose and poetry of this period is dotted with the words “piety” and “goodness,” and these are often given the ancestral tincture. “I write poetry,” Stevens said, “because it is part of my piety: because, for me, it is the good of life” (L 473). When Stevens, in 1948, angered by a publisher’s loss of some poems, expressed his outrage to Thomas McGreavy, he lapsed into the ancestral vernacular:

One should constantly confront the machinations of the devil and the contumely of his courts. These confrontations make one shrink back into one’s own virtue. The poet must always desire the pure good of poetry just as the sinner desires only the pure good of the blood of the lamb. Without thee, O Sophia, what value has anything? The poet lives only in and for the world of poetry. Nicht wahr? (L 625)

Stevens, in effect, seems, in the *Collected Poems*, to proceed “from the chromatic to the clear” in his handling of the figure of the Sophia as the “pure good of poetry” which the poet “must desire.” His first representations of her in *Harmonium* were ones he later rejected in “The Sail of Ulysses” as not the (presumably true or real) “shape of the sibyl.” This later reference to the “englistered woman, seated / In colorings harmonious, dewed and dashed” (OP 104) points back to the earlier more “chromatic” renderings of Her in “To the One of Fictive Music” and “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” Although Wisdom’s likeness continues to inform Stevens’ “queens,” “women,” “brides,” “spouses,” “nuns,” and “dames,” she is gradually “disembodied” (CP 445). In fact, each of the major volumes extends the likeness between Sophia and poetry beyond previous likenesses. “She” is a harmony, an idea of order, a world, a summer, an aurora, and a rock. Finally, she is, fittingly, embodied as the “sibyl of the self.” She began as someone external to the poet; she ends as an internal presence. She ends as a “self” in “need.” The tone of the poet’s disappointment deepens, but the discourse, and the legends imbedded in that discourse, continue “to bear” (CP 393). From the early “voice cr[y]ing in the Wilderness,” the letterhead of a letter to Elsie in 1909 (L 115), to the last “critic of God, the world / And human nature, pensively seated / On the waste throne of his own wilderness” (OP 115), the same “intimations . . . derived from analogies” (L 494) served him. The legendary materials of Wisdom enabled Stevens to continue to perfect a voice “To speak humanly from the height or from the depth / Of human things” (CP 300).

In so few pages I have been able barely to touch on the Wisdom parallel and its implications for Stevens’ criticism in general, and for Stevens’ feminist critics in particular. I hope that these pages will serve as an invitation to feminists to look to the female presence in the Palatinate Christian groups in Pennsylvania—a presence that differed significantly from the Christ of the New Eng-

landers of the same period. One last point should be made about Stevens' uses of female tradition. Stevens was not, in many of the ways we mean the term, a feminist. When the budding poet wished (to himself in his journal) for a "wife," he confessed his feeling on the subject but obliterated the *person* from the portrait: "The proverbial apron-strings have a devil of a firm hold on me + as a result I am unhappy at such a distance from the apron." He said he wished "a thousand times a day" that he had a "wife," explaining that he begins "to feel the vacuum that wives fill." By "wife" he says he means a "a delightful companion who would make a fuss over me" (L 43). Such a "wife" is without self; she is an extension of the poet's self, and a response, particularly, to the need to be fussed over. Stevens' undifferentiated "most beautiful maid / And mother" (CP 461) follows the outline of Wisdom as bride/mother. But Stevens' uses of the paradigm seem to me to weigh heavily on Her maternal, not her bridal, likeness. Stevens remains "a child that sings itself to sleep" at the end of his life (CP 436).

And for that very reason, the first letter in the *Letters* is a fitting document with which to launch that volume. He writes to his mother from Ephrata, where he was vacationing, that he is "in depressed spirits" and wants to "come home." He says he "hate[s] ladies? (such as are here)" (L 5), and then he proceeds to recount what he has eaten and express how impatient he is to have her response to his letter. He later puts the intimacy with his mother as a matter of identity: "I am more like my mother than my father," Stevens writes Elsie in 1919 (L 213-14). The "solace" of a maternal presence, his shared identity with her, and even his need to denigrate women, all persist as characterizations of the female presence who is nameless, or "So-and-So," or simply "the desired one" (CP 505). But in the magnificent life-review that is part of "Auroras of Autumn" it is the mother who "invites humanity to her house / And table" (CP 415). She, not the father, is the God-like presence. Her portrayal echoes Wisdom's inviting the elect to her "house" (she has spiced her wine, and she has spread her table in Proverbs 9:2). The father, in "Auroras of Autumn" is, by contrast, a poet of sorts. He fetches the "tellers of tales" who give forth a "clawing . . . sing-song." They are, like many of the ancestral singers in *Parts of a World*, a "loud, disordered mooch." The portrayal suggests Stevens' father's poeticizing with his cronies who loved to mimic Pennsylvania song and poetry. Here Stevens enlarges the portrait of the mother and writes about her with an unmixed quality of reverence and affection. "The mother's face" has become "the purpose of the poem." He writes with none of the sexual unease he has fallen into in his earlier imaginings of the fulfillment of his wishes: "They are," simply, "together, here, and it is warm" (CP 413). Stevens had called his own mother's house, "a huge volume full of the story of her thirty-five years or more within it" (L 173). The biblical echoes, the indirect references to literal parents, the enlargement of the domain of the mother and her presence as the poem's "purpose," all tellingly illustrate what the "pastoral nun" meant when she said that "poetry and apotheosis are one" (CP 378). In his understanding of "apotheosis" Stevens did not follow the orthodox

elders who "Pulse[d] pizzicati of Hosanna." Instead, he felt "Susanna's music," especially "now," when "in its immortality, it plays / On the clear viol of her memory" (CP 92). And therein lies a tale for the annals of feminism.

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Notes

¹In 1936, Stevens said, in a set of sentences that are surely "autobiographical in spite of [the] subterfuge" (NA 121), "We have a sense of upheaval. We feel threatened. We look from an uncertain present toward a more uncertain future" (OP 225). A. Walton Litz comments that Stevens' response to the critics of "Owl's Clover" reveals "a man off balance" (*Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1972], 205-06). Joseph N. Riddel and Samuel French Morse see the poet exposed in what Riddel calls, "a crisis, not only of craft but of self" (*The Clairvoyant Eye* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965], 123; Samuel French Morse, *Poetry as Life* [New York: Pegasus, 1970], 149). Harold Bloom makes similar comments in *The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 88-89, 113.

²Stevens complained of "periods of moodiness" (SP 146-47). "The Domination of Black," "The Region November" and "Madame La Fleurie" attest to the recurrence, life-long, of feeling states Stevens described as being "in the Black Hole again" (SP 128).

³Stevens characterized the Zeller family of Tulpehocken, Pennsylvania, as "this family of religious refugees" and dates their arrival in the New World as 1709 (NA 99). He then ascribes to them the path historians say the Palatinate refugees followed from the Schoharie region in New York to Pennsylvania. He stressed that "On my mother's side, I am Pennsylvania Dutch," when explaining to Victor Hammer about the photo of George Zeller's gravestone from which he wanted a bookplate made (L 541). To one of his genealogists he explained that the Zellers "were consecrated to the glory of God. These people, whatever else they were, were fanatics" (L 534). His father's family did not seem to him "like a family of farmers," however. "While I knew of the Dutch names in the background," Stevens explained, "the impression [his father's people] made was an English impression and not a Dutch impression" (L 405). Stevens used the terms "Pennsylvania Dutch" and "Pennsylvania German" interchangeably. Stevens wrote that he "used to think [he] got [his] practical side from [his] father, and [his] imagination from [his] mother" (SP 8).

⁴A number of critics have pointed out the androgyny of Stevens' creative self and of his approach to metaphor. Of the numerous "betrothals" and "marriages" some clearly refer to a figurative strategy. Others, as in "Artificial Populations" (OP 112-13), refer to a psychic condition: "a healing-point in the sickness of the mind." I will argue that Stevens' goddess is both maternal and bridal.

⁵Stevens, during the 1940s, steeped himself in regional histories. His letters suggest that he found Julius Frederick Sachse's two-volume study an important source (*The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania: 1694-1748* [Philadelphia: Printed for the author, 1895 and 1900], and *The German Secularians of Provincial Pennsylvania: 1708-1800* [Philadelphia: Printed for the author, 1895 and 1900]). References to these volumes are found in Stevens' bluebooks in box 77(4), The Huntington Library: The Wallace Stevens Collection. Stevens was a regular reader of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*. One article that interested him particularly was Oswald Seidensticker's "The Hermits of the Wissahickon," (1887): 427-41.

⁶Catherine F. Smith, "Jane Lead: The Feminist Mind and Art of a Seventeenth Century Protestant Mystic," Chapter Six. In *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Reuther and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 187. This essay gives a concise summary of Behmenism.

⁷I am presently re-working a book-length study of Stevens' use of his family past, tentatively titled *His Mother's House*.

⁸The universal creative process, according to Boehme, is a sexual one, involving an ongoing movement towards union, then separation, towards creation and then decreation. In one phase in this dialectical process, the Sophia is Logos/Christ/God's utterance, an aspect of Him, and, thus,

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in a sense, masculine in Her attributes. In another, she is God's opposite—earthly, female, and of the body. With the phrase “androgynous process,” I would like to suggest that at times the masculine principle, which both Stevens and Boehme called the “No,” dominates, and at times the feminine principle, which both called the “Yes,” does.

⁹Erich Newmann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of an Archetype* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 325.

¹⁰Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 16-18, 32, and *passim*.

¹¹Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 6, 80. Vendler argues for the “tethering” of Stevens' poems to “human feeling,” a position with which I agree. But Stevens' feelings did not, in my view, simply occur in response to “life occasions”; they were in him from the start. To be sure, the “real” was the “base of the design,” but for Stevens, after age sixty, the “real” was a complex amalgam of worlds, not least of which was the one he was born with and into.

¹²Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 507.

¹³Stevens' quotation of a description of “the local Christian minority” by the pietist Justus Falkner of Germantown and his applause for their attitudes is recorded in his bluebook, Box 77(4), The Huntington Library.

¹⁴John Joseph Stoudt, *Sunrise to Eternity* (Pittsburgh: Pennsylvania University Press, 1957), 140. This volume provides a readable account of the essential points of Behmenism. Stevens knew some of Stoudt's other work on Pennsylvania German folklore.

¹⁵Smith, *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁶For a general introduction to Wisdom, see Virginia R. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), especially Ch. 17: “God as Dame Wisdom,” 97-105. Also useful is Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 121-29. The Wisdom books of the Bible are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, and to a lesser extent, Psalms and Canticles. In the Apocrypha the Wisdom books are Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon.

¹⁷Edwin M. Fogel, “Proverbs of the Pennsylvania German,” *Pennsylvania German Society Proceedings* 36 (1929): 1-221.

The Woman in the Poem: Wallace Stevens, Ramon Fernandez, and Adrienne Rich

MARIA IRENE RAMALHO DE SOUSA SANTOS

Nothing need be lost, no beauty sacrificed.

— Adrienne Rich¹

I

STEVENS CLAIMED THAT HE WAS NOT thinking of the Spanish-named French critic and essayist, who in the twenties and thirties was a regular contributor of *La nouvelle revue française*, when he created his well-known character with “two exceedingly common,” “arbitrary” Spanish names in “The Idea of Order at Key West” (L 798, 823).² There is no reason to doubt Stevens’ sincerity; however, the fact remains that Ramon Fernandez *is* Ramon Fernandez, a very ordinary male intellectual and Western man of letters of the first half of this century. I do not mean to be unfair to the French Anglophile author, who played an important role in that very influential French journal of the modernist period. Though Fernandez would occasionally write an original piece, his regular contributions usually took the form of literary commentary or book review, very often bringing to the attention of his French readers the work of interesting foreign authors. Dreiser, Conrad, Freud, Kafka, Eliot—among many others—deserved his critical remarks on the pages of Gide’s *Revue*. Perhaps his luck—as far as fame goes—was that a particularly eloquent piece of his on the classicism of T. S. Eliot, who never drew much applause from Stevens, might for that very reason have been lurking in the poet’s mind as he composed “The Idea of Order at Key West.”³ In his article, titled “Le classicisme de T. S. Eliot,” Ramon Fernandez gives an approving account of Eliot’s early essays: his admiration for Dante’s “poetic lucidity,” his criticism of Blake’s lack of “a framework of accepted and traditional ideas,” his dismissal of romantic poetry for its “dissociation of sensibility,” and particularly his famous formulation of the “objective correlative.”⁴ In Stevens’ poem Ramon Fernandez is cunningly made to act the dumb part of a dull, uninteresting, unresponsive witness to the poet’s dread wonder at his own imagining of the woman as the mysterious originating power, infinitely desirable, but definitely alien—and totally out of reach. We might say, then, that Eliot’s French admirer with “two every day” Spanish names is thus ingenuously translated into a mere instrument for the objectification of the correlative of the poet’s imagination.

“The Idea of Order at Key West” (CP 128) is a modern recreation of the romantic myth of poetic origin and inspiration in the traditional figure of the female muse. The modernist swerve is clearly readable in the subtle ironies that resonate in the contrast between the solemn theme of the imagination as an ineffable ordering power and the inflated rhetoric of the self-assured, knowledgeable poetic voice, on the one hand, and, on the other, the tentative syntax and the repetitive prosody that culminate in the self-conscious poet’s

strivings for the truly knowing word. The final touch is precisely the comic creation of the mute character of "pale Ramon" as the irrelevant interlocutor of the poet's vain attempts at wording his own imagination, whose proper romantic symbol is the woman singer.

