WALLACE STEVENS AND THE APOCRYPHA
Two approaches to the story of "Susanna and the Elders"

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ABSTRACT

A comparative analysis of the story "Susanna and the Elders" as treated by Wallace Stevens in the poem "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and in the apocryphal text Daniel XIII.

A first reading of Wallace Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier," [1] will most likely lead one to agree with those who affirm that Stevens' "first noteworthy poem" is basically a meditation on the old-age theme of beauty, and particularly on the kind of beauty that harbors the seeds of permanence and immortality. The present reading, however, purports to show that, besides juxtaposing two contrasting approaches to beauty – the **instinctive** (restricted to the realm of the Imaginary) and the **creative** (located in the register of the Symbolic) – Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" makes a further point: it shows that to endure forever, beauty must inhabit the **golden mean** in which senses, intellect and imagination coalesce in harmonic equilibrium. Obviously, being an artist of the word as the Peter Quince of his poem is an artist of the sounds, and his Susanna an artist of bodily movements, Stevens could not help presenting the process of 'symbolization' inherent in the gesture of **aesthetic** creation as the only genuine way of rendering beauty eligible for immortality. Looked at from this standpoint, Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" will be readily understood not only as a poem about **beauty** in general, but also, and mainly, about that particular kind of beauty that the power of the human imagination immortalizes in the work of **art**.

The very name of 'Peter Quince' in the title of the poem does encourage one to think that way. It is true that Stevens seemed (or feigned) to be rather uncertain about the identity of 'Peter Quince' in the letter he wrote to Professor Renato Poggioli on July 1, 1953.[2] Yet, most likely, he had already met this character in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is its original 'habitat.' In that text, Peter Quince is the "carpenter playwright" who provides a festive finale to the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta with a bizarre stage version of Ovid's story of the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe.[3] Stevens' choice of the name, however

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'unconscious' it might have been, is quite fortunate. Either in the role of stage-manager or *improvisatore* in Shakespeare's play, or in that of clavichordist in Stevens' poem, Peter Quince represents the **archetypal artist**: in the first text because he "turns a myth into idea, which is to say, he gives back to the myth its reality;" in the second, because he "shapes it in the enduring forms of music."[4]

As one reads the first section of the poem, he promptly realizes that Peter Quince is able to organize (or 'sublimate') random feelings in orderly responses. He does not perceive the sounds that come out of his clavier as mere sounds. He realizes that they "make *a* music" in his spirit, just as his fingers make music on the keyboard of his instrument. The feelings he experiences – feelings of love in general and amorous desires in particular – gradually take on a "musical pattern" to be finally defined as **music**:

"Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the selfsame sounds
On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling then, not sound
And thus it is that what I feel
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music."

Peter Quince overtly recognizes the similarity between his desires and the lust of the elders for Susanna, in the story "Susanna and the Elders," of the **Apocrypha.** *"It is like the strain/Waked in the elders by Susanna."* Yet, it should be noted that, for Peter Quince, "feeling has a form."[5] And the **form** of his **feeling**, that is, the song he produces in section I of the poem, is the end result of a sensation filtered by the intellect and tinted by the imagination – something quite different from the elders' *"pizzicati of Hosanna"*, which stem exclusively from their bodily reactions to Susanna's beauty. The progressive transmutation of the musician's desire into music, corresponds to his transition from an **imaginary construct** of sensuous/sensual longings to an **imaginative verbalization** of (or **aesthetic response** to) them. This transmutation is suggested not only by the *accelerando* of the sencond stanza of section I, but also, and mainly, by the "motility" of the verbs with which Peter Quince refers to himself in that stanza. After leaving a stable point of departure (*"I feel"*) they take on "progressive" forms until they get to a stop in the definitive verbal/artistic form in the middle of the third stanza (*"Is music."*). This "motility" pits them in sharp contrast against the verbs used to describe the elders' responses to Susanna's nudity (*"throb"*, *"pulse"*), which denote mere erotic reactions.

