"A HIGH-TONED OLD CHRISTIAN WOMAN": WALLACE STEVENS' PARABLE OF SUPREME FICTION

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Wallace Stevens' "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," along with "Sunday Morning," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "The Snow Man," "Bantams in Pine-Woods," and other poems, has become a regular anthology-piece in collections of modern poetry. Like these other poems, it appeared in Stevens' first volume, *Harmonium*, in 1923,[1] and, like "Sunday Morning," it is often categorized as one of Stevens' "anti-mythological poems" in its debunking of traditional Christianity. It is, however, different from "Sunday Morning" in almost every way. Where "Sunday Morning" is meditative, deliberately incorporating religious overtones, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is irreverent and even raucous in presentation. The former poem embraces the lot of mortal man where "Death is the mother of beauty"; the latter parades a "bawdiness,/ Unpurged by epitaph."

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is, in fact, only tangentially connected with the New Testament and Christian dogma. It is, as Joseph Riddel has suggested, "a kind of traditional body-soul debate, with the moral reversed."[2] The old Christian woman, a widow, three times addressed as "madame" by the poem's speaker, represents rather a certain ethical code called "the moral law." This law is pitted against an "opposing law," one ostentatiously free from puritanical restraint. All of the commentaries on the poem recognize this kind of highly ironic debate culminating in a playful, somewhat cynical repudiation of the old woman. What is left wanting in these analyses, however, is the role of poetry in the debate. If "Poetry is the supreme fiction"--the first words of the poem--what then has poetry to do with the defeat of the "moral law" by the "opposing law"? There seems to be little apparent connection between "fictive things" and the bawdiness of the poem's victors. In the resolution of the disparate elements the poem's final meaning inheres.

The poem is a dramatic monologue. The speaker remains unidentified except for his opposition to the old woman whom he addresses. Outwardly, he casts himself in the role of an objective and fair-minded opponent, though his disinterestedness is ironical until, in the poem's final lines, he claims unequivocal triumph: "But fictive things/ Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince."

The poem is constructed around a series of metonymies which are associated with the two points of view. The old woman and her "moral law," for example, are represented by the nave of a church, by palms, by citherns, and by haunted heaven. The speaker and his "opposing law," on the other hand, are represented by a peristyle and masque, by palms, by saxophones and by the planets. In this manner, a series of parallel images is established. The images are accompanied by word-play, irony, and inevitable bathos.

The architectural projections (nave vs. peristyle) are the principal metaphors: the nave is associated with the Christian church while the peristyle recalls the temple of the Greeks. In later poems Stevens returns to the architectural image of the Christian church with a debunking intention in mind. "Blue Buildings in the Summer Air," for example, pits the roaring sermon of Cotton Mather against the quiet munchings of the mouse hidden in the walls of his Boston church. The ultimate prize is awarded to the latter:

> Yet the eminent thunder from the mouse,
> The grinding in the arches of the church,
> The plaster dropping, even dripping, down,
> The mouse, the moss, the woman on the shore . . .[3]

A late Stevens poem, "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," describes the edifice of Christian worship in terms of dilapidation, even though it once "rose loftily and stood massively":

> What is left has the foreign smell of plaster,
> The closed-in smell of hay. A sumac grows
> On the altar, growing toward the lights, inside.
> Reverberations leak and lack among holes . . .

In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" the nave of the Christian church is recast reductively as the knave of the poem.

The speaker architecturally represents the "opposing law" in terms of the peristyle. A range of free-standing columns enclosing the facade of the Greek temple, it harkens back to the pre-Christian epoch of Hellenic Greece. In place of Christian puritanism, the reader is relocated in a period without parallel in its artistic, athletic, and political acts of human achievement. The same spirit of liberation through architectural design is celebrated by Stevens in an earlier poem, "Architecture," which also appeared in the first edition of *Harmonium*.[4] The image of the palm appears in both poems and the projection of the building itself is to accommodate only "the lusty and the plenteous":

Let us build the building of light.
Push up the towers
To the cock-tops.
These are the pointings of our edifice,
Which, like a gorgeous palm,
Shall tuft the commonplace.

