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Author(s): BRIAN BRODHEAD GLASER

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Masculine Fecundity and "Overinclusiveness": Imagery of Pregnancy in Wallace Stevens' Poetry

BRIAN BRODHEAD GLASER

IN HER INFLUENTIAL 1995 book, *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, Jessica Benjamin articulates a concept of "overinclusiveness." It is not at first look the most appealing term for talking about the poetry of Wallace Stevens, who in his later work sought a "supreme fiction" yet made little effort to bring a diversity of voices into his poems. Stevens is a vulnerable poet in this respect. Mark Halladay's 1991 *Stevens and the Interpersonal* has fleshed out a sense of Stevens' world as without compassion and therefore emotionally stunted, and this has become a familiar criticism. Benjamin's idea, however, can help us to read Stevens' poetry as carrying out a process in which imaginative exploration leads to emotional maturation. Central to this way of reading Stevens is the idea that fantasizing is not always and only a flight from reality. Elaborating specific imaginative scenarios can lead to increased self-knowledge, which can in turn catalyze psychological change.

Considering the prevalence in clinical cases of frustrated longing for a measure of supremacy in daily life, Benjamin points toward self-conscious fantasizing as a route to growth:

> [I]f we cannot expect to eradicate the deep, unconscious sediment of the omnipotence fantasy in our psychic and cultural life, it might be good enough to know how we might mitigate its most dire forms: by taking that fantasy back into the self, owning our capacity to create a realm of the ideal. . . . [F]antasy can become the medium of the self at play. (113)

Considered as a medium, fantasy is a space where one can re-create, where one can be changed for the better by what one finds in play. In this context, what Benjamin calls the "transitional use of overinclusiveness" (127) means that one experiences in fantasy a capacity one does not actually have, an experience that is beneficial because it allows one to tolerate consciously a frustrated wish and, so, in some cases, to move toward a resolution of that wish. Benjamin describes a number of overinclusive fantasies, all of them originating in the "preoedipal" phase of childhood, when is-

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sues of identification with and separation from the mother or mother figure take place. For males, however, overinclusive fantasy does take a specific characteristic form: "the capacity to bear a baby" (63). Drawing on the work of Irene Fast, in particular her 1984 *Gender Identity*, as well as her own clinical experience, Benjamin claims that men can be led to an increasingly realistic—and less narcissistically frustrated—sense of self by revisiting in fantasy the "pregnancy envy" of the preoedipal phase.[1]

If we read poetry written across forty years in Wallace Stevens' body of work as "the medium of the self at play," its increasingly playful overinclusive elements can be seen as signs of Stevens' growing capacity to tolerate ambiguity and envy. Joan Richardson's biography of Stevens has discussed some of this material, focusing on the links among his personal life, his habitual defenses against emotion, and his poetry. I would like to approach the psychological dimensions of Stevens' work in a somewhat different way. Changes in his use of imagery of pregnancy show us something about a development in Stevens' inner life. In particular, the images of his later poems show a diminishment of his earlier tendency to associate birth with death, a sign of his increasing tolerance of the envious desire to be pregnant. This essay describes this process of development, contrasting *Harmonium* and later poems written with the idea of celebrating an enlarged and fecund male figure, arguing that as Stevens becomes overinclusive in his gender identifications he also works free of a tendency to associate birth and death.[2]

The Birth-Death Image Complex in *Harmonium*

Perhaps the most famous pronouncement in Stevens' first book, the 1923 *Harmonium*, comes in the poem "Sunday Morning": "Death is the mother of beauty."[3] The memorable quality of this epigram comes in part from the way it makes two concise observations about beauty: that it is intensified by finitude, and that it emerges from an obscure and threatening source. Its metaphor of death as a mother takes on another shade of meaning, however, in the context of images of motherhood in Stevens' early poems. Figural language in "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," as well as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "The Comedian as the Letter C," and "Nomad Exquisite" from *Harmonium*, repeatedly associate pregnancy and birth with corruption and death. It is an imaginative mechanism of the work.

