

Sybil Gage as Secret Muse

In the summer of 1913, Stevens did indeed rather suddenly return to writing poetry. There is no indication that he had composed any poems during the four years since he had presented the second “Little June Book” of verses to Elsie for her birthday in June 1909 shortly before they were married.

One factor that may have inspired Stevens to start writing poetry again was an event that electrified New York intellectuals during this period—the Armory Show in February 1913. This avant-garde art show shocked the general public but intrigued the artists, composers, and writers who viewed it. The work that attracted the most attention, in part because of its title, was a painting called *Nude Descending a Staircase*, a cubist work by a Frenchman named Marcel Duchamp. Two years later Stevens would find himself frequenting the same salon as Duchamp. Stevens did not record his impressions of the Armory Show, but like so many of his artistic colleagues, he probably found this new art liberating in its startling departures from tradition. He himself had in his 1909 poems for Elsie begun to move away from the conventional verses of his college days, and the Armory Show might well have accelerated this movement.

In 1914 Stevens became acquainted with a group of innovative young writers, probably through his Harvard friend Walter Conrad Arensberg, who had been an editor of the *Harvard Monthly* and had been elected class poet for the class of 1900. Arensberg was independently wealthy and thus able to pursue his various literary and artistic interests. From 1905 to 1907 he had lived in New York, serving as an art critic for the *Evening Sun*. Stevens probably saw Arensberg frequently during this period because in 1906 he recorded in his journal a luncheon with him. When Charles Eliot Norton, the famous Harvard art professor and translator of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, died in 1908, Arensberg and his wife bought his home,

Shady Hill, and returned to Cambridge to live in the house in whose library the young Henry James had experienced a “positive consecration to letters.” It was an appropriate setting for Arensberg because he had caught Norton’s fervor for Dante and had translated the *Inferno* into terza rima during this period. Arensberg had another passion besides poetry: his pet theory that Francis Bacon had written Shakespeare’s plays. He devoted many years to a cryptographic study of Shakespeare’s work and wrote several books expounding his theories.

In 1913 Walter Arensberg came to New York to see the Armory Show. Years later Stevens recalled, “I don’t suppose there is anyone to whom the Armory Show of 1913 meant more than it meant to him.” In fact, both Arensberg and his wife were so impressed with the avant-garde art movement that they moved to New York in 1914. Their apartment at 33 West 67th Street soon became a gathering place for artists and writers.

Arensberg and Stevens had a mutual Harvard friend named Pitts Sanborn, who was a music critic for the *Globe* for almost twenty years. Sanborn was also very interested in writing and was secretary-treasurer for a small literary magazine called *Trend*, which published some of his own poetry. A group of aspiring young writers who contributed to this magazine soon formed the nucleus of the Arensbergs’ salon. Glen G. MacLeod has explored the relationship of these young writers to Stevens in a study called *Wallace Stevens and Company, The Harmonium Years, 1913–1923*.

Three of these writers, Donald Evans, Allen Norton, and Carl Van Vechten, were good friends who worked for the *New York Times*. Evans was an aspiring poet who had published one book of poetry before coming to New York; he continued to write poetry during his spare time. By borrowing money, he was able to set up a small press called the Clare Marie Press, which printed his best-known work, a collection of poetry titled *Sonnets from the Patagonian*. His press also printed a collection of sonnets by Allen Norton and a play by Norton’s wife, Louise. Stevens became friendly with Evans and even considered collaborating with him on a book of one-line poems. The project never really got started, however, because as Stevens later wryly told a friend, the two of them were stymied in the beginning by

a disagreement over where on the page each one-line poem should appear.

Carl Van Vechten was a music critic who shared the literary ambitions of his friends and eventually became a prolific writer. He discovered the work of Gertrude Stein during this period and shared his excitement with his friends. As a result, Evans's Clare Marie Press printed a book of Stein's poetry titled *Tender Buttons*. Van Vechten was so inspired by Stein that he went to Europe in 1914 to meet her and became a close friend.

