

“Domination of Black” (*CP*, p. 8)

The colors cast in the room at night by the fireplace are like the colors of the bushes and the fallen leaves, and turn through the room as the latter turn in the wind. But the dark color of the hemlocks is also in the room; this and the memory of the peacocks' cry add an ominous note.

The colors of the peacocks' tails resemble the autumn leaves at twilight. These same colors, of the leaves, the tails, sweep through the room as they are cast by the fire, in a way resembling the leaves being swept from the trees. It is hard to tell whether the peacocks cry against impending darkness (“twilight”) or against one of the other elements of the scene, because one thing in it is so much like another, each so much part of everything else. The cry of the peacocks seems rather to mark, and to be itself part of, the whole process of annihilation exemplified by the fire, autumn, impending darkness.

Finally the stars in the night sky, the cosmos itself, is drawn into this vortex of similitudes. The stars too seem part of this process of annihilation, and the speaker, feeling afraid, remembers the cry which marks it.

“Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (*CP*, p. 13)

Stevens writes of the speaker of “Le Monocle” that, “I had in mind simply a man fairly well along in life, looking back and talking in a more or less personal way about life” (*LWS*, p. 251). Like “The Comedian as the Letter C,” this poem proceeds from speculation to speculation on the topic at hand, here love at middle age, but the didactic content, rather than being couched in narrative, occurs in the meditative mode that came to be dominant in Stevens' longer poems. The title of the poem may be interpreted as “my uncle's point of view,” the attitude toward love of a worldly-wise man of middle age. (Stevens comments that the title means “merely a certain point of view”—*LWS*, p. 250.) It is

in French perhaps because of that country's reputation for erotic enlightenment, but also, certainly, for the sake of the phrase's comic-elegant sound.

The poem is arranged in twelve eleven-line stanzas of iambic pentameter which accommodates variation freely, especially in the substitution of an anapest. The most notable thing about the verse is its extravagance of alliteration which is sometimes used structurally, like rhyme. End rhyme is itself not used regularly but as a convenience of structure. It is used in two ways: to form couplets, and to unify a stanza by means of sound echoes. The second is the more frequent. The most usual unit of organization within the stanza is the pair of iambic lines, though in some cases, as in the last six lines of section I, they are not merely pairs but rhymed couplets. The pair of iambic lines is the unit of organization in that the syntax is most frequently arranged in successive pairs of lines. In addition there is an attempt to bind pairs of lines together even, occasionally, when the syntax runs over, sometimes with rhyme but usually without. The main devices used to this end are multiple alliteration and balance of units within the pair of lines, as in lines four and five of section IX:

Their curious fates in war, come, celebrate
The faith of forty, ward of Cupido.

Sometimes alliteration is used to connect the terminal feet of a pair of lines as in,

And you? Remember how the crickets came
Out of their mother grass, like little kin, (V, ll. 8-9)

where the lines are held together by the consonance of “came” and “kin.” Repetition is used much like alliteration:

It stands gigantic, with a certain tip
To which all birds come sometime in their time.
But when they go that tip still tips the tree. (X, ll. 9-11)

The intense organization of this verse, like that of the heroic couplet, with its consequent capacity for succinct comment, helps to create the tone of fastidious didacticism (for example, "This trivial trope reveals a way of truth," VIII, l. 4) that is characteristic of the poem. The verse is capable of accommodating epigrammatic generalization at convenience:

The honey of heaven may or may not come,
But that of earth both comes and goes at once.
(VII, ll. 8-9)

The measure of the intensity of love
Is measure, also, of the verve of earth. (V, ll. 4-5)

In this, as well as in its organization, and sometimes even in the movement of a single line, the verse is comparable to the heroic couplet. (Compare, for example, the movement of VIII, l. 3, "It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies," with "The Vanity of Human Wishes," l. 76: "They mount, they shine, evaporate, and fall.")¹ The verse, then, gives the poem the formal appearance of close, logical reasoning appropriate to its didactic content. But in fact this formal appearance is illusory, for the style only reflects a self-consciousness in the poem's didacticism, and is a way of minimizing the didactic content. That is one reason why the meanings of the poem's lines are so elusive: figures whose sense is almost impermeable to the intelligence are expressed in forms that the intelligence is accustomed readily to grasp. For example, in VII a parable is explained by another parable, and in II, ll. 6-8, a difficult metaphor is offered as a gloss of the preceding lines. What is given is never the line of reasoning itself, but the more or less metaphorical illustrations of the line of reasoning, frequently in the form of obscure illustrative parables. The apparently reasoned, didactic tone of the poem is, rather, mock didactic, and its speaker, described as lecturer, scholar, rabbi, is deliberately pedantic.