In an earlier poem of *Harmonium*, Stevens had been even more explicit and playful. In its conception, "To the One of Fictive Music" (CP 87) is the male poet's conventional address to the (female) muse, with very many easily identifiable antecedents in the Anglo-American romantic tradition. "To the Muses," included in Blake's *Poetical Sketches* (1783), comes immediately to mind.⁵ Just like Stevens' invocation/dedication poem, "To the Muses" both reinvents and subverts an established form and a recognized mode. Its mocking lament for the flight of the "fair nine"—poetic naming thus skillfully suspended with the aid of conventional diction—is the announcement of the end of an epoch. Published in the exciting period between the American and the French Revolutions by the daring young poet who was still to recreate, in his 'prophetic' *Milton*, the imaginative possibilities of the English Revolution, "To the Muses" reenacts, in its ironic longing for an obsolete naming and placing, the preempting of an older order and hierarchy that alone brings about a new ordering of things. Against the "inane phraseology" that Wordsworth and Coleridge were about to condemn in their Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798),⁶ newness cannot but be spoken silence, as Blake himself suggests in another of his brilliantly innovative early poems on very traditional themes: "To the Evening Star."⁷

Two and a half centuries later, one of Stevens' many ways of arguing the possibilities of modern poetry is to subvert the romantic concept of inspiration by deconstructing the very word *muse*, thus naturalizing and humanizing the mythic figure it signifies: the Eternal Feminine as the Divine First Principle. The poet's musing of the muse, his sound reasoning of immortality, so to say, leads him back through forgotten lived experience on to his own origins, birth in the mother as the mortal woman. In its semi-jocular litany, which deliberately combines divinity and imperfection, superlativeness and earthly mothering, "To the One of Fictive Music" in the end both celebrates and exorcises the woman-as-source in the mother. There is a certain contradiction in the poet's musing, however. In a much later and stronger poem, Stevens will explicitly associate the mother with the purpose of the poem (CP 413), the source of poetry thus firmly reconsidered from the point of view of human generation, sexuality, and death. But the earlier poem, in which the humanization (or, perhaps rather, womanization) of the muse is obviously under way, also engages in the opposite process. As I have already suggested and has often been noted, images of divinity and images of mortality intertwine in the poem in its half humorous attempt to update the mythic character. The tensions involved in Stevens' recreation can best be analyzed in his use of the phrase "musing the obscure." If indeed it must primarily be understood as signifying the ancient 'mystery' of poetic invention, the phrase is actually its own decipherment in its reference to a non-human, transcendent power, symbolized by the traditional

figure of the female muse: the “obscure” is, literally, “mused.” In other words, to muse the “obscure” is to return “the real” to fiction—the “more than natural” and the “more than rational,” as the poet says in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (CP 406)—and thus avoid the difficulty of accepting the pain of generation and mortality as the true source of the poem.

“The Idea of Order at Key West” pushes this translation of “obscure” into “muse” even further by means of the romantic image of the woman singer as symbol of the poetic ideal. As a matter of fact, the pure singing voice, rather than the woman-singer, becomes the symbol. This mode of poetic representation is part of a large tradition that has travelled across times, spaces, and languages, and concerns mainly the strivings of male poets to come to terms with their own creativity. Wordsworth’s solitary reaper is an undeniable model here; or perhaps even more so, Coleridge’s Abyssinian maid.⁸ The repeated pattern is that of a male subject, at one time admiring and resenting a distant woman’s seemingly effortless act of creation. The poem arises out of the poet’s presumed sense of artistic inadequacy in the face of a stronger creative power that is the mysterious prerogative of a female entity.⁹ Nevertheless, the end result is one more beautiful poem authored by a man, a poem which, in the romantic mode, paradoxically bespeaks its own impossibility. A very sensitive, intelligent, and knowledgeable male poet once again presents himself *on the very brink* of overcoming his anxiety about the power and the limits of the creative imagination and poetic language by encapsulating the strange otherness of female creativity in the poem. Since the poet must needs feel threatened by what he does not know, he will eventually adopt ignorance as his true wisdom. And if the Stevensian “ignorance,” as his “evasions of metaphor” indicate, is the poet’s version of romantic spoken silence, then musing the obscure ultimately entails muting the muse.

Stevens had already amused himself (we might say) with this verbal play in his hilarious account of the “curriculum” of that “marvelous sophomore” (CP 36), that “aspiring clown” (CP 39), the modern American poet, as well as in his comic definition of modern American poetry as “[d]isguised pronunciamento . . . muted, mused, and perfectly revolved / In those portentous accents” (CP 45). Stevens is clearly facetiously aware of his own strategy to reinvent the “original” poet in the romantic tradition, or perhaps rather *out of* the romantic tradition; but muting the muse is also a self-conscious, earnest process of internalization that will find its finest expression in the poet’s final soliloquy. In “The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” (CP 524), though its archetype is admittedly that of a muse poem, no “metaphorical feminine presence” is to be seen or heard; rather, the egotistical sublime takes over—very appropriately in the disguise of a plural subject—as the more than privileged, indeed God-like, universalizing perspective.¹⁰ There is a quiet contentment in the poem, as of death surmised (suggested by the oxymoronic *knowing forgetfulness* of the third stanza), which sounds like a redefining of and a final reconciling with (self-)sufficiency. And yet, like the truthful reading of Stevens’ poetry that it is, the poem reverberates with the well-known tensions in his

work: light and dark, knowledge and obscurity, miracle and poverty, God/imagination and the boundaries of life. Lurking behind the absent muted muse, then, we might still sense the woman as the mother, caring homemaker, lighting lights and providing warmth and the comfort of unself-consciousness—always a giver of life, and already a giver of death also:

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.

(CP 524)

The woman in Stevens' poems is indeed frequently the mother. Except Rilke, whose echoes have been rightly heard in Stevens' poetry, I cannot think of any other major poet in the Western tradition who has so hauntingly mingled in the image of the mother the meaningful source of human life and happiness and the senseless despairing horror of dissolution and finality.¹¹ Hart Crane, it is true, also reaches a quivering moment of reconciliation with the female principle—bloody "matrix of the heart"—as "sweet mortality" in "The Broken Tower," a poem which I tend to read as a moving correction of such fierce denunciations of generation and death-in-the-mother as Blake's "To Tirzah" and Whitman's "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life."¹² But it is Stevens' "Auroras of Autumn" (CP 411) which stands as the poem that most eloquently gives voice to the inspiring contradictions of a male imagination, only too self-conscious of its condition of being woman-born, hopelessly soaring high with immortal longings in the father as the ever-brightening origin, yet ever mercilessly dragged down to the reality of destruction and annihilation by the mother's insidious pretense of innocence in her gentle domesticity. The existential creative (or fertile) realization that "Death is the mother of beauty" (CP 68) was earned by the poet quite early on; but the very metaphor he uses, by reducing sexuality to reproduction and reproduction to the womb and to bloodshedding delivery, returns the mother to him as "fierce" (CP 321) and "fateful" (CP 454).

Like a murderess, then, who feeds on her own children (CP 507), is the mother in Stevens; nevertheless, the figure of the earthly, mortal mother, as the appropriate symbol for the continuing process of generation, is ever in Stevens, in the form of memory, a kind of muse, too.¹³ When, in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (CP 431), Stevens actually dares to imagine the unimaginable experience of dying, it is childbirth, like a *release* and a *dazzlement*, that comes to the reader's mind. The mother as the *passage*, also, between remembrance and forgetfulness, being and nothingness, is clearly the presiding inspiration, or gnosis ("the knowledge that she had"), of the visionary sensuality

of the poet's writing: a poem "compounded," not line by line, but "life by life." So, "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" is primarily a poem about knowledge, the supreme, unattainable, impossible, *vital* knowledge that is knowledge of death. The owl in the sarcophagus means precisely that: Minerva (the goddess of wisdom whose symbol is the owl) inside death: "She was a self that knew, an inner thing" (CP 435). This elegy for Henry Church, no less than "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," which Stevens had also dedicated to this friend a few years earlier, is one more chapter of Stevens' theory of poetry. Poetry is knowing; in order to know, you must begin by not knowing ("an ignorant man again" [CP 380]); the ultimate ignorance is death; death is the mother of beauty—the woman in the poem.

Before I go back to "The Idea of Order at Key West" in order to bring in Adrienne Rich, so to say, from outside the poem, let me point out how the two poems I have been referring to, "Notes" and "Owl," depend, at the root of their conception, on the poet's implicit dialogue with a male companion. That this sort of privileged interlocutor or ideal reader is Stevens' actual close friend, Henry Church, patron of the arts, cosmopolitan intellectual and sensitive man of letters, becomes more meaningful when we contrast him with "Ramon Fernandez" in the earlier poem. Unlike dumb "pale Ramon," the unnamed male figure in the later poems is a fictive other self that legitimizes the poet's search for knowledge by turning it into a dialectical process. This pattern is overtly reproduced in the very structure of "Notes," beginning with the dedication itself; and "Owl," the elegy for Church, with its echoes of, precisely, the dedication of the earlier poem dedicated to that same friend,¹⁴ should properly be called a *responsive* poem, a poem that responds, with the inconceivable knowledge of death, to the search of the modern man of imagination and intellect for the extremest wisdom. The presupposed interlocutor accounts for the conversational mode and the intimate tone of the poem, uncannily voiced as if to be overheard by the poetic self alone—a child singing to put itself to sleep. This final image of circularity points to poetry as its own origin, the maternal reference, whether explicit or implicit, being the most adequate metaphor for the poet's desired total knowledge of life and death. There is indeed that *time* in "Notes" when he allows himself to say "I am and as I am, I am" (CP 405). But no matter how good the poet's exercise in imaginative self-sufficiency may be, there is that creative otherness in him (irrepressibly overflowing into the poem) that he must acknowledge without ever fully understanding. In "A Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror" (CP 460), a less quoted poem of *The Auroras of Autumn*, the poet actually impersonates Abba, god-the-father in the Aramaic of the New Testament, and the closing question ("How long have you lived and looked, / Ababba, expecting this king's queen to appear?" [CP 461]) points back to the female principle (as source), even as it deconstructs (in ab-abba) the very notion of an origin outside the father. Perhaps "They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne," he comically surmises at the end of "Notes" (CP 406), ironically hoping for the possibility of a final naming; but he already knows that he will be naming only himself, even as he always reinvents the

origin in the woman, whether in the image of the earthy lover ("Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night"), the domestic mother ("Bent over work, anxious, content, alone"), or the traditional muse ("soft-footed phantom" [CP 406]).

II

Rich's admiring reading of "The Idea of Order at Key West" is surely a measure of the subtle complexity of Stevens' poetry. "If a woman had written that poem, my God!" she exclaims.¹⁵ The context is a conversation with Albert and Barbara Gelpi on male poets' traditional representations of women, as well as on contemporary women's new awareness of their own power to bring themselves forth as poets or as creative artists of any kind. Rich has particularly in mind poems written by male authors "in which women are all beautiful, and preferably asleep," but also those that are "full of unconscious material which says that the female principle is the source of life, of power, of energy"¹⁶ If a woman had indeed written "The Idea of Order at Key West" ("pale Ramon" then ironically turned into the traditional muse poet silenced for good), that woman would have had the power to give herself the freedom to be *in* and *out* of the poem and to sing *her own* song; she would actually have given herself the power to use power and remain unscathed. It would have been a poem, Rich might say, written "in a nonpatriarchal society."¹⁷ Under patriarchy, power has been, and can continue to be, mortally dangerous to women, as Rich's poem about Marie Curie illustrates so well ("her wounds came from the same source as her power"). *The Dream of a Common Language*, of which "Power" is the opening poem (FD 225), becomes, in its rejection of the repeated pattern of female-loving passivity giving in to male-daring action, an indictment against patriarchal dominion as the source of oppression, war, and destruction; but it is also a creative, and compelling, act of faith in the possibility of a radical world change, once "intelligence" has overcome "myths of separation" such as "the splitting / between love and action."¹⁸ The major "splitting," of course, is the *gendered* sexual difference that has kept the woman incarcerated in the poem for so long.

The other implication of Rich's laudatory outburst is, no doubt, that, in some oblique but very deep sense, she is identifying with the male author of her admired poem. Consciously, yes, she identifies, as she must acknowledge, with the woman in the poem, not with the men, certainly not with "pale Ramon." But the woman poet cannot fail to identify with the interrogating poetic self as well, for his question is a question—about (poetic) knowledge, or power—that *all* poets must ask. To say "tell me, if you know" presupposes a knowing (here symbolized by the woman singer) that threatens to remain way beyond reach, even as the asking itself corroborates it:

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.

(CP 129)

The poem as an interrogating creative act arises out of its own ignorance of itself, as if in awe of the very fiction of origin it depends on. A very fine poet and a consummate craftswoman herself, Rich genuinely admires the male poet's ironic skill in bringing forth his own creativity—as a poem realized—out of his constructed ignorance of the woman-as-muse. By making the poem his sole responsibility as an ignorant man, a (motherless) man withdrawn from the source of knowledge, the male poet exerts the power of generating himself as a poet. I suggest, therefore, that what Rich once wrote of Emily Dickinson's "I would not paint—a picture—" is also relevant for our understanding of Stevens' poem, as well as for our understanding of Rich's reading of Stevens' poem.¹⁹ There is a tradition common to Dickinson, Stevens, and Rich. Stevens' poem, like Dickinson's, is also an ironic poem about *choosing to own the ear*, to be receptive rather than creative, acted upon rather than active. In their pretended passivity, both Dickinson and Stevens give birth to themselves as creators by actually writing their poems, even while seemingly reconciling themselves with what remains, for them, supposedly out of reach.

Now, this is precisely the point where Rich wishes to see women's poetry in the twentieth century really make a difference. Though sometimes she herself resorts to irony with great success,²⁰ she would suspend the kind of irony which makes Dickinson's and Stevens' poems work and demand for the poetry written by women—women who must always be aware of their power *as women*—the perfect coincidence between inspiration and realization, between love and action. "I am the lover and the loved, / home and wonderer," the woman poet hears herself say, just as she silences all ancient myths of origin by voicing a new poetic reality:

. . . two women, eye to eye
measuring each other's spirit, each other's
limitless desire,
a whole new poetry beginning here.
(FD 268)

"Transcendental Etude" (FD 264-69) is a poem that movingly celebrates lesbian love as the poet's true source of inspiration and life principle, but we must not jump to the conclusion that we are here faced with an idealized muse figure. The "study" proposed by the poet could not be more concrete and less transcendental, and she will later remind us that she "wasn't looking for a muse," rather for an equal, "a reader by whom [she] could not be mistaken" (NL 102). But it is also a poem about poetry, much in the same sense that Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry" (CP 239) is a poem about poetry. Rich has, however, learned Stevens' poetic lesson only too well. "It must be the finding of a satisfaction," says Stevens. For the woman poet, who actually wishes to *make* poetry (if I am allowed the pleonasm here) into one of the enlargements of life,²¹ the undeniable imperative of this search concerns a rigorous understanding of self and circumstance (that is to say, the "things" that must be known, as Rich reminds us in "North American Time" (FD 326, 327), which

forces poetry out of itself and brings the woman out of the poem and into her own self, body, and mind.