Stevens met Van Vechten in November 1914, perhaps through his friend Pitts Sanborn, who was also a music critic. Not long afterward, Van Vechten introduced Stevens to Evans and the Nortons. All these writers naturally gravitated to the salon that was forming at the Arensbergs' apartment. This was an atmosphere in which Stevens could shed his natural reticence and freely enjoy the company of other intellectuals. Here he no longer worried that his desire to write poetry was "lady-like." Van Vechten later described Stevens in this situation: "Stevens's conversation had been wholly amusing, full of that esoteric banter which may be described as Harvardian, at least generically, but containing some specific elements which made it original in manner as well as in matter."

William Carlos Williams, who also attended gatherings at the Arensbergs' apartment, later noted that on these occasions Stevens was shy and "unwilling to be active or vocal. Everybody knew him, knew him well, but he never said much. He was always the well-dressed one, diffident about letting down his hair. Precise when we were sloppy. . . . But we all knew, liked and admired him. He really was felt to be part of the gang."

The Arensbergs' salon included not only various writers, but also a group of young avant-garde artists from France and elsewhere on the Continent who moved to New York after the outbreak of the First World War. Among these artists was Marcel Duchamp, whose painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* had been the talk of the Armory Show. Francis Picabia, Jean Crotti, and Albert Gleizes also frequented the salon.

When Duchamp arrived in the States in the summer of 1915, the Arensbergs let him use their apartment as a studio while they were spending the summer elsewhere. In August, Walter Arensberg returned briefly to town and invited Stevens to join him and Duchamp for lunch. In describing the occasion to Elsie, who was again away for the summer, Stevens wrote: "After dinner, we went up to the Arensberg's apartment and looked at some of Duchamp's things. I made very little out of them. But naturally, without sophistication in that direction, and with only a very rudimentary feeling about art, I expect little of myself. Duchamp speaks very little English. When the three of us spoke French, it sounded like sparrows around a pool of water."

Although he found Duchamp's painting perplexing at this time, Stevens enjoyed the artist's company and met him frequently at Walter Arensberg's apartment. Later in life Stevens remembered Duchamp as "a good egg" and "one of the most amusing people in the world." He saw past the cheerful facade Duchamp presented to the world, however, and recalled in a letter written many years later, "Personally, I have always felt that he was an intense neurotic and that his life was not explicable in any other terms."

Stevens was happy to have the opportunity to speak French with Duchamp and his fellow expatriates. To a devoted Francophile who had never been able to visit France, this sudden invasion of French artists must have seemed fortuitous. Not all the American writers who attended the Arensbergs' parties shared, however, Stevens's enthusiasm for the French language and French artists. William Carlos Williams obviously felt uncomfortable with the Gallic atmosphere, for he wrote, "We weren't, or I wasn't, up to carrying on a witty conversation in French with the latest Parisian arrivals."

Williams's reaction raises a logical question: How would Elsie Stevens have fit into the Arensbergs' salon? If a sophisticated and well-educated poet and physician like Williams did not feel at ease there, how must Elsie have felt, with her lack not only of education but also of intellectual interests? To compound the difficulty, she was neither talkative nor sociable, so there was really no level upon which she could relate to the people who came to the Arensbergs'

apartment. It seems likely that Stevens usually dropped in at the Arensbergs without her. According to Van Vechten, on the occasion that Stevens brought Elsie for the first time, probably in late 1914, the guests gathered around the fireplace to hear him read some of his poetry.

[Stevens] brought out his poems, rather diffidently, and his wife, whose contributions to the conversation were accented by a painful nervous gulping laugh which came from her throat, gave a hint of her lack of appreciation. "She doesn't like them," he began. "Perhaps you will." "I like Mr. Stevens's things," she said, "when they are not affected; but he writes so much that is affected." And she settled down to the attitude of an unwilling listener. Then Stevens read in his strange word-dropping monotone the first of the poems which he had brought, "Dolls." It did not seem to convey much to us until he had passed it around and added an explanation. Mrs. Stevens gurgled, "It's so affected! Frankly I don't like it at all."

Elsie Stevens's behavior on this occasion says much about her character and relationship with her husband. This is virtually the only record we have of her attitude toward his poetry, but it seems consistent with a statement their daughter Holly later made: "While I was growing up my mother did not read my father's poems and seemed to dislike the fact that his books were published." According to Holly, after her father's death her mother told her that she had resented his publishing some of the poems from the small collections he presented to her on her two birthdays immediately preceding their marriage. Since the poems he published are very impersonal and in no way allude to Elsie, it is hard to understand how she could have objected to their publication. Her attitude would seem to be only one more indication of how flawed her relationship with her husband was.

