How do we talk “today” to project a better tomorrow with a language inherited from yesterday? “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” and “Sunday Morning,” early poems by Wallace Stevens, may answer such a question. One way of looking at these poems is to see their aim as promoting what has been neglected in the teaching of Christianity. These two poems, published in 1923 in Stevens’ first volume, *Harmonium*, adapt the style of an argument and a dialogue, respectively, between Stevens and a woman. I intend to refer to the persona of these poems as Stevens himself as the matter of belief is a theme he wrote about in letters and in his aphorisms (*Adagia*) over the course of his entire career as a writer. In 1940, decades after he began publishing, Stevens writes as follows in a letter to the critic, Hi Simons: “It is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. [...] 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” (H.Stevens 348). The timing for composing poems that offer a contemporary description of the age, and with the possible intention of being a prescription for another age, could not have been any better for Stevens. That is to say, when he published the poetry, there was Prohibition on the one hand and what we speak of as “the jazz age” on the other. In other words, the age was experiencing a kind
of asceticism which had attained its final shape of nineteenth century temperance movements while a new genre of music was embodying what this asceticism aimed to restrain.

Let us proceed to Stevens' argument as framed when he found himself in the city of New York, where people were "not only defying the Eighteenth Amendment [prohibition of alcohol] openly but also having a great time doing it" (Lerner 151).

The poem opens with Stevens' thesis statement:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms,
Squiggling like saxophones. And palm for palm,
Madame, we are where we began. Allow,
Therefore, that in the planetary scene
Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
Pround of such novelties of the sublime,
Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,
May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.
This will make widows wince. But fictive things
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince. (47)

With the intention to urge that “[p]oetry is the supreme fiction,” Stevens arranges his argument. Let us follow how he develops an argument designed, if not to persuade his high-toned old Christian woman, at least to persuade himself and his readers. To begin with, Stevens points out how Christian moral law converts conscience, a notion without a form, into “palms,” substantial palm leaves. One of the events that highlights the association between conscience and palms is Palm Sunday, the annual celebration which commemorates Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday before Easter. Inevitably, Palm Sunday calls to the mind the notable consequence of the Crucifixion, what Stevens refers to, in “Sunday Morning,” as “that old catastrophe” (53), a sudden upheaval.

As an agent of a counterstatement, and by adapting a style parallel to the Christian moral law, Stevens illustrates “the opposing law.” It is the law that allows our “bawdiness” to be “converted into palms.” The conventional idea of bawdiness, or what is “immodest, indecent, licentious; especially in sexual matters” (Partridge 70), must be examined before Stevens works his transformations.

We may regard “bawdiness” in terms of such Biblical texts as this, from St. Paul’s epistles: “we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin”
(Rom.7.14) and “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing” (Rom.7.18). Moreover, the struggle with human “bawdiness” is best described in the Bible as this; “I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom.7.23).

“Members” here, according to the Oxford of English Dictionary, may refer to human genitals, or more generally, to all the parts of the body. Indeed, this way of thinking as of the body is good for those who accept Christian teachings so that they may then utter, with St. Paul, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin” (Rom.7.25). Those who do not follow the teaching, however, are left under “the law of sin,” that is “unpurged by epitaph,” an inscription upon a tomb. That is, we may speak of an “inscription” such as that of St. Paul, saying that, in Jesus Christ, “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1.7). The only way, and what was presented as the only way, to be purged of sin had been to follow the Christian moral law. “Thus,” writes Stevens, our traditionally lowly esteemed bawdiness, or the lawless desire of flesh, is to be converted into “palms” Stevens presents.

The opposing law is now introduced by adapting the phrasing of the moral law. Skillfully, the sense of “palms” in the poem has been exchanged, by the time we reach line 11, from what had been based on “conscience” in line 4. That is to say, while retaining the sound of “palms,” the sense of the palm shifts to the one that derives from “the opposing law” based on “our bawdiness.” Now that the bawdiness is sung, or celebrated in this very poem, it is converted into a poem, a very different sort of
“hymn.” Not only the unsung theme finds its singer in this poem but also the bawdiness and “members” no longer bear any negative connotations. Being converted, palms are parts of our mere hands, with which we might smack our muzzy bellies, “purged” from the exclusive moral law.

