"SUNDAY MORNING" AND "SUNDAY MORNING"

It is not generally known that "Sunday Morning" exists in two printed versions. The first, published by *Poetry* in 1915 under the editorship of Harriet Monroe, is actually a truncated and re-structured rendering of Steven's original eight-stanza submission (Monroe printed only five).[1] The second is Stevens' restoration of the poem to its original length and ordering of stanzas; it first appeared in *Harmonium*, published in 1923, some eight years after the poem's original publication, and it is the only version normally studied or taught. Although scholars of Stevens know of the two extant versions of "Sunday Morning," no one has discussed how each alters one's reading of the poem.[2] And an examination of the two versions raises interesting questions concerning Monroe's reasons for wanting the poem shortened and re-arranged, as well as Stevens' willingness to see the poem altered significantly. And ultimately, with the probable answers to these questions, and with an examination of the different ways in which each poem proceeds, one may arrive at a unique understanding of the complex interrelatedness of the final version's stanzas.

In Stevens' *Letters*, the first mention we have of "Sunday Morning" comes on 6 June 1915, in a letter from Stevens to Harriet Monroe. In the letter, Stevens is apparently acquiescing to a request of Monroe (the original letter *to* Stevens is evidently lost) that the poem be shortened: "Provided," Stevens says, "your selection of the numbers of *Sunday Morning* is printed in the following order: I, VIII, IV, V, I see no objection to cutting it down."[3] From this it would appear that Monroe simply objected to the poem's *length*, but it would be unreasonable to conclude that, if this *had* been a concern, it was a primary one. That is, there were other poems in the same issue of *Poetry* in which "Sunday Morning" appeared which were far longer than "Sunday Morning" itself. Edgar Lee Masters had one poem of seven pages and another of five in the issue, and many poems in issues surrounding this particular one ran more than the three pages which "Sunday Morning" occupied. So there seems to have been no length restriction per se.

It is in the only other letter from Stevens to Monroe concerning "Sunday Morning" that a more likely reason for Monroe's asking that "Sunday Morning" be altered appears. Stevens replies to Monroe, in a letter of 23 June 1915, con-

cerning what probably was Monroe's suggestion that "Sunday Morning" be concluded with stanza VII. It is my guess, since in Stevens first letter to Monroe he suggests that only *four* stanzas of the poem be printed (I, VIII, IV, V) and that the seventh stanza be left out entirely, that Monroe wrote her approval of the change but suggested that the poem still needed a stanza which would provide a better sense of closure. She no doubt suggested stanza VII but had reservations about its *tone* in relation to other stanzas. Here is Stevens' reply of 23 June concerning that stanza: "No. 7 of *Sunday Morning* is, as you suggest, of a different tone, but it does not seem to me to be too detached to conclude with."[4]

From this, I believe, it could be reasonably conjectured that Monroe's reasons for asking that the poem originally submitted be cut down coincide with her reasons for hesitating about concluding "Sunday Morning" with stanza VII: she felt that the poem's "tone" was uneven, and she counted this as a fault. That she was fairly satisfied with Stevens' suggested truncation of the poem appears to reinforce this theory. For the stanzas that Stevens deleted—II, III, VI, and VII—are, with the possible exception of stanza VII, markedly different in tone from stanzas I, IV, V, and VIII. Specifically, these deleted stanzas are ones in which the poet poses questions the answers to which are gentle logical affirmations of a religion of the earth, of reality and the imagination, which Stevens so often promulgates. In stanza II, for example, the poet asks,

> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?[5]

With these questions, coming as they do in stanza II of the original (the one, that is, that Stevens *originally* sent to Monroe), and with the questions posed in the other deleted stanzas, it is, as I have said, the *poet* who develops a colloquy with the woman in the poem, the poet who gently, by poem's end, persuades her of the necessity of accepting "our blood" as that in which we can solely believe. It is in these deleted stanzas as well that one could view the poet as also, at times, working through his own doubts, however tenuous and

fleeting they may be, concerning his proposed religion of reality. In stanza III, he says,

> Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
> The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
> Seem all of paradise that we shall know?[6]

And in stanza VI, the poet continues his questioning:

> Is there no change of death in paradise?
> Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
> Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
> Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
> With rivers like our own that seek for seas
> That never touch with inarticulate pang?[7]

The poet here, one could say, is simply playing devil's advocate, as it were, simply re-stating in his own words what the woman in other stanzas says in her own. But in these questioning stanzas the woman's words are absent, and it is important to note that in the original "Sunday Morning" there are two stanzas of questioning, stanzas II and III, which include nothing but the poet questioning *himself*, before the woman's words are even introduced (in stanza IV). So there is, or was, in the original poem (the un-cut version) a level at which the poet could be seen to be at conflict with himself, a level at which he works through a conflict which he himself creates, as, it should be remembered, the woman's misgivings about this proposed earthly religion are never explicitly revealed in stanza I. It cannot therefore be said that the questions in stanzas II and III are directed at anyone but the poet himself. Clearly, then, these stanzas are of a different "tone" than the other, more specifically argumentative stanzas, and Harriet Monroe perhaps took issue with the sense of irresoluteness (and perhaps initial confusion for the reader) which this tone creates.