The first two lines of section I consist of ironic rhetoric directed to the woman whom the speaker addresses, in the

tone of "Who do you think you are?" As the fifth line says, the speaker, presumably the uncle of the title, is mocking her. This woman may or may not be his wife, but there is no reason to believe she is the fictive muse, as Kermode suggests.² The sense of the action makes her out to be a real woman who is growing old. Lines three and four indicate that some clash of words has taken place. They may be paraphrased, "There is nothing so painful as an exchange of cutting phrases." Whatever the nature of the argument, one may fairly presume that the speaker's reaction to it triggers the series of reflections on love of which the poem consists. The speaker continues that he wishes he might be without feeling ("a thinking stone"), for he remembers her as she once was (ll. 8-9), and the contrast with what she is now is enough to move him to tears (ll. 10-11). That is why he considers that in mocking her, he mocks himself (l. 6): in taunting her with a magnificence she no longer has he is exacerbating his own painful feelings on the subject.

In II the speaker represents himself as being at an age where each spring is seen marking not a year given, but a year taken away; as the "man of fortune greeting heirs," he is one who greets the passage of time as that which will eventually take away all he has. The first four lines of this section present an image of the coming of spring, abstract and evocative. The colors here create a quality of richness and vividness, as the blue and the white pigeons and the dark and the rose rabbis of the last section merely evoke distinctions in qualities between different states of mind. The evocation of the coming of spring is accomplished by abstracting a few of its qualities and recomposing them in a poetic image that suggests its reality. A vivid bird flies across a rich terrain, seeking his place among the bird choirs that greet the spring. When he finds it he will join the songs of welcome to spring which for the speaker seem to be, on the contrary, songs of farewell. There can be no spring, no bloom of life, for one who has arrived at the middle of his years ("meridian"). The woman he addresses will not accept the fact of aging, but rather persists with a baseless, a fabulous happiness ("anecdotal bliss")

in pretending that she has special knowledge, perhaps of the kind derived from 'star-gazing' ("starry *connaissance*"). Rather than accept the fact that in middle years one passes irretrievably beyond the bloom of life, she pretends to know better.

In the third section three images of artifice in hairdress are given. "Tittivating" means making small alterations in one's toilet to increase one's attractiveness. The speaker says that he will not draw out the history of the subject—how in the past women wore ingenious coiffures. Hair is here a synecdoche for physical beauty, not merely for woman's beauty. The barbers are not those who have cared for the present woman's hair, but include all those "studious ghosts" who invented beautiful coiffures in the past, among whom are the tittivating Chinese men. The sense of the second rhetorical question is that the result of such ingenuity in toilet, however elaborate, is transitory: "not one curl in nature has survived." Stevens writes of the last two lines that "the speaker was speaking to a woman whose hair was still down" (LWS, p. 251). The lack of coiffure ("dripping in your hair") of the woman he addresses mocks these examples of ingenuity passed away ("studious ghosts") because, though without artfulness, she is nevertheless present and alive.

The first two lines of IV state that the fruit of life, of its own nature, ripens and falls. When she to whom he speaks was without experience, it was sweet; but that was because she had not yet tasted its spicy fruit. An apple serves as well as a skull for a book in which to read a moral: they both, upon meditation, may yield the lesson that all living things must fall and die. But as the fruit of love (in the story of Adam and Eve), the apple is even better than a skull in which to read a moral because one can also read in it a lesson about love: one cannot understand love until after the heat of passion or of youth has passed and one can reflect on it merely "to pass the time."⁸

The intensity of love is an index of youth and verve (section V), which for the speaker no longer exists. He, on the contrary, is conscious of the ebbing of his life. Why will the

woman to whom he speaks not, on her part, admit this fact? He reminds her how she had recognized her kinship with that which is ephemeral and will return to dust. "When your first imagery/ Found inklings" may be paraphrased simply as, "when you first imagined."