Once this takeover is achieved, those who were once considered as “disaffected flagellants,” those who no longer accept the ascetic regime, proudly embrace their conditions. Being “well-stuffed,” what under the moral law may be considered to involve the sin of gluttony, is not to be accused under the opposing law that elevates such a condition. Instead of the solemn procession on Palm Sunday at church, of which Stevens may see as “the procession of the dead” (53) in “Sunday Morning,” a parade with “a jovial hullabaloo” is introduced. At last, the high-toned-ness of that “old Christian woman,” a moral snob, if you will, is replaced with the sound, “tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,” finally, with no sense at all, or with “nonsense.”

Furthermore, Stevens develops his idea. If “the moral law” may make “a nave,” the main part of a church, and may, from that vantage point, “build haunted heaven;” “the opposing law” shall make “a peristyle,” and “project a masque beyond the planets.” By “a peristyle,” Stevens may have in mind a theatre opposed to a church where “masques” are performed instead of “mass.” Moreover, the intention of the performance that shall take place at the peristyle is set at the scale of the universe. The projection of a masque, as an opposing production to that of “haunted heaven,” is that of the planet Earth among other planets. The “masque” which ought to be attractive is, according to the *OED*, “a form of courtly dramatic entertainment, often richly symbolic, in which music and dancing played a substantial part, costumes and stage
machinery tended to be elaborate, and the audience might be invited to contribute to the action or the dancing.” The presentation of the opposing law and its consequences reflect Stevens’ belief, as he puts in his Adagia, that “the highest pursuit is the pursuit of happiness on earth” (900).

Does this mean that the high-toned old Christian woman does not believe in the pursuit of happiness? Stevens, as a matter of fact, states that he “agrees” with his high-toned old Christian woman in principle. Before considering the case of agreement, let us first consider the possibility that they do not come to an agreement.

In this case, the argument framed by Stevens might fail to “wink.” For instance, the “bellies” that are “muzzy,” affected by alcohol, can be regarded as a controversial symbol in the 1920s, and how we regard such a norm likely depends, ultimately, on whether we are for Temperance or for jazz (and all that is associated with jazz in this context). It is noteworthy that one of the most active agents of the temperance movement was the WCTU, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, in which a high-toned old Christian woman might have found a home, in good company. The union aimed to establish a “pure” America by means of social reformation. Notably, stories in the Young Crusader, the periodical of the WCTU published since 1887, melodramatically illustrate the importance of Temperance. To state a few examples, “The Little Captain” by Lynde Palmer published in 1911 illustrates a father who participates in the “wild orgies” of the saloon resulting in his own destruction, and “Roger Hillman’s Honor” by Jennie N. Standifer in 1913 illustrates a widowed mother’s difficulty with her son who indulges himself in smoking cigarettes.¹

Stevens, on the other hand, takes the side of jazz, the age of “squiggling
saxophones” (so to speak). The work of Stevens can be seen as one of many counterstatements to the establishment of a “dry” society. One of the famous prohibition-era songs, “Save a Little Dram for Me” is an example. The persona in the song, Parson Johnson, laments the situation that one of the bretheren of the church is keeping the gin to himself. The song, popularized by the comedian, Bert Williams, in 1920, puts the case as follows:

In the middle of his sermon, Parson Johnson ’rose and started sniffin’ the air—
A familiar smell was ticklin’ up the Parsons nose it told him “Gin” was ‘round somewhere—
He closed his Bible gently in the middle of the Psalm—
And started figur’n mently where that smell was comin’ from— [...] 
When they passed that bone dry law I was the very first to say it never would stay—
Neither did I think the law could regulate our thirst thats why I got none stored away—
Now since Probition’s got us drinks are few and far between—
Of all the stingy Brothers you’re the worst I ever seen—
I “insists” on my share—
Dont say its all run out—
Or else you’ll go to where—
That bad place I been preachin’ ’bout.
Oh! Bretheren if you wants more preachin’
Save a little dram for me

(Glory Halliluch)

