"The Longed-for Lands": Petrarch, Spenser and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"

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I

Recent critics (Ackerman, Bates, Richardson, Vendler) writing on Wallace Stevens in love have chosen to emphasize the influence of the passionate and familial concerns apparent in his biography. I would like to diverge from the biographical approach by finding poetical sources that link Stevens to those Renaissance spokesmen for the "I" in love — Petrarch and Spenser.[1] While the Romantics may be close to Stevens in terms of their treatment of nature, it is the love theme that connects him to the Renaissance. As feminist critics (Gubar, Kelly-Gadol, Vickers) have shown, Petrarch and Spenser used the inspiring desired woman as an instrument in the creation of the desiring "I," inventing an elaborate construct where the rejected "I" rejected his rejector. Renaissance love poets are logical models for Stevens not necessarily because he read them thoroughly or imitated them consciously but because, in exploiting the woman's separateness, they informed the modern idea of the connection between love and art. William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden maintain that the connection was cemented for the Petrarchan poet through "approving readers [who could] stand in for an immune nymph. Embracing an armful of bays, the poet can do without the woman" (30). *Doing without the [inspirational] woman* was one part of Stevens' bravado. He was open about what Petrarch and Spenser only covertly admitted. It would have been impossible for the Renaissance writer to develop his poetic "I" without first dealing with the "you" who made him

feel alive. At crucial moments in Petrarch and Spenser, the process of self-definition is revealed. And, like those Renaissance poets galvanized by idealized women, Stevens sought to establish the crucial moment in his own poetry, the point at which he could begin to assert himself.

In earlier Stevens poems, those moments are often subverted as an independent "I" finds his poetics by belittling love. While Petrarch and Spenser established their artistic selves even as they found ways to praise their women, Stevens was much blunter, creating a poetic "she" or "you" the reader pities because she is so cruelly rejected or so obviously ridiculed. In the early poems, the Stevens persona is chauvinist in the worst way, challenging the "she" he creates by undercutting her importance. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" denies the sexual muse:

> If sex were all, then every trembling hand
> Could make us squeak, like dolls, the wished-for words. (17)

The speaker deflates the Petrarchan and Spenserian expectations of the woman he addresses by severing the connections between sexual potency and poetic fluency. His squeaking dolls negate both the womanly procreative and the petrarchanly creative results of sexuality: babies and poems. Squeaking dolls are what the sexual ethos produces. In his early poems, Stevens sterilizes the woman.

In three of his major late poems, "Auroras of Autumn," "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," a more conciliatory Stevens works from or off traditional female inspirational sources, "Auroras" redefining the connections between the "mother's face" (413) and the lover's voice, "Notes" acknowledging to the womanly "you" who becomes his "fluent mundo" (407) that he is "flicked by [the] feeling" (407) she provokes. In "An Ordinary Evening," the movement of being moved — the verb "flick" (407) — lapses into the interiorized noun "flicking" (488) as the poet absorbs the woman's negative impulses. To "flick" is to "move with a whip" (O.E.D.) or to spurn. For Spenser and Petrarch, that stroke is the woman's denial. In "An Ordinary Evening," the final image of the "woman writing a note and tearing it up"

(488) mirrors nature's generative and retractive movement even as both express the poet's creative and destructive inclinations. Casting himself as the nay-saying woman, Stevens explores the consequences of poetic isolation. His remarkable inversion allows him to look beyond the solid and through the interspace implied by the rootlessness and denial of the inherited conventions. His conclusions are perhaps astoundingly new as Stevens takes risks that look beyond the "solid" and into the interspace. But his beginnings are linked to Petrarchan and Spenserian assertions of self. Without those beginnings, it is hard to imagine a Stevensian ending. Stevens changes his Renaissance heritage by incorporating the psychology of the denying "other" into the poetics of a denying self. That incorporation, most fully realized in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," allows him to face what the anxieties of Spenserian and Petrarchan influences are. While it is easy to see modern Spenserian versions of Jerusalem, the Bower of Bliss and Acidale in "the heavens, the hells, the longed-for lands" (486) of Stevens's poetry, it is more difficult to assess the necessary unmaking that preceded those visions in Petrarch and Spenser.

In the Petrarchan model, the desiring poet — at first so obsessed by the woman that he becomes her — finds a way to become himself, even if that becoming involves distancing himself from his beloved. In *rime sparse 23*, Petrarch describes how he deified the woman and was reborn as poet:

> Song, I was never the cloud of gold that once descended in a precious rain so that it partly quenched the fire of Jove; but I have certainly been a flame lit by a lovely glance and I have been the bird that rises highest in the air raising her whom in my words I honor; nor for any shape could I leave the first laurel, for still its sweet shade turns away from my heart any less beautiful pleasure. (68)

Petrarch's original laurelization (his conversion into a womanly shape) ultimately leads to a reassertion of his manliness. The Ovidian conversion of the "first laurel" gave Petrarch roots and leaves. The present laurel, under whose shade he composes, is clearly above his head. When, as Jove, Petrarch raises Laura to the heavens, he also releases himself from her ballast. Rootless

now (as earlier he was rooted in the woman) the poet sings independently. That same independence is reasserted in *rime sparse 30*, where the adoring poet remains at "the foot of the harsh laurel" (86), clearly still apart from the woman he praises.

