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Wallace Stevens's Cloudscapes: The Disillusionment of Apocalypse

Boris Vejdovsky

Le plus profond c'est la peau.

René Char

Mantegna he did not like.

Hemingway, "The Revolutionist"

L'apocalypse déçoit.

Maurice Blanchot

I. "The Service of Clouds"

In *Modern Painters* John Ruskin suggests that the interpretative key to modern landscapes is their cloudiness. He is totally – albeit ambiguously – fascinated with the great painters of clouds, J.M.W. Turner and John Constable in particular, and writes that for these painters "the sky is considered of so much importance, that a principle mass of foliage, or a whole foreground, is unhesitatingly thrown into shade, merely to bring out the form of a white cloud" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 3:317). Ruskin devotes many pages in *Modern Painters* to the artists' renewed interest in clouds, which can be linked with the fascination of the Romantics with wild landscapes, in particular mountains, that were perceived as the image of a world in motion and evolution. The tormented landscapes of the Alps constitute, both for Turner the painter and Wordsworth the poet, the spectacle of a world that still bears the signs of its original – though always already lost – purity and totality and presents at the same time the signs of an always imminent – though always deferred – cataclysmic and sublime apocalypse endowing the scene with significance and troping it as a catachresis for the world and the human condition at large.

Like the Alps, whose slowly moving landscapes yield epiphanic moments of revelation, such as Wordsworth's "nature apocalypse" at the Simplon, clouds constitute a permanent invention of the sublime and present an image of the dying of the world. They form an infinite horizon of eschatological possibilities; they are ruins in evolution that proclaim that the end has begun. They also trope the becoming of a world hastening to its apocalypse and the eager desire of the artist to bear witness to the regeneration of the old fallen world. The Romantics (painters and poets alike) had already exploited the pedagogical value of ruins, which illustrated, like Wordsworth's "Ruined Cottage," the ravages of time and the vanity of man's endeavors in a fallen world. Clouds are fascinating ruins because they are totally out of man's control, which emancipates them from any anthropomorphic or moral reading. Clouds are just what they are; not dragons, not the expression of God's wrath: they are a pure becoming and a remarkable eschatological metaphor.

So strong is Ruskin's attraction to, and repulsion for, clouds as a unified trope to designate modernity that he writes: "if a general and characteristic name were needed for modern landscape art, none better could be invented than 'the service of clouds'" (3:272). Ruskin's remark metaphorically moves clouds to an epistemological foreground, where they become an apt metaphor for the discussion of the relation between modernity and eschatology. Although the term "modern" does not cover for Ruskin and for us the same theoretical and epistemological ground, I would like to extend his metaphor and propose that the "service of clouds" is a term that could aptly designate modern poetry and particularly the poetry of Wallace Stevens. What does it mean to "serve" clouds, to be in their "service"? Because of their highly mutable character, painted clouds are caught between two phenomenological moments, that of perception and that of representation; but they can never be represented in any ontological state of what they *are*. Much has been written about the state of in-betweenness of Stevens's poetry, poetry caught between – in particular – reality and the imagination, and about his attempt to "cure the ground," as J. Hillis Miller has it, that is, about his attempt to bridge that gap in-between. Robert Rehder proposes that the final metaphor in Stevens's "Sunday Morning" is an "assertion of the completeness of . . . incompleteness, that the unfinished can be whole, a statement . . . that combines the shadow and the light" (85). It seems that only a language made of oxymorons can account for Stevens's poetry and that much of the constant ontological paradox – consisting in what the poem does and undoes, says and unsays, writes and de-scribes – can be seen as pertaining to the cloud-like character of Stevens's poems, to their being suspended, like a cloud, between

two phenomenological moments. Between what the cloud was and what it has become is the time of memory, for clouds can only be painted – especially in Constable's windy England – from memory. Likewise, a poem by Stevens is suspended between origin and apocalypse; between the two, it happens, takes place in space and time: it is an occurrence.