The same connection is made in the Hindu notion of *Samsara*, the web of life and death, and it is also expressed, as Michele Lise Tarter suggests, in the curse of painful childbirth in the first book of the *Tanakh* (20). In *Harmonium*, Stevens has a particular way of coloring this longstanding and transcultural association, however. He emphatically imagines a corruption inherent in the fertile figure. Death dwells in the body that gives birth. In this respect, the pregnancy images of *Harmonium* are not only tropes on the enduring *topos* of birth-and-death but are also dynamized

by Stevens' attitudes toward maternal bodies. In *Harmonium*, beauty escapes from a deadly mother.

"The Worms at Heaven's Gate" offers a pronounced instance of this tendency. In the poem the body of Badroulbadour, the princess in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* whom Aladdin marries with the help of genii released from his lamp, is carried out of the tomb by worms whose gradual devouring of the corpse Stevens portrays as a re-assembling of her:

> Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbadour,
> Within our bellies, we her chariot.
> Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
> The lashes of that eye and its white lid.
> Here is the cheek on which that lid declined,
> And, finger after finger, here, the hand,
> The genius of that cheek. Here are the lips,
> The bundle of the body and the feet.
> . . . . . .
> Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbadour. (40)

This poem plays out the most concrete consequences for saying that death is the mother of beauty, for it expresses both celebratory and denigratory attitudes towards this thesis. On the one hand, the labor of the worms turns the process of decomposition into the material of a *blazon*, a praise poem listing the features of the beloved. The worms save Badroulbadour from decay and from the grave itself, and they translate her into a beautiful presentation, a saving carrying-over emphasized in the last line's reprise of the first. On the other hand, the worms chariot her to heaven in their bellies, a process that condenses womb and digestive tract. The combination of methodological precision ("here, . . . one by one," "finger after finger") and spontaneous, unorthodox ordering of the parts (eye, lashes individually, cheek, hand, then lips, body, feet) suggests a delivery of Badroulbadour that is part birth and part elimination. The worms are corrupt wombs themselves and also figures for the corruption in the tomb-womb birthing Badroulbadour into heaven.

The eighth section of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," a poem largely concerned with the less sanguine, more reflective pleasures of life after forty, displays at its end another intense and decadent metaphor of fecundity:

> Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love,
> An ancient aspect touching a new mind.
> It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies.
> This trivial trope reveals a way of truth.
> Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
> Two golden gourds distended on our vines,

We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.
The laughing sky will see the two of us
Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains. (13)

Stevens asserts the "truth" of his birth-death "trope" in the first half of the stanza, and he closes with a prophecy of the sky's cold mirth in the face of this decay. But the weight of the stanza lies in its middle, with its "distended," "Distorted" gourds. They match each other in their "grotesque" fullness. The distention, the disfigurement, the marking, the subjection to time, to winter and rain—these must happen to the two gourds together. The dyad has been handed over to a "fatness" that corrupts. Indeed, the note of decay enters only as the fecund "it" of the poem gives way to the over-ripe "we."

Fecundity itself is what has betrayed two that were blossoms, and so poisoned their relation. If the poem, like "Sunday Morning," makes an allusion to "To Autumn" in closing with a mention of the sky, it figures autumn differently, not as a voluptuary drowsing and watching the ooze of cider but as an ice queen, splashing frost and bringing warts. The characterization is motivated by envy and fear. It is possible to read these two unfortunate gourds as marking too the failure of Stevens' pursuit of an alternate figure of generation, his inability to imagine testicles as counterparts to the womb. In any event they have grown too big with fruit out of what Stevens calls elsewhere the "venereal soil" (38).

