

“Ancient Wisdom” to “Supreme Fiction”: Ideas of God in the Poetry of H.D. and Wallace Stevens

Heather Harrison Thomas, Associate Professor, English, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

Modernist American poets H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Wallace Stevens struggled differently to come to terms with the idea of God, yet both pursued a skeptical inquiry of desire. Each enacted a transformative poetics that invests poetry itself with religious value. Addressing the spiritually dead and embattled modern moment in need of rebirth, H.D. developed a revelatory poetics rooted in ancient mysticism that reclaimed for the 20th century a lost female divinity hidden beneath the overarching structure of patriarchal religion. She mediated between the old Judeo-Christian binaries that would separate body and soul, spirit and matter, devaluing one for the other. Stevens used imagination as the instrument of mediation between the idea of God as central to poetry, and modernity’s movement away from this idea. He transformed the spiritual desire for God, learned from his mother, into a sacred-secular delight in harmonious order. Poetry itself, his “supreme fiction,” came to offer the consolations of religion as a substitute for God. The crucial cultural work of these poets during the fractious era of modernism opened paths that we might consider today in efforts to construct a compassionate discourse and seek common ground during the struggle for global accord.

Introduction

As searchers in a 20th century of world war and social upheaval, the American modernist poets H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Wallace Stevens revised poetry’s visionary tradition for a skeptical era by re-imagining the idea of God. The visionary poetics of H.D. and Stevens extends a tradition that includes William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. H.D. and Stevens neither embrace conventional religion, as T.S. Eliot eventually does, nor reject abstractions of the spirit, as William Carlos Williams does in calling the poem “a machine made out of words.”¹ Instead, they evolve new poetics of the secular-sacred, inscribing themselves not as prophets of “transcendent forms” but as self-conscious artists whose “actual” words blaze with an art, or artifice, that can redeem the human spirit.² H.D. looks back to ancient myths, reclaiming but also revising female divinity in transgressive terms. Stevens re-conceptualizes poetry itself as a modern form of redemption. In bodies of work created through the mid-century (Stevens died in 1955; H.D., in 1961), they demonstrate poetry’s capacity to redeem the human spirit singed by historical disasters and existential alienation. Their distinctive inward quests lead to discoveries of the other within themselves; then to something larger beyond themselves, an encompassing being or sense of being that may be considered an idea of god.³ In the 21st century search for global accord amid perpetual war and ecological crisis, the work of H.D. and Stevens confirms the power of visionary poetry as a spiritual force for creating common ground. It demonstrates poetry’s effectiveness as a catalyst for compassionate dialogue across religious divides that are used to fuel global conflict.

¹ William Carlos Williams, Introduction to *The Wedge. Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 256.

² Wallace Stevens, from “A Quiet, Normal Life”: “There was no fury in transcendent forms. / But his actual candle blazed with artifice.” *The Collected Poems*, 523.

³ In his Foreword to *Hermetic Definition* by H.D. (New York: New Directions, 1972), Norman Holmes Pearson refers to her “self-seeking quest” as part of something much larger than herself, “the encompassing ‘self’ of which she was only a part.”

When Stevens says, “God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist),”⁴ he proclaims the divinity within, not a transcendent God separate and other from the human. “[T]his is the new heresy; /” H.D. writes in *Trilogy*:

...yet the ancient rubrics reveal that
we are back at the beginning:

you have a long way to go,
walk carefully, speak politely

to those who have done their worm cycle,
for gods have been smashed before

and idols and their secret is stored
in man’s very speech,⁵

History has failed us, or we have failed it, and we must begin again in the present, informed by ancient wisdom and prepared to undergo a complete metamorphosis, or “worm cycle.” Such a process has outlived gods as they have been defined and represented through time and various cultures. It is in language, “man’s very speech,” not in the idols of a religion, where ancient wisdom sets its store through the cyclical discourses of history.