The poem proceeds to enact a further projection from the peristyle to the masque: "But take/ The opposing law and make a peristyle./ And from the peristyle project a masque. . . ." Here the image shifts from architecture to the ritual acts associated with the spectacle of music and costuming performed in the English court from the time of Henry VIII to Charles I. One recalls especially the triumph of the genre in the poetic masques of Ben Jonson staged by Inigo Jones. The origins of the masque, however, seem to go back to ancient ceremonies which commemorated the passage of the seasons and, later, the dances and processions of the medieval mummeries. Part of its evolution is owing to its adoption of certain aspects of fifteenth-century religious drama.[5] In the light of its historical development, Stevens' masque should perhaps be seen as a pagan counterpart to the solemnity of the Mass and other religious ceremonies performed in the Christian church.

The nave reaches out toward "haunted heaven," while the masque becomes cosmic in its enactment "Beyond the planets." Although the contrast loads the argument in the speaker's favor, he makes no such explicit claim at this point in the poem. Instead, he declares an ironic equality. Both projections result in conversions into palms. The nave's extension to "haunted heaven" leads to the first conversion: "Thus,/ The conscience is converted into palms," while the masque's extension "Beyond the planets. . .Is equally converted into palms." The use of the palms seems at first a curious selection on Stevens' part. In the Christian context, the palms inevitably recall the reeds waved in homage to Jesus upon his arrival in Jerusalem shortly before his death. But, as A. Walton Litz points out, they also yield a second meaning: "The stuff of life can just as easily be converted into the 'palm' of tropic pleasure as the 'palm' of frozen morality."[6] A third meaning of the palms, however, is also indicated--namely, the hands which seem to clasp as the speaker summarizes, again ironically: "And palm for palm,/ Madame, we are where we began."

One other set of contrasting images is introduced in the speaker's argument. The conversion into palms by the old woman is "Like

windy citherns hankering for hymns." The speaker's own conversion is also to the accompaniment of musical sounds--here "Squiggling like saxophones." The strings of the obsolete citherns emit sounds that are easily drowned out by the boisterous saxophones. As "windy," the music of the citherns becomes a fitting instrumentation for "haunted" heaven.

Both of these outlandish projections introduced by the speaker are intended to be definitions of life after death--though they are ironically prescriptions for life as well. The aging Christian woman can anticipate, even on her own terms, nothing more than the unsubstantial ("haunted") heaven. The proponents of the "opposing law," however, will be "Unpurged by epitaph." Upon their death, they will simply apotheosize the hedonism of their lives: "bawdiness. . .indulged at last." The poem concludes in a third conversion--not, this time, into palms. Rather, the speaker implores the Christian woman to permit her own "disaffected flagellants" to become "well-stuffed" as they join him in "A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres," the final evolution of the masque itself. Asceticism is converted into bawdiness; haunted heaven is brought tumultuously to life; life-after-death is itself nothing more than the rowdy celebration of earthly existence. The lively celebration becomes a parade among the spheres. The "muzzy bellies" of the transformed flagellants are rudely exposed. Stevens' use of the word "muzzy" is not only fitting in its rhetorical brassiness, but also uniquely appropriate to the flagellants themselves. Etymologically, the word suggests not only befuddlement but dullness and stupidity as well. The flagellants will, after all, join the widow at the end of the poem in her wincing at such blasphemous irreverences. Following the speaker's direction, however, they can "whip from themselves/ A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres." The other self-inflicted whippings of the flagellants are transformed into the exuberant emanations of the parade, while the music of the spheres is ironically recreated, not by harmonious strings, but by squiggly saxophones. Only the Christian woman is "High-Toned," as the title defines her.

The ultimate purpose of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is not, however, to ridicule the old widow of Christian morality. She is never permitted to present her side in the poem, though the speaker ironically pretends to represent that side for her. The poem is a joke at her expense, but it is not finally a poem of theological repudiation. Rather, its fundamental intention is not comic at all, but parabolic and serious. The speaker's argument is to be taken as an illustration of the poem's first line: "Poetry is the supreme fiction,

madame.'' It is therefore a poem about poetics and a dramatization of the role of ''fictive things'' in the creation of poetry. Precisely *how* this is so has proved troublesome to some of the commentaries on the poem. James Baird, for example, simply identifies the supreme fiction with the ''opposing law'' of the poem's speaker.[7] As a result, the fiction and unrestrained bawdiness seem to be equated, though Baird does not demonstrate how this is so. Frank Doggett comes closer when he says that, by declaring poetry to be the supreme fiction, ''he means that poetry *creates* a supreme fiction.''[8] Doggett says nothing, however, about how the poem itself performs this creation, if it does at all.

