10 CRITICS DISCUSS

"Sunday Morning" (1915)

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

I

"His fundamental ideas are stated in 'Sunday Morning,' an early poem, and in some ways his greatest. The poem consists of eight stanzas in blank verse, each containing fifteen lines, and it presents a clear and fairly coherent argument. The first stanza sets the stage and identifies the protagonist. We are given a woman, at home on a Sunday morning, meditating on the meaning of death.

II

The second stanza asks the question which provides the subject of the poem; it asks what divinity this woman may be thought to possess as a recompense for her ultimate surrender to death; and having asked the question, it replies that her divinity, which must live within herself, consists wholly in her emotions—not in her understanding of the emotions, but in the emotions as good in themselves. This answer is not quite the orthodox romantic answer, which would offer us in the emotions either a true guide to virtue or a more or less mystical experience leading to some kind of union with some kind of deity. Any philosophy which offers the cultivation of the emotions as an end in itself, I suppose, is a kind of hedonism….

III

The third stanza, by means of the allegory of Jove and his human loves, through his union with whom he crossed the heavenly strain upon the human, implies that man has a capacity which may at least figuratively be termed divine; the stanza is a subordinate commentary on the one preceding, and does not really advance the argument.

IV

In the fourth stanza, however, the argument moves forward. The protagonist objects to the concept which has been offered her; she states that the beauties of this life are transient and that she longs to believe in a Paradise beyond them. The remainder of the stanza, and the greater part of it, is the poet's reply: in a passage of great rhetorical power, he denies the possibility of Paradise, at the same time that he communicates through the feeling of his language a deep nostalgic longing to accept the ideas which he is rejecting.

V

In the first two lines of the fifth stanza, the woman repeats her objection, and the poet then replies with an explanation of the function of death: it is our awareness of the imminence of death which heightens our emotions and sharpens our perceptions; our knowledge of life's transience stimulates our perception of life's beauty.

VI

In the sixth stanza the poet considers an hypothetical paradise, and, since he can imagine it only in terms of a projection of the good life as the hedonist understands the good life, he deduces that paradise would become tedious and insipid: we have in this stanza the first sharp vision of the ennui which is to obsess the later work of the poet and which is ultimately to wreck his talent, an ennui arising from the fact that emotion is not a good in itself, but that if cultivated for itself alone is merely a pleasant diversion so long as the novelty of a given experience endures, at most as long as new experiences can give us the illusion of novel excitement, and then becomes a disease of the spirit, a state of indifferency in which there is neither novelty nor significance.

VII

The seventh stanza presents a vision of a future race of men engaged in a religious ritual, the generating principle of which is their joy in the world as it is given them and their sense of brotherhood as 'men that perish.' The stanza contains suggestions of a pantheism which goes beyond the bounds of a strict hedonism, but they are merely suggestions and they appear nowhere else.

VIII

The eighth and last stanza begins by denying the immortality of Jesus, and, by implication, of men; and it places the protagonist finally and irretrievably on a small but beautiful planet, floating like a tropical island in boundless space, 'in an old chaos of the sun.'

This summary, even as summaries go, is extremely skeletalized. It has been my intention, here, merely to isolate the hedonistic theme for future consideration; the theme is not thus isolated in the poem, but is complicated by its interconnections with other human problems from which not even a hedonist can escape. Whatever the defects of the hedonistic theme, and with the possible but by no means certain exception of a few short poems by Stevens and of two or three poems by E. A. Robinson, 'Sunday Morning' is probably the greatest American poem of the twentieth century and is certainly one of the greatest contemplative poems in English: in a blank verse which differs, in its firmness of structure and incalculable sensitivity of detail, from all other blank verse of our time save that of a few poems by Hart Crane which were in some measure modeled upon it, it renders the acute uncertainty of what we are inclined to consider the modern mind, but it does so with no uncertainty of method or of statement; it renders an acute consciousness of the imminence of death, of the sensory and emotional richness of life on this bewildering planet, and of the heroic magnificence of the religious myths which are lost to the poet and to many of the rest of us, except as memories of things long past.

If Stevens' career had stopped with this poem, or a few years thereafter, it might seem an unnecessary unkindness to insist upon the limitations of understanding which the poem discloses; but those limitations appear very obviously in a few later poems, and they seem to me to be very clearly related to the rapid and tragic decay of the poet's style. As a poet in early maturity, Stevens brought to this subject a style which was the result of a fine native gift enriched by the study of English blank verse; the subject, once formulated, and accepted as a guide to life and to expression, destroyed the style in less than two decades. In 'Sunday Morning' itself, we detect the limitations of the subject only by rational analysis; in the later work we see the effect of those limitations."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 431-34

"In eight 15-line stanzas of blank verse is presented, in the manner of a dialogue, a consideration of the end of life in two senses: its purpose and its conclusion. The issues are raised by an elegant emancipated modern woman on her tropical patio rather than in church as she meditates upon secular and religious conceptions of reality, death, and the pleasures and beauties of this world as against those of heaven."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"Sunday Morning" states the problem of order in dramatic terms. The woman to whose mind the reflections occur is both charmed by her circumstance and fearful that it will not continue. The fact of death qualifies her every pleasure…. She protests: why should she have to give up the things that please her? Of what value is death if it be seen 'Only in silent shadows and in dreams?' To these complaints the answer is that 'Divinity must live within herself.' If there is to be any significance, order, beauty, it must be found in the facts of her own experience.

