

Noble Imagery: Wallace Stevens and Mesoamerican Mythology

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Recent critical debates around Wallace Stevens's poetry often explain away the more obscure passages of his poems by connecting them to their possible sources in contemporary culture (see Lentricchia, Filreis, MacLeod, Longenbach). This approach comes to replace an equally strong trend in the criticism that related the poet's work to various philosophical orientations, most of them of European origin. While the new historical contextualizations do not contest the poet's philosophical affiliations, they have a tendency to prove the former criticism either too speculative or too cosmopolitan. But if the historical approach invites us to see Stevens as an American immersed in the consumerism of his age, it also makes his poetry look more literal and downplays its aesthetic dimension. This outlook may not only appear curious to those familiar with Stevens's investment in poetics, but it may diminish the importance of the historical context as well.

The roots of a poetry in its surrounding culture should be obvious and incontestable, but while historical contextualization reveals otherwise unaccountable meanings, the reduction of a text to its cultural subtext may be as little warranted as a purely philosophical speculation. What is neglected in both cases is the text and its relation to its readers, a relation that ultimately determines not only the meaning of a poem but also its aesthetic impact. This relation reflects the complexity of historical background combined with ideas about the nature of poetry that determine interpretation. Equally complex are the ways in which poetry grows from its roots in the historical moment and the forms that poetic imagination fashions out of the cultural material at its disposal.

A reading of Wallace Stevens in relation to Mesoamerican mythology, which I will try to perform in what follows, goes beyond providing a

historical context for his poetry—a series of nativist theories regarding American identity and its origins in precolumbian cultures—because it tells us something about his poetics—the extent to which his poetic practice results, in a manner of speaking, from America’s own imprint on the imagination. Whether Mesoamerican mythology can explain Stevens’s more obscure passages seems to me less important than the fact that reading the poems with an awareness of that mythology can give us an insight in his complicated aesthetic and its relationship to history. Equally interesting is, I think, the fact that such a source of inspiration seems so improbable as to be ignored by virtually all his readers. And what I would like to contend is that this kind of ignorance is largely the basis for poetic effect.

Normally, mythological allusions or reinterpretations of myths are clearly recognizable in poetry. In most cases, the meaning of a poem depends directly on the reader’s familiarity with the respective mythology. It would be inconceivable, for instance, to read Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” without knowing Leda’s identity. But what happens if we do indeed ignore the mythology? The results can vary between incomprehension and interpretive excess, and Stevens’s “Sunday Morning” is definitely an example of the latter.

“Sunday Morning,” the most fascinating and widely interpreted poem by Wallace Stevens, won him, at the start of his career, the reputation of a hedonist (Yvor Winters, Frank Kermode), and continued to focus the attention of all critical orientations that followed. Part of its fascination lies in the play between its apparent classic clarity and the mystery that it envelopes. Clarity attracts explication, but most critics are able to explicate the poem only up to stanza VII, where speculation inevitably sets in. Stanza VII is also, not surprisingly, the main source of disagreement among critics. All perceive a change in pace at this point in the poem, but the nature of that change remains a bone of contention. Yvor Winters sees suggestions of pantheism; J. V. Cunningham takes it as the expression of a new religion based on sensory detail; Randall Jarrell considers it an evocation of Romantic wilderness; Frank Kermode envisages it as an antidote to paradisiac boredom.

The turn toward a more philosophical interpretation of the stanza can be found in Lentricchia’s early criticism that connects it to the

dialectic between reality and the imagination (1967). Later, Harold Bloom sees the stanza as a Nietzschean negation of God, and the philosophical implications do not stop there. More recently, Lentricchia has turned the interpretation around the question of gender and is able to see the dance of the ring of men as phallic (1988). Placing the poem in its historical context—the poem was written in all probability around 1915—James Longenbach interprets the stanza as an homage to the “men that perish” in the war. The variety of interpretations is clearly indicative of a hidden meaning which, unless attributable to poetic imagination or even caprice, has yet not been agreed upon. The stanza seems to justify both the attention and the difficulty in interpretation:

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 blue lake wherein their lord delights,
 The trees, like serafin, 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.