It is in the long poem "The Comedian as the Letter C" that Stevens most consistently imagines the earth as rank with generation, expanding his tendency to make dark etymological puns on the name Florida into a broader attitude of denigration toward (mother) nature. Harold Bloom concurs with Helen Vendler that Stevens acknowledges in the poem that his instinct for admiration runs to the "austerities" and "dilapidations" of nature rather than to its "fertility," and that Crispin, the character of the poem, represents a Stevens "who is repelled as the provocations of the senses reach excess" (76). The language of the poem is ceaselessly excessive, with a hyper decadence that critics alternately see as mocking or mirroring the intensity of Crispin's journey from Bordeaux to the Yucatan to Havana and then the Carolinas. If Crispin learns anything from all this motion, it is demonstrated in the shift from the postulate that "man is the intelligence of his soil" at the start of the poem to the contrasting claim that "his soil is man's intelligence" (22, 29) at the start of the fourth section. The freedom of the mental from the earthy becomes more skeptically seen as the poem goes on. The intelligence becomes soiled.

Against the background of this inclination away from unambiguous celebration of fertility, the poem's images of natural generation tend to seem repellent. In the poem's second section, for instance, surrounded by

"Green barbarism turning paradigm," the journeyer in the Yucatan surrenders to the influence of his soil this way:

> Crispin foresaw a curious promenade
> Or, nobler, sensed an elemental fate,
> And elemental potencies and pangs,
> And beautiful barenesses as yet unseen,
> Making the most of savagery of palms,
> Of moonlight on the thick, cadaverous bloom
> That yuccas breed, and of the panther's tread. (25)

Crispin ironically makes the most of the profuse vegetative (and animal) life around him by an imaginative reduction, winnowing down from the variety of a "promenade" to an "elemental fate" and then from that singular fate to a "beautiful bareness as yet unseen." The "pangs" of this bareness will be the opposite of the pangs of birth, for they will reduce rather than multiply. Surrounded by fecundity, Crispin longs to unmake it. To do this he relies on, in Stevens' accurate word, "savagery"—not only of the palms but of the panthers and, fittingly, of the "cadaverous bloom" the yucca bears at the end of its life, a death-bred flower. The round moon and the dying yucca conspire to hold one flower up and out from the savage forest. In both the literal figure of the yucca and the symbolic one of the moon, the mother of beauty is deadly.

Bloom notes the likeness between "The Comedian as the Letter C" and another of Stevens' more vegetal poems, "Nomad Exquisite," lamenting the change at the end of the poem from an earlier version's "So, in me, come flinging / Fruits, forms, flowers, flakes and fountains" to the final version's "Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames" (Bloom 86). His telling point in associating the two poems is that Stevens aspires to a version of the procreative power that frightens him, a power he is willing to imaginatively appropriate in *Harmonium* only if it is linked to decay. In "Nomad Exquisite," the speaker flings "Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames" (77), the last of which, presumably ashes, signify the unmaking of the flung forms. This too bears the marks of envy in its mechanical undoing of what has been created.

If one will agree, on the basis of these examples, that *Harmonium* links birth and death in a mechanical way, it is appropriate to ask why this might be so, particularly as this tendency diminishes in Stevens' later work. In an analysis of images of pregnancy in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Mary Thomas Crane relies on theories of cognitive psychology to argue that the play demonstrates how the human mind experiences itself as subject to the body, and to an extent inevitably contaminated by it. Characters' use of figures of the body demonstrate, in their recurrent depiction of corruption, "the inevitable vulnerability and contamination that are the conditions of human selfhood, productivity, and exchange" (292). In par-

ticular, Crane notes that "male characters attempt (and fail) to formulate a concept of pregnancy that retains its productivity and plenitude but avoids contamination" (282). Crane's approach to the play offers one way to talk about the similar tendency to associate pregnancy and contamination in Stevens' early work. But Crane does not explain why pregnancy of all bodily states takes on the importance that it does, and her approach leaves little room to explain why the birth-death image complex diminishes in Stevens' later work. Rather than accept the birth-death complex as biologically necessary, it seems to me more responsive to view "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" and other poems with a similar dynamic as the expression of a set of desires and fears about masculine creativity.[4]

I would argue that Stevens' first book repeatedly links death and the womb as a compromise between Stevens' sense of masculine identity on the one hand and his ambition toward a creative fullness and fecundity that can only be called maternal on the other. Two essays in the 1993 *Wallace Stevens and the Feminine* that approach the dynamics of gender in his poetry come to a similar conclusion: Stevens' work struggles with the process of individuation from a mother figure experienced as alternately engulfing and cold. As Mary B. Arensberg puts this:

> To reexperience "the mother's face" is a central idea or motivation behind the desires, narcissistic strivings, and quest for supreme fiction in the poetry of Wallace Stevens . . . [but] the healing of the poet's scar scratched on the psyche by the absent or rejecting mother is another subtext in the emergence of the feminine in Stevens' poetry. (24–26)

C. Roland Wagner makes a similar argument in more specifically psychoanalytic language, locating this conflicted relation in the preoedipal phase of development: "Ambivalent attachment to the nurturing, pre-Oedipal mother is central to our understanding of Stevens" (125). In the metaphorical language of "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," the articulate worms represent both a nurturing but potentially overwhelming mother and a companionable but potentially rejecting one, as well as connoting their slippery, uninviting entanglement in one another.

Wagner's term, "pre-Oedipal," is important because it points out that issues of male identity are inflected not only by Oedipal rivalry but also by genital difference from the mother, which complicates primary experiences of relatedness. Yet with respect to male identity, one should not insist on a rigid distinction between issues of connectedness and independence on the one hand and Oedipal envy on the other. As Nancy Chodorow has argued in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, consolidation of male identity is complicated even in the preoedipal period by both mother and son's awareness of their gender difference. A longed-for experience of oneness

can come to seem a threat to secure gender identity, forcing a male child to choose between mother and self:

> in societies like ours, which are male-dominated but have relatively father-absent families and little paternal participation in family life and child care, masculinity and sexual difference ("oedipal" issues) become intertwined with separation-individuation ("preoedipal") issues almost from the beginning of a boy's life. . . . [F]undamental feelings of dependence, overwhelming attachment, and merging with the mother, developed by a son during intense and exclusive early years, [are ones] that he feels he must overcome in order to attain independence and a masculine self-identification. (106)

Envy of the womb can be seen as a natural spot of developmental fixation, since it locks in place—through what Chodorow elsewhere calls the boy's compulsion to "distinguish and differentiate himself from others in a way that a girl need not" (174)—both the preoedipal fantasy of perfect union with the mother and the rivalrous possessiveness of the Oedipal phase. From such a position, envious corrupting of the womb in fantasy does the work of both externalizing intensely felt deficiencies of merger with a powerfully creative mother and managing the problematic assertion of gender identity. For a creatively aspiring man it has considerable appeal as a compromise.

Overinclusiveness, "Major Man," and Beyond

The holograph manuscript of Stevens' 1944 poem "Esthétique du Mal" has a number of revealing differences from the final version of the poem, many of which are discussed in Jeff Jaeckle's 2005 essay " 'These Minutiae Mean More': Five Editions of Wallace Stevens' 'Esthétique du Mal.' " One of the few differences not mentioned in that article is the shift from the holograph's "the adventurer / In humanity has not conceived a race / Completely physical in a physical world" to the ultimate "not conceived *of* a race / Completely physical" (WAS 4140 [12]). Stevens' relocation from the body to the mind as the source of generation is an understandable equivocation, particularly because he is talking about race, which occupies a space between the physical and the mental. Remarkable, though, in the context of his birth-death associations in *Harmonium*, is that Stevens could come to his formulation of what cultural work poetry should do in 1944 through an albeit finally occluded maternal metaphor.[5]

Stevens' imagination matured over twenty years and the changes in images of pregnancy and birth are a measure of that change. There is in the later poetry no envious corrupting of a fertile figure. But it is not only that shades of death and corruption around the subject of creative power diminish in the later work. Through a series of male figures, Stevens' imagination

also becomes in his later work increasingly overinclusive in Benjamin's sense of the term, representing masculinity as capable of a fertile enlargement, of pregnancy of a kind. Linked to Stevens' increasingly heroic aspirations for poetry in general and for his poetry in particular is the imagery of a male body that grows not out of desire but out of inclusiveness.