The “heresy” of H.D. and Stevens resulted from scientific, philosophical, and social change, along with massive world war. Nietzsche declared that God was dead and religion had lost its power long before World War I made poets face the brutal reality of large-scale modern warfare at odds with Romantic notions of heroism and honor. Darwin’s theory of evolution was taking hold as the 20th century began, along with Freud’s idea that unconscious motives control human behavior. When Stevens wrote, “The mind is the most powerful thing in the world,” it followed that the idea of God was a human invention.⁶ H.D. considered mind *and* body in her declaration that “the brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important.”⁷

H.D. was reared in the Moravian Christian community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, by a seminary-teacher mother and astronomer father. The Moravians believe in simple living, a communal spirit of unity, mission, and in mysticism, including the gift of “vision” manifesting as holy wisdom, insight, or talent. H.D., who titled her childhood memoir *The Gift*, wondered if “the gift” had passed to her, but was told that it had gone to her musical uncle. Her mother had musical talent but had stopped singing after criticism from her own father. H.D.’s grandmother had also abandoned music after a mystical experience of speaking in tongues. H.D. herself experienced visions, including hieroglyphic projections written on a wall in Greece, described in her 1919 essay *Notes on Thought and Vision*. During her psychoanalysis with Freud in 1933, she wondered if subconsciously she wanted to found “a new religion.” But Freud called her visions a “dangerous symptom” of “megalomania.”⁸ She went on to use psychoanalytic techniques, including free association and dreams, in her writing. A complex transference with Freud and recovery of “maternal presence” in her work helped her to create a “female spiritual politics,”

⁴ Wallace Stevens, *Adagia, Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989), 198.

⁵ H.D. “The Walls Do Not Fall,” *Trilogy, Collected Poems*, 517.

⁶ Stevens, *Adagia, Opus Posthumous*, 188.

⁷ H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision*, ed. Albert Gelpi, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1982), 21.

⁸ Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1984), 211.

nurturing a “revisionary impulse” into a new “gender authority.”⁹ More than any other 20th-century woman poet, H.D. mined and revised a wide range of ancient myths, first as a Greek-masked Imagist and later as an international epic poet, reclaiming female wisdom and divinity.

Stevens grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania, forty-six miles southwest of Bethlehem, a son of a lawyer and one-time schoolteacher encouraged by his father to take up law and to write poetry only as a hobby. Stevens felt that he had gotten “imagination” from his mother. He remembered “being lulled by the melody and rhythm of her voice into a half-dream state” during his mother’s nightly Bible readings. He also recalled his mother singing and playing hymns at the piano “with an abstracted, faraway look in her eyes.”¹⁰ Later, as a law student in New York, he lingered over these Bible stories at the public library. Raised in the Presbyterian church with a Puritan conscience, he struggled with the spiritual questions about heaven, hell, justice, and evil raised by the furious changes of modern life, concluding that he was brought up to inhabit a world that no longer existed. Stevens’ biographer Joan Richardson asks, “How could one bred to be certain of his place, as well as the place of every other creature and thing in the great chain of being, not feel uncertain of self in the century when everything became uncertain, even certain principles.”¹¹ Immersing himself in a wide range of philosophical and religious texts, from Heraclitus through Zen Buddhism, Stevens read, reflected, and, in the process, “fashioned a new self ‘on paper’” with a mythology of his own.¹²

Part 1: H.D.

In her World War II epic *Trilogy* H.D. recovers lost female goddesses, revises female symbols, and reclaims God-the-Mother to stand alongside God-the-Father.¹³ Transhistorical and cross-cultural, *Trilogy* counters a fractured modern world by suggesting that shared values exist beyond patriarchy’s authoritarian system based on inequality and the repression of women as other. Common ground has been destroyed by “illusion, reversion of old values, / oneness lost, madness.”¹⁴ Poets may be misfits “too old to be useful . . . not old enough to be dead,”¹⁵ but her female scribe stands “second only to the Pharaoh” because language has the power to mediate thought:

Without thought, invention
you would not have been, O Sword,

without idea and the Word’s mediation,
you would have remained

unmanifest in the dim dimension
where thought dwells,

and beyond thought and idea,
their begetter,

⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *H.D.: The Career of that Struggle* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 82.