From the perspective of middle age the nuances of love become indistinct and its sameness becomes apparent (VI). If men at forty persist in sentimental occupations—the rather remote metaphor referring to the poem's amatory theme is "painting lakes"—they will not see the peculiarities of the individual amour, "each quirky turn," but that which all love has in common, the "substance that prevails." They will view love as "introspective exiles," that is, as those who are no longer under the sway of love's sovereignty, as it were, and must look into memory to analyze their experience of it. The more romantic aspect of love is a theme for youth, "for Hyacinth alone."

In VII an image of possible heavenly dispensation is contrasted with an image of undeniable, earthy reality. The heavenly may never get here, while the earthy is here and now. The sense of the parable is that heavenly good ("honey") may come, but earthy good comes as certainly as it goes; its coming is contingent on its going. Line nine may also be a sexual pun in description of copulation: this is the good of earthly love, while that of heavenly love may never be realized. The good of heaven would not be thus uncertain if an indication of divinity were to arrive on earth, but none does (compare LWS, p. 464). What, in fact, would be the good for us of a lady "heightened by eternal bloom?" Though she might be eternal, our good would come and go all the same. This section signifies acceptance of whatever pleasure love still may offer in the here and now.

In section VIII the speaker's point of view is like that of one of the "introspective exiles" he described in VI, who no longer attends to the nuances of love. As "a dull scholar" he lectures on what all love has in common. Love here is figured as a predetermined cycle, the stages of which each, in his turn, must pass through, "an ancient aspect touching a new

mind." Love at middle age is described as the fruition of a process (the bloom of youth is gone, the fruit of experience and maturity remains); the decay from middle age to death is put, in terms of that process, as an appropriate health and, finally, the comparison of the middle aged lovers to squashes gives the distance of humor. Their end is seen as the joke of nature on man:

The laughing sky will see the two of us
Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

Section IX celebrates "the faith of forty," an attitude appropriate to love at middle age which can incorporate the kind of conflict that is represented by the initial clashing of words of the poem's opening lines (section I). The verses celebrating "the faith of forty" will include such "clashes"; they will also be smart and accurate, realistic like soldiers fighting. The celebration requires music that is as magnificent or, perhaps, as courtly as that of the paladins. The song must be lusty (ll. 6-8), and hence will call for a good deal of daring ("bravura"). The "oblation" would be more like a toast.

With an appellation reminiscent of "the bawds of euphony" of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, the speaker (section X) rejects the sentimentality of the "fops of fancy" who leave poetic records of their erotic fantasies (l. 2), and whose romanticism is figured in such phrases as "mystic spouts," "magic trees," and "balmy boughs." Line three means that such fantasies nourish the fops' grubby lives in reality. A figure is then presented which attempts to salvage love from such a sentimental point of view while accommodating it to the realistic point of view. Love is not mere sentimentalism like the "magic trees"; it is rather another kind of tree:

It stands gigantic, with a certain tip
To which all birds come sometime in their time.
But when they go that tip still tips the tree.

That is, love has an immutable reality (the "tip" of the tree) to which all come in their turn, but which is beyond its mutability in given lovers; it is, as in VIII, "an ancient aspect" that endures beyond each new lover's experience of it; it is, as in VI, innately part of our substance that prevails. It is possible that the "certain tip" is specifically phallic, depending on the nature of "the thing I have in mind" which it is like. As the plum in "The Comedian as the Letter C" outlives its poems and "survives in its own form," so does love outlive its lovers. The idea is the same as that in the last section of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (*CP*, p. 89), where beauty in the flesh, as opposed to its perception in the mind, is attributed immortality through a series of metaphors about things that pass away only to be repeated in the same form.