For our understanding of “modernity,” “the service of clouds” might appear as a liberating metaphor, but for Ruskin it is a highly problematic phrase, and he denounces a modernity that only seems to bring unnecessary confusion to the world. From that point of view the modernity criticized by Ruskin is not different from that envisaged by Stevens, for instead of being a revelation, it seems to make the world more obscure. Ruskin writes:

we are expected to rejoice in darkness and triumph in mutability; to lay the foundation of happiness in things which momentarily change or fade; and to expect the utmost satisfaction from what is impossible to arrest, and difficult to comprehend. (3:273)

Ruskin coins his “service of clouds” from Aristophanes' anti-sophistic diatribes contained in his play *The Clouds*, and he appropriates Aristophanes' judgment on philosophy to apply it to “modern poetry and art,” which must, he writes, “come down under that definition given . . . by the great Greek, ‘speaking ingeniously concerning smoke’” (3:273). Modern art for Ruskin has lost its clarity and has become too cloudy, too misty; like Aristophanes in *The Clouds*, he accuses artists of producing nothing but sophistries and of being dealers of mystery rather than clarity.¹ There is a lot at stake in Ruskin's critique: it is not only aesthetics, but also politics, ethics, and ideology, for the deplorable result of this “modern cloud-worship” is the loss of “the old serenity of social custom and religious quiet.” Ruskin concludes with another quote from Aristophanes that modern art leads to the “dethroning of Jupiter,” and the “coronation of the whirlwind” (3:273). What Ruskin is worried about is that modernity questions an established power structure dominated by Jupiter, the male god, who stands as a metonym for the

¹ Ruskin writes: “That darkening of the foreground to bring out the white cloud, is, in one aspect of it, a type of subjection of all plain and positive fact to what is uncertain and unintelligible.” Raymond E. Ficht comments on this passage from *Modern Painters*: “this for Ruskin also signifies the crucial difference between medieval and modern landscapes; for where the early landscapist drew everything as clear as he could, “now our ingenuity is ‘all concerning smoke.’” But Ficht concludes that “[Ruskin] will come to terms with the meaning of cloudiness in dealing with Turner's. At this point the rhetoric of antithesis is in control” (254).

mythopoeitic structure of Christian moral, socio-political, and gender order of the father and the son.

Modernity – Ruskin’s or ours – questions the Western myth of a fallen world, a world that has lost its totality, but above all it questions the possibility of recovering that totality through art. The West lives with the myth of a Fall into duality, history, and gender, and in that myth art has been assigned the apocalyptic role of unveiling the totality hidden behind the clouds of language, history, and gender. When Ruskin denounces the “cloud-worship” of the moderns, he does not object to meteorology or clouds being represented in painting: for him there is an essential relation between the service of clouds and eschatology, which directly impinges on the role and the function of the work of art. Ruskin is worried by a form of art where the subject of the painting becomes an allegory of reading of the world obscured by a poetico-metaphysical excess of signification, and his interest in eschatology expresses the impatient longing for a presence to be provided by the work of art, whose sensuous immediacy would help the spectator to overcome the distance caused by gendering and mutability inherent in representation.

Ruskin voices the impatient imperative to which art has been submitted in Western culture. Art is to be an apocalypse – *apocalypse now*. It is to presently reveal the end of art and the end of man. His impatience is symptomatic of Western (or, generally speaking, Platonic) culture, where the word “apocalypse” – which appears in the Old Testament as the Greek word *apokalypsis*, deriving from *apokalyptein* (“to uncover”) – has come to mean the ultimate and cataclysmic end of the world. In our culture dominated by the violently antagonistic dichotomy between appearances and a deeply veiled essence, the word has come to mean final catastrophe, for the revelation of the universal whole present before the Fall necessarily means the end of (fallen) history and implies that the light of revelation can only be the final solution to all thinking resolved in the blinding light of annihilation. The myth of the Fall has started a history made of successive generations leading all the way up to Apocalypse: the myth of origin has created the need for a myth of the End, and it has burdened art and the artist with the responsibility of revealing and uncovering the mystery of the supreme fiction of God.

The Biblical scholar André Chouraqui remarks that the word “apocalypse” never appears in the Bible in the sense of destruction, cataclysmic end, or sublime catastrophe but is associated with the “unveiling,” or “uncovering” of a part of the body, generally the eye, the hair, or the genitals. Chouraqui’s observation points to the fact that Western culture may have

translated somewhat hastily the word apocalypse by metonymically ascribing to it the sense of cataclysmic revelation and destruction. Chouraqui's interpretation also suggests that there is much at stake in those apparently innocuous, and apparently innocent, acts of uncovering. It may be that the cosmic and universal apocalypse is always disappointing, but there may be another sort of apocalypse, an apocalypse without apocalypse, that uncovers the self in its most intimate parts.