Later Stevens in short becomes increasingly tolerant of, and even drawn to, maternal identifications that can coexist with his idealization of masculinity. In reading him this way I rely on psychoanalytic thought not only for terms to describe the evolution of his work but also for a term to explain how poetry fosters emotional development. Poetry was for Stevens what the critic Frank B. Farrell has recently called, borrowing from the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, "transitional space." Transitional phenomena, according to Winnicott, are those that help a child through early experiences of separation by allowing him to give symbolic presence to an absent mother. (Winnicott argues, in a seminal 1966 paper, "The Location of Cultural Experience," that culture is an adult manifestation of transitional symbolization.) Farrell calls literature "transitional space" because of the way its language bears the marks of the developmental challenges—the difficult separations—that it works out and in which it has its roots:

> [L]iterary language . . . will be in its very nature a response to mourning and loss, an acknowledgment of what is both left behind and held on to in a different manner. The writer's working through language will repeat and compensate for various kinds of necessary separations, both personal and cultural. The losses . . . that are the occasion for a poem . . . have a peculiar affinity, then, with the character of the literary space that represents them, so that one thinks of that space as having required them, as having called them forth precisely to let the language do its sophisticated transitional work. (189–90)

One of the projects of Stevens' writing, seen from this perspective, is to experience the desire for creative fullness without an envious imaginary corrupting of the womb, to bring together that primordial image of creativity with his own sense of independence in his masculine identity. Poems facilitate, and are the evidence of, Stevens' transition to a more tolerant attitude toward an inescapably powerful though necessarily partially frustrated longing.

In *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things,* James Longenbach argues that in Stevens' attempt to "reassert (sexual) difference more schematically than ever before" during the Second World War, he "goes so far as to recast childbearing as a masculine power" (231, 235). Longenbach's insightful and provocative reading rests predominantly on the poems "The Woman That Had More Babies Than That" and "Chocorua to Its Neighbor." He is right to remark on a change of intensity in Stevens' masculinism.

Yet he probably overstates the importance of the war in the development of a tendency present in Stevens' work from his first book. In my view, Stevens' poetry carries out a gradually marked transition toward integration of his gender identity with his maternal identifications. The pattern of imagery in which later Stevens depicts a masculine figure as itself enlarging to include other bodies goes through three discernable phases of development. The first, playful period of "The Man With the Blue Guitar," who plays "A million people on one string" and promises to "evolve a man" (136, 149) from his music, is a preliminary but significant movement toward the more recurrent images of enlarged soldiers in Stevens' poetry of the Second World War and of solar roundness in his postwar poetry. Both of these later phases are overinclusive, attributing to an explicitly masculine figure a maternal capability to generate and shelter human life, and they mark, first in a military and then in a natural register, Stevens' gradual resolution of his earlier uneasiness about bringing together a sense of masculinity on the one hand and a sense of creative fullness on the other.

"Man and Bottle" can be read as Stevens' first re-writing of the image of the man with the blue guitar into a military key, as the image of a lone man with a necked container remains constant while the content of the poem shifts from music to war and destruction, activating the title's pun on "battle." Destruction is no less a presence in this poem than it was in the birth-death poems of *Harmonium*, but there is now an alternative to the womb-tomb in Stevens' imagination, as he establishes a contrast between an imperiled, feminine container ("romantic tenements") and a strong masculine one in the poem's early lines:

> The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,
> Who, to find what will suffice,
> Destroys romantic tenements
> Of rose and ice
>
> In the land of war. More than the man, it is
> A man with the fury of a race of men,
> A light at the centre of many lights,
> A man at the centre of men. (218)

The "romantic tenements" are destroyed in the "land of war," being made from too fragile or impermanent materials, in contrast to the mind's iconoclastic, enduring power. But this is not simply a Platonic response to war. Stevens is both unsettled by and admiring of the mind that is like a "man with the fury of a race of men," and he imagines this mind as capable of transforming not only the thoughts but also the bodies of men. Where the man with the blue guitar symbolically created a community, this heroic

figure is at the "centre of men" collectively, but also in a sense physically, turning them into gestating, preserving bodies in the midst of destruction.