What this means is that poetry, also, must be redefined in social and historical terms against the dominant aesthetic ideology, which goes on stressing the autonomous, universal, and immortal nature of the work of art. Rich's poem, on the contrary, by explicitly refusing to freeze into a timeless verbal icon or well wrought urn, sings of an art that is palpably made of bits and scraps, an art that is as fragmentary and precarious, as trivial and fickle as mortality itself.²² Studying herself, re-memobering herself, the woman poet invests the romanticized image of the mortal woman, or death, with a positive meaning, her life-giving, caring, homemaking, *domestic* body thus revalued as the exactest symbol of engaged, lived life. The Stevensian abstract dialectic of reality and the imagination, then, must be redefined, too. Only the coincidence between the body and its sole "muse," the mind, in the thoughtful handling of the materials (in the full senses of all the words) brings forth the poem, mere fleeting form of the creative fragility of life, or, still in the wake of Stevens, a *discovery* of reality.²³ "Such a composition," therefore, "has nothing to do with eternity," the striving for greatness, brilliance—

only with the musing of a mind
one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing
dark against bright, silk against roughness . . .

(FD 268-69)

The meaning of the internalized *satisfaction* expressed in the male poet's *act of the mind* is thus cleverly exploded, and properly turned inside out, by the woman poet, who pushes Stevens' play with etymology (*satis-facere*) to its concrete literal consequences. So, where Stevens elaborates on his self-contained satisfying act of the mind by drawing on the imaginative possibilities of surmise ([it] *may / Be of* a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman / *Combing*" [CP 240; my italics]), Rich conceives of no other way of *making what will suffice* than stepping out of the poem and the mind to plunge them both deeply where they belong, in time and history. There, precisely, is where she offers to rewrite the woman, or rather the women, *outside* Stevens' poem:

Suppose you want to write
of a woman braiding
another woman's hair—
straight down, or with beads and shells
in three-strand plaits or corn-rows—
you had better know the thickness
the length the pattern
why she decides to braid her hair
how it is done to her

what country it happens in
what else happens in that country

You have to know these things

(FD 326)

Other critics have heard echoes of Stevens' poetry in Adrienne Rich's work,²⁴ in her sensuous love of language, her deft handling of words, her imagery, the tender yet rigorous way she brings the light and landscape and mythologies of her country into her poems, her preferred structuring patterns, as well as her keen understanding of Stevens' subversive poetics, the way she, too, refuses to take poetry for granted. "A really good poem," she once wrote, out of her intelligent and knowledgeable love of poetry and the tradition, "opens up a possibility for other poems, rather than being the end of a succession of things."²⁵ Take Stevens' muse once again, that male-constructed female principle of total knowledge, both origin in ineffable singing and the dark sinister wisdom of death. To this structuring myth of some of Stevens' best poems, Rich gives a living reality and a political name: the changing woman in a changing world. It is usually herself, woman and poet, studying, learning, loving, bringing her hard-won knowledge of possibility and limits to the endless task of transforming the world, a woman barely distinguishable from the women whose history inspires her, from the women she loves, from her lover:

Your small hands, precisely equal to my own—
only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands
I could trust the world, or in many hands like these,
handling power-tools or steering-wheel
or touching a human face.

(FD 239)

Rich's poetic "I" is therefore an "I" that is not contained in the poem on the page. "[W]riting words like these," she says in another of her "Twenty-One Love Poems," "I'm also living." Her theoretical criticism of the discriminatory neat distinctions and specialized taxonomies of mainstream Western culture, notably in "Blood, Bread and Poetry" (*BBP* 167), have their poetic counterpart in her own poetry, particularly from the sixties on, when the private and the public, the poetical and the political become inextricably mixed together in her writing. Beyond such conventional and culturally imposed rigid distinctions, it is then irrelevant to decide whether her political trajectory conditions her life choices and the changing forms of her poetry writing, or vice-versa, or what kinds of correctness come first in the commitments and engagements of her life: the political, the poetic, or the emotional.²⁶

But very often she is more precise. In "Demon Lover" she explicitly invokes the traditional figure of the female muse to attack the socially accepted sexual roles and relations, as when conventional feminine passivity and availability are beautifully conveyed by the woman's romanticized desire: "In the harp of my hair, compose me / a song" (*FD* 84). Rich herself explains that in "Demon

Lover" she was "toying around" with the ideological and social meaning of an aesthetic tradition that is made up of superb works of art accomplished by men in praise of the Eternal Feminine, while women in society seem quite content (perhaps even flattered) to go on living merely as their great brothers' sisters, mothers, lovers.²⁷ Some female poets admired by Rich, above all Emily Dickinson, had already subverted this constricting pattern, without, however, replacing it. Rich proposes something different. The time has come, the woman poet writes in the seventies and eighties, for a radical change. Now, she argues, that women themselves have started to think what it means to be women, now that womanhood is being redefined from the women's point of view and that even women's dreams are changing, now that women have started to love themselves and each other and to value their own specific forms of power and creativity—now, a new poetry is beginning, bringing forth poems which, rather than acts of the mind, are (and Stevens' lesson is being pushed to the utmost) *acts of life*.

The poetical ideal that Rich wishes to realize, one must conclude, is also her political idea: to her vision of a world without oppression, discrimination, and violence corresponds her poem about a powerful imagination that does not feed on the subjection, or diminishing, or even just *naming* of the other. Consider "Emily Carr" (NL 64), the poem about the Canadian painter who, in Rich's words, "at the height of her powers . . . painted, *with deep respect*, the disappearing totem poles of the Northwest Coast Indians" (NL 113; my italics). In the poem, the painter, like the traditional muse figure in a romantic poem written by a man, is the poet's source of inspiration: "I try to conjure the kind of joy / you tracked . . ." But, unlike the singing woman in "The Idea of Order at Key West," she is not an absence turned metaphor for the presentification of the poet's creativity. The painter in "Emily Carr" is Emily Carr, an actual presence and a power, realized in the loving, characterless coincidence of life, land, and art: "yourself facing the one great art / of your native land, your life." She is thus an example. With her the poet learns another traditional lesson to the full—Keats's Negative Capability.²⁸

Wait for me, I have waited so long for you
But you never said that I
am ashamed to have thought it
You had no personal leanings
You brushed in the final storm-blue stroke
and gave it its name: *Skidegate Pole*
(NL 64-65)

So, too, Rich's poem about creativity and the imagination, a poem where "pale Ramon" and what he represents are no longer needed, is not given a title; with deep respect, the poet gives her *her* name.

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Notes

¹Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 187. I use the following abbreviations of Rich's works: *BBP* (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry*); *FD* (*The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New, 1950-1984* [New York: Norton, 1984]); and *NL* (*Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems* [New York: Norton, 1986]).

²I use the following abbreviations of Stevens' works: *CP* (*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* [New York: Knopf, 1954]), *L* (*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens [New York: Knopf, 1966]), and *OP* (*Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse [New York: Knopf, 1957]).

³Ramon Fernandez, "Le classicisme de T. S. Eliot," *La nouvelle revue française* 24 (Jan-June 1925): 246-251.

⁴See T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1964), especially "Hamlet and His Problems," "Dante," "The Metaphysical Poets," and "William Blake."

⁵William Blake, *The Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 408.

⁶The phrase occurs in the third paragraph of the Preface. See William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, ed. T. Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 734.

⁷Blake, *Poetry and Prose*, 402.

⁸Cf. William Wordsworth, "The Solitary Reaper," in *The Poetical Works*, 230, and S. T. Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," in *The Poems*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 295.

⁹Fernando Pessoa's "Ela canta, pobre ceifeira" is the most accomplished Portuguese contribution to this Anglo-American romantic poetics of the muse. See Pessoa, *Obra poética* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1981), 78. See also my, "Poetas e pássaros: a consciência poética em Pessoa e Stevens," *Colóquio/Letras* 88 (Novembro 1985): 94-101. In this context, I have also written on Coleridge and Pessoa in "Interrupção poética: Fernando Pessoa e o 'Kubla Khan' de Coleridge," *Persona* 9 (Outubro 1983): 15-19.

¹⁰I borrow the phrase "metaphorical feminine presence" from Mary Arensberg's "Wallace Stevens' Interior Paramour," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 3 (Spring 1979): 3-7. Even if I depart slightly from her here, I find Arensberg's paper very stimulating. See Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse (27 Oct. 1818) for my use of his rejection of the "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime"; I also have in mind here Virginia Woolf's critique of the supposedly impersonal and objective *we* of "academese" in her *A Room of One's Own* (1928).

¹¹Though she does not mention Stevens, Rich is perhaps the best commentator on the influence of, e.g., "The Third Duino Elegy" on modern poetic tradition. Cf. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam, 1986 [1976]), 186 ff. See also her "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff" (*FD* 248).

¹²William Blake, *Poetry and Prose*, 30; Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Brom Weber (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1966), 193; Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 394.

¹³In his reading of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," Harold Bloom speaks of Mnemosyne, the goddess of Memory, as, appropriately, "the mother of the muses." See his *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 284.

¹⁴These echoes have not been much noted. But see Charles Berger, *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 120.

¹⁵Adrienne Rich, *Poetry*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1975), 116.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸I am here drawing from "Splittings" (*FD* 226).

¹⁹Rich comments on Dickinson's poem in "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson." In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 168-169. See also Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960), 245.

²⁰Cf. the title of her poem "Transcendental Etude" and my comments below.

²¹See Stevens' "Introduction" to his *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951), viii.

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²²Cf. the titles of the two distinguished New Critical bibles, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), by Cleanth Brooks, and *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954), by William K. Wimsatt.

²³I am alluding here to Stevens' idea of "discovering" without "imposing" in "Notes" (CP 403-404). Cf. also Stevens' "A Discovery of Thought" (OP 95).

²⁴See, e.g., Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 252. I myself have already touched on the affinities between these two great poets in "Poetry in America: The Question of Gender," *Genre* 20 (Summer 1987): 163 ff.

²⁵Rich, *Poetry*, 117.

²⁶"North American Time" (324-26) might actually be read as a poem about the correct *terms* of the poet's life.

²⁷See Rich, *Poetry*, 115. In what follows I also draw from 117 and 122.

²⁸See Keats's letter to George and Thomas Keats (21, 27 [?] December 1817). Rich mentions Keats's "weak ego boundaries" in *Poetry*, 115.

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The Houses of Fathers: Stevens and Emerson

LISA M. STEINMAN

CRITICS HAVE DISCUSSED EMERSON'S influence on Wallace Stevens, and recently there have been a number of historically oriented studies of each poet, neither of whose writing—outside of Emerson's reactions to the slave question in the fifties—seems on the surface to have been deeply influenced by contemporary historical events.¹ My purpose here is to juxtapose some of the insights of the latter studies, to suggest how comparisons of these two American poets might involve discussing not only literary history but also history more literally conceived, including the historical place of poets in our culture. In particular, I would like to consider the situation of the male poet in America, not simply because of the special focus of this issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, but because questions of gender impinge on both Emerson's and Stevens' consideration of the poet's social role.

In "Spiritual Laws," Emerson writes that we "call the poet inactive, because he is not a president, a merchant, or a porter. . . . [R]eal action is in silent moments. The epochs of our life are not in the visible facts of our choice of a calling, our marriage, our acquisition of an office, and the like" (93, Vol. 2).² Emerson then argues that to "think is to act" (94, Vol. 2), and concludes that poetic power is not simply comparable to but above "all that is reckoned solid and precious in the world,—palaces, gardens, money, navies, kingdoms" (95, Vol. 2).

Yet while challenging the values of his culture, Emerson also reveals the need to defend poets against the charge that they are idle, dealing with what is not substantial. Throughout essays such as "Spiritual Laws," Emerson addresses those who believe that lack of success in the political and economic world marks writing as an idle pastime. The argument is pointed, because Emerson himself never forgets that poetry does not yield economic power: "There are not in the world at any one time more than a dozen persons who read and understand Plato:—never enough to pay for an edition of his works" (89, Vol. 2). Further, in 1853, Emerson writes that his "quarrel with poets is that they do not believe in their own poetry," a recognition of the ways in which poets internalized cultural values.³

In 1836, in "Spirit," Emerson notes that even the "poet finds something ridiculous in his delight, until he is out of the sight of *men*" (39, Vol. 1, emphasis added). While Emerson's point is to resist the self-mistrust that is socially bred, his language suggests how poetic delight was viewed as part of the private domain—traditionally, a woman's sphere—in contrast to the apparently more valuable and solid world of public action (where a man might comfortably identify himself as "a president, a merchant, or a porter," but not as a poet). The penultimate paragraph of "Spiritual Laws" implicitly reaffirms Emerson's task as rescuing what is culturally defined as passive, unimportant, and

feminine. He moves from a defense of writing, and specifically of poets, to the following:

Let the great soul incarnated in some woman's form, poor and sad and single, in some Dolly or Joan, go out to service, and sweep chambers and scour floors, and its effulgent daybeams cannot be muffled or hid, but to sweep and scour will instantly appear supreme and beautiful *actions*. (95-96, Vol. 2, emphasis added)

Here, Emerson's awareness of the value American culture places on action in the material world and of the concomitant depreciation of poetry is explicitly framed in terms of gender (as well as in terms of class). The passage above equates attempts to reclaim the importance of poetry with attempts to reclaim the importance of what is culturally defined as women's work. At the same time, however, it is only by redefining such work as active and powerful, that is, as important in the vocabulary of his culture, that Emerson can defend it.