¹⁰ Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: A Biography, The Early Years 1879-1923* (New York: Beech Tree/William Morrow, 1986), 50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope’s Web: Gender, Modernity, H.D.’s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 328.

¹⁴ H.D., “The Walls Do Not Fall,” *Collected Poems*, 533

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 522.

Dream,
Vision.¹⁶

The pen precedes the sword, or any object, because things must be imagined, inscribed in thought, or named in order to exist in a meaningful way. As an instrument that creates ideas through their inscription, the pen is more powerful than the sword, a weapon that kills and destroys. Yet words have the power to kill along with the power to create and transform. The holy Word is frequently construed as a metaphoric sword doing spiritual battle, while the embedded “word” within “sword,” suggests a connection between religion and war with contemporary resonance in our own times of so-called holy war. There are “deplorable gaps” in our knowledge, as there are literally holes in the bombed-out cityscape of London, where H.D. writes *Trilogy* during the 1942 Nazi blitz. Part 1, “The Walls Do Not Fall,” explores these gaps. Part 2, “Tribute to the Angels,” proposes new ways to bridge them, and Part 3, “The Flowering of the Rod,” offers an altered vision of male-female relation and female divinity. Historically, H.D. connects the ancient Egyptian ruins at the temple of Karnak with the ruins of contemporary London. Spiritually, she reconnects modernity to revised versions of ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Christian myths, known generally in their patriarchal versions, and she rewrites the lost or suppressed female perspective into the gaps. In “The Walls Do Not Fall,” her purpose is to

uncover cankerous growths

in present-day philosophy,
in an endeavour to make ready,

as it were, the patient for the Healer;
correlate faith with faith,

recover the secret of Isis,
which is: there was One

in the beginning, Creator,
Fosterer, Begetter, the Same-forever

in the papyrus-swamp,
in the Judean meadow.¹⁷

The “cankeraus growths” are ways of thinking based on hatred, prejudice, inequality, and violence. Healing requires a radical transformation, the sublimation of violence into something positive. This is what the Egyptian goddess Isis did when she ventured into a swamp to recover the dismembered parts of the murdered fertility god Osiris, then had the parts planted around the country and temples erected at these sites. Here H.D. equates the “papyrus-swamp” with the “Judean meadow” of Jesus’ time, adding a diverse list of “Same-forever” synonyms for God as a force of creation and healing. The implication is that religion, which escapes the limits and illusions of its own dogma as “the one,” can establish common ground among diverse people and cultures. By contrast, religion or nationalism in the grips of its own dogma as “the one” becomes

¹⁶ Ibid., 519.

¹⁷ Ibid., 541.

an instrument of divisiveness and strife that can be used to promote terror and brutality, such as the Nazi extermination of the Jews, a “holy war” between fundamentalist Muslims and Christians, or, relative to H.D.’s own background, the persecution of Moravian Christians in Europe for their mystical beliefs.

H.D. argues that change and healing can occur through the alchemy of language, given its power to transform our perception and thought. Isis gains the magical power of language, which may be equated with poetry, by tricking the sun god Ra into revealing his secret name. In gaining the power of naming, she also gains the power of life and death over him, which he has had over her, because to name things is to create them, to call them into existence. H.D. performs linguistic alchemy on familiar poetic symbols—the worm, the shell, the flower, the rod/rood—connecting the spiritual history of Christianity with pagan and polytheistic myth. As tropes for her own survival, she demonstrates the ways in which small creatures, such as the worm, can survive the perils of nature or war. Through their own persistence, inner strength, and ability to adapt to hostile environments, they can transform themselves and evolve:

In me (the worm) clearly
is no righteousness, but this—

persistence; I escaped spider-snare,
bird-claw, scavenger bird-beak,

clung to grass-blade,
the back of a leaf

when storm-wind
tore it from its stem;

....
I profit
by every calamity;

I eat my way out of it;
gorged on vine-leaf and mulberry

parasite, I find nourishment:
when you cry out in disgust,

a worm on the leaf,
a worm in the dust,

a worm on the ear-of-wheat,
I am yet unrepentant,

for I know the Lord God
is about to manifest when I,

the industrious worm,

spin my own shroud.¹⁸

What the she-worm also knows is that “the Lord God” will transform in *Trilogy’s* Part 2 into “Psyche, the butterfly / out of the cocoon,” a female symbol of recovered consciousness.¹⁹ Further re-vision will reveal a transformed Mary, Our Lady, carrying not a child but a blank book ready to record the transformations of changed consciousness and lost history.