Stevens was probably aware of this underlying tone of irresoluteness, uncertainty, on the part of the poet in the stanzas of questioning. Indeed, it is most likely that the poem—the ordering of the stanzas and their content—was not artificial but reflects the original tendencies of the poet's thoughts during composition. I have illustrated in another context that "Sunday Morning" is reflective of a deep ambivalence in Stevens toward Christianity, an ambivalence perhaps triggered by the death of his mother, a devout Christian, who

died shortly before the poem was composed.[8] The original poem's tone, especially in the stanzas in which the poet questions, in a sense, nothing but the air, hints at this ambivalence. Even the last stanza of the original, after the apparent philosophical triumph of stanza seven, is strangely hesitant about fully rejoicing in the new-found "religion." Words like "island solitude," "inescapable," "spontaneous *cries*," "isolation of the sky," "Ambiguous undulation," and "Downward to darkness" have a markedly ominous reverberation in what, if we were to read the poem as merely a paean to an earthly replacement of Christianity, should be a tone of celebration.

Why Stevens allowed the complexity of the poem, which was largely provided by the tone of the deleted stanzas as well as stanza VIII as the *concluding* stanza (in the *Poetry* version it is second), to be undercut is more difficult to discern than Monroe's misgivings. Stevens was, at the time he submitted the poem, a relatively new poet without a book. *Poetry* was and is a prestigious journal that Stevens had appeared in but once before. Not yet having the confidence or clout that comes with reputation, he was perhaps more willing to defer to the judgment of an experienced editor (who was also an experienced poet). What does seem certain, however, is that the one thing on which Stevens always insisted was the preservation of the *idea*. In the letter of 6 June 1915 to Monroe, Stevens indicates that the poem may be cut down "Provided" that the selection of stanzas is as he suggests. His reasoning is that "The order is necessary to the idea."[9] It seems clear, therefore, that Stevens placed more importance, at least in this case, on ideas than on complexity of tone.

In the original, uncut poem, then, we have a colloquy between poet and woman and, one could say, between poet and self. The woman, in either case, is gently persuaded by the end of the poem that "'The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering; / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.'"[10] In the *Poetry* version, with the stanzas of questioning removed, the level at which the poet could be seen as working through his own misgivings toward a "pagan" religion is, of course, expunged. And, with stanza VIII as the second stanza, the colloquy between poet and woman becomes more of a debate, a debate with a foregone conclusion, one which is provided by "A voice":

She hears, upon that water without sound,
A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering;
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."[11]

With these words from a kind of "third party," preceding both the woman's remonstrations and the poet's explanations, the woman is, in the *Poetry* version, reduced to mouthing futile objections, and, perhaps more bathetically, the poet's role is reduced to that of diligent spokesman for a cause that has already triumphed.

Thus the fundamental differences between the two versions of "Sunday Morning" are of tone and of the ways in which one may interpret the relationship of poet and "woman" and poet and self. The thematic pronouncement of the poem in both versions remains, as Stevens wished, essentially intact. But, because the level at which the poet questions himself has been removed, the *Poetry* version undercuts the complexity that has made the poem so often discussed and that affirms Stevens as much more than a poet of ideology.

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NOTES

[1] Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 7.2 (1915-16):81-83.

[2] Joan Richardson, in her recent biography of Stevens, does briefly discuss "Sunday Morning" as it first appeared in *Poetry*. She postulates that Monroe deleted three stanzas because they "presented all too clearly . . . an open challenge to a Christian view of life" [Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years 1879-1923* (New York, 1986) 437]. This statement, as I will point out and as Milton J. Bates has noted in a recent review of Richardson's book [Milton J. Bates, Rev. of *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years*, by Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens Journal* 10.2 (1986):113-116], is highly questionable, for in both versions the one element which remains unaltered is the poem's basic renunciation of Christianity. In the *Poetry* version, in fact, the final, unequivocal renunciation comes much sooner than in the *Harmonium* version, as the stanza in which the "Voice" announces bluntly that "The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering; / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay" is placed as the second stanza rather than the last.

[3] Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York, 1966) 183.

[4] Stevens, *Letters* 183.

[5] Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning," *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1982) 67.

[6] Stevens, "Sunday Morning," *Collected Poems* 68.

[7] Stevens, "Sunday Morning," *Collected Poems* 69.

[8] See my article "Stevens' Mother and 'Sunday Morning,' " *Wallace Stevens Journal* 10.2 (1986):100-106.

[9] Stevens, *Letters* 183.

[10] Stevens, "Sunday Morning," *Collected Poems* 70.

[11] Stevens, "Sunday Morning," *Collected Poems* 70.

SUNDAY MORNING*

I

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug, mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulcher.

II

She hears, upon that water without sound,
A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering;
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.
Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

III

She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"
There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle

Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary South, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures; or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

IV

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths—
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness—
She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to bring sweet-smelling pears
And plums in ponderous piles. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

V

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun—
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
The trees, like seraphim, and echoing hills,
That choir among themselves long afterward.
They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
Of men that perish and of summer morn—
And whence they came and whither they shall go,
The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

Wallace Stevens