Whereas in the first section of the poem Peter Quince may be considered as the artist **musician**, Susanna, who appears in section II, may be seen as the artist **dancer**, the **ballerina**. In the process of actualizing beauty, she becomes beauty

itself. Susanna is thus both an artist – a "maker of beauty" – and an art work in her own right, for she turns out to be the very embodiment of the artistry she happens to infuse into her swimming. Susanna's movements in the water are indeed langorous but controlled, and indicate that her bath is a sensuous (and sensual) experience as well as an artistic activity. The verbs used to describe her movements show that these are not haphazard motions, but intentful and orderly actions: *"Suzanna lay. . ./She searched. . ./ And found. . ./She sighed."* The bodily delight she enjoys as well as the gestures she makes end up producing artistic patterns comparable to those of music, leading her to sigh *"For so much melody"*. After she comes out of the water, her emotions are gone (*"Upon the bank, she stood/In the cool/Of spent emotions"*) and what she feels is *"The dew/Of old devotions."* Susanna's artistic activity goes on as *"She walked upon the grass/Still quavering"* – a verb that contains an obvious reference to the *quaver*, the "eighth note" of the musical system. Then, one is given the chance of witnessing natural elements responding to Susanna's ordering power as the (anonymous) poetic voice says:

> *"The winds were like her maids,*
> *On timid feet,*
> *Fetching her woven scarves,*
> *Yet wavering."*

Only in sections II and III of the poem, namely, Susanna's bath followed by the suggestion of the elders' presence (section II, lines 21 & 22 and 24 & 25) and the Byzantine attendants' noisy arrival (section III), does Stevens' reading of the apocryphal tale of "Susanna and the Elders" start to emerge.[6] According to Joseph Riddel and Henry Wells, those sections are like "dream-projection[s]" or "parable-like" developments of the "intellectual" propositions presented in sections I (through Peter Quince's voice) and IV (through the voice of the subject of the poetic enunciation).[7]

In section I, through Peter Quince, the subject of the poetic enunciation affirms that *"Music is feeling...not sound"*, and that "desire" – there presented first as **feeling** and then as **thought** – may even be turned into **music**, which is **form**, if it does not give rise to mere *"pizzicati of Hosanna."* In section IV, the subject of the poetic enunciation retunes his voice to take up this proposition and expand it, in connection with the concept of beauty:

> *"Beauty is momentary in the mind –*
> *The fitful tracing of a portal;*
> *But in the flesh it is immortal.*
> *The body dies; the body's beauty lives."*

In fact, confined to the realm of the **intelligible**, beauty is a "transitory possession," as Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois would have it, or *"the fitful*

tracing of a portal" as the poetic voice affirms. If *"in the flesh it is immortal"* it is not because the flesh endures, but because beauty has to inhabit the realm of the **sensible** in order to be **perceived** (by the senses), before it is **aprehended** (by the intellect) and eventually **tranfigured** (by the imagination) into "something that has a permanent artistic life of its own,"[8] into a "thing of beauty" that would be "a joy forever." In other words, to be immortal, to endure, beauty must first strike our senses, must be felt in the body. This initial sensation, however, must not be abortive: it has to be filtered by the intellect, colored by the imagination and transfigured into an orderly response. Beauty is thus rendered permanent only when the sensory experience it first elicits is transmuted into an aesthetic response, through the agency of the intellect and the cooperation of the imagination. Only from this standpoint can one guarantee that, after evenings die, their beauty will survive *"in their green going,/A wave, interminably flowing;"* that flowerbeds will remain "alive" after their disappearance, *"their meek breath scenting/The cowl of winter, done repenting;"* and that beautiful women will survive in the songs that celebrate their death, for *"So maidens die, to the auroral/Celebration of a maiden's choral."* In other words, "it is the endurance of the human power to imagine that renders beautiful things deathless."[9]

II

In contrast to both Peter Quince, the artist who adds an imaginative dimension to his desires and transfixes them onto aesthetic patterns, and to Susanna, the artist who succeeds in transforming her swimming into ballet, the elders are confined to the realm of mere sensory perception, never "ritualizing [their emotions] in a pattern of artifice."[10]

"Of a green evening, clear and warm
She bathed in her still garden, while
The red-eyed elders watching, felt

The basses of their beings throb
In twiching chords, and their thin blood
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna."