Most often, Emerson suppresses or glosses over any mention of women's work. For example, again stressing the importance of "Self-Reliance," arguing against the pressure to conform, Emerson proposes as an ideal the "nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one. . . . [whereas] the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness" (29, Vol. 2). In a recent article on "The Politics of Emerson's Man-Making Words," David Leverenz argues that Emerson's point tacitly rests on the assurance that those who make dinner "sure"—always women—will not adopt a similar nonchalance about conforming to social expectations. In fact, in American culture, being certain of a meal most often rests on the assurance that there is *both* a cook and a breadwinner in the family, which is to say that the passage could be read as a willful (or perhaps wistful) suppression of social realities for men and women. Nonetheless, Leverenz finally seems right, given Emerson's biography (his mother played both roles); certainly Leverenz is right to make us pay attention to the importance of gender roles in the passage. Moreover, he is equally illuminating when he discusses Emerson's re-conception of thinking as power. Pointing out the changes in social conditions in America between 1825 and 1850, Leverenz concludes that while Emerson's poetics are attractive, his language "resonates with the unresolved tensions of his life and times," in general by omitting women and their world in his attempt to reclaim a manly power for his own enterprise.⁴

Others, Quentin Anderson for example, have also noted that Emerson's vision of social reality is not his strong suit, often adding that Emerson's actual relationships with others—especially with his wife, Lidian, or with Margaret Fuller—were characterized by a related disregard for our collective social life.⁵ Anderson describes "the split American," whose practical and visionary sides have trouble with each other, noting that Emerson's internal divisions as well as his idealism devalue personal relations and sexual roles, both being seen as part of the practical world. There are also other ways in which culturally de-

finer gender roles are involved in the conflict Anderson identifies. For the male poet, this includes the internalization of what counts as a manly occupation and of the importance of being a material provider, which in turn entails seeing poetry as unmanly. To defend the visionary and the poetic thus often requires either repudiating the qualities culturally defined as feminine or appropriating such qualities by redefining them as masculine.

I have argued above that Emerson not only tried to resist the devaluation of poetry and the necessity of yielding to cultural expectations, but he tacitly acknowledged the connection between these two forms of resistance. Yet if Emerson's resistance and redefinitions allow him to celebrate the private sphere, he also slights the actual inhabitants of that sphere, or translates them into visionary terms, in order to proclaim the importance of his own activity. In other words, Emerson's defense of poetry involves establishing a distance between the private but valorized world of the poet, who withdraws from the public world, and the private life of the man, when he is at home. This is related to the healthy and unhealthy ways of distancing one's self from the world that Emerson explicitly discusses when he identifies a distancing he defines as a fact of spiritual existence, a distancing he advocates between the social and the spiritual worlds, and a "safe distance" from experience he deplores.

In "The Poet," for example, Emerson writes that "even the poets are contented with a civil and conformed manner of living, and to write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience" (3, Vol. 3). For Emerson, to be at a safe distance from real experience is to dwell in the illusory social world. But to explore experience is not to do away with all distance between the poet and the objects of the poet's attention: his description of higher minds as those who "never ceased to explore" (3, Vol. 3) suggests Emerson's celebration of exploration over discovery. "Experience"—an essay that follows "The Poet" in Emerson's second series of essays—spells out the belief that "souls never touch their objects" (29, Vol. 3). Specifically speaking of other people, in an argument for living in present experience, Emerson proposes that we should treat "men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are" (35, Vol. 3). He also notes that—like eating dinner (which boys take for granted in "Self-Reliance")—discussing "the household with our wives" is trivial compared with "the solitude to which every man is always returning" (49, Vol. 3).

Two aspects of Emerson's difficulty with the practical world become apparent here. Not only are men and women necessarily distanced from even worthy objects of their attention, but the images used to describe unworthy objects of attention recall the lines from "Spiritual Laws" where Emerson writes that like worldly professions or politics, marriage is not truly important. In other words, on top of the distance Emersonian idealism defines as a condition of life, Emerson argues for another kind of distance from what is trivial. Defining the trivial, Emerson sees domestic life as the mirror image of public life; it is not the realm from which he will draw his vocabulary of approval

(using terms like “action” or “power”), but it is part of that from which he requires a willed (rather than a necessary) distance. Thus, despite his celebration of the private, Emerson doubly distances himself from “mere” domesticity.

Given the ideal nature of the private realm Emerson defends, women are not banned from themselves seeking the solitude to which, Emerson says, “every man is always returning.” Yet, on the other—more practical—hand, such images assume that someone (presumably “our wives”) will make dinner and run the household while men return to their solitude.⁶ Moreover, the metaphors in which Emerson describes a more visionary reality re-emphasize his unsettling reinforcement of gender stereotypes in his attempt to empower his own activity. In the 1844 “Nature,” for instance, he writes:

It is the same among the men and women, as among the silent trees; always a referred existence, an absence, never a presence and satisfaction. Is it, that beauty can never be grasped? in persons and in landscape is equally inaccessible? The accepted and betrothed lover has lost the wildest charm of his maiden in her acceptance of him. She was heaven whilst he pursued her as a star: she cannot be heaven, if she stoops to such a one as he. . . . To the intelligent, nature converts itself into a vast promise, and will not be rashly explained. Her secret is untold. Many and many an Oedipus arrives . . . (112, Vol. 3)

Once again, although Emerson’s anatomy of desire is attractive, and although his other writings often imply he would protest any suggestion that his choice of metaphors was meant to exclude actual women, it is tempting to set against Emerson’s myth, Muriel Rukeyser’s recasting of the exchange between Oedipus and the Sphinx. In her poem, “Myth,” Rukeyser’s Oedipus says to the Sphinx, challenging her explanation that he has come to a tragic end because he answered her riddle incorrectly, “‘When you say Man . . . you include women / too. Everyone knows that.’ She said, ‘That’s what / you think.’”

There *is* a difference in Emerson’s thinking between the emblematic, astral maiden in the beginning of the passage from “Nature” quoted above and—for example—Lidian. Nonetheless, the passage suggests both that Emerson’s idealism had repercussions in the social world he wanted to ignore (perhaps just because he ignored it) and that his attempt not to identify himself with the domestic informs even his most idealistic passages. After all, the maiden described in the passage from “Nature” begins as a figure, like the figures of the silent trees or the star. Emerson’s larger argument is that the soul never gains its object. Trees and stars always do maintain their distance and their silence. Metaphorical maidens, though, must more willfully be kept at a distance from those who might want to discuss household affairs. And, on the other side of the coin, wives must be kept at a safe distance, in order that the poet’s activity—which American culture allied with the private and the impractical—not be identified with (or interfered with by) actual domesticity.

The questions raised by this consideration of Emerson are relevant to Stevens, who unwittingly echoes Emerson's claim that poets find their own delight "ridiculous" until they are outside of the sight of other men. In 1913, Stevens wrote telling his wife Elsie to keep his attempt to put together a collection of poetry "a great secret"; the letter continues: "There is something absurd about all this writing of verses; but the truth is, it elates and satisfies me to do it. . . . So that, you see, my habits are positively lady-like" (L 180).

It may be unfair to use the letter of a sixteen-year-old boy, written to his mother, to gloss the letter of a thirty-four-year-old man, written to his wife of less than four years. Still, one of Stevens' earliest preserved letters does seem a comment on his self-description of 1913. As a boy, Stevens wrote home from a summer resort: "I hate *ladies*? (such as are here)[.] [They] are all agreeable enough but familiarity breeds contempt— poor deluded females—they are contemptible without familiarity" (L 5). Although there is absolutely no question of literary influence, Stevens' letter begins almost like Emerson's passage from "Nature," disclaiming "ladies" as a social category, and staving off any charges of "familiarity." But the young Stevens ends his letter with contempt even for ladies kept at a distance (which must have been a way of both reassuring and disconcerting the distant lady to whom he was writing, namely his mother). Again in 1913, Stevens describes being "lady-like" as absurd, if not contemptible. Once more, he seems at the same time to have felt his writing was protected from ridicule when he was writing to his wife or in his home; perhaps just because writing poetry seemed "lady-like," it could be shared, but could at first only be shared, within the family circle.⁷ An early letter from Stevens' father makes clear that Stevens previously had the same habit of sharing not only letters but poetry with his mother. Garrett Stevens wrote to his son when Stevens was at Harvard: "I am convinced from the Poetry (?) you write your Mother that the afflatus is not serious—and does not interfere with some real hard work" (L 23).

Stevens' internalization of and resistance to the idea that poetry and real work were at odds are clear in his journals, which wrestle with the categories his father provided. Two months after the letter cited above was sent, Stevens wrote to himself: "Those who say poetry is now the peculiar province of women say so because ideas about poetry are effeminate. . . . Poetry itself is unchanged" (L 26).⁸ The journal entry is labeled "Poetry and Manhood," and explicitly rejects as "effeminate" the poetry of "silly men" (L 26). That is, in casting about for a definition of manly poetry, Stevens rejects not women who wrote, but the genteel poets whose work could be labeled effeminate.⁹ At the same time, it seems clear that Stevens was also trying to protest his father's suggestion—a suggestion Stevens at first took to heart—that the effeminacy of poetry was connected with poetry being the kind of thing one sent to one's mother, and therefore "not serious." The implication is that serious poetry is not genteel poetry, and neither is it read primarily by women.

In his obituary for Stevens—"Comment: Wallace Stevens," published in *Poetry* in January 1956—William Carlos Williams compares his fellow writer

not to Emerson, but to Emily Dickinson, "imprisoned by her conscience in her father's house for a lifetime."¹⁰ The idea that Stevens and Dickinson were equally affected by internalizing the assumptions of patriarchal culture is illuminating. As Frank Lentricchia insists: "Male is not equivalent to patriarchy."¹¹ Yet Williams' comparison brings home the separate difficulties faced by male and female poets in American culture, even as it implies that these difficulties are related. Williams suggests that for Dickinson to have removed herself from marriage was for her to have been trapped in her father's house; for Stevens to have been trapped in his father's house was for him to have assumed the roles his father prescribed for him: as breadwinner, as professional, and as one whose "afflatus" did not interfere with "real work." Stevens could write in "The Plot against the Giant," in a way that would not have occurred to Dickinson, of "a curious puffing" that "will undo" (which is to say unman) his giant "yokel" (CP 7).

Although the situations of Emerson, Dickinson, and Stevens are historically different, for all three socially prescribed gender roles affected their ability to declare themselves as poets in America. Emerson, of course, faced the assumptions of his culture from an unusual vantage point, biographically, having been raised and supported by women, from his mother to his first wife, Ellen Tucker, whose legacy, after her death, supported the poet. In the case of both Dickinson and Stevens, the problem of being trapped was more literally the problem of becoming or being supported by a father. Still, as argued above, in trying to resist being trapped in the roles culturally prescribed for him, Emerson leaves women to carry on the household affairs and feels he must distance himself from domesticity. Despite Williams' perceptive comment, Emerson and Stevens, as male poets, have more in common with each other, in their responses to cultural pressures, than either has with Dickinson.

To quote from Marianne Moore's poem, "Marriage": "She says, 'Men are monopolists,'" while "He says, . . . 'a wife is a coffin.'"¹² Moore's strategy is characteristic: her voices quote from others, indicative of the social nature of the different pressures brought to bear on men and women. Moreover, her quotations on both sides of the question carry weight, in part because they are drawn from others whom Moore admired, namely M. Carey Thomas, president of Mount Holyoke, and Ezra Pound. The portion of Thomas' 1921 address from which Moore quotes says men are monopolists because they "practically reserve for themselves" all affairs of state and of pomp—"membership in academies, medals, titles . . . and other shining baubles, so valueless in themselves." Thomas was aware not only that "men" did not mean "women," but that the baubles she dismissed on such an Emersonian note were nonetheless "infinitely desirable because . . . symbols of [public] recognition."¹³ Pound, on the other hand, when he said that a wife was a coffin, might almost have been thinking of Stevens, who virtually gave up poetry in the period (1924-1933) during which he consolidated his position at work and had a child. Stevens gained some of that recognition Thomas said was denied women, but he also identified himself as a breadwinner, who gained recogni-

tion in the world of business, not of poetry. As Pound reported to Williams: Stevens "says he isn't writing any more. He has a daughter!"¹⁴ I began with the suggestion that Stevens resembles Emerson in part because he faced similar cultural pressures; more self-consciously than Emerson, I would argue, Stevens was torn between his internalization of cultural commonplaces and his attempts to redefine or resist those commonplaces. But finally, as with Emerson, Stevens' very resistance exacted hidden costs from those closest to him.

The idea that artistic culture generally was the province of women, while men, to be successful, should be associated with business was widely commented upon by the time of Moore, Pound, Williams, and Stevens. Thus, for example, even Edmund Clarence Stedman's influential and genteel collection of American poetry, *An American Anthology, 1787-1900*, published at the turn of the century, noted that in America economics was "a more fascinating study than letters"; Stedman also mentions living "in a time half seriously styled 'the woman's age,'" a reference to what Ann Douglas has called the feminization of American culture.¹⁵ In 1909, the year in which he published his first book, Williams wrote to his brother, defensively, that a "good many people think to like poetry is to be a molly coddle."¹⁶ And Van Wyck Brooks, discussing "The Literary Life," in Harold Stearns's collection of critical essays on *Civilization in the United States*, suggests the culturally accepted belief that a man's place was in the public sphere of business and commerce explains "why our novelists take such pains to be mistaken for business men."¹⁷

Stevens obviously internalized such commonplaces; unlike Emerson, he deliberately took up residence in his father's house (metaphorically speaking), and with some self-awareness, seeing both the losses and the gains therein. He wrote to Ronald Lane Latimer in 1937: "a good many years ago, when I really was a poet in the sense that I was all imagination, and so on, I deliberately gave up writing poetry because, much as I loved it, there were too many other things I wanted not to make an effort to have them. . . . I didn't like the idea of being bedeviled all the time about money and I didn't for a moment like the idea of poverty, so I went to work like anybody else and kept at it for a good many years" (L 320). This is Stevens' acknowledgment of himself as a conformist ("like anybody else"), but also as a man who, by his own choice, made himself conform (he "*deliberately* gave up writing"). If there is some wistfulness or self-justification in the passage, there is no sense (such as one finds from time to time in Williams' late interviews) that he would do anything differently.¹⁸

At the same time, Stevens' proposal in "Adagia" that "[m]oney is a kind of poetry" (OP 165) might be seen as a late variation on Emerson's strategy of redefinition, although a peculiar one since although Stevens' statement subversively implies that poetry is that by which money might be measured, he could not have said the coinage of poetry granted him the power he sought, a power he was not willing to relinquish.¹⁹ Moreover, in his letters, Stevens, unlike Emerson, rarely equates the need to work like anybody else (and to achieve a

certain material comfort) with the demands of his domestic life, although he did apparently tell Pound that such demands kept him from writing. Still, as mentioned, early in his life the domestic sphere served as a preserve for Stevens, a place where he could retreat from the pressures of reality (pressures he claimed later he deliberately accepted) and be himself, as poet.²⁰