With *The Amoretti*, Spenser begins in the Petrarchan mode, suffering as the woman's "faithfull thrall" (xxix) from the disparities between his "hot desyre" and her cold disdain (xxx). But, recording the eventual *success* of his "leaues . . . lines . . . and rymes" (i), he celebrates the three Elizabeths, mother, queen and love, who gave him "such graces" (lxxiv). In the Mount Acidale sequence of *Faerie Queene VI*, Colin Clout graces himself, subtly showing how he invents the Rosalynde who presumably inspires him. Establishing the poet's, rather than the beloved's, creative powers, the Acidale incident focuses on the self-energizing lover and links Spenser to Petrarch in an independence that stems from the *failure* of love:

> That faire one,
> That in the midst was placed parauant,
> Was she to whom that shepheard pypt alone,
> That made him pipe so merrily as never none.
> She was to weete that iolly Shepheards lasse,
> Which piped there vnto that merry rout,
> That iolly shepheard, which there piped, was
> Poor *Colin Clout* (who knows not *Colin Clout*?)
> He pypt apace, whilest they him daunst about.
> Pype iolly shepheard, pype thou now apace
> Vnto thy loue, that made thee low to lout:
> Thy loue is present there with thee in place,
> Thy loue is there aduanst to be another Grace. (VI.x.15-16)

Piping merrily "alone," Colin emerges, like the genius of Book III, the source of renewal. Colin's recreated Rosalynde resembles the eternal Adonis. Both are "by succession made perpetuall" (III.vi.47). Both cease to be and come into being at the creator's behest. They are revitalized because of the cycle of eternal replacement, the wheel of III.vi.33. As Genius in Book III substitutes new lives for old ones, so Colin replaces the denying principal "one" with the continuous and replicated "many."

While Petrarch emphasizes the uniqueness of the beloved, Spenser heightens the solitude of the creator. Piping merrily

alone, Colin needs no one. The Petrarchan model stresses the importance of the initial desiring, the Spenserian, the importance of the initial loss. Both pay homage to their women, Petrarch to Laura the goddess, Spenser to Rosalynde the denier. The Petrarchan model depends on the fire of passion to come into being, the Spenserian, on the coldness of death to generate itself. Petrarch is reborn (like the Phoenix of his image). Spenser (like the Venus he admires) gives birth to the Rosalynde he imagines. Petrarch speaks of Laura as maternal, Spenser of Rosalynde as child. The ultimate Petrarchan state is the rootlessness of poetic freedom; the ultimate Spenserian state is the leaflessness of death. When, through the Phoenix image, he gives birth to himself, Petrarch sacrifices the maternal Laura. Spenser similarly abandons his prodigy. Like children who kill their families and then beg mercy of the court because they are orphans, Petrarch and Spenser invent their rejecting others.[2] When critics, like Mark Halliday, conclude that Stevens's refusal "to consider love as a relationship between two distinct separately subjective human beings" (136) is a reflection of a biographical coldness, they tend to overlook the poetic sources for that refusal. It has roots in Petrarch and Spenser. What is new in Stevens is the way he so openly — and often cruelly — rejects the "she" or the "you" who presumably is (or considers herself to be) his muse. In his shorter poems, he does so either (as in "So and So Reclining on her Couch") by deliberately fictionalizing her or (as in "Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man") by deliberately foiling her.

The Petrarchan Stevens of "So and So" assures the woman's remoteness by calling her *his* invention. Like Petrarch's Laura, she is the ABC, his beginning and end. She remains, as she was, totally the artist's creation, "born . . . at twenty-one, / Without lineage or language" (295). Released from the usual womanly impediments to a man — carping parents and scolding tongue — the silent woman comes to the poet unburdened. She exists without obligation to the past or responsibility for the future. "Suspended in air" (295) and hovering over the poet, she remains always separate and always about to be reached. But she is never achieved:

> If just above her head there hung,
> Suspended in air, the slightest crown
> Of Gothic prong and practick bright,
> The suspension, as in solid space
> The suspending hand withdrawn, would be
> An invisible gesture. (295)

In a great but invisible chain of suspensions, the crown hangs above the woman without touching her and the woman hangs above the poet without touching him; finally (withdrawing his hand) the speaker removes himself from the woman. "So and So" exists only in the poet's oxymoron (solid/space). He fills (with a solid) the void he created (space). The ideal woman in the painting no longer bears any resemblance to a real model. As the painter's subject, she wears his crown. The circuit is complete when it emerges clear that her condition depends on his gesture. As Petrarch flew from his roots to deify Laura, the Petrarchan Stevens pulls himself away from his idealization by calling her a projection, "the thing without gestures . . . an Idea." The concealed creator, like the priest behind the confession box, thwarts confidence. The "I" doesn't emerge through her partly because the inspiring "she" is actually the empty "he." The image of the Petrarchan poet, suspended beneath the high and mighty Laura he himself has raised, haunts "So and So." The woman becomes "the arrangement which contains the desire of the artist," what Mary Nyquist claims the Susanna of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" embodies. "She is contained by the poem as reproducible verbal artifact, as if it were a vial" (326). As the *container*, "So and So" merely represents the artist's invention. He arranges her. As unattainable object, she *contains*, by restraining it, the poet's desire. Seemingly, she deranges him. But, having withdrawn his hand, the artist, like Petrarch from Laura, releases himself from the woman's hold even as he claims to be *beholden* to her. Once created, the woman is no longer interesting to the artist. Since she contains his desire, he no longer has it. Withdrawing his hand, he remains perennially detached while she remains eternally crowned. Once he withdraws his hand, Stevens both undermines the tradition he uses by mocking its conventions

and forgoes the woman by establishing her remoteness. Mrs. Pappadopolus, the real woman at the end, affirms the inadequacy of the invented other.