In "Gigantomachia" this admiration for an enlarged and fecund male figure becomes more explicit and less ambivalent, signaling not only an increasing regard for the ideal of the soldier in Stevens' poetry of the Second World War but also an increasing tendency to separate violence from birth or growth. In a three-stanza poem about "what war magnified," the closing stanza imagines soldiers this way:

> Each man himself became a giant,
> Tipped out with largeness, bearing the heavy
> And the high, receiving out of others,
> As from an inhuman elevation
> And origin, an inhuman person,
> A mask, a spirit, an accoutrement.
> For soldiers, the new moon stretches twenty feet. (258)

In one sense this poem celebrates "courage" as a largeness of heart that extends to the rest of the body. But it also imagines *esprit de corps* as an insemination. The connotations of a healthy fecundity in the poem contrast strikingly with those of *Harmonium*—the dark moon distends protectively rather than revealing a "cadaverous bloom" as in "The Comedian," and the soldiers themselves bear heaviness with a stolidity missing in the overripe squashes of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." The soldiers maternally grow with "an inhuman person." Though this masculine distention is generated in part by their heroism in the war of the *gigantomachia*, the pregnant figure is not itself associated with death or corruption. The enlarged and life-bearing body has become male in Stevens' imagination, and it has become free from the taint of decay.

The culmination of this tendency to imagine a healthy, roundly fertile male figure in Stevens' wartime poetry comes through the recurrent notion of "major man," a concept alluded to in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and described this way in "Repetitions of a Young Captain":

> Millions of major men against their like
> Make more than thunder's rural rumbling. They make
> The giants that each one of them becomes
>
> In a calculated chaos: he that takes form
> From the others, being larger than he was,
> Accoutred in a little of the strength
>
> That sweats the sun up on its morning way
> To giant red, sweats up a giant sense
> To the make-matter, matter-nothing mind. . . . (271–72)

By the time Stevens could write this poem, the million-in-one figure of the man with the blue guitar had been wholly resituated into a military context. And the "fury of a race of men" had become the singular captain's exertion that, in an image suggestive of both the labor and creativity of childbirth, "sweats up a giant sense," his distinctively masculine "strength" leading to enlargement and fulfillment. This major man is large in the sense that he is a giant, but he is also fertile in a feminine sense in that he takes form from others rather than giving it. The "make-matter" mind of major man is a generative *mater* by which he seems to undergo the physical changes of pregnancy and childbirth—enlargement, exertion, and creation.[6]

There is nothing decadent about this process, a sign that Stevens' overinclusive imagination has, through a fascination with the heroic power of the soldier, made a transition away from envy of the womb and toward maternal yet masculine identifications. Death is no longer a necessary element of an enlarged creative figure. But the destruction of war does inform each of the poems of this period employing imagery of pregnancy. Although not inherent in the enlarged masculine body, death and decay are a part of the process of his growth. In the poems of the postwar period, however, Stevens begins to imagine a swelling masculine fecundity that is wholly apart from the violence of war, connected to nature in general and in particular to the roundness and creative power of the sun.

Stevens' persistent overinclusiveness in poems spanning more than a decade adds plausibility to the idea that they are, among a number of other things, elaborating a gradual inward transition. Already in "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," Stevens imagines a masculine natural spirit as growing larger and then giving birth to itself, a natural force speaking its own heroic self-generation. It is in the figure of the sun, however, that this masculine power seems to come to a perfection, as in "The Red Fern," which contrasts sunrise with the unfurling of the plant giving the poem its name:

> The large-leaved day grows rapidly,
> And opens in this familiar spot
> Its unfamiliar, difficult fern,
> Pushing and pushing red after red.
>
> There are doubles of this fern in the clouds,
> Less firm than the paternal flame,
> Yet drenched with its identity,
> Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-motes
>
> And mist-mites, dangling seconds, grown
> Beyond relation to the parent trunk:
> The dazzling, bulging, brightest core,
> The furiously burning father-fire . . . (316–17)

In contrast with the "unfamiliar" fern, the sun itself shoots off red branches in the clouds with a "paternal" generative power. The opening of the fern itself is like a bloody birth, pushing red after red, but the sun enacts another kind of parturition, "furiously burning" to produce "dangling seconds" of red-tinged clouds. The "firm" flame is a "father-fire," unambiguously masculine, but it is also a "bulging" "parent trunk" whose generative powers are at their fullest, physically and figuratively. The synthetic power of "major man" has become subsumed into the natural power of the "brightest" single star, which creates while being free of any taint of death.