Whereas Peter Quince *"desires"* his beloved while *"Thinking of her blue-shadowed silk,"* the elders observe Susanna out of the corner of their *"red eyes."* Their response to Susanna's beauty does not cross the boundaries of the physical body. Intellect and imagination play no part in it. Also, the contrast between the elders and Peter Quince becomes more evident when one realizes that the color of the elders' eyes is **red** – the color of the brute force of nature according to Stevens'

poetic chromatism – while the **blue** which adds ethereal overtones to the object of Quince's desire is the color of the imagination.[11]

The elders' presence is suggested again in section II of the poem (lines 21 & 22). In this passage, their impulsive advances *"muted the night"*, standing in sheer opposition to Susanna's deliberate and cadenced movements in the water, in synchronic harmony with nature – or with the night, in the present case – which is illustrated by the specular relation between lines 10 and 11 of section I (*"Of a green evening, clear and warm,/She bathed in her garden...*) and lines 1 & 2 of section II (*"In the green water, clear and warm, /Susanna lay."*). Both the *"cymbal"* that *"crashed"* and the *"roaring horns"* (sec. II, lines 24 & 25) suggest 'dissonances' in Susanna's 'music' caused by the unpatterned sounds of the unbridled emotions with which the elders suddenly disturb her privacy. They find echo in the *"noise like tambourines"* of the *"attendant Byzantines"* (sec. III, lines 1 & 2), whose perception of that particular occurrence seems to be as superficial as the elders' response to Suzanna's beauty. Their *"noise"* is the opposite of Peter Quince's *"music,"* which means that, like the elders, they too are incapable of transposing the realm of the senses in their "reading" of live experience.

The elders are referred to once again in section IV, where they are said to have been left just with *"Death ironic scraping"* (line 13). It is precisely because the elders let *"Susanna's music"* go 'unsublimated,' or let it *"escape"* shortly after it had touched their *"bawdy strings"*, that they are left just with the music of death. This deadly music is compared to the *"ironic scraping"* of an untuned viola – or of a mistuned clavichord – far inferior to Susanna's *"viol"* or Peter Quince's *"clavier."* The elders' sterility, embodied in their 'whiteness', prevents them from carrying their sensory experience to further consequences, that is, from giving a worthwhile response to Susanna's loveliness, and consequently of aprehending, prolonging and thence perpetuating her 'music.' There is no artistry at all in their mode of perception: "Their limitation to the body prevents them from realizing its imaginative power."[12] This is the main reason why they are left with the "scraping of death," just like in the story of the **Apocrypha**, in which they are put to death.[13]

Speaking about the elders in this poem, Edward Kessler says that "they are Blake's 'Songs of Experience' that must accompany the 'Songs of Innocence'."[14] It is hard to believe that Kessler was able to hear any elderly songs in 'Peter Quince at the Clavier', let alone elderly songs 'sung' in a Blakean fashion. The elders have no voice in the poem, since they never come out of their hiding place. If there is any 'experienced' song in the poem, it must be attibuted to the voice which manifests itself in section IV to provide an 'experienced theoretical foundation' for the 'innocent' song of Peter Quince presented in section I. As he submits his sensory drives to the ordering power of his imaginative potentials, Peter Quince succeeds in

'sublimating' them, by condensing them into an artistic creation. The voice of the poetic enunciation in section IV affords a 'philosophical justification' for the clavichordist's gesture.