But what of the real woman — the one in whom one does confide? She appears as the failed "you" of "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man" who, despite her prior inspirational claims, gets put down. Stevens begins with a defence of ordinary sequence:

> One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths,
> One's tootings at the weddings of the soul
> Occur as they occur. (222)

There is no intermediary inspiration. If grand flights and Sunday baths are equal, then both are taken in solitude. The "you" who obviously announced her importance (to filling the house of the self, in sharing the poet's experience prior to the poem) is told both that the house is empty and that it has no meaning. But that is not enough. The "I" insists on her superfluousness by telling her how she underestimated the force of surprise:

> Could you have said the bluejay suddenly
> Would swoop to earth? It is a wheel, the rays
> Around the sun. The wheel survives the myths. (222)

Seeking to make connections between herself and poetry, the "you" fails to include nature's unaccountability. "It is a wheel," the poet answers, using the image of the Spenserian garden. The wheel rises and falls and the falling enables the poet to create a world excluding the woman:

> To think of a dove with an eye of grenadine
> And pines that are cornets, so it occurs,
> And a little island full of geese and stars. (222)

The speaker's little island full of coexistent geese and stars joins the earth to the firmament, a vision made possible by the downward swooping and upward tilting poetic eye. As cornets, his upside down pines contain the sky. They scrape the heavens and scoop them up. What the woman failed to see — the sudden swooping down — is what the poet needs: the reversed impact. His turn-about is private. Colin Clout pipes merrily alone; the Spenserian Stevens plays up his solitude:

> It may be that the ignorant man, alone,
> Has any chance to mate his life with life
> That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
> That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze. (222)

Choosing the pearly spouse of life instead of the constant companionship of the woman, the poet invents exclusive islands of solitude as casually as he takes a bath. Like the ablutions of his daily life, the absoluteness of the enchanted island is personal. As the Spenserian Colin finds his inspiration inwardly, so the Spenserian Stevens comes independently to life. That independence involves an acceptance of the constantly reversing wheel which, in its diurnal wandering through the heavens and seasonal ebb and flow, "survives the myths" of love. In these early poems, Stevens brings the Petrarchan and Spenserian ethos into the corpus by naming a "she" and a "you" even if he denies their validity.

In "An Ordinary Evening," Stevens ceases to regard the woman as the created or excluded other. He *does without* by becoming her, incorporating her into his own resistance. Combining Petrarchan and Spenserian independence, the poem explores the rootlessness and separation Stevens earlier only hinted at. In his pursuit of "the thing apart" — the distance between immobility and freedom in the Petrarchan system, the distance between death and renewal in the Spenserian — Stevens first moves what seems like a firm foundation and then fixes on what seems like a confirmed absence. Unlike Hopkins' Margaret who grieves over unleaving, the Spenserian Stevens relishes what he calls "leaflessness" (477). Playing with the *part*ing and the de*part*ure of the "thing apart" the Petrarchan Stevens turns se*para*tion into a celebration of rebirth. The question "An Ordinary Evening" asks of the desired rootlessness is how to achieve that state, how to become one with the wind.

The question "An Ordinary Evening" asks of denial is how to accept that state, how to risk unmaking. While the Petrarchan and Spenserian originals bypass the difficulty of those questions by attaching themselves to mythological escapers (Petrarch to the volatile Jove, Spenser to the androgynous Venus), Stevens "sur-

vives the myths" (222). The defensive tone of the early poems is subsumed by the triumphant voice of a self who exults in what the earlier denials afford: a sense of oneness with, and likeness to, his source in nature. The Petrarchan vision dominates the first poems in the sequence and emerges most clearly in poem XII. The Spenserian ethos surfaces in the last sections, particularly in poem XXXI. Stevens arrives at his natural source by detaching himself (precisely the same way as Renaissance love poets did) from the inspiring other. But while those poets remained piping visions of their estranging beloveds, Stevens turns completely away, exploring the remote regions he opens up. The emotional energy that launches the quest stems from a psychic need to push away the other and to tell her so by writing poems that seek out the lonely "I."