There is no reality beyond the grave, nothing that will permit her 'remembrance of awakened birds' to endure. Death is not only the end of life; it is 'the mother of beauty.' Through the fact, the inevitability, of death, things while they live acquire a quality, a beauty they would not otherwise have. Mortality, in setting limits to life, also forces or encourages a mode of intense evaluation of experience…. The most extreme statement is made in stanza 8, a final word concerning religion and death: Palestine is not the beginning but the end of life, not 'the porch of spirits lingering' but 'the grave of Jesus where he lay.' In this 'old chaos of the sun' in which we live, we realize the beauty and pathos of impermanence….

This poem is a beginning for Stevens, not a conclusion. To say that 'Death is the mother of beauty' is to leave major questions of beauty and order unanswered. Stevens' poems are in one sense a history of his attempts to answer these questions."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 212-13

"The details of the first, sixth, and seventh stanzas exemplify Stevens' fondness for brilliantly colored backgrounds, particularly evident in his early poems. 'Sunday Morning,' as James V. Cunningham has described it, 'has as its subject a deep emotional attachment to traditional Christianity and a rejection of Christianity in favor of the clear and felt apprehension of sensory detail in life, together with an attempt to preserve in the new setting the emotional aspects of the old values.' The poem shows a woman musing while at a late Sunday morning breakfast. It tells what she sees, feels, and thinks, and also sets forth comments of the poet upon her experience. The wish of the poet, typically, is, as Cunningham puts it, 'to be at peace with his surroundings, with this world, and with himself. He requires for this an experience of the togetherness of himself and nature, an interpretation of himself and his environment, along with some intuition of permanence in the experience of absoluteness."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 973

"'Sunday Morning' is Stevens' best-known poem, and has been called one of the most important American poems of the century. It consists of eight stanzas of exactly fifteen lines each. In Stanza I we are introduced to the protagonist, a lady arising on a Sunday morning and taking her breakfast on a terrace. The sunlight intensifies the pungency of the orange she is eating and the bright green wings of her cockatoo. These images do not seem quite real to the lady, however, since she is meditating on the meaning of death. Stanza II introduces the theme of the poem: what divinity does the lady possess, and what is the meaning of this divinity in the light of the obvious reality of death? The poet answers provisionally that delights of the senses are more valuable than any ephemeral hope of life after death.

But in V the lady refuses to accept this hedonistic solution; the human desire for immortality is too strong even in the midst of sensual pleasure. But, the poet answers, death is necessary in order to set life into relief; our appreciation of life is heightened by the ever-present consciousness of death. In VII a new religion is predicated; the poet describes a ritual in praise of the generative principle of life. Men will find comfort and strength in their 'heavenly fellowship of men that perish.' In the final stanza the immortality of Jesus is rejected, and by implication the hope of human resurrection is also abandoned. Man is inescapably destined to live on the earth, a whirling ball in 'an old chaos of the sun.' Yet nature, life, and the generative principle are all about us; in the final lines the doctrine of hedonism and life-worship is reiterated."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 523

"The center of consciousness, the perceiving and informing imagination in 'Sunday Morning' is that of a woman intelligent and sensitive enough to be disturbed by her awareness of a 'holy hush of ancient sacrifice' in which she cannot participate. She tries to break through the limits of her bright warm world and achieve realization of the world of orthodox religion, 'Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.' She tries to conceive of a divinity which is not immediate and palpable, which is entirely of the spirit. Yet 'Divinity must live within herself'…'These are the measures destined for her soul.'

So she struggles to break through her hard and sweet reality, to conceive of a God, a paradise, an eternity, which might be abstracted from that reality. We are made to follow each of her thoughts and questionings as one flows into another. We are placed at the center of her predicament; yet we know it as she cannot. Like her, we are bound in time, in the reality which is of time; yet seeing her thus, we may know that we must live and believe only in the light of the sun-as-reality, a light which, above all, may make us aware of experience as concrete and immediate and of infinitely delicate gradation."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 385

"His most famous poem, 'Sunday Morning,' is a direct engagement of this spiritual enigma in terms of an unremitting paganism that is neither Whitman's 'barbaric yawp' nor his divine vision. 'Death is the mother of beauty…' The above is the pivotal stanza of an eloquent lyrical 'argument' against the consolations of Christianity. The poet, who provides a rhetorical voice for the inner conflicts of his indulgent lady, had previously established the center of reality—both physical and spiritual—within the single self, by abusing her lingering nostalgia for the 'holy hush of ancient sacrifice': 'Divinity must live within herself…' The poet dictates an either/or choice for his lady who would have an eternity of pleasures, and in choosing for her sensation necessarily rejects permanence. The primitive cry of resolution in the penultimate stanza cannot but recall Whitman's Adamic devotions to the sun. But the pagan 'chant' is ritualized and restrained, and the supplicants yearn for no heavenly diadems….