However, as argued earlier, for Stevens to be a poet only at home was in some sense to yield to his father's definition of poetry as "not serious." And, whatever else he says, Stevens' early letters about wanting a family, or about wanting, once married, to observe the social conventions, suggest that his marriage became part of the reality that put pressure on him, not the escape his early letters sometimes envision.²¹ Lastly, if Stevens increasingly internalized the feminine, as Joan Richardson proposes, it was not so much, as Frank Lentricchia suggests, because Elsie felt betrayed and turned away from him once he began publishing the poems he first identified as a private offering to her, but because in his quest to internalize the feminine, Stevens ultimately, like Emerson, distanced poetry from both the world of commerce and the actual domestic world. As he came to claim he was a worldly success as a lawyer by choice—a self-made man—so too his appropriation of the "feminine" world of poetry was on his own terms, and to some degree at the expense of those who might claim to be exterior paramours. The ways in which Stevens insisted on composing Elsie before their marriage (telling her what to wear) and the ways in which he arranged to keep her, physically, at a distance after their marriage, suggest again that his desire to appropriate "the feminine" was evident well before the failures of his marriage and, indeed, may have played some part in those failures.²²

This is not to deny Frank Lentricchia's suggestion that we might read Wallace Stevens as a figure of patriarchy against itself, but it is to question the repercussions of Stevens' position. For example, Lentricchia denies that Elsie Stevens' appearance on the Liberty head dime and the walking Liberty half dollar has relevance in considering Stevens' relationship to the feminine.²³ Certainly, that Stevens' wife sat for the sculptor Adolph Alexander Weinman is only an accidental emblem of Stevens' relationship to his economic responsibilities as husband and father. That is, he did not force his wife to pose. But the emblem thus formed seems quite relevant to Stevens' situation. Weinman, at the time, was also the Stevenses' landlord, for one. Also, in the same period, Stevens was paying very careful attention to finances (not least, as Joan Richardson notes, in trying to furnish and improve the apartment where the couple lived).²⁴ Economic "Liberty," the coin, then, was graphically bound up with marriage, and with landlords. It is difficult not to believe that Stevens noticed such an emblem, albeit an ambiguous one.²⁵ Is the coin a sign of how artistic freedom was, for the male poet, at odds with economic liberty: Stevens might have a wife, and money, but only by deliberately choosing to give up writing poetry? Or is the coin a sign of how money is a kind of poetry? Weinman himself was a sculptor who made money as a landlord. Perhaps more to the point, Elsie is transfigured into a double-sided symbol—at times a sign of

the pressure and need to conform, to be a breadwinner; at other times the sign of another kind of liberty, poetic freedom, as Stevens came to embody his interior muse in the figure of a woman for whom first his mother, then Elsie, modeled. In neither case, it should be pointed out, could Elsie figure as herself, or as a flesh-and-blood paramour.

There is evidence that Stevens thought about what it meant to have his wife's image thus within and without. In 1934, Stevens was just emerging from the period of relative silence as a poet, having foregone literary efforts (and, for the time, literary recognition) while he struggled with career, family, and health. Indeed, Stevens' high blood pressure, diagnosed in the late twenties, meant he could not buy life insurance; thus, his health problems may have been important as much because they made him work and save to provide for his family's long-term financial security as because of the actual effects—though these were real enough—on his time and energy.²⁶ It is in such a setting, then, that Stevens wrote "Lions in Sweden," proclaiming he

was once

A hunter of those sovereigns of the soul
And savings banks, Fides, the sculptor's prize,
All eyes and size, and galled Justitia,
Trained to poise the tables of the law,
Patientia, forever soothing wounds,
And mighty Fortitudo, frantic bass.

(CP 124)

This may be Stevens' comment on literary lions, as well as on the quest for those "medals" and "shining baubles" that Thomas characterizes as symbols of recognition. The poem also comments on the "manly" virtues Stevens had just spent roughly a decade trying to embody (fidelity, justice—as in practicing law—patience, and fortitude). Such virtues are turned into relics, decorations found on social institutions, suggesting that Stevens' commitment to the social roles he had been playing may have been "galled."

Significantly, in light of this reading, liberty is not mentioned. And yet Stevens' image of the "sovereigns of the soul / *And savings banks . . . the sculptor's prize*" recalls Elsie's profile, both within Stevens' life and on United States coins. "Sovereigns," in the poem, rule both the soul and the banks, as coinage, as ideals, and as images of personal identity; traditional sovereigns are also, by the end of the poem, rejected for more indigenous sovereign images, as if the poem were the prelude to a personal declaration of independence. As such, the poem is one of renewal, an attractive Stevensian gesture of self-fashioning. Nonetheless, it is significant that to make such a gesture, Stevens must proclaim that if "the fault is with the soul, the sovereigns / Of the soul must likewise be at fault, and first" (CP 124). This may be, as with Emerson, a rejection of (among other things) patriarchy. But it also sounds a warning to those who unwittingly serve as the models for sovereigns of the soul, especially the "poor deluded females."

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Stevens and Emerson

Notes

¹See Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). See also, for example, David Leverenz, "The Politics of Emerson's Man-Making Words," *PMLA* 101 (January 1986): 38-56; Barbara Packer's "The Fugitive Slave Law and *The Conduct of Life*: Emerson in the 1850s," given at the Modern Language Association meeting on "American History in American Literature" (December 1985); Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered, An Oral Biography* (New York: Random House, 1983); Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens, A Biography: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), or the exchange between Lentricchia, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the former's "Andiamo!" and the latter's "The Man on the Dump versus the United Dames of America; or, What Does Frank Lentricchia Want?" both in *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Winter 1988): 386-413.

²Quotations from Emerson's essays, including "Nature," are cited from *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert Spiller, Alfred Ferguson, et. al. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971-).

³*The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* [JMN], ed. William Gilman et. al., 13 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960-): 236.

⁴Leverenz, 39-53.

⁵Quentin Anderson, "Practical and Visionary Americans," *The American Scholar* 45 (1976): 408-411.

⁶Indeed, in a journal entry for February, 1841, Emerson notes that literary men "ought to be released from every species of public or private responsibility. . . . If he [the writer] must marry, perhaps he should be regarded happiest who has a shrew for a wife, . . . who can & will assume the total economy of the house, and having some sense that her philosopher is best in his study suffers him not to intermeddle with her thrift" (JMN 7: 420). More often Emerson suggests simply that writers "leave to others the costly honors . . . of housekeeping," and opt for a more Spartan, celibate life (JMN 7: 351).

⁷See *Ariel and the Police*, 140, 172.

⁸Stevens' father also stressed the fact that young American men needed to find a profession (see *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens [New York: Knopf, 1977], 71). Further light is shed on Stevens' relationship with his father by Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 87; Richard Ellmann, "How Stevens Saw Himself," in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 154-58; as well as by Joan Richardson's biography.

⁹The link between this journal entry and the genteel poets owes a debt to *Ariel and the Police*, 161-167, although it is also discussed in Lisa M. Steinman, *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

¹⁰See Kurt Heinzelman, "Williams and Stevens: The Vanishing-Point of Resemblance," in *WCW & Others: Essays on William Carlos Williams and His Association with Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, Marcel Duchamp, Marianne Moore, Emanuel Romano, Wallace Stevens, and Louis Zukofsky* (The University of Texas at Austin: The Henry Ransom Humanities Research Center, 1985), 85-113, especially 109ff. Joan Richardson discusses what Stevens and Dickinson have in common, noting that Stevens probably did not know Dickinson's work well, but equally probably would not have found it "effeminate" (*Wallace Stevens, A Biography*, 126, 436, 466). At the same time, I suspect Stevens would have resented the comparison, at least coming from Williams, precisely because he would have thought Williams was viewing him as "lady-like."

¹¹"Andiamo!" 412.

¹²*The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 67.

¹³*Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁴Cited, *Parts of a World*, 244. Peter Brazeau (*Parts of a World*, 245) goes on to point out that Stevens' silence was due to health problems as well, although it is worth noting that Stevens, when he discussed the subject, emphasized the burden of his family responsibilities. As I suggest at the end of this article, the two may have been related.

¹⁵*An American Anthology, 1789-1900* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1900), xxviii. See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

¹⁶April 6, 1909 letter to Edgar, cited in *Made in America*, 16.

¹⁷*Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry By Thirty Americans*, ed. Harold E. Stearns (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), 192.

¹⁸For Williams' expression of regret, see "The Art of Poetry VI," *Paris Review* No. 32 (Summer-Fall 1964): 124.

¹⁹See *Ariel and the Police*, 213.

²⁰See, for example, Stevens' letter to Elsie on not existing from nine to six at the office, cited in Joan Richardson, "Wallace Stevens: Toward a Biography," *Raritan* 4 (Winter 1985): 42.

²¹See *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, 81-82, and *Wallace Stevens, A Biography*, especially 414-423.

²²See *Wallace Stevens, a Biography*, 239-240.

²³See "Andiamo!," 408-409, and "The Man on the Dump versus the United Dames of America," 393-394.

²⁴*Wallace Stevens, A Biography*, 421-423.

²⁵As Kurt Heinzelman points out in "Williams and Stevens," 111, Williams commented upon what having Elsie's image on the coin of the realm might have meant to Stevens.

²⁶See *Parts of a World*, 245, and *Ariel and the Police*, 216.

Alabama

Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools

Melita Schaum

with a Foreword by John N. Serio

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Lava-Writing: A Status Report On Stevens and Feminism, 1988

DANIEL T. O'HARA

WITH THE PUBLICATION OF Frank Lentricchia's *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (1988), Wallace Stevens has become a central focus for the important debate about the relation of sexual politics to literary study.¹ This is so as much for Lentricchia's spirited critique of what he terms the "essentialist feminism" of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their readings of modern poets, especially Stevens, as for his interesting reconstruction of the historical, social, and psychological forces shaping the American male imagination in this poet's representative case. The prior journal publication of a generous selection from the sections on Stevens has provoked, in fact, a strong and detailed response from the objects of the initial critique. In light of the different readings of "A Postcard from the Volcano" emerging in this exchange, I propose to examine the respective critical stances of these leading American critics, in order to raise a more general question about the function of criticism in American culture today.

By "essentialist feminism" (a term he borrows from Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics*), Lentricchia refers to that kind of feminist reading in which a fundamental biological difference of identity along gender lines is asserted or assumed. The result is that the patriarchal hierarchy is simply inverted, with women becoming the privileged victims of history. They are thus represented as the moral superiors of imperially empowered males, regardless of all socially specific, historically constructed differences between people and cultures of diverse epochs. Feminists are therefore in danger of erecting into dogma a "manichean allegory," "a formalism of gender" that is the mirror-image of the patriarchy's naturalistic ahistoricism:

If history, as Gilbert and Gubar argue, is a repetitive sexist drama (not easy to argue otherwise) with men in the pilot-controlling role of the oppressor, and women in the role of selfless victim, then history may be in danger of being translated by some of our most influential feminists into manichean allegory and the very category that Moi and others invoke in order to explain the transformation of biology into history—she calls it interchangeably, the "social" or the "cultural"—this category will be banished almost as quickly as it is invoked. With the social banished behind the scenes, history begins to look very much again like biology, biology like metaphysics, and the writing of feminist literary criticism like a ritual of scapegoating propelled by paranoia.²

Lentricchia spends considerable time discussing the position of Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and in the studies now incorporated into *The War of the Words* (1988), the first volume of their two-volume study, *No*

Man's Land, devoted to the place of the woman writer in modern culture. However, for convenience's sake, I want to focus on his analysis of Gilbert's reading of Stevens in "What Do Feminist Critics Want? A Postcard from the Volcano."

Gilbert begins her essay by reflecting on the fact that male writers and critics feel that they have inherited from the past the "patrimony" of the entire canonical Western literary tradition, whereas female writers and critics, more often than not, feel only their own "penury" in relation to their male counterparts, and so women are turning to the past to discover a tradition of their own that has previously been neglected or denigrated. Hence, the answer to Gilbert's ironic revision of Freud's infamous question about women is, quite simply, that what feminist critics want is to replace their "penury" with their own "patrimony," as it were. It is in this context that Gilbert offers her comparative reading of "two volcano poems," by Stevens and Dickinson, respectively.

Stevens' poem, Gilbert contends, "employs very much the same metaphor of the world as ancestral property" that she had used to discuss the presence or absence of the literary tradition in the different experiences of the world of male and female writers and critics. "Imagining his own and his generation's extinction by the symbolic Mount Saint Helens that annihilates every generation," Gilbert continues, "Stevens prophesies also the imaginings of his heirs, 'children picking up his bones,' who will never entirely comprehend his passions." Nevertheless, Gilbert concludes, "these uncomprehending children will inherit a cosmic mansion that has been in some deep way transformed by his language, his literary authority, his power: 'We knew for long the mansion's look,' he notes. 'And what we said of it became / A part of what it is . . .,' adding that when he is gone 'Children . . . Will say of the mansion that it seems / As if he that lived there left behind / A spirit storming in blank walls.'"³

Gilbert then contrasts "Stevens' authoritative wistfulness" in his volcano poem with the fiercer attitude she finds in Dickinson:

Emily Dickinson, who wrote many more volcano poems than Stevens did, had quite a different attitude toward both the mansion of the cosmos and her own Vesuvian presence:

*On my volcano grows the Grass
A meditative spot—
An acre for a Bird to choose
Would be the General thought—

How red the Fire rocks below—
How insecure the sod
Did I disclose
Would populate with awe my solitude.*

For Dickinson, the gulf between appearance and reality is bleaker, blacker, and more unbridgeable than the one Stevens records. Trained and defined as a lady, she is conscious that she herself seems to be a sort of decorous (and marginal) landscape, "a meditative spot" on the edge of the patriarchal estate, a quiet "acre for a Bird to choose." What is unimaginable is her volcanic (and powerful) interiority: the fierce fire, the insecure sod, and the awesomely quaking rock that not only enforce but create her "solitude." Moreover, it is that solitude, so different from Stevens' authoritative wistfulness, which in turn both determines and defines her alienation. Alone, unknown, and unimaginable, she is *other* and possibly awful to everyone, even to herself. (FC 33-34)

However ironical and embittered Stevens imagines the relation of his life and work to the coming ages, he at least can represent that relationship in a compensatory dream of subtly lasting verbal power, whereas Dickinson can only perform in secret her otherwise unimaginable self as volcanically other, a powerfully self-defeating if representative gesture for a woman poet to make in a repressive patriarchal culture.