Addressing the spiritually dead and embattled modern moment in need of rebirth, H.D. repositions the old Judeo-Christian binaries of body and soul, spirit and matter, male and female not as contested terms opposed to one another, but as linked terms in a healing and generative, co-equal interaction.²⁰ One method of renewal involves the ritual revision of words themselves, for example “Venus.” Besides denoting the Roman goddess of beauty and her Greek counterpart, Aphrodite, H.D. also invokes the Egyptian star goddess, Astarte. As both an evening and morning star, Venus might seem to escape binary thinking, but H.D. shows that etymologically this has not been the case. The root of the word “venus” carries a connotation of promiscuity (“venery”), poison (“venom”) and sin (“venial”), so H.D. performs a ritual cleansing of the word to redeem it as “venerable” and “venerate,” finally addressing the goddess as “venerator.”²¹

As H.D. performs these and other transformations of symbol and word, she is preparing for a larger epiphany of Mary, beginning in “Tribute” as reaffirmations of healing, religion, and art, according to critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis. The Mary of religion and renewal is incarnated in H.D.’s image of a flowering apple tree in May, seen suddenly through the charred frame of a bombed-out London house:

we asked for no sign
but she gave a sign unto us;

sealed with the seal of death,
we thought not to entreat her

but prepared us for burial;
then she set a charred tree before us,

burnt and stricken to the heart;
was it may-tree or apple?

....

we crossed the charred portico,
passed through a frame—doorless—

entered a shrine; like a ghost,
we entered a house through a wall;

¹⁸ H.D., *Ibid.*, 515-16.

¹⁹ H.D., “Tribute to the Angels,” *Collected Poems*, 570.

²⁰ Georgina Taylor, *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers 1913-1946*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 174.

²¹ H.D., “Tribute to the Angels,” *Collected Poems*, 553-54.

then still not knowing
whether (like the wall)

we were there or not-there,
we saw the tree flowering;

it was an ordinary tree
in an old garden-square.²²

The renewed Mary carries a blank book, “not / the tome of the ancient wisdom,” but “the blank pages / of the unwritten volume of the new.” She is not a Sybil, “she is not-fear, she is not-war / but she is no symbolic figure / of peace, charity, chastity, goodness, / faith, hope, reward.”²³ Instead, she is a guardian spirit. Her book “is our book,” one of multiplicity and pluralism, awaiting the story of female gender authority, given that “the virginal page is not single, hieratic, authoritarian revelation.”²⁴ This rewriting of Mary Madonna and later of Magdalene in *Trilogy*’s final part leads to H.D.’s revelation of God-the-Mother not as a horrific and destructive apocalypse, but as new life. “H.D. offers the possibility that Mary is not a conduit for One whom she bore, but is herself the One: the goddess is God.”²⁵

In Part 3, “The Flowering of the Rod,” H.D. tells the story of Mary Magdalene gaining from the Magi Kaspar the alabaster jar used in the anointing of Christ’s feet. At first the Magdalene is represented traditionally as a prostitute and “the first actually to witness His life-after-death.”²⁶ She is unbalanced, neurotic, and doubted by the male disciples because “no secret was safe with a woman.”²⁷ Yet H.D. reminds us that Jesus said “the outcast” will be the first redeemed; Mary stands up for herself, predicting her redemption even if it seems, ironically, as bitter as myrrh:

I am Mary, she said, of a tower-town,
or once it must have been towered

for Magdala is a tower
Magdala stands on the shore;

I am Mary, she said, of Magdala,
I am Mary, a great tower;

through my will and my power,
Mary shall be myrrh;

I am Mary—O, there are Marys a-plenty,
(though I am Mara, bitter) I shall be Mary-myrrh;²⁸

²² H.D., “Tribute to the Angels,” *Collected Poems*, 558-59.