Therefore, Stevens' poem is closer to the story in the **Apocrypha** than one might expect. The purpose of the apocryphal story of "Susanna and the Elders," in **Daniel XIII**, is "to show that, when the elders or aged men of Israel had corrupted their ways, God would raise up champions of his truth and righteousness from among the young men."[15] In the story under consideration, the young prophet Daniel interrogates the two old men separately, discovers their lie and reasserts Susanna's innocence. Daniel's role of "reformer of judicial procedures,"[16] thus parallels that of Peter Quince, the 'reformer' of oldfashioned and narrowminded approaches to beauty. Both Daniel and Peter Quince are endowed with a perceptiveness that leads them to overstep the limits of phenomenal appearance to reveal its essential features.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that the 'message' of Stevens' poem is not, as Newell F. Ford affirms, "the opposite of the story in the **Apocrypha**."[17] It is just a message of a different kind. In the apocryphal story, emphasis is laid on the fact that the elders are put to death shortly after their accusation against Susanna is proved to be false. The message is religious, and, more than religious, puritanic. In Stevens' poem, Susanna's music escapes, leaving to the elders only *"Death's ironic scraping."* In the poem, the elders die because they let Susanna's music die, for they are incapable of proceeding from crude sensory experience to controlled artistic response, through the common agency of the intellect and the imagination. Stevens' poem, in contrast to the text of the **Apocrypha**, is interested not in **ethics**, but in **aesthetics**.

Therefore, because (and in spite) of all that has been said, the elders in Stevens' poem must be placed in proper perspective. Undoubtedly, they are extremely **necessary** to the total design of the poem, because they represent a mode of response to beauty which ignores 'symbolization' and confines itself exclusively to the 'Imaginary' register. Since they are limited "to the fact of the body," they cannot fully actualize its imaginative power.[18] In contrast to Peter Quince, or to any artist, they represent the common observer, who never surpasses the level of the senses or overteps the limits of immediate perception. In conclusion, therefore, it could be said that only by placing the elders beside Peter Quince (the **musician**), Susanna (the **ballerina**) and himself as **poet** (whose voice is heard in the conclusive remarks of section IV), could Stevens make "Peter Quince at the Clavier" the triadic utterance it really is: a meditation on beauty, an essay on the psychology of eroticism, and a theoretical reflection on the mechanics and finality of artistic creation.

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RESUMO

O presente ensaio consiste em uma análise comparativa da história de "Susanna and the Elders" com base no poema "Peter Quince at the Clavier", de Wallace Stevens e na história apócrifa constante do Cap. XIII, de Daniel.

NOTES

1. Wallace Stevens, Peter Quince at the Clavier, in *Collected Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968, p. 89-92.
2. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Letters*, ed. by Holly Stevens New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968, p. 786.
3. Samuel F. Morse, **Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life** (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 106. In **A Midsummer Night's Dream** Peter Quince appears in the following passages: In act I, scene ii, leading the rehearsal of the play, distributing the parts and giving instructions to the actors; in act III, scene i, again conducting the rehearsal of the play; in act IV, scene ii, looking for Bottom and trying to put things in proper order so that everything comes out all right in the evening of the performance; in act V, scene i, playing the role of 'Prologue' in his adaptation of the Pyramus and Thisbe love story.
4. Joseph N. Riddle. *The Clairvoyant Eye*: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 74.
5. Riddel, p. 74
6. The presence of the *elders* is suggested (or referred to) on lines 12-15 (section I), 24 & 25 (section II), 4 (section III) and 11 & 12 (section IV). They will be more fully analyzed in the second part of this paper.
7. Henry Wells, *Introduction to Wallace Stevens*. Blomington: Indiana University Press, 1964, p. 133. Cf. also Riddel, p. 75.
8. Stanislaus Joyce. *My Brother's Keeper*. London: Faber, 1958, p. 103-104.
9. James Baird, *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968, p. 207. Cf. also Wells, p. 133.
10. Fred Stocking. Stevens Peter Quince at the Clavier *The Explicator*. vol. 7, May 1947, paragraph 47.
11. George McFadden. Probings for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens. *Modern Philology*, February 1961, p. 186-193.
12. Edward Kessler, *Images of Wallace Stevens*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, s.d., p. 94.
13. Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Apocrypha: An American Translation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938, p. 350.
14. Kessler, p. 94.
15. Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 111.
16. Metzger, idem.
17. Newell F. Ford, Peter Quince's Orchestra. *Modern Language Notes* LXXV, May 1960, p. 405-411.
18. Kessler, p. 94.

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