Stevens invents a new poetics based in part on Petrarchan and Spenserian models. In their self-sufficiency, those models provide Stevens with a rationale for the repositioning of the poetic "I." If, in "Le Monocle," Stevens energizes himself by mocking the "you," in "An Ordinary Evening," he pulls the argument inward. His opening "and yet" is both an addition (and yet as *still another*) and a contradiction (and yet as *yes, but*), a playful elaboration on an internal and interminable quibble. In "Le Monocle" and "Sleight-of-Hand," Stevens deflates the woman's claim to inspirational importance. In "An Ordinary Evening," there isn't even a "you" to provoke mockery. The "I" has absorbed her objections in his desire to forge his identity. The single dimension allows a retrieval of self that opens up the range of independence. The woman is reduced to overhearer as the battle between the sexes becomes a private "meditation." The initial separation prepares for the upheaval in poem XII:

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it.
> The poet speaks the poem as it is,
>
> Not as it was: part of the reverberation
> Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues
> Are like newspapers blown by the wind. He speaks

By sight and insight as they are. There is no
Tomorrow for him. The wind will have passed by,
The statues will have gone back to be things about.

The mobile and immobile flickering
In the area between is and was are leaves,
Leaves burnished in autumnal trees

And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
Together, said words of the world are the life of the world.
(473-74)

If Petrarch emphasizes the rootlessness through which he finds his poetic identity, Stevens — delving deeper — discovers how to look at the world rootlessly. And, while in "So and So" his rootlessness is ruthless, here it becomes magical.

Reflections, plays of light, emerge synonymous with reflections, "presences of thought," as sight (what we see) becomes insight (what we think). The merging of sight and insight occurs by aligning the unalignable, by hinging floating newspapers to solid statues or (more precisely) by unhinging the statues. Stevens finds a way to turn what should be confrontational into what could be sequential. That unexpected reversal, like the bluejay's swooping in "Sleight of Hand," turns the contrast between newspapers and statues into an identity. Ordinarily, a flying newspaper might brush against a statue and the sight of that brushing might become an occasion for thought about the impact or even the lack of it. But, here, the newspaper becomes the statue as Stevens eliminates the contrast. By establishing the links, "the poem becomes the cry of its occasion / And not about it." The poem depends on a new idea of reflection, one where parts merge, through alignment, with each other. The alignment occurs only at the precise moment when the marble statues "are like newspapers blown by the wind" (473). How can Stevens relate marble statues, fixed in the earth and valuable in their casting, to newspapers, flying in the night and disregarded after their use? As

something is unfastened in the gap separating Petrarch's laurelization from his creation under her shade, so something is unhinged in the interval between the mentioning of marble statues and the appearance of the newspapers. The reversal in Petrarch is caused by Ganymede's flight. In Stevens, a similar reversal is facilitated by the metaphorical "likeness" of newspapers and statues. All are lifted up and blown by the wind.

Stevens creates a surrealist universe of flying objects resulting in a casual litter — the discarding of the last remainder — which becomes a casual litter — the expectation of the first birth. The sequence results from an initial alignment of statues and newspapers which might occur as follows: Marble statues are the newspapers of the past, commemorating specific events. If they become *like* newspapers, then they are relevant now, part of the cry of *this* occasion. In becoming like newspapers blown by the wind, they acquire sound — the cry of the paper crackling. They come to us now. They are also temporary, speaking only of today. Art risks its permanence, emerging — on this occasion — ephemeral. But in losing its eternity, it acquires a timelessness — a relevance. When the Petrarchan Stevens speaks by "sight and insight as they are," he announces that he has brought his inner and outer worlds into correspondence, matching nature with his own nurture. The two function in a compound way, reverberate each other. But the statues also lose their solidity when they become like newspapers. They flicker and it is the flickering quality that is of interest.

If the statues are no longer solid or fixed, then they are partly themselves, partly the occasion they contain, and partly something carried by the wind. Transformed, they emerge as evanescent and fleeting. "Flickering" is a remainder of light, the last sign of life before extinction. It occurs in the "area between is and was," like "the glowing of such fire as after sunset fadeth in the west." Stevens's flicker is the glow of Shakespeare's sonnet 73.[3] Both evade what, in "Monocle," is called "a distinct shade" (19). The shade simultaneously suggests both the shadow of death and the blackness of print on the page. In the shade, as shadow, is the end result of nature; in the shade of print is the end result of

art. Stevens returns to the dual shade at the end of "An Ordinary Evening." But, here, the "flicker / flutter / shade" involves a process of minute loosenings, like Peter Pan wriggling in and out of his shadow, that allows for a release. To describe the difference between the flickering light and the darkened shadow, Stevens (like Shakespeare in sonnet 73) chooses two stages of autumn leaves, first the burnished leaves made golden in the fall as they hang on the trees, then the burnished leaves abandoned in the streets as they are blown by the wind. It is the whirling leaves that resemble thoughts the way the *statuas moving* in an Elizabethan play becomes human. In the final resemblance, the serious "whole psychology" (containing the self, the town and the weather) equals the accidental "casual litter," since one substitutes for the other grammatically and since casual litter contains the identical "leaves . . . newspapers . . . weather . . . selve[s] . . . [and] town[s]." The casual litter represents a movement toward decreation, an uprooting of foundations. The litter mocks the serious self/psychology/statues and is, at the same time, a lightening. To be *in* a casual litter is to be inside of the moving/flickering/whirling so that thoughts become actual presences, as real as leaves and statues, acquiring, by the identity to the whole human spectrum, a sense of reality. The Petrarchan Stevens makes thought real not by converting reality into it but by converting it (through metaphor) into reality, by fixing it first and then miraculously letting go. The flickering is a little movement upward that denies the downward thrust. "Said words," blown into being by the windy breath, equal — in their reality — the casual litter blown into a new being by the breathy wind. The flicker represents the palpitation of desire which is at once the suggestion or light cast off by the object and the longing projected by the perceiver. The glow incorporates both, linking the desired other with the desired viewer, making the man into the woman, the newspaper into the statue, the litter as refuse into the litter as rebirth.