Little did Elsie realize on this occasion when Stevens read the poem "Dolls" to his friends that the poem might conceal a cipher of the name "Sybil Gage," as William Ford points out in his article

“Seeking the Sibyl of *Harmonium*: Wallace Stevens and Sybil Gage.”

The poem reads:

DOLLS

The thought of Eve, within me, is a doll
That does what I desire, as, to perplex,
With apple-buds, the husband in her sire.

There's a pious caliph, now, who prays and sees
A vermeil cheek. He is half-conscious of
The quaint seduction of a scented veil.

Playing with dolls? A solid game, greybeards.
Think of the cherubim and seraphim,
And of Another, whom I must not name.

The key short phrase, admittedly an odd one, is the following, with the capital letters supplied by Ford:

a soLId game, greYBeardS [Sybil]
a solid GAmE, GrEybeards [Gage]

In the first line, one must read primarily backwards to arrive at the name “Sybil.” Ford notes that in order to make his cipher work, Stevens had to use the English spelling, “grey,” while everywhere else in his poetry he used the American spelling, “gray.” (A search of the online concordance for Stevens’s poetry turns up twenty-four appearances of the word “gray” in his poems.) It is also of interest to note that a search of the concordance shows that he used the word “game” nowhere else in his poetry. Here the word would seem to hint that a game of wordplay may be going on in the poem. Ford refers to “Arensberg’s obsession with wordplay and cryptography,” an obsession that may have inspired Stevens to try his hand at concealing a hidden message in this small poem that he read to the Arensberg circle.

The following passage from Ford's article offers perhaps the strongest evidence for his thesis that Stevens was indeed influenced enough by Arensberg that he included ciphers and other concealed messages in some of his poems:

For example, in "Anecdote of the Jar," Stevens does something similar. He had previously read Dante's *A New Life*, where the poet speaks of his initial meeting with the nine-year-old Beatrice Portinari, including the Latin phrase "ecce deus fortior me, qui beniens dominabitur mihi" [the god of love, greater than I, came and took dominion over me]. This was Dante's first meeting with his muse. In "Anecdote of the Jar," a poem composed in 1919, when Stevens was still part of the Arensberg group, Stevens writes:

The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.
It took dominion everywhere.

This wordplay on the name Port-in-ari seems obvious (once you see it), but commentators have puzzled over "port in air" since the poem was published.

Ford's discovery that "Anecdote of the Jar" contains Beatrice Portinari's name coupled with the phrase "took dominion" that Dante used to describe his falling in love with Beatrice is key to our discussion of the extent to which Stevens may have experimented with including ciphers and other hidden messages in some of his poems during this stage of his poetic development. Once we see that he almost certainly concealed a secret message in "Anecdote of the Jar," it becomes even more likely that the apparent wordplay in some of his other poems did not occur by chance. And it is especially relevant that this cipher is the name of the most famous muse in literary history. Stevens's inclusion of the name of Dante's muse, Beatrice Portinari, in a poem in *Harmonium* could be his private way

of announcing that elsewhere in *Harmonium* he had included concealed messages about his own muse—Sybil Gage.

If Ford's conjecture that Stevens did indeed include a cipher of Sybil's name in his odd little poem "Dolls" is correct, then Eve in that poem would seem to represent Sybil. (Ford also notes that the word "Eve" is contained in the name "Stevens," which makes the phrase "Eve, within me" yet another example of his wordplay in this poem.) The perplexing phrase "the husband in her sire" can be explained by noting that although Adam is Eve's husband, he is also her sire because God created her from one of Adam's ribs. The apple of the creation story here becomes apple-buds.

The phrase "cherubim and seraphim" in the last verse of "Dolls" offers further evidence that the poem may be about Sybil, whom Stevens had termed an "angel" in the letter he wrote to Richard Eberhardt at age seventy. His capitalization of the word "Another" in the last line of the poem would also fit with his placing Sybil upon a heavenly pedestal. The phrase "whom I must not name" is reminiscent of a sentence he wrote in his journal in February 1904, a year and a half after his Adirondack encounter with Sybil: "Yet I dare not say what I do want." In the journal entry, there was no strong reason for his reticence, but he obviously could not name Sybil in a poem that he was reading to a group of listeners that included Elsie. Although it would appear that Stevens remained in love with Elsie for a few years after their marriage in 1909, his feelings for her had clearly waned by 1914, when he started writing poetry that may have been inspired by Sybil Gage.