(CP 69-70)

All critics might agree that the stanza's mystery, if solved, would give a clue to the whole poem. Randall Jarrell's criticism attracts attention because it suggests a historical context for Stevens's poetic project: “In *Harmonium* [Stevens] still loves America best when he can think of it as wilderness, naturalness, pure potentiality (he treats with especial sympathy Negroes, Mexican Indians, and anybody else he can consider wild); and it is this feeling that is behind the conclusion of *Sunday Morning*” (203). Jarrell correctly identifies Stevens's romantic outlook on the “savages” of America, but he does not find worth pursuing the implications of the symbolism that this interest in “savages” might be injecting into the poem.

How correct Jarrell's assessment of Stevens's interests was can be proven by the references the poet makes to ancient Mesoamerican civilizations in his letters. As early as 1900, Stevens mentions Mexico in his journals as the destination of a possible vacation. A number of references to Mexico and the Maya appear in his correspondence with Jose Rodriguez Feo, showing interest for the latter's Hispanic background, but also hinting that such interest was more than casual: "During the last several years I have been taking a number of Mexican magazines. In the last week or two, I have discontinued my subscription to Cuadernos Americanos. It is an extraordinary publication but it overwhelms me" (*Letters* 543). Such interest in things Mexican may have been fostered in Stevens by his contact with people who studied Mesoamerican civilization. According to Brazeau, one of his colleagues at the Hartford Insurance Company, Benjamin Lee Whorf, was an authority in Maya and Aztec civilizations and languages (19n). It is quite conceivable that Whorf might have been discussing his findings with his colleagues at the Hartford office, where, Brazeau tells us, virtually everyone had an intellectual interest outside the job.

Although the more serious preoccupations with Mesoamerican civilizations seem to come later in Stevens's life, a quick examination of one of the best known Aztec myths seems to suggest that the "wild" Mexican Indians might play a more important role in "Sunday Morning" than Jarrell was ready to see. The beginning of the world is imagined in Aztec mythology as the decision to appoint a Sun/god for whom all the other gods must be sacrificed. Bernardino de Sahagun, the most assiduous chronicler of Aztec history and mythology, renders the myth in the following words:

But this is plain, [that] there at Teotihuacan, as they say, in times past, when yet there was darkness, there all the gods gathered themselves together, and they debated who would bear the burden, who would carry on his back—would become—the sun. . . . And when the sun came to arise, then all [the gods] died that the sun might come into being. None remained who had not perished (as hath been told). And thus the ancient ones thought it to be. (*Florentine Codex* IV, 1)

This is only one version of the myth, but the version that seems to be reenacted in the most famous, if not infamous, Aztec ritual in which

human sacrifices to the sun were performed. Diego Duran describes and interprets the sacrifice in terms of which Stevens's poem seems to be an echo:

The victim, carrying the bag of gifts to the sun together with the staff and shield, slowly began to climb the steps of the pyramid. In this ascent he represented the course of the sun from east to west. As soon as he reached the summit and stood in the center of the great Sun Stone, which represented noon, the sacrificers approached the captive and opened his chest. Once the heart had been wrenched out, it was offered to the sun and blood sprinkled toward the solar deity. Imitating the descent of the sun in the west, the corpse was toppled down the steps of the pyramid. (Qtd. in Todorov 229)

One can easily imagine how some versions of the myth and its ritual reenactment might impress a poetic imagination with a taste for romantic savages and an interest in recovering their ancient spirituality. Details from other descriptions of the Aztec ceremony have it that the sacrificial victim was indeed a naked man who represented the sun, "not as a god but as a god might be." Western eyes would perceive the ritual as "boisterous" and savage and would place it in what appeared, to the early explorers of American land, to be an earthly paradise. Although it is hard to assess how familiar Stevens was with Aztec mythology at the time he wrote "Sunday Morning," it is quite possible that the source for stanza VII was some watered down version of the myth for popular consumption or touristic advertisement. It is also highly probable that such knowledge of the Aztec ritual may have circulated in Stevens's intellectual circles. In fact, books like Waldo Frank's *Our America* prove that an interest in native American past was prevalent at the time.¹