Drinkin’ Gin ain’t against my teachin’

Treat me with equality—(Skidmore)

The equality here is merely that of sharing alcohol. Such talk may “make widows wince.” The song is funny as the style of speech is that of a Christian, while the content is that of a drunkard. In other words, the “preacher” wants “a little dram” of the jin. As long as this person remains in the Christian community, however, a high-toned old Christian woman may impose her superior moral teaching upon him. The language adapted by the persona in the song, by Parson Johnson, has its limitation and can be regarded as a mere mockery of the high-toned-ness of a telling old Christian woman. Notably, the song was performed by Bert Williams who was famous for his traditional performance in blackface or as “a master of the double entendre song in which he often mixed humor with bitter political criticism” (Aberjhani 33). There may be a potential “wink,” in the line stating to his brethren that unless the Parson is accorded equal treatment: “you’ll go to where—that bad place I been prechin’ ‘bout.” The “bad place” the Parson would refer to is, literally, Hell, so bad that it appears better to cut of offending hands as the Bible has in Mark 9:43. At the same time, the place may be “bad” but not necessarily “evil” unless Christians want it to be. Moreover, as the “bad place” is sung by Bert Williams, the place seems to imply, with the association of his appearance, where people dance to the “squiggling” saxophones, a speakeasy.

The equality Stevens presents in the poem is the one that “wink[s] most when widows wince” [emphasis mine]. As we have already seen, Stevens addresses his
poem to a high-toned old Christian woman, using diction that grows out of her diction, and, to her dismay, prophesies that he shall overcome the boundary separating the believer and the non-believer in the law in question. It is a question of generosity, and this is why the poem, a “supreme fiction,” makes “widows wince.” Moreover, towards the end of this highly nonsensical last line of the poem, a high-toned old Christian woman, too, has been transformed. That is to say, she is widowed. The reason for her shift in condition may have to do with the sound or “music” of the poem itself. That is to say, Stevens arranges a train of alliteration and consonants involving the sound of “w.” Arguably, if a Christian woman identifies herself with those Biblical virgins, as depicted in Matthew 25, with the lamps to meet the bridegroom, the Son of God, she is a widow, in the eyes of Stevens, who sees in “Sunday Morning” that “the tomb in Palestine” is nothing but “the grave of Jesus, where he lay” (56), just as would any other mortal.

The poem reaches its end, and we do not witness the result of Stevens’ argument. It is noteworthy, for now, that Stevens attempts to make the woman “wince” by going as far to make her a widow— possibly according to the “sentimental” diction of a high-toned old Christian woman, such as seen in the Young Crusader.

II

Let us now proceed to the case when Stevens offers his hand, not yet for a handshake to come to an agreement, but for leading the hand of a woman towards his idea of the “supreme fiction.” The woman represented in the following poem is not a high-toned old Christian woman. In contrast, she appears young and relatively “low-
toned," i.e., she is no prudish moralizer. This is a woman who, if introduced to the argument between Stevens and the old Christian woman, may find herself standing in between the two. Her non-committal nature is best illustrated by Stevens in the first stanza in “Sunday Morning,” which has eight stanzas in total:

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,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre. (53)

This woman sleeps in on a Sunday and enjoys her coffee and oranges in the sun. She may appear to be free as a green “cockatoo” from the solemn atmosphere of church that asks the attendants to remain silent. The joyous notion of her Sunday is but momentary, for the notion that implies the Passion of Christ in Palestine disturbs the
woman. Though she does not seem to mind her non-churchgoing, her thought is nonetheless loosely bound to the teaching of the church. In other words, while she physically sits in the sun in the United States (supposedly), her thoughts fly beyond the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea to Palestine, near the Dead Sea. The destination of her thought is the “dominion of the blood and sepulchre,” or, as Stevens puts in the last stanza of the poem, “the grave of Jesus, where he lay” (56). As the woman dreams, this “nightmare,” not frighten enough to “wake her up,” disintegrates her physical and psychological locations. Especially the psychological side of her is not only divided place-wise but also time-wise. That is to say, her present thinking (supposedly in 1915, when the poem was originally composed by Stevens) is depicted as being haunted from the description of events, especially that of the Crucifixion, that have been disseminated for more than a millennium by the church.