The poem's final stanza underscores this restraint. By inverting the Christian imagery which haunts the lady's divided conscience in stanza one, the poet adopts Christ as this symbol of mortality and Palestine as the holy land of man's temporal martyrdom. There is no redemption, and we live immediately in the 'chaos' of time where pleasure and pain are necessary complements: 'We live in an old chaos of the sun…' Isolation is the human condition and death man's lone sponsor. The poem's concluding metaphor, of natural life describing in 'Ambiguous undulations' a ritualistic circle around the center of darkness, dramatizes Stevens' basic figure of the relation of life and death: the tension produced by life's vital resistance to the insensible center toward which all mortal things are drawn."

Joseph N. Riddel
"Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens: Functions of a 'Literatus'"
The South Atlantic Quarterly LXI, No.4
(Autumn 1962) 506-20

"An early version of 'the imagination's new beginning' as it searches for a truth to replace the discarded truth of religion appears in 'Sunday Morning,' notably in two passages which have often been superficially read. In the first of these, the speaker of the poem imagines for the meditating woman an alternative to that 'divinity' of 'silent shadows' to which she has for the moment committed her thoughts: "Divinity must live within herself…' Stevens' adoption in this poem of the cadence and idiom of Tennysonian and late nineteenth-century verse, for all his mastery in the handling of it, has proved an invitation to misunderstanding. It is easy to be lulled by the music of the words, the imagery of misty fields, silken weaklings, and plucked lutes, the 'whence' and 'whether' and other instances of archaic-biblical diction, into reading the above-quoted passage as an invitation to escape from present reality into a poetic never-never land of refined sensations and beautiful emotions. But the satisfactions outlined are not escapist; they are positive and of the present moment, disciplinary 'measures' whose aim is to restore health to the mind, to bring it about that our blood shall not fail.

The woman is exhorted to practice a complete identification of the self with the natural landscape in its seasonal changes. She is to experience 'passions' not 'in rain' but 'of rain,' directly reflecting and in a sense consisting of the weather itself. Her 'moods' of winter will similarly be both occasioned and defined by watching the snow as it falls. Her curriculum emphasizes grief as much as joy, and it is to be pursued in solitude, 'within herself,' 'in loneliness.' Her 'elations' or liftings-up of the heart will have their sufficient cause in the upward surge of life in the spring trees. The wording of the last item in the series, 'gusty / Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights,' is especially significant. So closely here is emotion united with

landscape that it can be described only by an adjective properly belonging to the landscape itself. The result is metaphor: a perception of relationship which is a valid step toward piecing the world together.

The second passage follows Stevens' famous apothegm 'Death is the mother of beauty,' and constitutes a gloss upon it: 'Is there no change of death in paradise?'…. Stevens is expressing here not the cliché that the transient things of earth become more precious, hence more beautiful, as we feel them to be transient, but the profounder idea that all the beauty we as human beings can know is born of the process of change which is one with the process of death. Ripeness itself is beauty in death, the beauty of the fruit that has come to the end of its life upon the bough."

Marie Borroff, ed.
Introduction
Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays
(Twentieth Century Views: Prentice-Hall 1963) 9-10

"The strength of desire for belief sharpened the militancy of his skepticism. That is one of the reasons why 'Sunday Morning' is as great a poem as it is. There is passionate longing in it for what has been lost and must continue to be denied. The longing is not, of course, for the woman's Christian beliefs as such, but for something they represent to the speaker, some lost security perhaps. The poem is at once naturalistic in its ideas and religious in its feelings. The woman's dreams of 'Dominion of the blood and sepulchre' are denied by the argument of the poem, but the speaker who argues away the woman's faith shows himself capable of experiencing religious emotions.

The woman is essentially a device to make clear the separation between dreaming and thinking. Her presence in the poem gives the appearance of dramatic form to what in effect is an interior monologue, a debate within the speaker between aspects of himself. The rational mind wins the argument, but the man finds no exhilaration in his victory. Despite its denial of what it takes to be the supernatural and transcendental, 'Sunday Morning' is the product of a religious imagination."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 433

"[*Harmonium*] did contain one conventionally named poem in a conventional style—'Sunday Morning.' But this poem, soon to become very famous, was *unconventional* in theme; it was a bold declaration of the death of God. In the poem a sensuous aestheticism and agnosticism became substitutes for religious observance."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1528

Michael Hollister (2016)