Our America also shows the purpose of such interest. What interested Frank, as well as other contemporaries of Stevens, was to define "Americanness" beyond the condescending view that England bestowed upon its former colonies. The effort had been there ever since the eighteenth century, when Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson had put aside their prejudices against the Indians in order to prove to the English or the French that the native American element was culturally and racially on a par with the European civilization.² This was a form of historical validation for America, which was most often described as a country without history.

Stevens himself seems to have been involved in the enterprise of reconstructing the American past from the ruins of older, native civilizations. The nature of his interest in the Maya appears to be similar to Waldo Frank's. In a letter discussing the art of former British colonies, he portrays the Maya as adopted precursors of American civilization:

I don't know whether you know about Maya art. This consists very largely of glyphs and sacrificial and calendar stones, all of them completely hideous. They are found in Mexico and in the jungles of Central America, Yucatan, and so on. Many people believe that these early Indians came from the South Pacific. We feel a special interest in things of this sort because they give us the antiquity which the English like to deny us. The English insist that Americans have no background. (*Letters* 614)

The Maya past is thus, according to Stevens, one to which Americans can refer in support of their claims to civilization. Although the Maya and their art remain essentially alien and "hideous," they are claimed as native American ancestors in order to validate America's prestige among other nations.

One may ask why, when Stevens and his contemporaries felt the need for a history and a mythology that would endorse their civilization, they went to the Mayas, Aztecs, or Incas for inspiration, rather than to North American native tribes. The reason may be that the Mesoamerican civilizations had long been hailed for their value and sophistication, perhaps because they were more commensurate with European standards than the cultures of the Northern Indian nations.³ Stevens registers a trend in American culture, a trend that asserted American identity against the European disdain by invoking the grandeur of certain native civilizations.

Acknowledging the traces of Aztec mythology in "Sunday Morning" would place the poem in the line of such nativist preoccupations with American identity that have also produced a number of other poems of which "The Comedian as the Letter C" is only the most salient example. Edward Marx's recent article "The Comedian as a Colonist" in the *Wallace Stevens Journal* convincingly demonstrates that reading the poem as a colonizing adventure is in harmony with "an American consumerism of the exotic" prevalent in Stevens's time (195). The

inclusion in "Sunday Morning" of the Aztec ritual among other religious and mythological allusions has to be seen in the context where the Mesoamerican past serves as a means of validating contemporary American culture. In this light, the poem appears to be not an inquiry into religious feeling, as it is most often interpreted, but a way toward American self-definition through the examination of religious options.

This new perspective alters the significance of other details in the poem. Most interpretations take for granted that the religion debated in "Sunday Morning" is Christianity, and the alternative to it is something pagan or imagined, therefore practically anti-religious. Once we accept that the ring of men in stanza VII may be performing an Aztec sacrifice, the whole poem appears as a search for the religion most appropriate to the American self and not a rejection of religion. In the woman's examination of her religious options, Christianity is evidently the most obvious, and perhaps the most boring choice, given that it is being rejected in favor of bourgeois comfort. However, the "silent Palestine" at the end of the first stanza might be an allusion to Hebrew rather than to Christian religion. The classic Greek option is itself represented by a version of the rape of Europa by Zeus, who is called in Shakespearean manner, Jove, in stanza III. In one of his letters, Stevens agreed with Hi Simons that his purpose in stanza III (about Jove) and stanza VII (about the ring of men chanting to the sun) was indeed to suggest a more naturalistic religion as a substitute for supernaturalism (*Letters* 464). One may note here that the incursion in Greek mythology in stanza III is as transfigured by the imagination as the Aztec ritual in stanza VII. And significantly, the "savage" religious ritual turns up at the end, after the other options of finding a more "natural" religion have been exhausted.