Stevens’ response to the woman is that the paradise today is this very earth. He attempts to introduce this idea by conducting, in the third stanza of the poem, a chronological examination of divinity, that is, the changing ideas about divinity over the long history of the the Western tradition:

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.
He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.

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? (54)

First comes Jove, the highest deity of the ancient Romans; he represents an inhuman divinity. He is depicted by Stevens as having the least association with the worldly or "earthly" sphere, and with the idea of a mother. That kind of divinity gets replaced by a semi-human divinity. The birth of this semi-human divinity refers to Jesus. The illustration of his mother conceiving the child, or "our blood, commingling, virginal, with heaven," is well known from the Bible. The Bible has it told by the angel Gabriel to Mary as follows: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1.35).

The argument Stevens may be proposing to the somewhat diffident, uncommitted, or "complacent" woman is this: since history has seen the transformation of divinity, from inhuman to semi-human, it naturally follows that the time for a merely human "divinity" shall come. Moreover, the historical shift, illustrated by Stevens, suggests the growth of importance in how the divinity is associated with the earth and with the mother. This merely human divinity, therefore, ought to be earthly and fully associated with the mother, with its origin. To the woman in peignoir, who happens to be a potential mother, Stevens states in the second stanza:

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?

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?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.

These are the measures destined for her soul. (53-54)

This “divinity,” now fully earthly and human, does not divide the woman as her “travel” to Palestine would. Stevens writes that there is no need for her to look “abroad” for divinity, psychologically and physically. The idea can be noted as a revision of “Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson when he says, in the so-titled essay, “let us not rove; let us sit at home” for “God is here within” (272). This invitation by Stevens allows the woman to “give her bounties,” what the OED has as “goodness shown in giving,” no more to “Passion” of Christ. Instead, Stevens suggests that there are passions, moods, grievings, elations, and emotions within her to which she should “give her bounties.” As the woman becomes both the object and the subject of giving, even a conventional term of “de-flowering,” having the sexual meaning of being
deprived of her virginity, becomes “unsubdued elations when the forest blooms.”

By showing that divinity may dwell in her, Stevens leads the woman to say “no” to his question, “shall our blood fail?” and “yes” to the question, “shall the earth seem all of paradise that we shall know?” If the woman follows this teaching of Stevens on this Sunday morning, he may offer the young woman, in the seventh stanza, a song that may answer to the “hankering for hymns” which that high-toned old Christian woman likely fails to agree to:

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 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. (55-56)

An orgy, according to the *OED*, entails “secret rites or ceremonies practiced in the
worship of various gods of Greek and Roman mythology; especially those practices
connected with the festivals in honour of Dionysus or Bacchus, or the festival itself,
which was celebrated with extravagant dancing, singing, drinking, etc.” The chant
Stevens presents is sung in a circle. It differs from the hymns that are sung in the
chancel, a separated section next to the nave of a church, and dedicated to the “semi-
human” divinity of Christ. Moreover, the song of Stevens is performed by “supple and
turbulent” men that “perish.” Such notion recalls another “orgy,” perhaps not to the
mind of the woman, at least to Stevens himself and his readers who are aware of the
established imagery of the preceding poets.² It is “Song of Myself” by another figure
with divinity within, “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son” who is “[t]urbulent,
fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, and breeding” (210). Through his own voice, Whitman
sings:

Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and
heart,

Copulation is no more rank to me than death is. (211)

Though Whitman and Stevens share the attitude towards “the holy hush,”
Stevens, a man of the post-transcendental generation, casts his point of view aside
from the “grass” of Whitman. That is to say, Stevens evolves out of Whitman’s diction
with the last line of seventh stanza: “the dew upon their feet shall manifest.” Stevens’
attempt may be to go beneath the “dew.” Aside from the examination of Stevens’ attempt, for now, let us linger a while to see Stevens’ attempt to “extravagate” Whitman since Whitman, like any other mortals, has had his time. Stevens writes in the fifth stanza:

Although she [Death] 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. (55)