With the image of burnished leaves, Stevens establishes a point which he describes physically calling it an "area" (474) not an interval, a space not a time. But the burnished leaves represent

time — leaves coloured in the autumnal hue; as burnished, they acquire a light which his analogy carries inward. Moreover, by associating the leaves with presence, he makes a space word into a time word. *Present*, the filling up space, is also *now*, the filling up of time. Further, the leaves are both remainders associated with the litter and departures — leavings. In brief, the leaves become the memory of what was and the vehicle for flight; they embody the whole psychology of the past (the weather) the present (the self at the point of discovery) and the future (a litter as a brood of children). By clinging, they suggest the capacity of things to remain rooted as, by leaving, they demonstrate their freedom to whirl away; the words become the wind by the very process of exhaling, an interior match for the cycle of nature, a mating and a meeting of presences in the present that inhabits the area between "is and was." The Petrarchan "I" comes independently to the world and, by fixing himself fully on it, emerges identical with what he sees. Like the wind, his words convey (carry) in the freedom of detachment (leaving) the sense of what occurs. That detachment results from a willingness to abandon the past. As conveyance, the litter evolves into a vehicle for flight. In the twelfth poem, Stevens aligns himself to reality in the same way that the statues are connected to newspapers: by an unhinging. As the leaves let go of their origins in the fall so the poet denies his past certainties and follows the insecure "whirlings" of the wind. That independent birth, like Petrarch's separation from the mother-muse inspiring him, facilitates the poem as "cry of its occasion." Immediacy results not from clinging to the solid but from an acceptance of flux. The rebirth into the wind aligns the poet with those forces that speak spontaneously.

The entire sequence could have ended in the reverberations of a poetic which depends on a letting go where the self becomes, like the leaves, wholly without ties to the past, even to its own past. But the Petrarchan Stevens goes one step further, not by pulling the heavens down through a mediating lady (Astrophil's Stella, Keats' "bright star"[4]) but by making himself the maternal nurturer ("the sleepy bosom") of his own rebirth:

> Creation is not renewed by images
> Of lone wanderers. To re-create, to use
>
> The cold and earliness and bright origin
> Is to search. Likewise to say of the evening star,
> The most ancient light in the most ancient sky,
>
> That it is wholly an inner light, that it shines
> From the sleepy bosom of the real, re-creates,
> Searches a possible for its possibleness. (481)

The process by which the evening star becomes an inner light is part of the reverberation, the meeting and mating that comes through a fixed attention and a subsequent becoming so that the outer flows naturally with the inner. The strobe-light looking down becomes a searchlight looking out. By uniting the inner and outer light, by calling them both a "possible" to be explored and a potential to be realized (a "possibleness"), the Petrarchan Stevens includes a growth of self which he describes as he changes from naked alpha in VI, to ephebe in VIII, to poet in XXII. Once reality becomes moveable, there is no certain demarcation between inner and outer. The microcosmic maternal breast is replaced by the macrocosmic "sleepy bosom of the real." That shifting to a present resource allows the poet to become mother to his self, even as the real recreates itself daily. As Petrarch, freeing himself from Laura, justifies his art, so Stevens, freeing himself from the womanly solace of his roots, finds comfort in the sleepy bosom of the real. The Petrarchan Stevens is midwife to his own rebirth as he transforms the outer light of nature to create an inner light in the self. He needs no human intervention because — like the flickering light — he has merged the object of desire with the desiring subject.

But the Spenserian Stevens is compelled to explore the darkness. If Spenser, "piping apace" creates a constantly renewing Rosalynde, Stevens writes of the way reality renews itself. Instead of the idealized Mount Parnassus, Stevens moves into the real New Haven. And if the Petrarchan Stevens emphasizes the necessity of separation, the Spenserian Stevens stresses the value of substitution. The possibility of eternal replacement, through which Colin invented the deified Rosalynde, is the probability

through which the Spenserian Stevens manufactures the "longed-for lands" (486). Like the desired woman, the desired country depends on an emptiness in the self. But whereas Spenser's emptiness is contingent on Rosalynde's denial, Stevens goes behind the external cause, confirming instead an internal negative impulse. One of the truisms of both the Petrarchan and Spenserian visions is that, without the initial rejection by Laura and Rosalynde, the crucial poetic emergence would never have occurred. In the Spenserian vision the cruel lady is to blame for whatever happens; Stevens blames himself, establishing in XXVIII the sequence resulting from "misericordia" (485) and then affirming in XXX and XXXI the desirability of emptiness.