Stanzas IV to VI explore imaginative alternatives related to the life surrounding us but the need for "some imperishable bliss" suggests that we (or the woman) shall return to a religion as rooted in tradition as Christianity is.⁴ The vote is not likely to be cast for Christianity because of its detachment from the soil of America. In many of his later poems, Stevens insists that a culture should be related to its soil: "Man is the intelligence of his soil" becomes "The soil is man's intelligence" in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Martha Strom has argued that such lines

may be mocking localists like William Carlos Williams. The target of Stevens's mockery, however, is not the quest for the American self but the way in which poets like Williams went about it. His own sentiment on the relation between a culture and its roots in the soil is more clearly expressed in "A Mythology Reflects Its Region":

A mythology reflects its region. Here
 In Connecticut, we never lived in a time
 When mythology was possible—But if we had—
 That raises the question of the image's truth.
 (*The Palm* 398)

The ancient religion of the native inhabitants of her region is thus a more natural choice for the woman in "Sunday Morning," but it also leads to the awareness of the unusual relationship of the American culture to its soil, to "the question about the image's truth." The "tomb in Palestine" reappears in the ending stanza, followed by a description of nature, perhaps in order to indicate the cultural estrangement implied in American identity. Its essentially hybrid character and the spiritual loss it entailed was also noted by Waldo Frank: "The soil of Europe was still rich with its spiritual past. Not so America. The spiritual fall was slow in Europe. In America, it was immensely swift. Absorption in the outer world became with us an imperious need: compelled attention to impersonal channels. The personal life faded. The personal God also" (67). Frank's insistence on the loss of spirituality seems to be of the same order with Stevens's emphasis on the necessity to search for a religion, for some spiritual identity. His woman is as absorbed in the outer world of her bourgeois comfort as Frank's colonists were in their struggle with the new land. Her (our) final indecision and her (our) commitment to the "chaos of the sun" are mirrored in the "ambiguous undulations" of the birds falling "downward to darkness, on extended wings."

Keeping in mind the possibility of allusions to Aztec mythology in "Sunday Morning" helps us see Stevens engaged in a project of American self-definition not much different from that of Waldo Frank. But this new meaning of the poem is the result of our relationship with it, a reading in another context. How necessary or true this context is is of less importance than the change its presence or absence imposes upon

the poem itself. Has the poem become better for this new context? That will depend on what we want to achieve with the reading. If clarity is our purpose, then the new context is to be preferred, because it certainly makes it easier for us to see what the poem means. We do not have to appeal to as complex a philosophy as Nietzsche's in order to understand what the boisterous men are doing in stanza VII. We do not have to suspect Stevens of fabricating pagan religions. We may even have to abandon the search for phallic symbolism. The poem becomes, quite clearly, an examination of religious options, and the stanza is no more than a stylized description of an Aztec ritual. But one may wonder whether in understanding the poem this way we have not forcibly removed the charm of its obscurity, an obscurity that Stevens may have cultivated.

The readership to whom Stevens addressed his poem could not have been exceedingly familiar with Mesoamerican mythology, and its evocation might be serving the purpose of increasing the mystery and enhancing the poetic effect. This has been, in fact, the effect on the reading public so far. The possibility is worth considering that the ignored or forgotten mythology is simply used as a source of poetic imagery. When working upon a known mythology, a writer would want to surprise his reader with his interpretation of the myth, a new twist added to an old story. Had he counted on his reader's familiarity with the Aztec ritual, Stevens might have done the same. But such familiarity is difficult to prove even for Stevens himself, who may be only unconsciously recovering the memory of a strange and exotic ritual.

