

A DIALECTICAL READING OF WALLACE STEVENS'

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"

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"The partaker partakes of what changes him"¹

This description of dialectics is a fitting epigraph for a dialectical reading of any poem by Wallace Stevens. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,"² a later poem, the poet reveals his quest for the "ultimate poem," one that "... "Must be Abstract," "Must Change," and "Must Give Pleasure," titles of its three parts respectively. "Notes" ends with an exact balance among all parts. The second part of "Notes," "It Must Change," celebrates mutability, "the marriage of contraries without which there is no progression."³ This can be seen as dialectics.

In Hegelian terms, dialectic designates the triadic movement of thought from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. In *Phenomenology* Hegel points out that thought moves forward toward truth by negation: "Every assertion ('That color is red') is negated by some other assertion ('No, it is blue'), and these two are then reconciled in a third assertion ('Rather, it is royal purple')." ⁴

We will focus our discussion of Stevens' "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" on the triadic movement of the poem, the way it develops around and through opposition in the figures of the poet and the woman. It is true that Stevens' earlier poem "Sunday Morning,"⁵ first published in 1915, evolves around similar characters, being a dialectic between the poet and a woman who feels guilty for staying home from church and enjoying the physical

beauty of "late coffee and oranges in a sunny chair, / And the green freedom of a cuckatoo / upon a rug ..."⁶

But the woman of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" would never feel twinges of conscience since she believes herself superior to the rest of the mortals, no matter how much her high morals might be pretentious, as we could infer from the very adjective "high-toned."

The long title of the poem is the first hint to its tone: it partakes of an old fashioned world-view, and it sounds as if it might comprise not only the experience of this particular woman, but of a group of people of whom she is representative. The poem is a dissection of the values of a Christian woman, not this woman. At this point, though, one cannot tell the poet's attitude towards her.

"Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame." From the outset and later on in the poem one feels the presence of two characters dialectically opposed: the poet's voice, the sole speaker throughout the poem, and the woman-listener, whose opinions we are to deduce from the movement of the poem. We wonder whether the poet's voice may be identified with Stevens', the actual Poet.

The expression "supreme fiction" enters the title of Stevens' longest and most ambitious poem, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," and is repeatedly referred to in his works as the "world of imagination," where the poet should take men to, leading them away from their purely moral world. In his essay "Imagination as Value" Stevens states: "... the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos."⁶ So, from the first statement one may consider one of Stevens' issue, that is, the need of "permeation of man's life by the imagination,"⁷ and the speaker can be seen as Stevens himself.

After expressing his view, the poet will attempt to guide the old woman away from her world and towards the "supreme fiction." The next couple of lines invite her to partake of an imaginary "flight" taking her "moral law," and transforming it into a "nave," and expand it into "haunted heaven." The connotations of the latter expression are related to the foundations of this paradise: while on the one level it brings to mind the pleasures and joys of an unknown paradise, a pagan place of sensuous bliss, on the other level it is haunted by moral stiff laws, abstractions, fixation, paralysis. The nave, related to the physical aspect of a Christian church, the sitting area of a congregation, does not articulate with the distant heaven, since the nave is horizontally placed. The void between the nave, fixed on the ground, and heaven, haunts the latter, suggesting a place devoid of vitality tension, or challenge. "Haunted heaven" connotes a locked, compartmented doctrine, a place lacking in imagination.

"Thus," the poet continues, "the conscience is converted into palms."

This implies, on the one hand that imagination is a flux that "changes as the mind changes," multiplying images, as mirrors reflecting mirrors. On the other hand it carries a religious connotation of the "conscience" (moral law) transformed into symbols of victory, gaiety, and joy.

"The windy citherns hankering for hymns" offers a challenging image of paradoxal desire. Citherns (here in a combined spelling mixing "cittern," a guitar of Renaissance England, and the ancient Greek musical instrument "cithara") are symbols of the cosmos, with round and flat sides. A cithern is the synthesis of heaven and earth; it carries here the negative, noisy, empty qualities of "windy," which is also related to the violent aspects

of the element air. One detects a rather admonishing tone in the use of "hanker," implying a desire for something forbidden or rather unattainable. Might one deduce that "conscience" (i.e. moral law) should not covet the "palms," symbols of fecundity, and victory? One should also remember that in Jung palms are connected with the "anima," the feminine, intuitive side of beings.

Both characters "agree in principle," Stevens says; that is, we assume that the woman agrees with and understands where imagination is leading her. The poet adds "That's clear," meaning that he expected this reaction from her. But is the old woman capable of following the multiraying connotations of the images presented here? The poet seems to feel that she is unilaterally biased by her religious faith; maybe she is merely creating her own image of "her" heaven. Since it is the poet's role "to help people live their lives," "to make his imagination theirs," the poet moves dialectically into another direction, in another "flight" with the woman.