In section X a psychosexual reality is attributed to love: it is part of our nature to which all come "sometime in their time." In XI a final qualification is made. If love is not merely sentimental, neither is it merely sexual. We play the routines of romantic love, its "doleful heroics," and so on, without regard to sex, the "first, foremost law"; any such note of coarse realism as that of the frog is anguishing and odious to us as lovers beside the romantic pool. We believe in love because it is in our nature, our prevailing substance, to believe in it, whether or not such belief is supported by the physical processes of reality. For Stevens, belief comes about through psychological necessity, and it is the function of the imagination to mediate between that necessity and what he calls the "absolute fact" of reality. Speaking of the glory of the gods of classical mythology, for example, he writes: "Their fundamental glory is the fundamental glory of men and women, who being in need of it create it, elevate it, without too much searching of its identity" (*OP*, p. 208). So the poem has created an imaginative relation—in Stevens' term, a "fiction"—between the fact of aging and the psychological necessity of affirming love, that reconciles the two or, again in Stevens' terms, brings us into "an agreement with reality" (*NA*, p. 54). For this reason the final section, by way of resolution,

merely notes the imaginative relation that has been created in the body of the poem.

The final section begins with the kind of parabolic utterance that has often served in place of direct formulation throughout the poem. The blue and the white pigeons are abstract qualities representing different states of mind. The dark and the rose rabbits are also such abstract qualities, but the moods they represent are more specific. The former is analytic and reductive, and is that of youth.⁴

. . . Every day, I found
Man proved a gobbet in my mincing world.

This is contrasted with the attitude developed in the poem, which is the attitude of middle age—the attitude of “Mon Oncle” of the title, “my uncle’s point of view.” It represents a willingness merely to note the psychological facts of love, as the poem does, without reducing them through an analysis of their transitory nature. “Fluttering things” refers to the blue and the white pigeons which, as different aspects of love, represent the attitudes toward love distinguished in the poem: that of youth, which is participating, active, and that of middle age, which is more reflective. Lines eight to eleven are a notation of the attitude of the poem—that love appears to be different from these different perspectives.

“The Comedian as the Letter C” (CP, p. 27)

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” represents an extreme at which didactic content is unusually limited; “The Comedian as the Letter C,” on the contrary, is an argument couched in narrative. It is a poem that proceeds by logical discourse, from proposition to proposition modified to proposition further modified. It sets forth doctrine just as does the *Essay on Man*, though in form it is not expository, but narrative and comic: “not doctrinal/ In form though in design”

(VI, l. 73). In kind the narrative is, like *The Prelude*,⁵ literary biography, the history of a poet’s mind—though the mind of the poet in question is that of the fictive Crispin, Stevens’ invention and mask—and the action of the narrative is a voyage and quest for knowledge which deals, like Wordsworth’s poem, with the loss of the imagination and the conditions in which it may be revitalized.

The subject of the poem includes the relation of a poet to his art but is not fundamentally that. Crispin’s aim is not merely to achieve accurate description of reality in poetry, but, rather, through accurate description of reality to establish satisfactory rapport with it. That is the point of the colony Crispin projects after arriving at his “new intelligence” (IV, l. 15), in which the inhabitants are to be the harmonious articulations of their environment. Hence the crucial propositions of the poem (variations on the initial “man is the intelligence of his soil”) turn on man’s relation to his environment, not on that of the poet to his art. The narrative, although its hero is appropriately a poet, is basically concerned with the poet as a type of imaginative man, and thus the subject is not quite, as Hi Simons puts it, the relation of the poet to his environment.⁶ The denouement may be a defeat of the poet but it represents a reconciliation of the imagination to the quotidian and, therefore, the poem has a happy ending: “what can all this matter since/ The relation comes, benignly, to its end?” (VI, ll. 95–96).

“The Comedian as the Letter C” is conceived as thoroughly comic. Crispin is the comedian, the comic personage of the action. As the letter c, “merest minuscule” (that is, lower case letter), as he is described in the poem, he is both an abstraction representing the comic point of view and an example of comic destiny: (Stevens has also made a point on three different occasions of the c sounds recurring throughout the poem, apparently as a kind of comic emblem for Crispin—see *LWS*, pp. 294, 351–52, 778). He is a valet from Bourdeaux whose name derives from the comic valet of seventeenth-century French drama, and he is associated with a long and various tradition of the figure of the harlequin.⁷ As