His work upon the original is minimal, for beside the overlay of exoticism, there is not much in his vision to distinguish it from the accounts of Duran or Sahagun. Stevens's main changes consist in leaving out some essential details about the setting of the scene. Like Duran's explanatory description, Stevens's focuses on what presumably the ritual meant to its performers, but he leaves out the explanation for the uninitiated reader. It thus happens that the essential feature of the ritual—the representation of the sun as a naked man, who is about to be slaughtered so that his blood may go back to the sun—appears as a hard-to-decipher metaphor: "Naked among them like a savage source, / Not as a god but as a god might be." This is a beautiful image, the

more beautiful when we do not quite know what to make of it and have to exercise our own imagination to give it a meaning. The evocation of the ritual in carefully selected fragments performs the function of creating an aesthetic effect.

But the aesthetic effect does not lie only in the mystery of ancient images. The images themselves, even when we know their origin, are laden with poetry. The alien cultural context endows them with as much aesthetic potential as we need in order to find them profoundly poetic. The aesthetic effect generated by the encounter of two very different cultures is evident in the chronicles of the conquest which, as Mario Vargas Llosa well noted, surpass fiction in their propensity to fabulate. They are also responsible for transforming the reality of the American continent into a sort of poetry: "Our country, our countries, are in a deep sense more a fiction than a reality" (14). Vargas Llosa's observation leads us to see Stevens as a discoverer rather than a creator. The textual remains of the past have only to be brought up to light in order to produce a poetic effect. The poet's work, in such cases, is not very different from that of an excavator that brings to life metaphorical treasures. We should not forget, however, that what makes them into treasures is the very process of excavation. And what such a process brings to light is as meaningful as what it leaves under rubble.

There are many of Stevens's poems where images from Mesoamerican mythology might be at work. "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," for instance, may be based on the ending of the Legend of the Suns documented by Bernardino de Sahagun and others. In the course of the story, two suns are produced instead of one. One of the gods throws a rabbit in the second sun's face to dim its light, and thus creates the moon. Stevens's rabbit rises against the moon encompassing the world for itself. The monstrous deity from "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" also resembles Maya or Aztec deities who do not share the physical beauty of Greek gods. In "The Auroras of Autumn," the paradise we all assume to be Biblical has an "Indian in his glade" suggestive of the Florida glades, once seen as paradise by Spanish or French explorers. The serpent of this paradise may be not Eve's tempter but the plumed serpent of Aztec mythology.

Leaving aside the task of proving the authenticity of such details, I shall follow Stevens's poetic excavations in a couple of other poems, under the caveat that the difference between the historical detail and the poet's imagination is by no means clear or possible to document. My interest is not in proving the authenticity of sources but in noting the shifts the awareness of Mesoamerican mythology produces in the reading of the poems, as well as in the way the aesthetic effect results from changing contexts.

Unlike "Sunday Morning," "Some Friends from Pascagoula" is one of the most neglected poems by Stevens. And yet it must have been important to Stevens himself since he took the trouble to explain it in a letter to Hi Simons (*Letters* 349). In a different way than "Sunday Morning" the imagery of "Some Friends" can be traced back to the same Legend of the Suns so pervasive in Aztec mythology. The legend, as transcribed by Bernardino de Sahagun, tells about two candidates for becoming the sun. One is rich and a coward, the other is poor but brave. The rich and coward one does not have the courage to jump into the fire, the act required to be reborn as the sun. The poor and brave one jumps without flinching. He is then followed by the coward, who cannot bear the humiliation. With them jump in the fire their symbolic animal incarnations, the eagle and the jaguar. The eagle's wings are said to be singed by fire, and the leopard's spots are supposed to be the traces of burns. From this fire are born the two suns, of which only the first will rule the heavens. Leaving aside the less significant details and the second sun that Stevens might have used in "The Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," one could see the legend emerging in the poem:

Tell me more of the eagle, Cotton,
And you black Sly,
Tell me how he descended
Out of the morning sky.

Describe with deepened voice
And noble imagery
His slowly-falling round
Down to the fishy sea.
Here was a sovereign sight,
Fit for a kinky clan.