Whitman, as he sung in “Song of Myself,” was already in one of the graves with “the beautiful uncut hair” (193) of grass when Stevens composed his poem. The age Stevens lives is the time when the “leaves,” or pages, of Whitman’s work have been strewn. It is the time when the “grass” is “relinquished” to the maiden’s “feet.” Unlike Whitman who conducted a meditation from the grass then uttered “[t]he smallest sprout shows there is really no death” (194), Stevens illustrates the shivering willow in the sun, confronting Death. Unlike Whitman who uttered the “brassy phrase” and “love [...] out of tenderness,” Stevens offers his young woman Harmonium, an instrument with which to play “a chant of paradise” if she may.

The song Stevens offers, notably, is “a chant of paradise” [emphasis mine] and not the absolute chant. A ring of men who commits to this orgy of Stevens appears to
be aware of this. The sun they devote themselves to, for example, is not God or the god. It is just as “a god might be”—one of the possible ways of seeing the sun. Likewise, Stevens writes in Adagia: “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” (903).

To Stevens’ dismay, however, such an orgy dedicated to “a god might be,” and with “the heavenly fellowship [of] men that perish,” does not satisfy the young woman:

She says, ‘But in contentment I still feel

The need of some imperishable bliss.’ (55)

This need of the woman is understandable, given that she may be used to the teachings of the church which are based on the Biblical descriptions such as, to state an example: “this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory [... ] the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15.54-57).

As a response, Stevens declares:

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,

Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams

And our desires. (55)

We have already seen that the idea of the age of mere human divinity, judging from the historical examination of Stevens, shall be fully associated with the earth and the mother. Two important features are now associated with the idea of death. In fact, death is an inevitable fact in the life we lead on earth. As Stevens sings that from death
alone comes “fulfillment to our dreams and our desires,” the power of death is depicted as greater than that of human beings. For instance, those oranges which the young woman finds pleasing are one such example of our daily desires. Without change, which involves the death to a former state of being, no oranges ripen to be enjoyed on a Sunday morning.

III

The question the woman is now invited to face by Stevens is how she deals with this change, one of the most dramatic features of life, called death. Does she find “the rub” there and “wince”? Finally, Stevens states, in the sixth stanza, a song that leads to a possible agreement with his women, widowed high-toned and complacent low-toned:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly. (55)

The relationship between humans and death Stevens suggests is familiar to the classic structure of God and humans. In other words, humans stand within the realm of Death and experience individual deaths. Stevens sings the song of earth as the song of death, owing to the role of the poet. Emerson, whose works the young Stevens was acquainted with as well as he was acquainted with the Bible, states the role of the poet on earth, or in “Nature” in the Emersonian diction, in his essay titled “The Poet”:

She [Nature] makes a man; and having brought him to ripe age, she will no longer run the risk of losing this wonder at a blow, but she detaches
from him a new self, that the kind may be safe from accidents to which
the individual is exposed. So when the soul of the poet has come to
ripeness of thought, she detaches and sends away from it its poems or
songs,—a fearless, sleepless, deathless progeny, which is not exposed to
the accidents of the weary kingdom of time: a fearless, vivacious
offspring, clad with wings (such was the virtue of the soul out of which
they came), which carry them fast and far, and infix them irrecoverably
into the hearts of men. These wings are the beauty of the poet’s soul.

(457-458)

The individual man, including the poet, is exposed to death on the earth, “the weary
kingdom of time.” When the poet reaches ripeness, which is due to the changing
features of earth—just like the process those oranges have gone through to be ripe on
a Sunday morning—he issues his “pungent” poems. Such songs, according to Emerson,
are “clad with wings.” Stevens likewise, in the last stanza of “Sunday Morning,” adapts
the image of wings:

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. (56)

As Stevens sings the song of paradise-earth for mere humans, he seeks no relation to
the sky that used to have importance with “inhuman” and “semi-human” divinity.
Stevens himself, as a poet, is like that “green cockatoo” in the first stanza or that
swallow, in the forth stanza, who works “the consummation” (54) to the changing
features of earth by its wings. “Casual flocks of pigeons” are “the heavenly fellowship of men that perish,” and together with the winged poet and with its song, “they sink downward to darkness,” to the earth. Stevens, through eight stanzas of “Sunday Morning,” repeats and develops his argument that the only place for humans is this “perishing earth,” and here we experience individual deaths, or “earthly mothers.” The same image towards death is illustrated more baldly in “Madame La Fleurie,” a poem composed in Stevens’ late years:

Weight him down, O side-stars, with the great weightings of
the end.