Lentricchia focuses on Gilbert's reading of Stevens' poem at the end of his article; this analysis also concludes the first half of the reading of Stevens in his book. Thus, it is centrally positioned, and can be fairly taken as representative. And Lentricchia has argued up to this point that Gilbert and Gubar have accepted the aristocratic model of literature and the literary tradition as being just like inherited wealth and property, as (in Gilbert's own words), "treasures" of Western culture, the "grand ancestral property that educated men had inherited from their intellectual forefathers" (FC 33). Their blanket acceptance of this model, regardless of changed circumstances, leads them to impose it, Lentricchia contends, indiscriminately upon American poetry in general and Stevens' poetry in particular. Consequently, Gilbert in her reading of "A Postcard from the Volcano" combines historical misrepresentation of the bitter realities of American middle-class culture in the 1930s with "essentialist feminist" idealization of Dickinson's superior difference to obscure what the poem is struggling to overcome: viz., Stevens' fiercely gnawing sense of not having any appropriately appreciative heirs to whom he can pass on his aesthetic passions.

For Lentricchia, Stevens is ever anxious about his poetic strength in relation to the epic masters, Dante and Milton, since he recognizes himself as a "Strange new patriarch," who can only imagine "his nonsurvival as a writer," and so must repeatedly confront "his inability to become canonical, part of tradition."

What shall we say of this male's relation to his patrimony? What is patrimony, anyway, that cannot be bequeathed to one's children as it was bequeathed to oneself? Probably patrimony that never was bequeathed, patrimony, then, that never was patrimony. Gilbert's

feminist categories break down, at this point, because they cannot attend to the American circumstances of this poem's production: in the context of the early 1930s when Stevens bought his first home, gracious in space, but no mansion; in the context of this middle-class life in which he inherited no real estate from his father; in the context of a life, in other words, whose only mansions were metaphorical. And even those were radically in doubt: in the early thirties Stevens, then past fifty years of age, could look back at his first and only volume of poems, published in 1923, at age forty-four, and contemplate the almost nothing written or published in between. And he could look forward and imagine himself childless: not "my children" but

Children picking up our bones
Will never know that these were once
As quick as foxes on the hill . . .

He could look forward and imagine himself unacknowledged by a generation of writers who feel no burden of history; his golden style repeated in blithe ignorance and ease . . . (PA 786)

Lentricchia therefore concludes by claiming that the terms of "patriarchy, patrimony and ancestral property" that Gilbert uses to discuss the poem could not be "less appropriate to Stevens or any number of other modern writers in the United States," because she is projecting wholesale "the conditions of [canonical] literary production in nineteenth-century England," which do imaginatively involve such concerns, onto "the conditions of . . . writing in modern American middle-class culture" (PA 786), which definitely do not involve such concerns, not even figuratively speaking.

Since none of the respondents in the subsequent debate return to "A Postcard from the Volcano," it is not germane to my argument to rehearse in detail their responses. Moreover, the responses, although beginning with Stevens, soon enough leave him behind in what becomes a scatter-shot argument about the relative validity of one critical approach over another that ends in various ad hominem attacks.⁴ The two contrasting readings of the poem by Gilbert and Lentricchia, however, already reveal the essential difference between these leading American feminist critics and this representative poststructuralist new historical critic, whose critical ideal derives largely (but not exclusively) from a continental context. Such context inspires a severe suspicion of the easy use of metaphors for critical models, and positions every sublimated "difference" as always already potentially a textual performance of the privileged metaphysics of presence of a critical humanism supporting the hegemony of ruling elites over the repressed. Given such a critical difference between them, is it no wonder that Lentricchia criticizes the much less theoretically freighted style of American feminism, and that Gilbert and Gubar claim they and the other

American feminists they asked do not know what Lentricchia means by “essentialist feminism.”⁵

The argument between Lentricchia and Gilbert and Gubar concerns the comparative priority of the principle of gender difference over other differences as a standard of judgment in the current practice of criticism. Although Gilbert and Gubar naturally deny Lentricchia’s charge that they are guilty of “essentialist feminism” (they know enough to know that, whatever it may be, it is “bad”), they do agree with him that all significant differences to them, too—those of class, race, and gender—are naturally made to mean something only as such differences are historically constructed by the cultural operations of social and economic power. For besides being feminists fighting for women’s rights, they are also “literary historians who have learned . . . almost more than we want to know about the pain experienced by both sides in the twentieth-century’s war of words” between the sexes, and they are certainly not “unaware of the social determinants with which modernism is usually associated (industrialization, alienation, and so on)” (*Dump* 389). In short, Gilbert and Gubar are also, like their nemesis Lentricchia, “historical” critics, and not, despite his adversarial charges, gender formalists. Lentricchia, on the other hand, argues in his response to their critique of him that the “differences” among people that ultimately matter most “can’t be accounted for by the gender difference that is the heart of Gilbert and Gubar’s way of reading.”⁶ He, in other words, cannot concede them their critical good conscience, since they claim not to know what his accusations actually mean. Their ignorance does not grant them their innocence. Meanwhile, of course, Wallace Stevens is left devastated. He now appears either as a rather unreflectively complicit representative of the “sexual poetics” (and “sexual politics”) of the repressive patriarchy, or as the equally victimized, historically constructed and deformed poet/theorist desperately struggling for imaginative survival amidst the death-throes of the world capitalist order. In sum, both the feminist and the new historicist “ways of reading” leaves Stevens’ poetry in figurative ruins, demolished by the critical perspectives brought so explosively to bear upon it.

In light of this last point about such equally devastating ways of reading, I want now to raise a larger question about the function of criticism in contemporary American culture. What should be the primary difference for a literary critic that ultimately matters the most in any reading? Traditionally, of course, the answer would have been: the literary (i.e., formal) difference. This is the difference in the effective use of words on the page, as compared with other possible uses, to elicit from generations of readers the judgment of beauty. But this customary formal criterion has been held in ill repute now for some time, in favor of other critical standards and institutional imperatives, such as those of deconstruction, reader-response criticism, feminism, new historicism, neo-Marxism, and Lacanian analysis, to name only a few of the more vocal critical developments. Gilbert and Gubar, you recall, take some pains to counter Lentricchia’s charge that their way of reading is “a formalism of gender.” Formalism in any form thus appears to be truly bad form these days.

I do not propose in the following reading of the conclusion to "A Postcard from the Volcano" to argue for a return to formalism. Polemical pronouncements on all sides today are just too popular. Besides, I suspect that one could argue until blue in the face without changing the dim prospects of formalism making an official comeback in the profession any time soon.⁷ My aim is to suggest that an exclusive focus upon the effects of economic, social, and cultural differences upon literary texts loses too many of the most satisfying features of such texts, a loss that few of us can afford to incur for too long without beginning to wonder why we are doing literary study if all we are going repeatedly to discover in our readings are the grandiose images of our collective bad faith.

Since Lentricchia and Gilbert both agree that the poem's opening mood and tone is one of "authoritative wistfulness," even if they disagree over its significance, I will accept that characterization, too, for most of the poem. But its conclusion is anything but wistful, however authoritative sounding it continues to be. (If anything, the last three stanzas sound even more authoritative.) The poem ends to my ear not on a note of wistfulness but one of ever increasing defiance, as the final lines accumulate and mass into a climactic scene of opulent if impersonal self-display:

Children,
Still weaving budded aureoles,
Will speak our speech and never know,

Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls,

A dirty house in a gutted world,
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
Smear'd with the gold of the opulent sun.⁸

It may be that the dying social and cultural order of 1936 will be replaced by a more innocent, know-nothing order to come, but the children of that future epoch will have to speak of the past, however unwittingly, in the terms that past fashioned for itself and handed on to the future in the only styles of perception, feeling, and language still available for use. And the poem's final four lines, I believe, compose a single monumental apocalyptic image whose ghostly lineaments ironically suggest the superbly artificial and literate volcano that a Stevens would put together and elaborate, Van Gogh-like, in order to drive his point home with a vengeance.⁹ "So you think I am an outmoded elitist chauvinist aesthete," one can almost hear Stevens chuckling demonically to himself as he composes these lines, "well, then, here's your 'real me' for you, in the grand style."

By attending to the formal features of tone, imagery, and rhythm, one can hear what critics that focus on the purely social dimensions often miss: comically heroic defiance of all merely social pressures. Moreover, if one pays close

attention to the play of allusion in the poem, then the defiance becomes, if possible, even more pronounced. The title and setting of the poem, for example, allude to Nietzsche's widely-cited, extravagantly aesthetic injunction from *The Gay Science* to "live dangerously" by building our cities on "the slopes of Vesuvius."¹⁰ The last four lines amass similar apocalyptic images that transform to Stevens' own purpose of comic defiance four sets of literary allusions. Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Hamlet* animate "A spirit storming in blank walls," and Milton's scenes of cosmic devastation from *Paradise Lost* construct "A dirty house in a gutted world." Meanwhile, both Shelley's abstract Power from "Mount Blanc" and his Demogorgon from *Prometheus Unbound* weave the deep, spectral truth of "A tatter of shadows peaked to white." Finally, Stevens' own early solar impersonations, especially the golden utopian vision of male power in the famous seventh stanza of "Sunday Morning," shine playfully through in the grandly self-deprecating last line of the poem. All such revisionary imagery of dangerous literary strength Stevens ironically composes without any sentimental evasions: "Smear'd with the gold of the opulent sun." This perversely glorious aestheticism ("Smear'd") is the inescapable hallmark of his modernism.

At first glance it may seem that the result of my "psycho-aesthetic" formalist exercise in reading is to leave Stevens as devastated as do the readings of Gilbert and Lentricchia: Stevens as an apocalyptic Oscar Wilde or exquisite American *Übermensch*? But, as both the marshalled allusions and rhythmical shifts in temporal perspective particularly suggest, I think, the voice that speaks the poems is meant to be seen as a highly artificial, willfully constructed voice, the voice of a literary persona, an intentionally playful terrible mask; a volcanic bogeyman; indeed, if we credit the Vesuvian setting at all, we must see this voice as the ironically posthumous voice of vision—Stevens' imagination of death—that can foretell the future, even as it imposes upon the decade Edmund Wilson memorialized as "The American Earthquake" the sublime after-shocks of an already ancient catastrophe. In this unforgettably impressive manner, the posthumous voice intoning "A Postcard from the Volcano" is not so secretly intimating, with a last savage twist of the knife, that we should think of the standard cliché of all postcard writing: "Wish you were here!" Sloughing off virtually all accouterments of human being, this posthumous voice acquires the apocalyptic tone of the spectral volcano the poem creates in our minds. After all, if Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C" can be said "to vociferate again" the "gigantic quavers" of the Yucatan thunderstorm's "voice," it would be nothing for Stevens now to imagine the speaker articulating volcanic perspectives on humankind. Such a voice would continue to produce a unique lava-writing especially designed for all those who, like the poem's "Children," overlook the forms of feeling preserved from the past in the very play of the words they use to condemn it—and so, significant portions of themselves—to certain oblivion. Perhaps this is the self-destructive function of literary criticism in America at the present time: to trash the imagi-

nation that, as Keats put it and Stevens practices it, delights as much in Iago as in Imogen.

Temple University

Notes

¹Stevens is also at the center of the general debate about literature's relation to society. See, for example, Imre Salussinsky, *Criticism in Society: Interviews with Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida, Northrop Frye, Geoffrey Hartman, Barbara Johnson, Frank Kermode, Frank Lentricchia, J. Hillis Miller, Edward Said* (London and New York: Methuen, 1988). Each critic interviewed is asked to comment on a Stevens poem in order to focus discussion.

²Frank Lentricchia, "Patriarchy Against Itself—The Young Manhood of Wallace Stevens," *Critical Inquiry* 13, 4 (Summer 1987): 775. Hereafter cited in the text as *PA*. See also *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). Nearly half the book is devoted to a reading of Stevens' career.

³Sandra M. Gilbert, "What Do Feminist Critics Want? A Postcard from the Volcano" in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 31-32. Hereafter cited in the text as *FC*.

⁴The exception is Donald Pease's response, "Patriarchy, Lentricchia, and Male Feminization," *Critical Inquiry* 14, 2 (Winter 1988): 379-385.

⁵Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Man on the Dump versus the United Dames of America; or, What Does Frank Lentricchia Want?," *Critical Inquiry* 14, 2 (Winter 1988): 402. Hereafter cited in the text as *Dump*.

⁶Frank Lentricchia, "Andiamo!" *Critical Inquiry* 14, 2 (Winter 1988): 412.

⁷See, for example, Christopher Norris, "Paul de Man's Past," *London Review of Books* 10, 3 (4 February 1988): 7-11.

⁸*Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 159.

⁹I am particularly indebted for my reading of the poem to A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 199-200, and Helen Vendler, *Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 33-35.

¹⁰Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 228.

Announcement

1988 Modern Language Association Convention
New Orleans
December 27, 7-9 PM, Salon 2, Hilton
Presiding: Alan Filreis, University of Pennsylvania
Topic: Stevens in History

1. "The Fellowship of Men That Perish: Stevens and the First World War," James Longenbach, University of Rochester.
2. "Stevens and Thirties' Radicalism," Harvey Teres, Princeton University.
3. "Stevens in History and Not in History: the Poet and the Second World War," Jacqueline Brogan, University of Notre Dame.

Respondents:
A. Walton Litz, Princeton University
Stanley Burnshaw

Poems

The Conversion of Wallace Stevens

There must be more.
Beyond this life, beyond this death.
Something, which, for the mind
Would be enough.
All this is not enough.
Not life, not death,
Not what we fix with the hardest
Most unevaded gaze,
Nor anything of God we can conceive.
What we want is everything,
From those remotest poles
To these most fragrant faces,
Yet everything itself is not enough.
What we want,
And what could be enough,
Is one green queen in one green heaven
Singing in deepest light, far
Beyond the brightest
Most distant skies of noon.
This queen
Who, to the heart, and to the
Vastest imagination of the heart
Is everything,
To the mind, and to the mind alone,
Is nothing.
Yet this nothing,
This nothing of the mind
That can never be enough
Hearkens. She says,

The mind itself can never be enough.