The second stanza of "Dolls" would appear to relate quite directly to a poem that Stevens published within the same year that he wrote "Dolls." This poem, "An Odor from a Star," is the first poem in a group of eight that he published in September 1914 in the magazine *Trend* under the title "Carnet de Voyage." This group included five poems from the second "Little June Book," which Stevens gave to Elsie in 1909. Stevens rewrote these five poems slightly and added three new poems, one of which was "An Odor from a Star." These were the first poems he had published since his student days at Harvard. "An Odor from a Star" is quite a lovely and delicate poem

that shows a marked increase in Stevens's poetic ability. It is this poem that recalls the second verse of "Dolls":

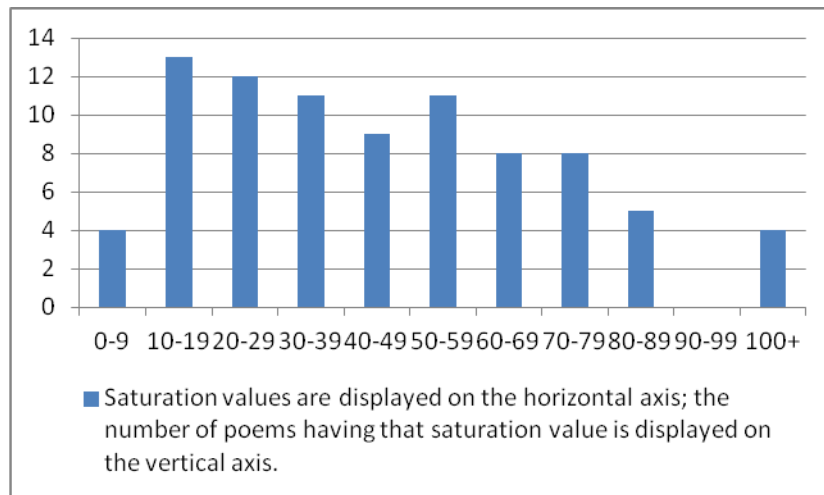
An odor from a star
 Comes to my fancy, slight,
 Tenderly spiced and gay,
 As if a seraph's hand
 Unloosed the fragrant silks
 Of some sultana, bright
 In her soft sky. And pure
 It is, and excellent,
 As if a seraph's blue
 Fell, as a shadow falls,
 And his warm body shed
 Sweet exhalations, void
 Of our despised decay.

The "pious caliph" of "Dolls," who is "half-conscious of / The quaint seduction of a scented veil," has become in the poem "An Odor from a Star" a seraph who "Unloosed the fragrant silks / Of some sultana." It is noteworthy that this poem contains more sexual imagery than almost any other Stevens work. His decision not to include it in his first book of poetry, *Harmonium*, may be further evidence that it was an intimate personal poem inspired by Sybil.

Once Ford's article on Sybil Gage had alerted me to the elaborate wordplay involving Sybil that Stevens seems to have engaged in when he was writing "Dolls" and other early poems, I happened to notice that in the short poem "An Odor from a Star" there are thirteen words beginning with the letter "s."

This unusually large number of words beginning with the letter "s" raises the possibility that Stevens selected for this sensual and intimate poem words that begin with the letter "s" to provide a clue that it related to his love for Sybil. Of course, one might argue that he was just trying for a sibilant effect in this poem. (Even if that were the case, the Sybil-sibilant connection could have been intentional.) To investigate the likelihood that this large number of words beginning

with the letter “s” happened by chance, I counted the number of words beginning with the letter “s” in each poem in the second edition of *Harmonium* and assigned to each poem a “saturation value” obtained by multiplying by 100 the ratio of the number of words beginning with the letter “s” in each poem divided by the number of lines in the poem. This saturation value indicates the degree to which a given poem is “saturated” with the letter “s.” Only four poems out of eighty-five in *Harmonium*—“Colloquy with a Polish Aunt,” “On the Manner of Addressing Clouds,” “Banal Sojourn,” and “To the Roaring Wind”—have a saturation value of 100 or above, as does “An Odor from a Star.” Almost all the other poems have much lower saturation values, as is shown in the following chart:



Later in this chapter, I will argue that “To the Roaring Wind” and a handful of the best poems in *Harmonium* may refer in veiled terms to Sybil. Thus I believe that William Ford’s thesis that Sybil Gage was Stevens’s secret muse casts new light on some of his major poems.