Tell me again of the point
At which the flight began,

Say how his heavy wings,
Spread on the sun-bronzed air,
Turned tip and tip away,
Down to the sand, the glare

Of the pine trees edging the sand,
Dropping in sovereign rings
Out of his fiery lair.
Speak of the dazzling wings.

(CP 126-27)

One may say that here Stevens has restored the myth to its metaphorical stage, where the descent of the eagle toward the sand lighted by the sun gives the impression of a flight into fire. But this is the mythical eagle already, because with its "dazzling wings" he is the source of light, and he may indeed be the sun of the Aztec legend. The fact that the poem is set up as an entreaty or injunction to tell what might be a sort of legend is more reason to believe that this is no more than a repetition of an ancient myth. The original myth tells us how the sun began, whereas its repetition takes place in the presence of that sun. The beginning is thus reenacted as in a ritual. Mircea Eliade tells us that such rituals are meant to regenerate time: "through annual repetition of the cosmogony, time was regenerated, that is, it began again as sacred time, for it coincided with the *illud tempus* in which the world had first come into existence" (*The Sacred and the Profane* 80).

A similar process of regeneration, at the verbal level, takes place in Stevens's poem. Taking for granted that the sun is an eagle, the teller of this story has him fall toward its own light, as if in a fire that will give him birth as the sun. The metaphoric core of the myth is thus doubled upon itself and becomes strangely literal. The reader's ignorance of the myth helps in construing the image as a straightforward description of a natural phenomenon. It is, however, a natural phenomenon of such grandeur and beauty that the eagle is liable to become a symbol, and we might suspect that the formulaic introduction aims to aid just such a transformation. But in spite of the suggestion

of archaic preexistence that the beginning of the poem may lead us to, the symbolic value of the eagle is potential rather than realized. The image has been emptied of its meaning through the elimination of its original context and through a deliberate literalization: an eagle descending on a sunlit beach may literally look dazzling. Nevertheless, the separation from the original context of the legend is by no means complete. What Stevens preserves of it is precisely the myth/legend quality and the potential for deep symbolism.

I have argued elsewhere that the sound scheme of the poem, together with its syntax, first empties the words of their symbolic value and then restores it to them, but on another plane. The weakening of the sound pattern in the middle of the poem and its intensification at the end leaves the impression, to the ear, that the eagle is indeed a symbol, but one to which a symbolic value has yet to be ascribed. In this sense, the imagery in the poem is itself like music, because it functions as an empty sign. According to Kevin Barry, to think of poetry by analogy with music gives us a different perspective on significance and aesthetics: "Given that a piece of instrumental music must appear, according to Lockean principles, to be empty of signification, its enjoyment is evidence of the necessity for an aesthetic complex enough to include the pleasures of uncertainty and interpretation and of some free subjectivity in response" (*Language, Music and the Sign*, 3). Such an aesthetic is the more necessary for Stevens as the plenitude of his images may be lost somewhere in the mythologies of the past. The image of the ring of men in stanza VII of "Sunday Morning" is aesthetically interesting precisely because it lets the reader's imagination fill in the missing details and produce their significance. So is the eagle in "Some Friends from Pascagoula."

It would seem that an awareness of Aztec mythology helps to confirm an impression of significant emptiness that the poem can produce, even if, or maybe especially because, we read it in ignorance of its possible source. More powerfully than the reworking of a myth in "Sunday Morning," the disembodied imagery of "Some Friends from Pascagoula" leads us to believe that Stevens may have found a different use for the images derived from Mesoamerican mythology. Instead of integrating that mythology into America's self-definition, he struggles, in fact, to invent a mythology, one more reflective of its region, perhaps. This is

also his declaration of intent, at least as far as the latter poem is concerned: "This is neither merely description nor symbolical. A man without existing conventions (beliefs, etc.) depends for ideas of a new and noble order on 'noble imagery'. This poem is an attempt to give a specimen of 'noble imagery' in a commonplace occurrence. What seems to be a description is, after all, a presentation of a 'sovereign sight'" (*Letters* 349). Here, Stevens seems to have transcended the worries about America's lack of historical pedigree on the international arena. His purpose is more personal, but no less related to being an American—"a man without existing conventions."