Colin's misery is caused by his helplessness in the face of Rosalynde's unwillingness. Stevens's "misericordia" is self-willed, a product of the mind:

> If it should be that reality exists
> In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,
> The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her
>
> Misericordia, it follows that
> Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven
> Before and after one arrives or, say,
>
> Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,
> Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes
> Or Paris in conversation at a cafe. (485-86)

If real and unreal are two in one, then they cancel each other out. New Haven before (unreal) is replaced by New Haven after (real), just as Bergamo on a postcard subsequently becomes the "real" city. Rome after dark replaces Rome before dark — the newer something constantly invalidating the older version in a cycle of destruction which leaves finally nothing but the mind. One thing not only replaces another; it displaces another so that the poet must create from "nothingness":

The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands (486).

The Spenserian Stevens establishes a preconditional denial by finding a way for reality to destroy itself — a process of intricate evasion ultimately leading to the nothingness with which he began. Out of the cancellations caused by "misericordia," the Spen-

serian Stevens creates things unseen. Stevens changes Spenserian expectation (destroyed by the woman's will) into his own disinclination (fostered by his own unwillingness) just as he cancelled Petrarch's idealized other by "otherizing" himself.

Whereas Spenser goes through an elaborate pretense in order to arrive at the rejected Colin, Stevens confesses openly to a rejecting self. His ordinary evening has to take place in "total leaflessness" (477):

> The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen.
> The robins are là-bas, the squirrels in tree-caves,
> Huddle together in the knowledge of squirrels. (487)

If the poem of reverberations in XII depends on a letting go that makes reflection possible, the plain version depends on a holding fast that makes things clear. The poem turns inward with the wind, moving both beyond the horizon and into the ground. The reverberating poem depends upon the mobility of observed and observer, so that the statues are *like* leaves. This poem depends on the stasis of observer and observed. The effort is to acquire the inward vision, the vantage point and knowledge, of the squirrels. That position depends on a penetration (a struggle for protection from others) which is also an exposing (a desire to imperil or risk the self). The will emerges as a willingness-to-risk-exposure. And, in the last poem, Stevens demonstrates *how* that willingness reveals:

> the inner men
> Behind the outer shields. (488)

Plainness allows for something besides starkness. "Barrenness . . . appears" (487) not as an inward lack of fertility but as an outward lack of protection; naked alpha and the exposed child are the inward coming outward, something tiny now visible because the shield has been removed. The exposure is a willingness to risk not being.

But in the conclusion of XXXI, the Spenserian Stevens goes one step further, progressing in three stages, from a potential observer of reality to a potential creator of reality. The last poem has three parts — the first cosmic as the poem moves from music

to thunder; the second political as the poem moves from Constantine to President Blank; the third centripetal as the poem moves from force to dust. All three sections have at their centre a potential nothingness — a ghostliness — epitomized in the first by the dead candle; in the second by Mr. Blank; in the third by a shade. The nest of boxes Stevens describes envelops the minutia even as it exposes it. Stevens establishes the existence of the inside something and its connection to the outside forces. As the "little reds" and "lighter words" come into focus, they are almost instantly absorbed by the fires and thunder they compose. The first third of the poem moves outward to define the sweep, the last third moves inward to search out a still finer something. As Stevens ends "Le Monocle" with the downward movement of a fluttering surface thing, so he ends "An Ordinary Evening" with a hidden — and imagined — "flickering" underneath. The way to avoid being swept up is to move even further than downward. It is to move inward. But the section begins with an outward absorption:

> The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds
> Not often realized, the lighter words
> In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men
>
> Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music
> In the strokes of thunder, dead candles at the window
> When day comes, fire-foams in the motions of the sea. (488)

The first section suggests a sensual doubling and then tripling, as the sound of the sea becomes a stroke in the sky and the sight of the ocean emerges a fire/foam. With the last image, the vaulted lightening descends into the wavy ocean. One element (fire/water/earth/sky) merges with the other as each outward thing is composed of its inward substances; one destroys the other as each larger thing absorbs its smaller components. The theory of replacement — essential to the Spenserian ethos — emerges as a theory of transformation as the fire foams of the waves combine fire and water and as the light of the candle is enlarged "when day comes" (488).

If the first part of poem XXXI suggests how the individual thing is absorbed even as it is evoked, the second suggests how

it might resist that absorption, not forever in a permanent recession but for a while in the freedom of regression. In the first section, the shieldless inner men get swept up by the larger strokes and motions of the world. In the second section, the tiny man moves himself — by observation — through history. The flicking, like the flutter of "Le Monocle," is a movement of the eye into the centre of detail: the finikin. The transition from observer to participant occurs in the ambiguous transformation of observer to artist in the stanza that begins:

> Flickings from finikin to fine finikin
> And the general fidget from busts of Constantine
> To photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank.
>
> These are the edgings and inchings of final form,
> The swarming activities of the formulae
> Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at. (488)

If, in XII, the statues uprooted themselves to become like leaves and like the self in flight, here the sculptor moves in history, within the political world, a kind of Ariel of the centuries, jumping nervously (from finikin to fine finikin) and moving from busts of Constantine to photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank, from the earliest history to the present state. History becomes art as artist and observer merge so that it becomes difficult to tell who does the flicking or who participates in the "general fidget." The historical personages themselves are reduced to almost nothing, as the waves eliminate by their motion both the fire foams that propel them and themselves, as day extinguishes the candles and itself, as the thunder out-shouts the sheets of music and dies. Resembling the statues that are "like newspapers" (473) in XII, the busts are linked to the photographs in their ephemerality. Art and technology merge in the process of absorption that defines the universe. The great "strokes" and "motions" of the first part become the tiny fidgets of the attenuated event. If, in the first stanza, sight and sound move toward the spectacular, sheets of music drowned by strokes of thunder, dead candles dwarfed by the sun, man outdone by nature, here the spectacle and the spectator are diminished as the flickering

eye merges with the vanishing subject. Constantine becomes Blank.