In Stevens's poetry the cultural and religious impatience which demands that action be taken to produce revelation *now* leads to such painful disillusionment. In spite of all his efforts, Stevens cannot create in his fiction, no matter how supreme, the totality demanded from him, and he cannot satisfy himself with results that are always disappointing, because they do not reach the expectations imposed on him by his culture. Even the most celebrated lyrics cannot sing the victory of the (American) sublime in an apocalypse that would be the final revelation of Truth, Poetry, and the Supreme Fiction. These lyrics are, on the contrary, somber and not entirely disabused meditations on the formidable pressure exerted on the poet, who feels that he must keep trying to reach a final solution to all questionings.

There is, however, another sort of apocalypse in Stevens. It is a less grandiose but equally disquieting uncovering of something so well hidden that it has fallen into an aesthetic, ethical, and political blind spot. It is also a paradoxical apocalypse, for instead of allowing the recovery of a lost totality, it further fragments the world and the self that was supposed to unveil it. This sort of unveiling operates a movement from the metaphysical to the physical and the bodily and makes of the body the place where the apocalypse can be observed. Derrida writes on the intimate relation between unveiling and the body:

Apokalyptō, I uncover, I unveil, I reveal some thing; it can be a part of the body, the head or the eyes; a secret part, the sex, or some other hidden part; a secret, something that must be hidden, something you neither show nor speak about; it may alluded to (*[cela] se signifie*) but it cannot, it must not, be presented evidently. *Apokekalummenoi logoi*: indecent words. What is at stake is (*il en va de*) some secret of the *pudenda*. (Derrida 11-12; my translation)

The mystery of the apocalypse is something hidden in the self that can be signified by the self but that the self refuses to sign and appropriate as one of its proper parts. Far from allowing the poet to speak with the tone that suits those who have cosmic or universal pursuits on their mind, this displacement

of the apocalypse reveals in poetry something like a crack in the self that has been previously covered up by the metaphysical urge for unity and totality.

If Western eschatology demands that art should perform an apocalyptic act of uncovering to neutralize the effects of history and gender, Stevens's poetry not only demonstrates the vacuity of such demand, it also allows us to read the hidden – because too glaringly visible – ideological agenda of the demand. A patient reading of Stevens's poetry may lead to uncovering some hidden part of the apocalyptic drive that has determined much of our thinking about the end of art and culture. It may also lead us to consider whether the uncovering of the secrets of the *pudenda* that takes place in Stevens's poetry could be related to the mystery of the world that poetry has been urged to reveal.

II. "Sunday Morning"

For a long time Stevens has been read as a self-assured aesthete detached from, among other things, historical, political, and gender issues.² Apocalypse in Stevens's poetry does not lead to the contemplation of a totality that many critics desired to see there but to an uncovering of desire as a form of power veiled by Stevens's would-be historical, political, and gender atonality. Derrida notes about the use of the word "apocalypse" in the Old Testament that "what seems most remarkable in all the Biblical instances of the word . . . is that the uncovering itself seems more serious, sometimes more guilt-ridden, certainly more dangerous than what ensues, or could possibly ensue from it, as, for instance, sexual intercourse" (Derrida 15; my translation).³ Something of that sort happens in Stevens, where the uncovering is never innocent and leads to jeopardizing the unity and the integrity of the self.

Apocalyptic poetry – the poetry of Blake or Yeats, for instance – constitutes a rhetoric of resisted desire that finally breaks its bonds and sacrifices the world, "things as they are," on the altar of final revelation. There, the old world is destroyed by the imagination to yield its place to a new and better world – no matter what the cost. To write about apocalypse in Western culture – and maybe even more particularly in American culture – is to try to

² Despite, or maybe thanks to, some very polemical and consequently debatable positions, Frank Lentricchia struck a signally new note by proposing that Stevens "believ[ed] in the social responsibility of his poetry, everything he says to the contrary notwithstanding"; Lentricchia insists: "The fundamental hope in Stevens is political – though neither Stevens nor his critics are comfortable with that word" (214, 217).

³ See for instance Genesis IX. 21.

reach for that ultimate revelation of a lost totality; but it also means to write about masculine desire and power structures. This is what Stevens's poetry – very much to the disappointment of the poet – uncovers.

But before speaking of the end, here is a very famous beginning:

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
 And the green freedom of a cockatoo
 Upon a 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.

(Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* 53)⁴

Though primarily visual, the opening of the poem is a composing of senses, where the pungent smell of oranges that whets the appetite mingles with the smell and the taste of coffee. The composition of bright colors contrasts with the black of the coffee and the white, or most likely light, hue of the peignoir. This composition is further combined with the indulgent pleasure of what is rare, exotic, expensive. The enjoyment of carefully chosen objects is echoed in the sensuous pleasure of sounds as in the contrast between the suave vowels of “peignoir” and the prickly sonority of “cockatoo.” The sensory composition of smell, sight, touch, hearing, and taste is further reinforced by the impression of total abandonment of the woman's body luxuriating in a sense of well-being. If the coffee tastes so good, it is mostly because it is “late,” because it is a complacent pleasure that exhausts the desires of the mind and the body, as it is warmed by the morning sun in the cozy and soft peignoir. The adjective “late,” visually isolated at the end of the first line, is announced by the alliteration in “complacent,” and the two words are articulated around the feminine garment, the peignoir, whose French-sounding exoticism makes the rhythm of the line more languid. It also recalls the French reflexive verb *se peigner*, which appears here as the feminine and self-indulgent activity of brushing one's (long) hair. The opening of the poem plays on all the strings of the sensuous and erotic pleasure of being very lightly clad and enjoying the warmth of the sun. The eroticism is also enjoyed by the poet through his voyeuristic attitude, which objectifies the woman and puts her at the same level as the cockatoo in the rug,

⁴ Hereafter quoted as *CPP*.

whereby she becomes the representation of a representation of femininity. Rather than being the “woman in the poem,” she is a trope of femininity.

Lentricchia points out that the sensual opening scene of “Sunday Morning” is recast by Stevens many years later in the opening stanza of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Both inaugural scenes, Lentricchia remarks,

replay a strange little story that Stevens wrote as an undergraduate: a young man takes a photograph of his sweet-heart to be framed; after it is done and he opens the package, he finds a picture of himself. The implied sexual reversal of this early story anticipates Stevens’ later response to his culture’s debunking feminization of poetry. . . . (222)

Soon, under the pressure of the impatient demands of the culture that calls for a virile poetic attitude, the comparatively harmless voyeurism and idealization of woman by the poet will become more violent, when the “I”/eye that oversees the scene from the outside penetrates the woman’s mind and knows her dreams. But in the beginning, this Sunday morning with its religious and symbolic associations becomes – one might be tempted to say “simply,” except that it is not that simple – a woman’s sunny morning.

Michel Benamou has observed that “Sunday Morning” is composed “not with a succession of ideas, but of pictures” (13). However visual, the poem manages to keep away from the tyranny of a central eye/“I” imposing its totalizing perspective. This diffidence toward the “I”/eye also appears in Stevens’s numerous references to painting in his poems, prose, and letters. They all testify to his yearning for a supreme fiction that would make his poetry accede to the condition of visual arts, but at the same time Stevens’s poetic development reflects, as Bonnie Costello notes, “his ambivalence about the eye’s domination of consciousness” (69). The woman’s vision remains fragmentary; it is not brought to a sense of totality by a central perspective, and we are offered multiple points of entry into the bourgeois interior where the day-dream takes place. In the first lines the inner glow dispensed by the late coffee, the feminine peignoir, and the soft warmth of the sun manages to “dissipate / The holy hush of ancient sacrifice” that constitutes the dark foreboding of Apocalypse, as it is announced in the Scriptures. If she was not complacently indulging in ways that her class and economical milieu allow her to, this woman would be – ought to be, certainly – in church, where, like every Sunday morning, the coming of the Apocalypse would be announced to her. The apocalypse that happens here is an uncovering of “Stevens’s” feminine eye/“I” or tone of voice through the uncovering of the peignaired woman’s hair, her eye, and, allusively, her sex. It is an apocalypse of the self,

an unveiling of a secret of the *pudenda*, that is, an uncovering of the "I," Stevens's "I," who unveils, without signing his name to it, some hidden part of his self.

"Sunday Morning" opens with the woman's patience, her passion – later expressed in "passions of rain or moods in falling snow" –, and her passivity, which contrast with any form of hasty, desiring, and active attitude. But this passivity is soon disturbed by the "dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe," even as an impatient and desiring "I" slowly returns to the scene:

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?"

Several critics have remarked that "Sunday Morning" operates a rejection of traditional Christian values by discarding the promise of a post-apocalyptic paradise and that "[Stevens] suggests that by repudiating the false paradise of Christianity and accepting the limitations of an earthly paradise, we shall gain a new sense of intimacy with our world" (Carroll 50-51). This is certainly to the point, but this kind of reading turns the poem into a unified whole controlled by a monolithic "Stevens" and veils – maybe consciously – the fact that there is more than one "Stevens" in the poem.