²³ *Ibid.*, 570.

²⁴ DuPlessis, *H.D.: The Career of that Struggle* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ H.D., “The Flowering of the Rod,” *Collected Poems*, 586.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 589.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 590-91.

By *Trilogy*'s end, Kaspar's revelation of a female trinity changes him and his view of Mary Magdalene, making possible a renewal of her presence and authority, and enlarging his own sense of empathy and connection with others. His heart enlarges with the painful work of spiritual growth and reconciliation, the suffering "ecstasy" of compassion. Kaspar's revelation is of "Paradise / before Eve....,"²⁹ a lost time of female goddess religion that he now sees as the missing part of mythic history. With this, Mary Magdalene can re-enter that history as a figure redeemed. Kaspar then tells his own story, including his role as the myrrh-bearing Magi in Christ's nativity scene. But now there is room for a woman bearing her own gifts of myrrh.

When Kaspar's perspective on Mary Magdalene changes, she gains the possibility of seeing herself differently, of becoming more fully human *and* divine. It is this human power to transform consciousness—our capacity to create a belief system engendered from that which is fully human, enlarging our compassion and wisdom—that is the idea of god in H.D.

Part 2: Wallace Stevens

Wallace Stevens also stakes his poetic project on the "necessary angel" of a new perspective. The idea of reality as subjective, with no stable objective reality 'out there' undermines the idea of god as stable and transcendent, suggesting instead the notion that god is a shifting and relative human construct. In the language of Freudian psychoanalysis, the idea of god becomes a mental projection, an ego-construct, a form of wish-fulfillment to sustain hope and allay mortal fear. Stevens ponders these ideas in his equation of god with poetry. God and poetry become "the supreme fiction" of mind and language, and he is a man "made out of words."³⁰

[I]t is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion," Stevens wrote in a 1940 letter. "My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe. Humanism would be the natural substitute, but the more I see of humanism the less I like it."³¹ Stevens first proposes a substitute for God in his 1915 poem "Sunday Morning," which he considered an expression of paganism. The woman forgoing church to lounge in her nightgown over coffee and oranges finds "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." Now, "[d]ivinity must live within herself."³² Without the idea of a God accompanying immortal souls in heaven, the problem in our earthly paradise is how to cope with loss and death. The poet concludes that the idea of death must be incorporated into one's understanding of life: "Death is the mother of beauty."³³ Every living thing already contains its death; life must be lived with this painful knowledge, and with hope residing in the cycles of regeneration.

By 1937 in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens argues that poetry and art have the power to be a "substitution for all the gods: / This self, not that gold self aloft."³⁴ He launches his argument for poetry as the new religion:

²⁹ Ibid., 602.

³⁰ "Supreme fiction" is first used by Stevens in the poem "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (CP 59) and later in the poem title "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP 380). The phrase "man made out of words" refers to the poem title "Men Made out of Words" (CP 355).

³¹ Holly Stevens, ed. *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 348.

³² Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 67.

³³ Ibid., 68.

³⁴ Ibid., 176.

Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,
Even in the chattering of your guitar.³⁵

Poetry and god have always been related, he argues, because neither results from reason or the rational mind. “All mystics approach God through the irrational. Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational.”³⁶ Poets compose from an “intense need” to renew their sense of life itself, or perhaps to find God. In his essay “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” Stevens works out the idea of god as a poet’s desire for order amid the seeming chaos of life, and a delight in “the harmonious and orderly.”³⁷ But believing this depends on the “will to believe,” which psychologist William James called the greatest problem of the age.³⁸

