



Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

Sunday Morning (1915)

I

Complacencies of the peignor, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon the rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

II

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,

Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

III

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.
He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

IV

She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"
There is not any haunt of prophesy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures; or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

V

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love

Whispered a little out of tenderness,
She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

VI

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
Why set the pear upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
The silken weavings of our afternoons,
And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

VII

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
That choir among themselves long afterward.
They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
Of men that perish and of summer morn.
And whence they came and wither they shall go
The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

VIII

She hears, upon that water without sound,
A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.
Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;

Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

ANALYSIS

I

On Sunday morning, rather than attending church, an affluent woman stays home luxuriating in the sun with late coffee and oranges. She is not even dressed, exposed as the poem exposes her psychologically. Like the cockatoo on the rug she is a free spirit, an exotic in her community. The cockatoo also connotes a preening indulgence and pride. At the same time the repetition of the modifier “green” emphasizes that her desire for freedom imaged in “green wings” is natural and conducive to growth. Birds are a common metaphor of the spirit, such as the parrot and the mockingbird in cages at the beginning of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899). Here the uncaged cockatoo evokes the unconventional attitude and subsequent awakening of this woman protagonist, initiating a bird motif in the poem.

Her sensory pleasures “mingle to dissipate / The holy hush of ancient sacrifice” as she avoids thinking. Instead she “dreams a little,” using her imagination, the only means of transcendence in the world of Stevens. Her complacent escapism is disturbed by “the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe”—the crucifixion of Christ. The feeling is creepy, like a calm on water darkening as it moves into light. The feeling of death spoils her pleasure. For now the oranges and the bird are reduced to things that will die. The feeling of a silent emptiness enlarges as it winds across “wide water.”

Until the feeling is like “the day”—subsuming time as well as space. The repetition of “wide water, without sound” enlarges the image into a metaphor of the infinite universe, empty of all meaning except beauty and death. She can no longer resist thinking of her religion, paradoxically facing reality by using her imagination. Palestine is “silent” to her, like death, and the stanza ends not with the thought of resurrection but at the *tomb* of Christ, an image to which she returns in the last stanza, with resignation rather than dread.

II

The poem becomes an inner dialogue when she asks herself why she should remain faithful to a dead religion. She has already lost her faith in immortality and the poem dramatizes her rejection of Christianity altogether. Since she is mortal, what does the alleged divinity of Christ matter? Why not cherish the sensory pleasures of life instead of clinging to a myth? The answer is without quotation marks, indicating that it comes from inside her: Divinity must live within herself.

This is Existentialism, the belief that the universe is meaningless and that we must create our own meaning in life. The poem does not present an argument, it consists of assertions made in response to her questions and is a dialogue between parts of her psyche—a psychological allegory. Stevens may have thought of the two contending parts as, in his terms throughout his poetry, the “mind of winter” and the “mind of summer”: the cold objective masculine side that sees “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” and the warm feminine side that desires and dreams—the insurance executive and the poet.

As a realist with a “mind of winter” Stevens rejected transcendentalism of any kind, yet his assertion that “divinity” must live within is pantheistic, but only in the limited sense of what he called a “supreme fiction.” His examples of divinity invest Nature with a spiritual value that redeems life from meaningless absurdity, offering a secular salvation based on his perception of Reality. Since his passionate periodic sentence exalts “All pleasures and all pains” Stevens cannot be reduced to a mere hedonist. He affirms more than the pursuit of pleasure, he embraces all of life. Within the limitations of his worldview he is holistic. Though he was an Atheist at the time he wrote this poem, he was also a poet who believed in

spirituality, “divinity” and the “soul.” Sensations, feelings, a life poignantly brief, “These are the measures destined for her soul.” And no more. Enter the old theme of seize the day.

III

Past measures of the human soul are western mythologies, beginning with the Greek and Roman. Pagan gods, represented by Jove transcendent in the Sky, reduced humans to a herd of animals, if not asses—“hinds.” The virgin birth of Christ referenced by the star mingled the human “with heaven,” bringing “requisite to desire”—the desire for godlike immortality. Now that modern man—or woman, as in this poem—no longer believes in immortality, the experience of divinity and the potential of human fulfillment may be lost. “Shall our blood fail?”