As the poem progresses there is a shift in direction and in tone when the poet firmly warns: "But take the opposing law," by which he means the sheer pleasure in life, the flexibility, the tension, the challenge, the sensuous expression of life as compared with the "moral law" of the old woman's world-view.

Now all the images will be counterparts of the ones presented in the first "flight" (in the sense that neither the former nor the latter have "completeness" by themselves). Thus, opposing "haunted heaven" we have the "masque," opposing the "nave" there is a "peristyle," which projects itself higher than the nave, vertically. A peristyle is a range of roof-supporting columns, partaking thus of the three levels of meaning of any world-axis

symbol; that is the reason why it can help"... project a masque..." beyond the planets, in the seven directions beyond the life generating planets. "And from the peristyle project a masque beyond the planets," that is, present a dramatic performance to amuse the Universe, with music, dancing, fine costumes. The degree of paralysis is lower here, and there is more articulation in the peristyle, as a form. "Thus, our bawdiness unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last, is equally converted into palms," that is, in an amoral world it is also possible for a man to get his "palms" of "victory" and joy, even without having a formal approval of his counterparts, even if he gives way to his pleasures. The issue here has two levels, such as in the first "flight": on the level of human actions morality is depicted as relativistic, rather than absolute. On the level of art, imagination may create its imagery out of the conventional or unconventional "morality" of art. Note also that the "saxophones," more blatant, more earthly, contrast with the heavenly image of the "citherns" of the opposite view.

"And palm for palm, madame, we are where we began." The circular movement is inferred by both flights reaching the same spot, back to reality; but, through this continuously expanding process of resolving contradictions by seeking even larger wholes in which they are included, maybe doubts have arisen in the woman's mind. The two opposites "conscience" and "bawdiness" were "equally converted into palms." Perhaps the thesis (moral law) and its antithesis (bawdiness) have a point of contact where opposites are assimilated and transcended, and doubts resolved. Thus, the third quest begins with a vision of the disloyal "flagellants," disciplining themselves in a purification ritual, "proud of such novelties of the sublime," proud of their unusual behavior. "Allow therefore... "that these men,""May, merely may, madame, whip from

themselves / A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres." The tone turns ironical and almost impatient. In trying the synthesis of the betrayal of the body and acceptance of it as a joyful expression of life, the poet feels that the woman will oppose him. How can she (even in her imagination) deny her dearest moral values? She is not free to yield herself, Stevens seems to imply.

The idea of the flagellants partaking for a moment of the pleasures of life, roaring, having a grand time, "will make widows wince," since the widows stand here for no share in life, for no balance between reality and imagination. They do not live organically, having one dimension only, and this prevents them from feeling the vibrations of earthly life. For Stevens (and for the poet here) "all real religion is concerned with a renewal of earth rather than with a surrender to heaven."⁸ This is the point the poet wants the old woman to realize. In Stevens one feels that "an important manifestation of the skeptical strain(...) is the rejection of revealed religion."⁹ As the widows leave the scene "... fictive things wink," that is, the imagination becomes more vital, as it adheres to what is real, in Stevens' sense that "'reality' is "things as they are." The old woman was absorbed by an imaginative insight. The poet played his part displaying (through his imagination) a more flexible life to the woman, a dynamic existence full of changes and movements as the imagery of curved forms connotes. Now, it is her turn to choose between fixity or flexibility, between "heavenly" or earthly life, or the balance between both.

One of the leitmotifs in Stevens' work is the sheer play of "reality" and "imagination" or "the power of the mind over the possibilities of things," in his words. "Art," he says, "is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals." His concern is with a changing consciousness in a world moving

dialectically, towards changes.

This poem we discussed, besides the implication concerning life and morals, also illustrates the nature of poetry brilliantly.

Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" Transport to Summer in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 392.

² Stevens, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," in *Collected Poems*, pp. 308-408.

³ Harold Bloom, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," in *Wallace Stevens*, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 83.

⁴ W.T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy: Kant to Wittgenstein and Sartre* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1969), p. 125.

⁵ "Sunday Morning" was first published by Harriet Monroe in *Poetry* in a truncated version. Later it came as part of *Harmonium*. It contains the germ of practically everything Stevens later wrote. It is published in *Collected Poems*, pp. 66-70.

⁶ Wallace Stevens, "Imagination as Value," in *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), p. 153.

⁷ Stevens, "Imagination as Value," p. 144.

⁸ Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens" in *Modern Poetry: Essays on Criticism*, ed. John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 274.

⁹ Marie Borroff, ed., "Wallace Stevens: The World and the Poet," in *Wallace Stevens* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 2-3.