Seal him there. He looked in a glass of the earth and
thought he lived in it.

Now, he brings all that he saw into the earth, to the waiting
parent.

His crisp knowledge is devoured by her, beneath a dew. (431)

Again, death as the mother devours us “beneath a dew” and, according to our Emersonian Stevens, it is her beauty that ripens the poet for the song of death, of this changing world.

Can the young woman and the high-toned old Christian woman find that “they agree in principle” in addition to the fact that all seem to be “hankering for hymns”? In the last stanza of “Sunday Morning,” this is as far as the young woman follows the teaching of Stevens:

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."(56)

The principle which Stevens and the women, both old and young, hold in common in respectable Sunday poems is that they are all concerned with mortality.4 The high-toned old Christian woman who would wince at the fellow who enjoys jazz, the culture of the underground (so to speak), may not be able to lend her ears to what kind of "underground" Stevens has in his mind in 1923. He “entertains” the tomb, that is, he takes it up as an idea, as much as the Christian women are concerned with the tomb of Christ. Only, he considers the tomb of Jesus, a fellow man, Harmonium, the very collection which holds “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” includes a song of death that represents death not dreadful but strangely jolly under the title of “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate,” singing:

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

Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbadour. (40)

The exotic and apparently nonsensical “Badroulbadour” is the name of a princess who
figures in the "Story of Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp" collected in *The Thousand and One Nights; Or, The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*. Though this may appear whimsical, the intention of Stevens appears to rest in the illustration of the secular image of the consequences of a death. Stevens’ attempt even desecrates the transcendental description of death by Whitman and his grass by going into the soil, and by arranging Darwinian understanding of the function of worms. The body buried underground is “devoured by her,” by “the waiting parent,” through the works of worms.

How do we talk “today” to project a better tomorrow with a language inherited from yesterday, knowing, at some point in our lives, a particular tomorrow never comes? In 1599-1601, when *Hamlet* was written by William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* finds “the rub,” a difficulty, in his meditation “to die” that appears, to his eyes, somewhat similar “to sleep” and therefore to imply the possibility of “dreaming” (or consciousness after death):

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: ’tis a consumption
Devoutly to be wish’d. To die, to sleep:
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay there’s the rub:

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Must give us pause—there’s the respect

That makes calamity of so long life. (III.i.57-69)

Though Hamlet, who faces “a sea of troubles,” considers the possibility of utilizing his bodkin (or dagger) to end the pains that “flesh is heir to,” the unknown consequences of physical death bring his thinking to a halt. Hamlet seeks for salvation through death while the idea of death, for him, occasions trepidation or qualms. For another example, when Hamlet is asked where Polonius, stubbed to death by Hamlet, is, his answer is deliberately cynical:

King. Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?

Ham. At supper.

King. At supper? Where?

Ham. Not where he eats, but where a is eaten. A certain convocation of political worms are e’en at him. (IV.iii.16-20)

To be humorous (perchance to bring beautiful “Badroulbadour” out of Polonius) is out of the question in this context. Decades later, John Milton attempted to “justify the ways of God to men” (I. 26) by publishing Paradise Lost in 1667. The Miltonic description of how the transgression of Adam and Eve resulted in the denouncement of death, enhances the feature of redeeming Christ. In short, the Christian description of death is a major force that has formed lives according to the “moral law.” Be it “memento mori” or “carpe diem,” death has been the force to act against.
Out of this tradition, famously, and infamously to some, Charles Darwin introduced to the world the alternative and secular description of how life on earth was formed, with his book, *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Darwin was attracted by the conventionally lowly esteemed worms and by their function of enriching the soil. To borrow the words of Adam Phillips from his *Darwin's Worms*, the attempt of Darwin was to “justify the ways of worms to Man” (47). Darwin, who still keeps making some “widows wince,” however, tactfully avoided his direct attacks on Christianity:

> [I]t appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against christianity & theism produce hardly any effect on the public; & freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds, which follows from the advance of science. It has, therefore, been always my object to avoid writing on religion, & I have confined myself to science. (Darwin Correspondence Project)

Stevens, when he published his first collection of poetry, *Harmonium*, in 1923, could afford “direct arguments against Christianity.” The tide was high, thanks to the earthly phenomena called history. Once so many had witnessed the booming of underground culture of jazz, the time had evolved from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, and many *homo sapiens*, the historical animals, or the bookworms of history books, bore the words of the day to embrace death. With his given Christian diction with its heavily death ridden perspective of life, Stevens gave a birth to an alternative perspective of death for his fellow men and women. In “The Men That Are Falling,” Stevens illustrates a man who dreams about God and all angels as his desires, and comes to a conclusion: “This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die” (174). We
talk “today” to project a better tomorrow with a language inherited from yesterday, knowing and looking forward to a change.

1. The summaries of “The Little Captain” and “Roger Hillman’s Honor” derive from Alison M. Parker’s *Purifying America* on pages 178-9 and 183-4 respectively. I refer to these stories, despite the fact that, of present, I have no access to the original texts, the better to recapture the image of a “high-toned old Christian woman” in the early twentieth century. These two stories, according to Parker, embody ever-striving campaign spirit of the WCTU even after the death of its President Frances Willard in 1898. The figure of an old Christian woman is a choice of Stevens to claim a “change” and such imagery is owing to the changing urban environment of the 1920s. As Michael A. Lerner writes in *Dry Manhattan*, it was the time when New York witnessed the emergence of “flappers.” These women of the younger generation, as Stevens behaves in his poem, emerged and challenged the traditional notion. Flappers’ denial of the conventional ideas included that of the WCTU, that “women had always been, and would always be, devotees of the dry cause” (171).

2. According to Joan Richardson, Stevens resolved that “imagination would save him from the hard, cold facts of his everyday world.” This notion led Stevens to “come to terms with justifying his image as the strong poet he envisioned himself against that provided by earlier strong poets. Stevens had to assert his way as being as viable as Whitman’s, Milton’s, Shakespeare’s, or any of those others whose shades spoke to him of what they had had to conquer and transcend in order to proclaim their potency” (480).

3. My biographical references of Stevens derive from Joan Richardson’s *Wallace Stevens: A Biography: The Early Years, 1879-1923*. Specifically, Stevens’ making acquaintance with the Bible, through the influence of his mother, is noted in the above book on page 40 which then leads us to Stevens’ journal entry on page 173 of the *Letters of Wallace Stevens* by Holly Stevens. As for Stevens’ acquaintance with Emerson, again, I follow Richardson. According to the above mentioned book (page 540), Stevens owned, and heavily marked, a
twelve-volume set of Emerson's *Works* which he was given as a Christmas present in 1898 from his mother.

4. Joan Richardson also relates "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "Sunday Morning" to Stevens' negative observation of Christianity, and by referring to a sentence from Stevens' journal entry: "The Christian fears life and loves death." Richardson's argument is in the above mentioned biography of Stevens (page 234), and Stevens' journal entry is on page 164 of *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens* by Holly Stevens.

5. The spelling of the name of the princess varies according to the translations. To state a few examples, her name is spelt as "Badroulboudour" in the edition published by John B. Alden (1883) and as "Bedr-el-Budur" in the edition of *The Harvard Classics* (1910). Aside from my meticulous examination of the spelling, it seems, nonetheless, Stevens entertains the sound of her name.

6. The idea of relating "Darwin and worms" and "Stevens and worms" derives from my reading *Darwin's Worms* by Adam Phillips. The book refers directly to Stevens during its argument, on page 12, and it led me to the following essay by Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Action of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits*. In the essay, Darwin writes that through the examination of worms, "some degree of intelligence" appeared and that surprised him "more than anything else in regard to worms".(35).

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