The opening words are not the woman's words; they are not spoken by her, let alone written by her, and no sign or signature allows us to legally attribute them to her. They can be heard or read as the feminine voice in "Stevens" that seeks expression and for a short while seems to find it. The words are a form of passive expression, one that precedes, or comes after, the desire to speak or write; when she is prompted to speak, the woman's voice gradually changes in intensity or pitch to assume the graver tone of deep metaphysical questions. By listening to these words we can start considering "what happens to Stevens's 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 that is feminine metaphorically in the way the idea of 'feminine' itself is metaphorical" (Vaught 4). The passive vision of the beginning is closely associated with the idle, late, and complacent woman, but when we read "she dreams a little," the tone changes and another voice insinuates itself into the woman's day-dream and passivity. The poem operates as an uncovering of Stevens's self, fragments it, and reveals a part of it as the woman's body. It is also an unveiling of Stevens's

problematic relationship to the fact that the “supreme fiction” may be gendered and not necessarily embodied in a young and virile poet.

There are signs of this disquieting discovery in private writings that never take us very far away from Stevens’s meditation on poetry. Thus, in a letter to his wife-to-be, Stevens refers to his poetic activity as being “positively lady-like” (*Letters* 180), while an earlier entry in his Harvard journal also shows his preoccupation with the gendering (and the historicity) of poetry writing: “Poetry and manhood: Those who say poetry is now the province of women say so because ideas about poetry are effeminate. Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Browning, much of Tennyson – they are your man poets” (*Letters* 26).⁵ The need to affirm the masculinity of poetry is most strongly expressed in Stevens in structures of repressed desire, which find their way to expression in a post-Romantic and apocalyptic troping of the imagination as a prehensile and destructive force. The moment of bliss that opens “Sunday Morning” is, as Stevens writes in a later poem, “*Encore un instant de bonheur*,” but as that poem continues, this happiness is disqualified: “The words / Are a woman’s words, unlikely to satisfy / the taste of even a country connoisseur” (*CPP* 127). The metaphorically feminized words of the opening of “Sunday Morning” are a moment of bliss, but they are gradually overruled by the male tone of voice, which is striving, on the one hand, for a revelation of totality, and on the other, against the uncovering of a part of the poet’s self that is revealed as “feminine” and that can only be alluded to in private letters and intimate journals.

Thus the development of the poem is related to a masculine consciousness gradually taking over in a series of fantasies that all try to constitute answers to the woman’s question opening stanza two: “Why should she give her bounty to the dead?” The answers are articulated around the mysterious phrase “death is the mother of all beauty,” which recurs in stanzas five and six. The figure of the mother associated with the aesthetic ideal of beauty of the male poet makes us pass from the complacent and comfortable interior of the first stanza associated with a feminine presence to a place of revelation that turns out to be the interior of the mother’s womb. The apocalyptic desire for rebirth and the desire for beauty mingle with the desire for death expressed in the incestuous desire of the male poet to know his mother. Death as the fulfillment of desire and ultimate revelation of beauty is the final

⁵ Kim Townsend remarks that in Stevens’s culture, maybe even more than in ours today, poetry was deeply imbedded in the structures of patriarchal society and education. According to the severe fathers and keepers of the flame, Townsend notes, “The writing or appreciation of poetry was clearly incompatible with making one’s way among men in the ‘real’ world” (129).

temptation. It is an apocalypse that is to bring to a still point, once and for all, all that we have to enable us to think, and the temptation of regression and death resulting from the disappointing answers in the previous stanzas appears as a suicidal drive. The return to the mother tropes the desire to go once and for all beyond the veil, to uncover what Maurice Blanchot calls the "invisible secret without a face." When death is associated with action and impatience, when it becomes an eschatological project, or a projection of the self, it becomes a flight and an evasion from reality, responsibility, and truth – a disillusion with what poetry is to perform. "Death is the mother of all beauty" implies the impossibility of the male heterosexual desire for the figure of the mother, who embodies the beginning and the end and whose body contains the whole of man's eschatological dreams.

But the association of death with the figure of the mother also calls for another reading, one that is not related to regression. Death – or rather dying (*le mourir, le mourir de soi*) – is "passivity itself" (*la passivité même*), Blanchot writes, "The only true philosophical act is that of the passive dying of one's self (the dying of the self, the self as dying; *Selbsttötung* rather than *Selbstmord*)" (*Écriture du désastre* 56; my translation). The passive dying of the self is, to prolong Blanchot's metaphor, the only true poetic act – an act of passivity and passion. The series of answers to the woman's question reach a climax in the phallic orgy of stanza seven:

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.