Such a man stands in need of "noble imagery," and whether this imagery derives from a commonplace occurrence (we are at a loss to see how this visionary descent of an eagle can be a commonplace occurrence), or from the noble imagery of other races, it is the poet's own imagination that has to endow it with nobility. Its poetic effect, however, resides, more than Stevens himself seems to be aware of, in fragmentation and selection, in the play of memory against oblivion. No images of a commonplace occurrence could leave that impression of symbolic power without a legendary antecedent radiating from their obscurity.

Bringing light to what lies in obscurity is in itself a dubious enterprise because such action might diminish a poetry born from America's own history and encouraged by its habit of reinventing itself at every turn "in the course of human events." Oblivion is perhaps to be preferred, but reinvention, and perhaps poetry, are not possible without the material traces of others, without a historical debris in itself as fascinating as the most beautiful poetry. It is hard to assess whether some of the most striking poetic effects in Stevens stem from his own imagination or are scattered fragments of ancient Mesoamerican myths or history. It must be said, in favor of the hypothesis that he was consciously or unconsciously inspired by such material, that his images bear a striking resemblance with those to be found in the chronicles of the conquest of America such as those written by Diego Duran, Bernardino de Sahagun, and as I want to point out in what follows, Bernal Diaz del Castillo.

But first let me bring up another example of extraordinary imagery whose unexpectedness makes us perceive it as no less than violently beautiful. "A Postcard from the Volcano" is a poem about history, a vision of ourselves in the future seen by our descendants, in about the same manner as we see our ancestors. This is the sight of the future intimately identical to the site of the past:

Children,
 Still weaving budded aureoles,
 Will speak our speech and never know,

 Will say of the mansion that it seems
 As if he that lived there left behind
 A spirit storming in blank walls,

 A dirty house in a gutted world,
 A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
 Smear'd with the gold of the opulent sun.
 (CP 159)

In a poem that leads us calmly along the path of a commonplace meditation about death and the future, in a poem where imagery is reduced to descriptive purposes, the ending shocks not only because of the sudden metaphoric flight of the words but also because of the violence it does to our common sense expectations. We might expect anything from a "dirty house" but to be "in a gutted world," and "smear'd with the gold of the opulent sun." The shock value resides in the clustering of words that almost never go together. "Smear" is often used in relation to blood and echoes another powerful image from "Contrary Theses I," where "Blood smears the oaks." "Gold" may be related to opulence, but here it is closer to smearing, and that suggests that it might be molten and ghastly similar to blood. The sun, on the other hand, we would readily describe as gold, but Stevens makes it opulent, the source rather than the semblance of the gold that smears. Are we invited to see the sun bleeding the richness of its light over the dirty house? And what sense does this all make?

These are questions which we normally do not ask, because if the violence of the words does something, it is to obliterate our common-

sense perceptions of language. The image touches us as poetic, therefore acceptable beyond unacceptability, because nowhere—in no context we know—could anything be “smeared with the gold of the opulent sun.” The symbolic value of the imagery is the more powerful for being empty, almost impossible to fill. But what if it were not empty?

How much more shocking and violent these images could become in a real context, we can see by flipping through the *History of New Spain* written by Bernal Diaz del Castillo. He was a soldier in the army of Hernando Cortes, who took the pen to settle misconceptions about his beloved general and left us a testimony as fascinating in the violence of its images as it is crude in its style. For if they horrify us today with their own violence and greed, in their progress through Mexico, Cortes’s soldiers encountered the new world with more wonder and horror than we can possibly conceive of. Awed by the human sacrifices, Cortes thought he did the work of God when he ordered the local *cues* or temples to be whitewashed and transformed into Christian churches. On such occasions, Diaz del Castillo gives us the facts with no poetic embellishment:

There were two masonry walls before the entrance to the *cue*, and the court was paved with white stones like flagstones, and all was whitened, burnished and clean. . . . A little way away was a place of sacrifice, all blood stained and black with smoke. . . . Near this place of sacrifice there were many large knives and chopping-blocks like those on which men cut up meat in slaughter-houses (239)

Among these dirty houses of this literally “gutted world,” Cortes’s men were looking for treasure, for the gold of Montezuma:

I heard a report that, at the time when the great *cue* was built, all the inhabitants of that mighty city placed offerings of gold and silver and pearls and precious stones in the foundations, and bathed them in the blood of the prisoners of war whom they had sacrificed. They also put there every kind of seed that grew in their country, so that their idols should give them victories and riches and great crops. Some curious readers may ask how we came to know that they had thrown gold and silver and precious *chalchihuites* and seeds into the foundation of the *cue*, and watered them with the blood of the Indian victims. . . . (238-39)

It is easy to see how the horrific images that Diaz del Castillo was spinning out of his memory could have fallen, mangled and mingled, into the metaphoric order of Wallace Stevens's poem. But does the juxtaposition of original and created images clarify the latter for us? Does it make them more intelligible and less violent? It is doubtful, for the verbal violence is only doubled by the actual violence behind the original images, and we would not know whether to stand in awe of the poetic imagination that invites us to see the light of the sun as molten gold/blood smearing a dirty house in a gutted world or of the actual violence that lies somewhere at the foundation of the culture that produced that imagination.

In a way, Stevens's project to define America and being American is confirmed by his use of Mesoamerican mythology and history, but such use is no simple evocation, nor is it only a complacent consumption of the exotic. Stevens does not have an audience to whom the simple evocation would make sense, and he cannot allude to events that his readers would have forgotten or never learned about. For he addresses an audience amnesiac and detached from its own past, a past too violent and unacceptable to remember. The fragmentation of that past and the reintegration of its fragments, although potentially poetic gestures in themselves, do not reach his audience. But their aesthetic effect can displace and replace the missing historical awareness with a mythology no less powerful and authentic because it is practically invented.

Frederic Jameson once noted that "The symbolic space opened up by Stevens' work, the autonomization of image from thing, idea from image, name from idea, is in itself neither true nor false, neither scientific nor ideological: it is an experience, and a *historical* experience, and not a theory about language or a choice susceptible of ethical or political judgment" (189; my emphasis). The historical experience is that which produces Stevens's aesthetic and not a mere source of allusions. His "empty" symbols result from the complicated process that at once eradicates and demands meaning. Beyond the simple fact that his theme is America, Stevens works with an aesthetic that cannot be separated from the historical process that engendered America.

Stevens makes us return to a past that we do not know, or prefer to forget, in the same way classical myths make us eternally return to a

center that has had to be imagined. His poetry does not revive or revise the old myths but ambitions to replace them with a "noble imagery" that is "of the soil"—a mythology that only America can claim as its own. Poetry itself becomes mythological in the sense that it functions in the same universe of discourse where myths are generated, where empty signs are made full in the process of interpretation. Mircea Eliade explains how myths endow with significance places that otherwise would be empty of it. Words are such places for Wallace Stevens, but words do have meanings, and in order to become the perfect receptacles of our interpretations, they first have to be voided by the meanings they once had. History offers, in a hyperbole we call colonization, a very suitable analogy for Stevens's poetics, for the task of giving meaning to emptied signs is at once the task of the poet and of the colonist.

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NOTES

¹It is perhaps interesting to note that Waldo Frank wrote for *Cuadernos Americanos* at the time when Stevens subscribed to the magazine, and that his work may have been familiar to Stevens.

²Benjamin Franklin, "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America" (1784), and Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) both extol the virtues of the American savages against scientific theories from Europe which tried to debase Amerindians as an inferior race.

³Further research may reveal that Stevens drew upon the folklore of the tribes on US territory as well.

⁴Stevens noted in one of his letters that "Sunday Morning" is "not essentially woman's meditation on religion and the meaning of life. It is anybody's meditation" (*Letters* 250).

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