David Middleton

The Woman on the Dump[†]

Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.
—Wallace Stevens

She sits on a smoldering couch
reading labels from old tin cans,
the ground ground down
to dirt, hard as poured cement.
A crowd of fat, white gulls
take mincing oblique steps
around the couch, searching for
an orange rind, a crab claw.

The Wallace Stevens Journal

Clouds scud backward overhead,
drop quickly over the horizon,
as if weighted with lead sinkers.
The inside's outside here,
her "sitting room" *en plein air*:
a homey triad of chaise longue,
tilting table, and old floor lamp
from a torn-down whorehouse,
the shade a painted scene
of nymphs in a naked landscape.
The lamp is a beautiful thing,
even if she can't plug it in,
the bare-cheeked, breathless
nymphs part of the eternal
feminine as they rush away
from streaming trees and clouds
that can't be trusted not to change
from man to myth and back again.

The dump's too real. Or not
real enough. It is hot here.
Or cold. When the sun goes down,
she wraps herself in old newspaper,
the newsprint rubbing off,
so that she *is* the news as she
looks for clues and scraps
of things in the refuse. The *the*
is here somewhere, buried
under bulldozed piles of trash.
She picks up a pair of old cymbals
to announce the moon, the pure
symbol, just coming up over there.
Abandoned bathtubs, sinks, and stoves
glow white—abstract forms
in the moonlight; a high tide
of garbage spawns and grows,
throwing long, lovely shadows
across unplumbed ravines and gullies.
She'll work through the night,
sifting and sorting and putting
things right, saving everything
that can be saved, rejecting
nothing, piles of tires
in the background unexhaustedly
burning, burning, burning.

Elizabeth Spires

[†]First published in *The Georgia Review* (Winter 1987).

Reviews

The Poetry of Wallace Stevens.

By Robert Rehder. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Robert Rehder's *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens* joins the small circle of introductory books on Stevens for the general reader. Without imposing a limiting theoretical perspective, Rehder provides a general overview of Stevens' life and poetry. Employing a method that combines description and discussion, Rehder primarily offers an *explication de texte* of the important poems, as he himself admits in his preface: "I have attempted throughout the book to place the individual texts in the context of [Stevens'] work as a whole and to make suggestions about his development; but my major concern has been to analyse individual poems." The final assessment of this book, therefore, rests with its audience: unlike other introductory books, such as Susan B. Weston's *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Rehder's book offers the specialist little that has not been said before; for the uninitiated, however, it provides a coherent and often insightful reading of Stevens' poetic achievement. Unfortunately, this accomplishment is marred by serious typographical faults, unbecoming of a serious scholar and such a major press as St. Martin's.

Rehder's first chapter, "I Was the World in which I Walked," illustrates the problem of a limited audience. Fifty-five pages in length, the chapter summarizes Stevens' biography to give a flavor of both the man and the poet. To do so, however, Rehder draws on familiar sources: Holly Stevens' edition of *Letters* and her *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, Peter Brazeau's *Parts of a World*, Milton Bates's *A Mythology of Self*. There are 185 footnotes in the chapter, with over 110 of them referring to Brazeau's oral biography. From one point of view, Rehder does a good service for the novice reader of Stevens by compressing much of the basic and even titillating biographical information into a readable, accurate, and revealing mini-biography. From another perspective, however, he offers nothing new, and an informed reader quickly tires of the well-known background information on Stevens' life and the well-worn generalizations about his poetry: "For Stevens the great division was not between the country and the city, but rather between reality and imagination"; "The earliest poems chosen for *Harmonium* were composed when he was thirty-six; he was forty-three when the collection itself was published"; "The freshness of Stevens' vision in *Harmonium* is such that everything is exotic. He uses an extraordinary vocabulary of strange and rare words, such as 'princox', 'scurry', 'chirr', 'lacustrine'; "Between August 1924 and June 1928 Stevens composed no poetry."

Rehder devotes the next six chapters to discussing the poetry in chronological order, with the long pieces—"Sunday Morning," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"—forming the centerpiece of the respective chapters. Although he claims in his preface that he is concerned with the poetic development of Stevens, he really does not believe Stevens changes after "The Man with the Blue Guitar"; he devotes only twenty pages to the last chapter which discusses all the poems from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" on: "The sound of the guitar lingers on in Stevens' poetry virtually until the end."

For the most part, Rehder's readings are consistently sensitive and sensible. He is especially solid, I think, in his discussion of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where he makes some refreshingly intelligent observations, often based on close scrutiny of Stevens' diction. For example, he says of the dedication to "Notes": "Stevens makes the more active *Changingness* [sic] out of the present participle, rejecting *changeableness* as

only denoting potential. He converts an adjective, *central*, to a noun, again to make it more active and less obviously spatial than *centre*, to endow this newly created location with controlling power. This makes it a place that we have not visited before: "The central of our being." Or again, he discusses Stevens' selection of MacCullough with persuasively good common sense: "MacCullough is a name chosen for its prosaicness, to be the opposite of *Phoebus*, and Stevens makes his major man a Scot in order to make him as practical as possible, stubborn, industrious, hard-headed and tight-fisted, knowing the value of money and the world, someone without any vestige of the imagination's moonlight. . . . 'The MacCullough is McCullough' [sic] so as to be totally human, because he is to take the place of *Phoebus* and of God." And Rehder does such a wonderful job of showing the parallelism between "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" that it's worth quoting in full:

'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' is in many ways a reworking of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', but with the opposite emphasis: on truth not fiction, on everyday mundanity instead of all-mastering invention, and it obtains some of its form from this countervailing of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'. Both poems consist of thirty-one sections composed of blank-verse triads, seven in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', six in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' (where the blank verse is so free as almost to disappear). There are innumerable echoes of the former poem in the latter. 'The vulgate of experience' (I) recalls 'the imagination's Latin' (2.IX) and the celebration of Jerome (3.I); the statue of Jove that is blown up (XXIV) reminds us of the statue of General Du Puy that 'was rubbish in the end' (2.III); the land of the lemon-trees (XXIX) seems another version of the planter's island with its orange- and lime-trees (2.V) and of Catawba (3.IV). The last leaf that has fallen in the penultimate poem (XXX) is the spinning leaf of the penultimate poem (3.IX) of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'—and the robin is in both poems; and 'the late president, Mr Blank' (XXXI) might be the President who ordains (2.II). The ephebe is present in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' (XIII) as well as a mature scholar, Professor Eucalyptus, presumably of Yale (XIV-XV, XXII). Professor Eucalyptus, who appears in the second half of the poem and who 'does not look / Beyond the object' (XIV.3-4), is the counterpart of Canon Aspirin in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' who sees himself as the angel of the absolute beyond whom 'thought cannot progress as thought' (3.VI-VII). Eucalyptus listens to the ramshackle sound of the rain in the ramshackle spout of his house, while Aspirin listens to 'the whole, / The complicate, the amassing harmony'. Their equivalence is confirmed by the Professor's statement that 'The search / For reality is as momentous as / The search for god' (XXII.1-3).

Yet, there are moments when one questions Rehder's interpretations, as when he suggests that Crispin "is able to assimilate without difficulty, without tragedy, the multitudinous magnitude of the Atlantic and the thunderstorms of Yucatan," or that "nature is never fierce of [sic] awful in Stevens' poetry." One thinks immediately of such lines as, "Crispin was washed away by magnitude," or "The scholar of one candle sees / An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything he is. And he feels afraid," or "His grief is that his mother should feed on him, himself and what he saw, / In that distant chamber, a bearded queen, wicked in her dead light," to counter such assertions.

In general, Rehder is content merely to quote from the *Letters*, and, perhaps, what is more disappointing, to let Stevens' word be the final word. He is particularly vulnerable to this tactic in discussing "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the poem Stevens explicated for both Hi Simons in the early 1940s and Renato Poggioli in the early 1950s. Typically, Rehder discusses the poem (in this case, Canto III) by repeating and then embellishing Stevens' own explications:

Stevens' image is one of ordinary country life, as he explains to Simons: 'On farms in Pennsylvania a hawk is nailed up, I believe, to frighten off other hawks. Here in New England a bird is more likely to be nailed up merely as an extraordinary object to be exhibited; that is what I had in mind' (8 Aug 1940).

'His living hi and ho. This means', he tells Poggioli, 'to express man in the liveliness of lively experience, with pose; and to tick it, tock it, etc. means to make an exact record of the liveliness of the occasion' (25 June 1953).

Such a pedestrian approach to interpretation quickly exhausts the specialist, although it may be of value to the beginning reader.

But what ultimately detracts from this book is its sloppy presentation: the path is strewn with typographical errors, errors that are annoying, ludicrous, and, sometimes, downright misleading. Stevens is quoted as requesting a colleague to ask the president of the Hartford to give one of his assistants "a rise" (instead of "a raise") and as saying of Henry Church: "He could sit up in bed until two or three o'clock in the morning the Nietzsche" (curiously, this same sentence is repeated correctly three lines later as "in the morning with Nietzsche"). Despite the nod to "scrupulous copy-editing" in the preface, glaring errors assault the reader's eye—"tth," "psychological," "plae," "Penlope's"—and nearly a dozen sentences begin without capitals. Rehder refers to the fight between Hemingway and Stevens as having occurred in February 1926 (instead of 1936), cites correspondence with Poggioli as having taken place in 1935 (instead of 1953), and humorously, or should I say, *posthumously*, quotes a letter from Stevens to Norman Holmes Pearson postmarked 24 June 1973. Certainly, Stevens needs to be introduced to non-specialists in an accessible way, and, for the most part, Rehder's approach qualifies as one. But, ironically, for the audience for which this book is best-suited, the undergraduate just beginning a study of Stevens, these numerous typographical errors become factual distortions.

John N. Serio
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Gesta Humanorum: Studies in the Historicist Mode.

By Roy Harvey Pearce. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987.

When Roy Harvey Pearce published *Historicism Once More* in 1969 the title almost seemed to apologize for itself. Yet as Pearce recognized in the title essay of the volume (originally published a decade earlier), the moment seemed auspicious for the rise of a new and sophisticated kind of historical criticism. The hegemony of the New Criticism had waned, and a common call for a movement beyond formalism was sounding from otherwise unrelated critical quarters. Having been trained in the history of ideas by Arthur Lovejoy, Pearce espoused an existential historicism compatible with the line of

German hermeneutics that extends from Dilthey to Gadamer (and related, as Pearce sensed early on, to certain aspects of T. S. Eliot's work which the New Critics ignored). "Studying language," said Pearce, "we study history." Our historicity is our being in the world, and our literary criticism "is ineluctably a mode of historical understanding—and thus a mode of history itself."

But the decade that followed the publication of *Historicism Once More* witnessed not so much a movement beyond formalism as a new formalism, this time under the aegis of the assortment of poststructuralist criticisms imported from abroad. In *Blindness and Insight* (1971) Paul de Man equated literary criticism and literary history not to underscore our ineluctable historicity but to undermine the possibility of historical understanding altogether: "the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions." Today, especially since de Man's war time activities have been uncovered, remarks like that one have lost much of their glamour and authority. And just as Murray Krieger and Gerald Graff exposed the limitations of New Critical formalism thirty years ago, a new wave of historically oriented readers have for the last several years dismantled the anti-historicism of deconstruction. The 1980s have seen an "attempt to move beyond both the reductionism of positivistically inclined historiography and the formalism of *explication de texte*." That was Pearce's thought in the 1969 foreword to *Historicism Once More*, and it may be more relevant today than it was almost two decades ago. The present moment is especially auspicious for Pearce's new book, *Gesta Humanorum: Studies in the Historicist Mode*.

The volume collects essays written during the last twenty years (most of them substantially revised), dividing them into two groups: an opening section on historical methods and a longer section of interpretations of Paine, Hawthorne, Whitman, Twain, and Stevens. Pearce is self-conscious about the critical horizon which greets his book, and in the foreword he places his own historicism in the context of the various new historicisms offered by Fredric Jameson, Stephen Greenblatt, and Frank Lentricchia. What separates Pearce from much of the new historicism is his unwillingness to forsake his life-long devotion to humanist values, and throughout *Gesta Humanorum* one feels the pressure of Arnold's best that has been thought or said: "As humanists we are interested in what man has achieved in the light of what he might have achieved. Thus we construct our critiques of societies and cultures by understanding and interpreting privileged documents as expressive of *gesta humanorum*. The documents project deeds done on behalf of man, although often in spite of man."

Even those of us who do not share these values will find much to admire in Pearce's essays, since his goal is to uncover both the strengths and the weaknesses of the humanism bound up in American literature at large. The humanism of Pearce's methodology is also his subject. He writes in the essay on Paine that "for poems and stories of great power, an occasion, even one out of the past, must be felt strongly enough to become a cause," and the subsequent essays measure American writers against that generalization. Pearce reveals the success of Twain's historical vision and the failure of Whitman's, and he goes so far as to offer this stunning judgment: "I daresay that in all cases—that of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, as well as of Whitman—there occurred a huge error, a huge failure of nerve." That failure of nerve was the eliding of historical necessity into utopian longing. Yet those failures remain valuable for Pearce precisely because they comprise our own history. Here Pearce's subject and method become indistinguishable, for both his words and those of Whitman or Twain point to our own historical predicament today.

The poetry of Wallace Stevens has always been central to Pearce's work, and the long essay on "The Cry and the Occasion" is another worthy addition to his pioneering discussion of the poet in *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961). Looking back to that volume today, it is reassuring to see how prescient Pearce was: Harold Bloom's sense of Stevens' Emersonian heritage, Hillis Miller's influential, deconstructive reading of "The Rock," and Frank Lentricchia's recent discussion of Stevens' political life were prepared for in Pearce's study. "The fundamental hope in Stevens is political," says Lentricchia in his recent *Ariel and the Police*, "though neither Stevens nor his critics are comfortable with that word: it is conspicuously absent from their discourse." Yet here is Pearce in *The Continuity of American Poetry*: "Stevens' faith was that the ultimate poem contained within itself the ground of political belief because it contained within itself the ground of belief in man."