"Credences of Summer" continues this figuration of the sun as a masculine birth-giver, bringing the birth-death association to its ultimate uncoupling in Stevens' work by presenting the summer as a culmination of the year, an ending of the growth of spring, and yet as an ending that is full rather than decadent, "the barrenness / Of the fertile thing that can attain no more" (323). The stasis and plentitude of summer is a contrast to the desirous becoming of spring, and the sun is its presiding spirit, as in the third section of the poem:

> It is the natural tower of all the world,
> The point of survey, green's green apogee,
> But a tower more precious than the view beyond,
> A point of survey squatting like a throne,
> Axis of everything, green's apogee
>
> And happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymns.
> It is the mountain on which the tower stands,
> It is the final mountain. Here the sun,
> Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.
> This is the refuge that the end creates.
>
> It is the old man standing on the tower,
> Who reads no book. His ruddy ancientness
> Absorbs the ruddy summer and is appeased,
> By an understanding that fulfils his age,
> By a feeling capable of nothing more. (323)

There is a sure note of finality in this description of "the refuge that the end creates," but there is also the suggestion of an insemination through the "ruddy summer" that is absorbed by the old man and that fulfils him. The old man himself, reddish like the sun of "The Red Fern," stands atop the phallic figure of the tower, and his "feeling capable of nothing more" represents the consciousness of the "final mountain," full in both a literal and metaphoric sense. The old man is a later version of major man, fulfilled and enlarged like him, though in this case by the natural world rather

than an aroused community. He and the sun are a pair, each of them resting at a "green apogee" that comes at the end of a progression to mark a peak of development. Although the old man is not a figure of heroic power, he is a figure of creative fullness, blending feminine receptivity with a masculine identity, and his "age" is a point of culmination of life, of vitality, one that is not touched by morbidity or death.

Chapman University

Notes

[1] For an exploration of the dynamic of "womb envy" and consequent repression and sexism at work in male modernist texts, see Susan Stanford Friedman's "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," *Feminist Studies* 13:1 (1987): 49–82.

[2] I do not mean to argue that Benjamin's intricate examination of the difficulty of gender identity is in every way appropriate to Stevens. In particular her exploration of the incessant alternation between experiences of likeness and difference in all important relationships calls deeply into question the possibility of maturing into the process of having a gender; such maturation is to me one of the most moving things about Stevens' body of work. My argument relies on her observations about the phenomenon of overinclusive fantasy and its transitional use from one conception of one's gender to another, aspects that can be separated from her underlying and more controversial theory of identity.

[3] Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 55. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

[4] Two feminist scholars, Janet Adelman in *Suffocating Mothers* and Elizabeth Sacks in *Shakespeare's Images of Pregnancy*, have taken this approach to figuration of the female body in Shakespeare's work. The question of engulfment by a maternal figure that they take up was first considered closely in a seminal paper by Karen Horney, the 1932 "The Dread of Woman," a text that is also important to Benjamin and Nancy Chodorow.

[5] For a historical analysis of the association of labor with inept poetry in English, see Terry J. Castle's "Lab'ring Bards: Birth *Topoi* and English Poetics 1660–1820," particularly her claim that "after Dryden it becomes conventional to use the trope (of childbirth) as a negative model for the work of the bad artist" (198).

[6] For a discussion of similar movements toward maternal identifications in the work of James Joyce and Henry Miller, respectively, see Jeanne Perreault's "Male Maternity in *Ulysses*" and Paul R. Jackson's "Henry Miller's Literary Pregnancies."

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