Ford relates Stevens’s long and puzzling poem “The Comedian as the Letter C” to Sybil Gage’s family in many ways, including this example:

The final section of “The Comedian,” “And Daughters with Curls,” is a description of Charles Gage’s life and obituary. . . . Crispin’s four daughters are, in fact, the daughters of Charles Gage. . . . Although they are unnamed and only barely differentiated, it is significant that the third daughter is somewhat more fully described: “The third one gaping at the orioles / Lettered herself demurely as became / A pearly poetess, peaked for rhapsody.”

If Ford is right in his conjecture that the third daughter, the “pearly poetess,” represents Sybil Gage, who was Charles Gage’s third daughter, then this would suggest that Sybil might have been in Stevens’s thoughts when he wrote to a friend many years later in 1946: “For myself, the inaccessible jewel is the normal and all of life, in poetry, is the difficult pursuit of just that.”

Yet another clue Ford has found that links Sybil Gage to the poems Stevens was writing during this period is another poem that he read at the Arensbergs’ apartment the same night he read “Dolls,” a poem with the odd title “Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges.” Ford points out that Sybil’s birthday, October 21, “is the traditional feast day of Saint Ursula and her companions.”

Although Elsie Stevens did not respond positively to her husband’s poetry reading at the Arensbergs’ salon, Stevens’s fellow writers obviously did. In early 1915, after the demise of *Trend*, Allen Norton started a small magazine called *Rogue*. He asked Stevens to contribute to the first issue the Ste Ursula poem that he had heard him read at the Arensbergs’ apartment, a poem that illustrates his transitional work and his emerging use of sardonic wit.

In 1915 yet another small magazine emerged from the Arensberg circle. Titled *Others*, it was founded by Walter Arensberg and Alfred Kreymborg, another writer in the group. Arensberg himself had continued to write poetry since his Harvard days and had published a book of poetry in 1914. Kreymborg and Arensberg of course urged Stevens to contribute to their new magazine, and such requests must have stimulated him to start writing more poetry. Stevens himself later in life told an interviewer: “When I got to New York I was not

yet serious about poetry. . . . I wrote occasionally. . . . It was not until ten or fifteen years later when some friends of mine came down from Cambridge that I became interested again. After that, I began all over.”

While Elsie was away during the summer of 1915, Stevens told her in his letter of August 29 that he was more interested in writing poetry than ever, saying, “I wish that I could give all my time to the thing, instead of a few hours each evening when I am often physically and mentally dull.” The next day he wrote a passage indicating that he now realized that he could get more writing done with Elsie away. At the same time, however, he provided reasons why it was important for her to take these summer vacations:

I’ve been lonely for you anyhow—that’s the truth. I think that it is not only my desire for solitude that suggests vacations to me. It appeals to my pride to be able to send you away. I have not made much progress, as the world goes but I forget that, when I can feel that you are away in the country, like everybody else, doing pleasant things. When New-York is empty and dull, I should feel as though I were of no account to have you here and be unable to make things pleasant for you.

A manuscript still in existence shows that around 1918 Stevens asked Arensberg to read his poem “Sonatina to Hans Christian” and suggest possible improvements. The manuscript shows his original poem together with Arensberg’s suggestions, most of which Stevens adopted.

Whatever the motivation for Stevens’s sudden surge in poetic activity during this period, it seems remarkable that after publishing the minor poems of “Carnet de Voyage” in September 1914, he was able to produce only a few months later one of his finest poems, “Sunday Morning.” Critic Yvor Winters has called this poem “the greatest American poem of the twentieth century and . . . certainly one of the greatest contemplative poems in English.” Stevens sent “Sunday Morning” to Harriet Monroe in early 1915 for her Chicago-based magazine *Poetry*. Monroe had already published a group of

four Stevens poems called “Phases” in the November 1914 issue of *Poetry*. In connection with these latter poems, Stevens had written to her a letter remarkable for its brevity, containing only the two sentences: “My autobiography is, necessarily, very brief; for I have published nothing. I am grateful to you for your notes and, of course, for the check.” Although “Carnet de Voyage” had appeared only two months earlier in *Trend*, for some reason he chose not to mention this fact. In a letter of June 6, 1915, in which he discussed “Sunday Morning” with Monroe, he was only slightly more forthcoming when he wrote, “I was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, am thirty-five years old, a lawyer, reside in New York and have published no books.”