The way forward in history becomes a way backward in time as each event is telescoped by the fact that it is possible, as observer, to move from the bust of Constantine to the photograph of the late president, Mr. Blank. If the theory of replacement works in the geography of cities (New Haven before one arrives and Rome after dark), it works as well in the history of nations. Stevens's edging and inching are Spenser's "low-louting" and exalting, the recessive/progressive impulse. To edge is to fall off, to inch is to climb up, not in a grand gesture but in a modest imitation that encapsulates the movement of the waves and the progress of the planets. The geographical replacement depends on a moving self in space, the historical on a moving self in time — one able to jump from finikin to fine finikin. And, if the theory of replacement reduced reality to a sense of one's presence in it, New Haven before and after one arrives, the Spenserian Stevens makes the individual part of the process of reality as he echoes the movement from or toward a final form, as he reduces form to formula, to the parts composing it. The word formula is a little form — both aligned with the concrete object and contingent on the abstract theory. The formula becomes a proposition about reality and reality itself: the statue is an existent artifact and an idea about Constantine. Reality moves toward its own elimination, when progress dwindles into repetition. The emperor joins the president (Constantine becomes Blank) even as both approach obliteration (the nameless Mr. Blank). If leaflessness is the means by which the seasons achieve vision, even if the vision is a proposition of its own nothingness. To face the possibility of extinction, to keep facing it throughout history, is to submit the human to the test of nature. "Edging" and "indirectly" imply a cutting away — a recession — the opposite of "inching" and "directly" — a progression. Extinction in the face of expansion makes way for Spenserian replacement. Even as Stevens identifies the "lighter words," he names the "heavy drum."

Section XXXI seeks to make sight into sound, as poetry is an auditory record of the world we see. That reduction of the senses is part of the attenuating process of the poem. "The eye's plain

version" is the ear's planed occlusion. Sight and sound are obliterated in the sequence as the vision of nature and the record of history evolve into the "blank" of leaflessness. The second section is linked to the first and to poem XII. Its *flicking*, the tiniest movement of sound, resembles the *flickering* of XII, the tiniest movement of sight. The recessive sweep in the first section via the oxymoron of "fire-foam" connects to thunder and to the enormity of heavenly clatter. *Flicking* is the final reduction of sound as the blankness of the "late president" is the final elimination of sight. The first third of section XXXI turns sight into sound as the "reds" of speech merge with the reds of candles to become fire-foams of thunder. That connection between sea and sky cements the recession into a primal void, the undoing of the Genesis separation. The second third reverses the order as swarming formulae move toward final form, the silence of blank, yet another void. In the last section, the sight of the "spectrum of violet" and the sound of the practiced scales combine in the image of the woman tearing up a note. She provides visible evidence (the note) and audible denial (the tearing). Her "note" as music turns into the "naught" of silence. If the first third of XXXI presents the disappearance of the exposed minutia as its surface is effaced in the sweep and flow of nature, and if the second third presents the effacement of the faces of history into the nameless blank, the last third presents the appearance of a deeper minutia as the surface is scratched off in the penetrating traversal at the end. The transition from absorption to penetration that links man to nature occurs as history and art emerge cyclical in the section about Constantine and Mr. Blank.

In the second section, the observing eye turns the world into a blank. In the last section, the participating "I" creates the void. With politics and history obviated, the Spenserian Stevens compares his own denying impulse to that of the denying woman:

> Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,
> A philosopher practising scales on his piano,
> A woman writing a note and tearing it up.
>
> It is not in the premise that reality
> Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
> A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (488-89)

In the personification of the evoking evening, he portrays nature's tendency to pull back even at the very moment it is most suggestive, the way violet is both the colour of the transition state between sleeping and waking (a becoming) *and* the herald of night (an annihilation). The philosopher practicing scales constructs a field which is both full and empty (exploring the range of possibility as he climbs the scale, denying the range as he descends toward silence). Similarly, the woman writing a note and tearing it up exhibits the ultimate freedom to create and destroy what she makes. That freedom expresses her desire to refrain from the liaison she initially seemed to want. The woman may be writing a love note, a statement of feeling which she can always deny just as nature revokes the notes (the leaves) it creates and leaves itself leafless. When she tears up the note, the woman refuses contact, postponing indefinitely the inevitable meeting. She is both the denying Rosalynde and (through the simile of woman and philosopher) the denying poet.