By the time of Stevens’ 1942 major long poem *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, he writes: “One’s final belief must be in a fiction. I think the history of belief will show that it has always been a fiction.”³⁹ In this poem, he makes three claims for poetry as a “supreme fiction.” First, “it must be abstract,” meaning it must be written in the abstract sign system of words. Second, “it must change,” because the central component of life is change. Third, “it must give pleasure”; one must love the images, rhythms, and sounds as one loves life itself.⁴⁰ In a dazzling passage from the “Pleasure” section, the speaker wonders whether to believe in a downward-leaping angel as a figure of his imagination, an updated rebel angel fearlessly playing the music of modernity’s abysmal spheres in the “lapis-haunted air”? Or, is the angel a direct reflection, embodiment, and satisfaction of the poet’s own desire for transport and otherness? Is his verbal creation of this angel a sign of the poet’s own “expressible bliss” with “no need” for any other solace, certainly not the iconic trappings of religion? The speaker’s self-conscious struggle vibrates in the paradoxes of oppositional diction: “serenely” with “violent,” “abysmal” with “glory,” “the motionless motion” and the word-slide from “abyss” as “abysmal.”

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening’s revelations, and
On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?

³⁵ Ibid., 167.

³⁶ Wallace Stevens, “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989), 227-28.

³⁷ Ibid., 228.

³⁸ Holly Stevens, ed. *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 443.

³⁹ Ibid., 370.

⁴⁰ “It Must Be Abstract,” “It Must Change,” and “It Must Give Pleasure” comprise the titles of the three sections of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*.

Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

It is he or is it I that experience this?
Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
And if there is an hour there is a day,

There is a month, a year, there is a time
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

These external regions, what do we fill them with
Except reflections, the escapades of death,
Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof? ⁴¹

Through "reflection" as it means both contemplation and mirror image, the poet mirrors God's creativity even though he lacks God's "majesty" and is wholly human, warts and all: "I have not but I am and as I am, I am." The poet's majesty occurs in those fulfilling and satisfying moments that make life complete by the enactment of his imagination, which he can imagine as a form of the divine. The experience of delight is leavened by the knowledge that the God imagined is his own invention, a fiction he inscribes to create meaning, which is as ironic as the fulfillment of a character in a fairy tale. In our mental "escapades of death," our brush with death-wishes, death does become the mother of beauty.

What Stevens finds in the poetry of desire is the consolation of religion: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."⁴² He explains: "The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give."⁴³

The wild country of the soul finds no home outside of the poem itself. In several later poems, Stevens rehearses the redemptive capacity of poetry as desire, enacting an encounter with an imagined other which brings a sense of renewal, vitality, and peace. Such encounters occur in the dedicatory poem to his friend Henry Church in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*; "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," "The Rock," and "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour." In the "Notes" dedicatory poem, for instance, the "vivid transparency" of "peace" when "I meet you" and "we sit at rest" becomes a shared moment of delight in harmonious order, the "central of our being" as it can be known amid life's "living changingness" without a "single, certain" God:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?

⁴¹ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 404-05.

⁴² Wallace Stevens, *Adagia, Opus Posthumous*, 185.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 186.

In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
 Equal in living changingness to the light
 In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
 For a moment in the central of our being,
 The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.⁴⁴

In “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” a stunning poem chosen by Stevens to end his 1953 *Selected Poems*, the encounter recalls the *Notes* dedicatory, but has the erotic charge of “intensest” desire with an imagined, illicit lover. Assuming the persona of the paramour, Stevens describes an encounter which turns out to be profoundly meditative. According to critic Eleanor Cook, Stevens defined his poetic paramours as “all things in our nature that are celestial,” implying the heavenly or divine spirit within human nature.⁴⁵ As the other within, the paramour is a secular-sacred muse, “a crucially enabling part of one’s self.”⁴⁶ Such a construct is made literally *par-amour*, or through love as the ultimate claim on the imagination. But without poetry the paramour’s world is poor; we must collect ourselves out of all indifferences into one thing, “a single shawl / Wrapped tightly round us.”⁴⁷

Elsewhere Stevens has said that poetry will give satisfaction amid “the irremediable poverty of life,”⁴⁸ and as evening comes, the “light, a power, the miraculous influence” of imaginative transport comes and “we forget each other and ourselves.”⁴⁹ Self, other, and ego dissolve into an encompassing “obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge.” But this knowledge is self-conscious; it has arranged the rendezvous in the first place, and exists within the “vital boundary” of the mind. In this place, “God and the imagination are one.” And here is where “we make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough.”⁵⁰ This interior dwelling is both a place and an action, noun and verb. It is abstract, it changes, and it gives pleasure.