When the speaker declares that ''poetry is the supreme fiction,'' he means in the most obvious sense that poetry is a fiction which supersedes the fiction of Christianity. In his rejection of the inherited Presbyterianism of his youth, Stevens never suggests that the embellishments of poetry and the imagination are not themselves fiction. The difference is simply that one accepts them as fictions. In one of his ''Adagia,'' he asserts, ''The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.''[9]

The imposition of fictive things upon the world always entails a transforming process--one which in ''A High-Toned Old Christian Woman'' is illustrated as a *converting* process. The widow's conscience can be ''converted'' into palms. So too can the speaker's bawdiness be ''converted'' into palms. Both are realized, albeit ironically, in the poem. The third and crucial conversion occurs when the speaker proposes that the ''disaffected flagellants'' of an ascetic Christianity be converted to his own camp as ''well-stuffed,/ Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade.'' Each of these conversions is *fictionally* achieved, but the speaker (and Stevens with him) implies that these fictions are far more attractive than those which impel the individual to defer the pleasure of the flesh in favor of ''haunted heaven.'' Objectively, the poem's sensuous and strutting parade among the spheres is an absurdity. Fictionally, its human vitality is recommended as a way of life. Because the ''jovial hullabaloo'' is hyperbolic, it is appropriate as an example of ''fictive things.''

When the poem's speaker declares at the end that ''fictive things/ Wink as they will,'' he means ''wink'' not only in the sense of poking fun at the wincing widow, but also winking at reality,

pretending that it is other than it is. The imagination occasionally demands, as Stevens writes in a 1948 letter to Barbara Church, a fight (in this poem a debate) with reality: "Perhaps poetry, instead of being the rather meaningless transmutation of reality, is a combat with it; and perhaps the thing to do when one keeps saying that life is a dull life is to pick a fight with reality."[10]

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" directs attention to itself as a poem about fictions. The rhythm of the parade among the spheres is defined as "Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk." The meter of the poem's own blank verse is baldly scanned even as it measures the parade of the "muzzy bellies." The "hymns" and "epitaphs" of Christianity are insufficient in comparison with the poem's own "jovial hullabaloo."

Twenty years after the initial publication of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens began composing "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," though his first use of that phrase ("supreme fiction") dates back to this *Harmonium* poem. The supreme fiction had begun to take on different and larger meanings for Stevens, as the subtitles of the long poem ("It Must Be Abstract"; "It Must Change"; "It Must Give Pleasure") intimate. It continued, however, to find its fullest expression in poetry itself, as the "conversions" of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" had already demonstrated. Even the Wallace Stevens of 1942 found it difficult to be any more specific: "I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. The NOTES start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract. Of course, in the long run, poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure."[11]

The rhetoric of a poem like "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" marks it uniquely as a poem from *Harmonium*--not unlike the bold self-indulgence in language Stevens allowed himself in "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Bantams in Pine-Woods." Underlying the poem's self-conscious verbal play and shrewd irony, however, is the serious issue of poetry and fictions forced into confrontation with a world that often stubbornly prefers the widow's wince to the poet's wink. To "pick a fight" with that reality was Stevens' earnest and continuing preoccupation as a poet.

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NOTES

[1] The poem had appeared one year earlier in *Dial*, July 1922.

[2] Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 73.

[3] Citations to this and other poems by Stevens are taken from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1961) and *Opus Posthumous,* ed. Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957).

[4] The poem was included in the 1923 edition of *Harmonium,* but was removed by Stevens from the second edition in 1931. It appears in *Opus Posthumous,* pp. 16-18.

[5] See William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York, 1960), p. 274, for a convenient discussion of the history of the masque.

[6] A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1972), p. 116.

[7] James Baird, *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore, 1968), p. 206.

[8] Frank Doggett, *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore, 1966), p. 106.

[9] "Adagia" in *Opus Posthumous,* p. 163.

[10] *Letters of Wallace Stevens,* ed. Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), pp. 620-21.

[11] *Letters,* p. 430.