The "dark encroachment" that puts an end to the passive vision is replaced by images of male regeneration, where the birth of Christ is removed from its Christian pattern of the Father and the Son, to be reintroduced in the broader frame of a myth applicable to all men, and even to women who do not go to church on Sunday morning:

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, like a muttering king,
 Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
 Until our blood, commingling, virginal,

With heaven, brought such requital of desire
The very hinds discerned it in a star.

The question "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" has been replaced by anguished questions of death and regeneration: "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 (re)generative anxiety peaks in phallic rituals where naked men celebrate in their wild chant their rights of kinship and their being of the same flesh and blood as "their lord." In the name of this "heavenly fellowship" celebrated on a "summer morn," which ironically repeats "Sunday morning," these men are willing to sacrifice "Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow; / grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued / Elations when the forest blooms . . .," because these are all too fragmentary and partial to yield the sort of ultimate vision their worship is to bring about.

The end of the poem seems to restore us to a more serene state reminiscent of its opening, but the somber cadence and the thematic range of the final lines indicate that something has been irretrievably, irresponsibly, lost because of the irruption of the masculine apocalyptic will and desire into the woman's reverie.

Deer walk upon our mountain, 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.

It is difficult to agree that "the serenity of this conclusion seems scarcely ruffled by the ambiguous undulations of the pigeon's wings" (Carroll 54), for the movement from morning to evening and the sinking to darkness of the pigeons that replace the "bright green wings" of the cockatoo are evocative of a death that is not the mother of beauty, from whom "shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires," but that prefigures the disillusionment of death as mother in "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

The earth is not earth but a stone,
Not the mother that held men as they fell

But stone, but like a stone, no: not
 The mother, but an oppressor, but like

An oppressor that grudges them their death,
 As it grudges the living that they live.

(*CPP* 142)

Nothing shall preserve the men that perish in "Sunday Morning," whose only memory is the dew on their feet that remains as a sad euphemistic trace of the blood they shed, for, Stevens commented, "Life is fugitive as dew upon the feet of men dancing in the dew. Men do not either come from any direction or disappear in any direction. Life is as meaningless as dew" (*Letters* 250). Life did not seem meaningless in the opening of the poem; it certainly did not have the transcendental significance boisterously invoked by the ring of chanting men, but superficial, as the woman's vision may have appeared to the male consciousness of the poem, it was comforting, fulfilling, albeit fragmentary and partial. After the disillusionment caused by the virile and regressive apocalypse, life has acquired ironic transcendental significance at last: it is as meaningless as dew.

Few readers have reacted to the irremediable loss that takes place in "Sunday Morning," and many critics prefer to continue speaking of Stevens as a self-assured aesthete. Marianne Moore perceived that something was off balance in the poem: "['Sunday Morning,'] a poem so suggestive of a masterly equipoise, gives ultimately the effect of the mind disturbed by the intangible; of a mind oppressed by the properties of the world which it is expert at manipulating" (Moore 93).⁶ What is intangible to the male poet is the disillusionment caused by the yearning, a revelation that results in the uncovering of a part of his self that precisely resists the apocalyptic myth of revelation. "Apocalyptic writers," Ficht notes, "authenticate their personal visions by drawing upon resonant material already traditional in the culture as prophesy and myth" (29). This is what the male voice in "Sunday Morning" tries to do by recalling Christian but also pagan myths to establish its kinship with Jove or Gesu. There is, however, an intangible resistance to that apocalyptic mythopoiesis in the poem, and it comes from the femininity revealed by a personal pronoun and a garment. The woman's passive attitude is neither in conflict with, nor in adoration of, Jesus, Jove, Gesu, or the "lord" for whom the men boisterously chant. The feminine consciousness in "Sunday Morning" is related to forms of patience, passion, and passivity,

⁶ I am indebted to Celeste Goodridge for alerting me to Moore's comment.

which does not mean that she does nothing: she resists the apocalyptic and suicidal drive of the male consciousness that proclaims that the end has begun and strives to bring her "*instant de bonheur*" to an end. Contrary to the apocalypse demanded by Western culture and voiced by the male consciousness in the poem, the uncovered feminine consciousness does not respond to any imperative; it is a gift; it expects nothing in return; it has no vested interest. In the poem the woman is late; she freely gives her time, the time of her passivity, the time of her dying; this is what she deliberately and passively does – she offers resistance.

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