Or shall we accept that we must create divinity within ourselves and live accordingly. If we accept Reality, we will feel more comfortable resigned to an indifferent universe. Stevens here takes up a major theme of the Naturalistic fiction writers and turns a negative into a positive. We will no longer have to reconcile the prevalence of evil in the world, as the early Melville struggled to do, with faith in a benevolent almighty God. “The sky will be much friendlier than now,” because we will feel united with Nature rather than divided from the divine and ignored. Then we can appreciate Nature for its “glory” next to “enduring love.”

IV

Up to this point she has been talking silently to herself, the only character introduced into the poem. Now the quotation marks indicate that she speaks “aloud” for the first time, asking herself what happens to her inner divinity when she dies. The voice within refers to her in the third person, implying transcendence of her ego. To suppose that the narrative voice is coming from outside the woman is contrary to the realistic tenor and to the organic form of the poem. The relationship between the two voices in Stanza IV corresponds to the relationship in Jungian psychology between the conscious ego and the deeper Self, the transcendent center of the psyche—our archetypal connection to divine Nature. Whether he intended to do so or not, in this poem Stevens dramatizes the individuation process of inner dialogue between the ego and the Self, leading to reconciliation and the integrity of the psyche.

The poetry throughout this stanza is the most Shakespearean in American literature. The beauty of the language reinforces the authority of her inner voice, which declares that, though they are beautiful, all the religions of the world including Christianity, referenced by “heaven’s hill,” are transitory myths. All religions will eventually die. Nature alone endures, including human nature and our “holy” longing for divinity. Stevens’s rhetorical power and elegiac tone convey his own longing and feeling of pathos at being unable to accept Christianity—until the end of his life.

The stanza begins and ends with birds, sustaining the motif of freeing the spirit. Psychological development, or individuation, is symbolized by the changing types of birds. The uncaged cockatoo is replaced by “wakened birds” that “test the reality” they perceive with “sweet questionings.” Her new vision of Reality is imaged at the end of the stanza by “the consummation of the swallow’s wings.” The tip of a swallow’s wing is so fine it tapers into invisibility, implying that the end of all is in the material world, even though it may appear to extend beyond. This image is the center of the poem, between two phases of development perfectly balanced like the wings of a bird and equaling 8--the sign of infinity. The symmetrical structure, logical form and measured blank verse are aesthetic characteristic of Neoclassicism, whereas the lifestyle values affirmed in the poem are Romantic.

V

Still feeling “the need of some imperishable bliss,” she speaks only two lines in this stanza, after speaking four in the preceding one. And she does not speak again. Her naïve desire for immortality is displaced by the authoritative voice of Reality within: “Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires.” Paradoxically, it is death—“sure obliteration”—that fulfills life. Awareness of death makes us value and appreciate life more fully and intensely. Otherwise we would take too much for granted and would fail to be nourished by our

experiences, the abundant sweetness of life imaged here in a pile of plums and pears “disregarded,” while in contrast the maidens “taste / And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.”

Of course, it should be noted, death is *not* the mother of beauty. Children appreciate beauty before they understand the meaning of death. We see beauty in those we love because we love them not because they will die. And we think of great art, such as “Sunday Morning,” as immortal. We do not find it beautiful because we anticipate that it will be destroyed, but because of its inherent aesthetic qualities and our capacity to respond to them. Death is the mother of pathos.

VI

The vision of heaven in this stanza is conventional rather than original. Paradise is an idealized version of earthly life, where there would be no death. Stevens represents such a place as insipid and boring, much as Huckleberry Finn imagines the heaven of Miss Watson. His entire stanza assumes without evidence that an afterlife would be static: “Does ripe fruit never fall?”

Stevens based his secular disbelief on the mechanistic science of his day. According to him, our earthly mothers give us life, while our mystical mother death gives us the meaning of life—beauty and pleasure. By now, however, quite different popular conceptions of an afterlife are supported by scientific evidence presented on television every day, which suggests that the afterlife is not static but a state of fluid energy. Physicists exploring current “string theory” speculate that there may be over ten more dimensions beyond the limited reality we are able to perceive. The vision of Stevens, both Victorian in its concept of an afterlife and Postmodernist in its secular disbelief, has become another mythology of the past that can still be appreciated in the form of great art.