While Spenser puts all the blame on Rosalynde, Stevens indicts himself as he becomes evening, philosopher and woman, expressing his increasing desire to "tear it up." That becoming occurs through the process of the metaphor which refers to the large world (the sun rising and the sheets of music) at the beginning. The sun setting and the small scales are the opposites of the brightening and volume of the opening. But the reference backward into the completion of the circle is a reference forward into a penetration of the circle, toward the centre of denial. To avoid the absorption of the individual by the larger forces of the world, it is necessary to pull back from the world and to negate, by a process of "unscaling," the brightening prospect. Instead of expanding to wave or thunder or sun, Stevens contracts still further, regressing from solid to shade, from spectrum to speck, into the minutia. The movement of shade and dust parallels the relationship of edging and inching which, in turn, repeats the "and yet" of the opening. The word "traverse" is both a movement across and an opposition. Such a contradiction involves a pulling back of the self, a reining in which controls. The perceiver, the philosopher, the woman, and the force create the conditions they parallel even as they recognize the larger cycle

that absorbs them. Reality is a movement not a solid, a movement that resists life simultaneously as it prepares for rebirth, a movement that asserts life even as it includes death. Stevens does not deny that leaflessness anticipates spring, or that the woman who tears up a note can always write a new one, or that the philosopher can still practice another scale when he finishes the first. Rather he finds — if only temporarily — support for his instinct to withdraw and to remain the spokesman for isolation and retreat. The rejection of solids includes a rejection of the permanent manacle of love. But that rejection allows for an exploration of self which facilitates the regenerative force.

Spenser begins with a "she" who makes him "low to lout," blaming his recreated fantasy on the reality of a rejecting other. Stevens begins with his own denying impulse and finds, in concentric circles of resemblances, his connection to the naturally denying universe. Thus, while Spenser creates other worlds out of his exemption from the procreative process of this one, Stevens sides with nature's decreativeness and forges his poetics on a denying world. Through the similes, he becomes the hesitating woman, the scaling philosopher and the darkening evening. He acquires from nature itself the energy that other writers seek in the inspiring security of mothers or the desired stimulation of lovers. His poem evolves from an imitation written in apparent "lessness" — leafless, loveless, objectless — equal to the potential fullness — leaves, regeneration, purpose — of reality. While the plenitude of the Spenserian vision depends on the emptiness of an initial "no," Stevens openly seeks that emptiness. He does so to arrive at the necessary first stage through which Petrarch framed the vision of a deified Laura and Spenser designed the sequence of an eternal Rosalynde. Without the animus of external rejection, the Spenserian and Petrarchan visions have no reason for being. In "An Ordinary Evening," Stevens incorporates the naysaying "other," an incorporation that allows him to assume on his own the rootless "I" of Petrarch and the naturalized self of Spenser. When he alludes to their conventions, Stevens openly asserts his place in that long line of poets beginning with the Renaissance who, though they pay lip-service to the inspiring and coveted woman, find their poetics in the resources of the insular

and private self. But while Petrarch and Spenser still pay homage to the denying Lauras and Rosalyndes who make them "pipe so merrily," the Stevens of "An Ordinary Evening" seeks to understand the sources of denial by assimilating the deniers. His traversing of spatial (the violet evening), temporal (the unwinding scales), and gender (the tearing woman) barriers allows him to conclude that "it is not in the premise that reality / is a solid." By eliminating the boundaries, Stevens assumes the decreative burden, pulling the withdrawing other into the withdrawn self.

NOTES

[1] Connecting Stevens to two Renaissance poets despite the fact that the act may "appear perverse" (39), Margaret W. Ferguson speaks not of the inspiration of love but the influence of death. She argues that Rome was a woman for du Bellay and Spenser as well as the lens through which the successor viewed his source. Spenser's translation of du Bellay supports "the myth . . . [of] finding reassurance about the continued existence of one's own poetic powers through a re-creative vision of another's ruin, a ruin that is made an occasion for the exercise of one's own eloquence" (43). Speaking of George Santayana as the Roman focus for Stevens in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," Ferguson maintains that while the Renaissance poets "struggle against the seductive or threatening power of others' voices," Stevens attempts to merge "his voice with Santayana" (43).

The argument here involves the Renaissance poets and Stevens in another mood — that of separation from the desired other who is seen not as the source of poetic language but as the origin of poetic energy. I agree with Ferguson's assumption that it is possible to find a critical thread binding poets across periods.

[2] Michel Benamou speaks about Stevens's conscious struggle to rid himself of parents:

> He is a poet who has vested himself with the power wrested away from the symbolic parents and the mythic Parent. The decentering of presence implies also the disseminating of the poet as father. (482-83)

[3] Helen Vendler, too, cites this sonnet largely because she sees "An Ordinary Evening" as Stevens's "excursion into that 'undiscovered country' of the old." (*On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, pp. 270, 274, and 295.)

[4] Harold Bloom links this passage to Keats' "Bright Star":

> [Keats] wants to be at once the star "in lone splendour" but also "pillowed upon the sleepy bosom of the real" which for him is "my fair love's ripening breasts." The evening star is one of Time's images, ancient in its anteriority. By saying that it is an inner light and then calling its home the real, Stevens has introjected reality even as he tries to draw the star out of the Not-me into the me. (328)

Bloom's emphasis is on the "not-me" turning into the "me." But Keats' reference to his beloved indicates that he acquires his poetic vision "pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast." Keats makes the beloved into a mother whose comforts enable him to acquire the "steadfast" qualities

of the star. Bloom does not emphasize enough that for Stevens, star and bosom are the same. There is no intermediary to heighten the poet's sensitivity to his only inspiration — reality.

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