Pearce has always seen the ineluctable historicity of Stevens' work, even as New Critical and poststructuralist formalists have denied it. And in the last several years, a few of Stevens' readers (Milton Bates and George Lensing the most sensitive among them) have begun to interrogate the historical content and context of the poems. Pearce's "The Cry and the Occasion" not only offers a similar interrogation; more important for the state of Stevens criticism today, it also investigates the dynamics of reading Stevens historically. To understand one of the poems, says Pearce, the reader "must determine the nature of [its] occasion, not for its own sake but rather for the sake of understanding the cry that celebrates it and, so celebrating, celebrates itself." In writing the poems, Stevens dismantled and reconstructed the stuff of his world; the poems (especially the later poems) embody that dialectic, and to read the poems successfully, we must read them through that dialectic, just as Stevens wrote them. For Pearce, Stevens' poems not only begin in history; their very shape embodies the historicity of understanding. In this sense, Stevens' poems emerge as more profoundly historical than Pound's "poem including history," despite Pound's vast accumulation of historical particulars.

Pearce locates the occasions for "Anecdote of the Jar," "The Emperor of Ice Cream," and "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," but even after he has uncovered the latent historical content of this work he confesses that Stevens ultimately succumbs to the same failure of nerve he found in Whitman and Emerson: "Thus I must be bold enough, even as I am profoundly grateful for poems that taught me how to think, how to read, to find them, however perfected in their intensity, to be lacking in scope and compass and altogether human complication." Here I think Pearce has given up too soon. For each of the poems he examines he is able to locate a specific historical source—an accomplishment which is not always possible in Stevens' work (as it so often is in Pound's). Yet if Pearce were willing to expand his own sense of a poem's "occasion," the implications of his argument would become even richer. "Sunday Morning" may be one of the most well-wrought of Stevens' urns, a poem inextricably bound up with Keats and Pater and (ultimately) itself. Yet if we recall that the poem was written during the first World War and that Stevens was fascinated with groups of drilling soldiers during that war, then his apotheosis of "the fellowship of men that perish" and his ethereal meditations on death take on a more urgent historical resonance. While we may be able to locate a specific "occasion" for "Sunday Morning," I do not think we would be rash to think of it as a war poem, especially when we see its attitudes and anxieties mirrored in the volumes of more obvious war poetry that share its historical moment.

The task for the next decade of Stevens criticism is the historicizing of the poetry; for Stevens to retain his relevance to our time, we must understand the place of his work in his. That Stevens was for so many years read as a poet who lived outside history (when

in fact his daily life acquainted him with the intricacies of politics and economics as Pound's or Eliot's did not) only testifies to the difficulty and the necessity of this effort. As this rereading takes place Roy Harvey Pearce's work will serve as part of its foundation, not only reminding us of the limitations of formalism but of the dangers of a naive historicism as well.

James Longenbach
University of Rochester

Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens.

By Eleanor Cook. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

We have so long thought of Wallace Stevens as a strong poet; perhaps it is time we begin thinking of him as a weak poet. Not weak in any pejorative sense of the word, but "weak" in the way Michel de Certeau uses the term in his analyses of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where he distinguishes between "strategies" and "tactics." Strategies, for de Certeau, are actions—both physical and mental—that structure the world into stable arrangements, establishing for each element of the world its proper place and significance. They "elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed." Political, economic, and scientific rationality are strategies; so are syntax and "'proper sense,'" theme and dialectic (in the sense of rational argument), or the traditional metaphors and topoi of Christianity. Tactics are also actions, but they operate within and against the "theoretical places" set up by strategies, taking advantage of what presents itself in these places and opportunistically manipulating these in destabilizing ways. Tactics "vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse." On the one hand, the strong exercise their power through dialectic strategies; on the other hand, "the weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them." If dialectics belongs to the realm of strategies, rhetoric belongs to the realm of tactical practices, for it "describes the 'turns' or tropes of which language can be both the site and the object, and . . . these manipulations are related to the ways of changing (seducing, persuading, making use of) the will of another (the audience)." Thus de Certeau gives to the Sophists "a privileged place, from the point of view of tactics," since "their theories inscribe tactics in a long tradition of reflection on the relationship between reason and particular actions and situations."

Most of our work on Stevens, as for just about any other canonized literary figure, has focused on his strategies and has sought to articulate the theoretical places of his themes, arguments, and topoi. Eleanor Cook, however, has written a book of tactics, and given her title, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, de Certeau's military language does not seem misplaced. For Cook envisions Stevens' poetry as the site of a running battle (or play) of "rhetoric and dialectic against each other," a "mental war" in which the generalized strategies or "larger structures (of belief, ideas, conventions)" are engaged or deflected or rewritten by the local tactics, the tricks and turns, of Stevens' rhetoric (a "system of figuration, for example, of tropes and schemes"). Her focus is thus on the particulars of Stevens' poetic practices and not on the abstract theories that turn those particulars into transparent examples of some "big picture." For her, Stevens' "word-play" is neither trivial ornament nor thematic servant: as she puts it, "Word-play may indeed embody or inform or illustrate an argument, but argument or

theme or dialectic is only one form of the meaning." Rather, her "sense of Stevens' word-play is that it says what cannot be said in other ways. It is not necessarily subordinate or superior to theme or plot or argument. It may be either, or neither." We might say that word-play is serious business, except, as Cook points out, it causes us to rethink all strategic separations, all theoretical maps, including the one that divides the serious from the trivial. Mobile and nomadic, word-play "is better troped as a frontier-crosser or a boundary-breaker than as a territory or a state. Word-play crosses borders unexpectedly or finds unexpected borders, and this break with expectations is always worth watching." For Cook, Stevens' poetry is the work of a consummate tactician.

She finds Stevens engaging in a dazzling variety of local tactics in the war of rhetoric and dialectic, and in this Cook is a particularly fine listener to the subtleties of Stevensian word-play: finer even, I think, than Helen Vendler, the critic from whom she seems to have learned the most (Cook writes, "Vendler's recent remark about Stevens' art of deflecting words from their denotative meaning . . . points toward the area that interests me"). What Cook hears has often gone unheard in previous, more thematically-oriented readings of Stevens. By relentlessly pursuing Stevens' rhetorical particulars and by forcing us to focus on the minutiae of Stevens' practice rather than on the larger theoretical or philosophical structures, Cook has made a useful contribution to Stevens studies, finding in the poetry a range of verbal cleverness and allusive complexity we knew was there, but had never so completely worked out. Cook reads with *extreme* care a majority of poems from the canon and often stops to linger over poems not normally considered to be worthy of such extended analysis. And this is what I find most helpful in her way of operating: her refusal to be content with what may seem the most obvious argument in a line and her willingness to follow up on the seemingly small questions—of etymology, syntax, allusion, cadence, and so forth—easily overlooked by a critical rush to dialectic clarity. Cook's ear has been tuned by classical rhetoric and scholarship: she hears, for example, Virgil in "Sunday Morning," a comparison which, she admits, "may sound strange in these days of parched classical scholarship." This tuning, she suggests (and I would agree), allows us to hear more of Stevens' word-play than we have previously been able to.

Working her way chronologically through the canon from the earliest *Harmonium* poems to the late poems of "last things," Cook traces the shifting skirmishes between rhetoric and dialectic, trope and argument, verbal particulars and ideal generalities. Her work on *Harmonium* focuses on Stevens' development of a rhetoric of beginning and ending a volume of poetry; his consideration and abandonment of a poetry of eros; and his own confrontation with the limits of word-play in "The Comedian as the Letter C," which Cook finds to be a poem of "unhappy tropes," a deconstructionist nightmare in which Stevens "not only scrambles the code . . . but also throws out the decoder," producing "highly disconcerting effects." I find the second part of the book, on *Ideas of Order*, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, and *Parts of a World*, to be particularly helpful. Here Cook emphasizes what could be the major tension in Stevens' poetry: "Stevens is entirely aware of the seductiveness of sliding from parts to whole . . . [and is] wary of themes that commonly give a sense of unity or wholeness, whether war and nation, whether old ideas of light and space, whether home or heaven or the quarter for either . . . He is equally wary of rhetorical patterns that commonly give a sense of unity or wholeness: synecdoche, metaphor, symbol, closure." Hence Cook's stress on surfaces, particulars, and rhetorical tactics. The third part of the book, taking up questions of metaphor and belief in *Transport to Summer*, gives an enlightening reading of "Esthétique du Mal" and shows how Stevens undoes the evil/good opposition by rewriting it into an evil/normal (or everyday) opposition. It also examines how "Notes toward a

Supreme Fiction" "points toward ways of rewriting" our "sacred scriptures." The book closes with chapters on "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (Cook ties it, as do other Stevens critics, to a play with a "definition of reality as energy") and various late poems of common places, in which Stevens achieves a way of looking "through and at language at the same time."

The precision of Cook's analyses and her unswerving attention to fine detail constitute both the book's strength and its weakness, for in spite (or, perhaps, because) of the fact that it flashes with many insights into the local particulars of Stevens' word-play, it is not an easy book to read for very long. Cook accepts the risk of her critical procedure: "One [risk of studies in word-play] is the risk of lapsing into miscellany, unless they are centered on some larger structure or decorum. Yet centering word-play on a larger structure can also be a risk." Cook's own work thus repeats the tension she finds in Stevens' poetry, but it does not reach the kind of balance Stevens himself achieves. Although Cook divides Stevens' work into three principle subjects—the poetry of place, the poetry of eros, and the poetry of belief—we often find ourselves awash in a sea of bright rhetorical particulars. Perhaps this overbalancing is as it should be, for it is Stevens' play with larger structures of cognitive and dialectic order that Cook emphasizes. The book, I think, succumbs to the risk of miscellany, but Cook has not really left herself any other option.

There is one large structural order, however, that Cook accepts whole-heartedly: the Stevens-against-Eliot map of modern poetry already laid out by Pearce and others. In her preface, Cook picks up the Bloomian thread of her project: "Some of the echoes in Stevens' work confirm Bloom's sense of Stevens as heir to a Whitman-Emerson tradition . . . Stevens' echoes offer a powerful, intricate rewriting of the English Bible, as mediated through a Milton-Wordsworth line or a Milton-Keats-Whitman line. They work against mediation through a Dante-Eliot line, and they conduct an on-going battle with Eliot." Cook is very good at hearing Eliot in Stevens and at tracing the intricate evasions and criticisms of the Eliotic line (or what she takes to be that line) in Stevens' poems. But to set Stevens against Eliot as though Stevens were the resisting hero of local tactics and Eliot the purveyor of strategic traps is to reproduce the conventional caricature of Eliot currently being revised by such critics as Harriet Davidson, William Spanos, and Richard Shusterman, among others. Stevens may have drawn such overly-simplified battle lines, but we should be as wary of Stevens' generalizations as Cook shows Stevens to be of Eliot's. Eliot-as-sitting-duck may be the critical topos, the strategic "fiction of an absolute," that remains to be undone.

Michael Beehler
Montana State University

News and Comments

Two new editions of Wallace Stevens' works, both edited by Milton J. Bates, will be out this spring. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. will publish a newly revised and expanded edition of Stevens' *Opus Posthumous*. The volume will contain the complete "Adagia" and many selections not included in the first edition. Stanford University Press, in association with The Huntington Library, will publish *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Subjects: Wallace Stevens Commonplace Book*.

The American poet Stanley Kunitz, winner of the 1987 Bollingen Award, read from his works on March 23, 1988, at the 25th annual Wallace Stevens Poetry Program on the campus of the University of Connecticut at Storrs. Steven Peyster was the first-prize winner in the poetry competition. This annual event is sponsored by the Hartford Insurance Group and the English Department of the University.

Three poems by Stevens were selected for a pilot production by Kinesis featuring "poetry interwoven with music, choreographed movement, sculpture and light" on March 2, 1988, in Washington, D. C. Later programs, expanded to include nine poems, were entitled *Radishes and Flowers* and were scheduled to be performed at ten colleges and universities in the Washington area. The speaker and choreographer was Mary-Averett Seelye and the producer Leslie Weinberger. The whole project was supported by the D. C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities; the first production was co-sponsored by the World Bank Community Relations Office. The poems interpreted were: "The Place of the Solitaires," "Bantams in Pine-Woods," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "A Fish-Scale Sunrise," "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges," "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch," "The Hand as a Being," and "The Idea of Order at Key West."

Admirers of Stevens' handsome books printed by the Cummington Press could pursue two versions of *Three Academic Pieces*: a fine copy from the small-roman ninety-two on Beauvais Arches paper, at \$950 from the William and Victoria Dailey Catalogue 50 (Summer, 1988), 182; or a fine copy, signed, from the large-roman fifty-two on the same paper, at \$2,750 from Black Sun Books List G88 (Summer, 1988), 37. Interested purchasers could also request, from J. Howard Woolmer Catalogue 77 (March, 1988), 174, a "just about fine" copy of another Cummington Press book, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, one of eighty signed copies, at \$2,250. Less fastidious collectors could go after, in the same catalogue (item 171), a "very good" copy of *Harmonium* (New York, 1923), first binding, for \$500. Collectors with no more than \$100 to spend will find Stevens' first editions to be receding galaxies.

Stevens scholars who have worked at the Huntington since last year's report include Charles Altieri (University of Washington), journal article; Lisa Banner (Montgomery Gallery, San Francisco), Stevens' correspondence with Paule Vidal; Daniel Brint (Cambridge University), doctoral dissertation; Margaret Dickie (University of Illinois, Urbana), journal article; Theodora R. Graham (Pennsylvania State University, Middletown), relationships of Elsie Stevens and Dorothy Pound to their husbands' writing; Linda Gutierrez (unaffiliated), documentary film; Carter Jones (Brown University), doctoral dissertation; James Longenbach (University of Rochester), Stevens and politics; Joan Richardson (CUNY, La Guardia College), second volume of a biography; David L. Thomas (University of California, Riverside), doctoral dissertation; Joan White (Citrus College, retired), journal article on Stevens and Borges.

Daniel Woodward, Librarian
The Huntington

Wallace Stevens—From Princeton

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