VII

The woman on a Sunday morning is displaced here by a “ring of men” on a summer morn, celebrating their faith in the sun “as a god might be”—as a “savage source” not a benevolent one. Barefoot, implicitly naked and explicitly “turbulent,” they fulfill the fantasy of the environmentalists today who want to stop civilization and regress to the Stone Age. The “heavenly fellowship” of primitives replaces Christianity with a pantheism that reunites humanity with all Nature, “returning to the sky.”

The stanza concludes with lines that are deeply moving as poetry but ridiculous as philosophy. We are transitory like the dew. Peace on earth can be achieved if people will just give up their religion and their clothes. This is Romantic primitivism in the tradition of Rousseau. There is no recognition here of the civilizing moral and social value of Christianity in history. Stevens has repudiated civilization. Far from being ideal, turbulent tribalism—including militant religion--continues to be the cause of wars, terrorist attacks and domestic conflicts in the world, not their cure.

Stevens evokes a sexual revolution with the word “orgy” and prefigures the Woodstock Festival of half a century later. Imagine the sensible Vice-President of Hartford Insurance hurtling down the mud slide at Woodstock in his executive suit with vest unbuttoned and necktie flapping. But his celebrants are all men. Where are the women in his utopia? And in what primitive society of turbulent naked men are women liberated? Perhaps the “ring” of men is intended to convey that the woman has integrated her masculine side, transcended gender and become whole as signified by circular movement in a unity.

VIII

The “water without sound,” the feeling of encroaching death, speaks to her in the authoritative inner voice that dominates the poem. In stanzas IV and V it is she who speaks within quotation marks. In this stanza, for the first time what is actually an inner voice appears to speak not from within her, but from outside, as indicated by quotation marks. The shift of quotation marks from her conscious mind to her inner voice indicates that the voice of Reality has prevailed and is speaking objectively, as if from outside her. Reality has replaced God. With regret, her inner voice “cries” to her that Christ is dead, not immortal. The poem has become secular humanist scripture.

After the declaration that Christianity is merely a myth, the quotation marks are dropped and the final lines confirm that the woman has accepted Reality. The two contrasting perspectives in the poem, the conscious ego and the deeper Self, have been reconciled. The feminine and the masculine have united. In Jungian terms, after an inner dialogue, her ego has submitted to the sovereignty of her deeper Self, or soul. Her psyche has attained wholeness. This happens in a short time in the poem, whereas in real life the individuation process takes many years, even a lifetime—and often never proceeds very far.

The poem ends with a reiteration of themes: “We live in an old chaos of the sun.” Like the universe, we humans are merely accidents, not part of any divine order. Earth is an isolated “island solitude, unsponsored, free”—but it too is subject to inescapable death. We should be consoled by our freedom to be as joyously spontaneous as the birds and the deer, by the beauty of Nature and by all the sensory pleasures we have to enjoy and the many we have yet to discover, as imaged by sweet berries ripening in the wilderness. The final image is of a dignified, even “casual” descent into death. The cockatoo in Stanza I, displaced by the swallow when the woman “awakens” in Stanza IV, is succeeded at the end by flocks of pigeons, birds that are well adapted to Reality like the ring of men, but they are placid rather than turbulent. The calm of the pigeons displaces the calm that disturbed the woman in Stanza I. These birds accept their vulnerable place in Nature with grace, exemplifying a transcendence within themselves.

“Sunday Morning” is perhaps the most beautiful of Modernist poems, yet it prefigures in idealized form characteristics of the decadent Postmodernist culture of the late 20th century that Stevens did not live to witness: (1) atheistic; (2) hedonistic; (3) solipsistic; (4) regressive; (5) amoral; and (6) turns people into pigeons. At the end of his life Stevens was converted to Christianity by a priest and baptized a month before he died, recanting the atheism of this and other poems.

Michael Hollister (2015)