For Stevens, the purpose of poetry was “to make life complete in itself.”⁵¹ His poetics of spirituality evolves from “Sunday Morning’s” impersonal authoritarian voice and distanced representation of the woman as other, to “Paramour’s” intimate speaker, a male-female wisdom fusion. Yet whatever transformation occurs must be limited by awareness of the poem as an invention. Stevens wrote: “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.”⁵²

Stevens’s paramour is sanctified as H.D.’s Venus and Magdalene are redeemed through language, the sign of the mind’s power of imaginative transformation. Stevens’s idea of god perhaps can be called a form of humanistic atheism and H.D.’s a polytheistic Christianity. However, both escape these labels, given the multiplicity and changing shape of their visions. Stevens’s harmonious order is not “a single world” but a “constellation of patches and pitches.”

⁴⁴ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 380.

⁴⁵ Eleanor Cook, *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 292.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 524.

⁴⁸ Wallace Stevens, *Adagia, Opus Posthumous*, 193.

⁴⁹ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 524.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Wallace Stevens, *Adagia, Opus Posthumous*, 188.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 189.

We are the “[T]hinkers without final thoughts / In an always incipient cosmos.”⁵³ As long as we live, we have the possibility of renewal, of beginning again.

H.D. unfolds her idea of god across history and myth in a self-seeking quest for another form of encompassing being of which she is a part. She seeks the seed of renewal in the fragments of death and destruction, creating a body of work for others who can heal themselves in what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls a process of “accretive social change, building cell by cell, like coral or honeycomb.”⁵⁴ H.D.’s vision of healing and reconciliation of religious traditions remains a possibility today because of humanity’s power to think differently, to transform ourselves or to be transformed.

Stevens said as much in a late poem, “Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It”: “He had said that everything possessed / The power to transform itself, or else, / And what meant more, to be transformed.”⁵⁵ Amid history’s horrors, which we make from our own mind-forged manacles, we have the ability to transform ourselves and our world anew into something sustainable. In the poetry of H. D. and Wallace Stevens, the idea of god as humanity’s best possibility comes in breath and moves into the air between us, moving us, making possible a change.

Works Cited

- Cook, Eleanor. *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *H.D.: The Career of that Struggle*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.
- _____. *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Penelope’s Web: Gender, Modernity, H.D.’s Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Guest, Barbara. *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World*. Garden City, Doubleday, 1984.
- H.D. *H.D., Collected Poems 1912-1944*. Ed. Louis L. Martz. New York: New Directions, 1986.
- _____. *Hermetic Definition*. New York: New Directions, 1972.
- _____. *The Gift*. Ed. Jane Augustine. Gainesville: U of Florida Press, 1998.
- _____. *Notes on Thought and Vision*. Ed. Albert Gelpi. San Francisco: City Lights, 1982.
- Hollenberg, Donna Kralik, ed. *Between History and Poetry: the Letters of H. D. and Norman Holmes Pearson*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997.
- Richardson, Joan. *Wallace Stevens: A Biography, The Early Years 1879-1923*. New York: Beech Tree/William Morrow, 1986.
- _____. *Wallace Stevens: A Biography, The Later Years 1923-1955*. New York: Beech Tree/William Morrow, 1988.
- Robinson, Janice. *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982.
- Stevens, Holly, ed. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 1981.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage/Random House, 1990.
- _____. *The Necessary Angel*. New York: Vintage/Random House, 1951.
- _____. *Opus Posthumous*. Ed. Milton J. Bates. New York: Knopf, 1989.
- Taylor, Georgina. *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers 1913-1946*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2008.

⁵³ Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, 140.

⁵⁴ DuPlessis, *H.D.: The Career of that Struggle* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 143.

⁵⁵ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 514.