Monroe wished to publish only five of the eight sections of “Sunday Morning.” Stevens acquiesced and the reduced poem appeared in the November 1915 issue of *Poetry*. He even gave Monroe permission to make certain changes. Since she found the phrase “to pile new plums and pears / On disregarded plate” obscure, he allowed her to substitute the words “to bring sweet-smelling pears / And plums in ponderous piles.” Stevens later reinstated the original phrase and included all eight sections when he printed the poem in *Harmonium*. In its final version it reads:

SUNDAY MORNING

I

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
 And the green freedom of a cockatoo
 Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
 The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
 She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
 Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
 As a calm darkens among water-lights.
 The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
 Seem things in some procession of the dead,

Winding across wide water, without sound.
 The day is like wide water, without sound,
 Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
 Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
 Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

II

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.

III

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?
The sky will be much friendlier than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

IV

She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"
There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures, or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

V

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness,
She makes the willow shiver in the sun

For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

VI

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
Why set the pear upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
The silken weavings of our afternoons,
And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

VII

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.

VIII

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

It is of particular interest to note that the same Stevens who had in 1907 urged Elsie to join a church and attend regularly had in the space of some eight years almost totally reversed his position and now urged the protagonist of this poem to reject the "dominion of blood and sepulchre" and rejoice instead in the pleasures of nature. This is one of the few poems upon which he commented in response to a query about its meaning, saying:

The poem is simply an expression of paganism, although, of course, I did not think that I was expressing paganism when I wrote it.

Of the last two lines, it is probably the last that is obscure to you. Life is as fugitive as dew upon the feet of men dancing in dew. Men do not either come from any direction or disappear in any direction. Life is as meaningless as dew.

Now these ideas are not bad in a poem. But they are a frightful bore when converted as above.

The year 1915 also saw the publication of another remarkable Stevens poem, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," which like so many of the poems that followed it, has a distinctive title bearing only a peripheral relation to the poem.

PETER QUINCE AT THE CLAVIER

I

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. It is like the strain
Waked in the elders by Susanna.

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 witching chords, and their thin blood
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

II

In the green water, clear and warm,
Susanna lay.
She searched
The touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings.
She sighed,
For so much melody.

Upon the bank, she stood
In the cool
Of spent emotions.
She felt, among the leaves,
The dew
Of old devotions.

She walked upon the grass,
Still quavering.
The winds were like her maids,
On timid feet,
Fetching her woven scarves,
Yet wavering.

A breath upon her hand
Muted the night.
She turned—
A cymbal crashed,
And roaring horns.

III

Soon, with a noise like tambourines,
Came her attendant Byzantines.

They wondered why Susanna cried
Against the elders by her side;

And as they whispered, the refrain
Was like a willow swept by rain.

Anon, their lamps' uplifted flame
Revealed Susanna and her shame.

And then, the simpering Byzantines
Fled with a noise like tambourines.

1V

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.
So evenings die, in their green going,
A wave, interminably flowing.
So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
The cowl of winter, done repenting.
So maidens die, to the auroral
Celebration of a maiden's choral.
Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings
Of those white elders; but, escaping,
Left only Death's ironic scraping.
Now, in its immortality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

Given Stevens's deep love of music, it is interesting to see how he structures the poem with four verses in different forms and rhythms that resemble the four contrasting movements of a sonata. His use of varying poetic forms to set the mood of each section shows a new

willingness to experiment that is a distinct departure from his more conventional earlier work. In both “Sunday Morning” and “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” we also see Stevens striving to enunciate a philosophy of life based upon a response to beauty that is inextricably linked to the flux of nature, “a wave, interminably flowing.” This theme would intrigue him for the rest of his life.

These two poems that rank among Stevens’s finest creations fascinate us because they are not only extremely beautiful poetry but they also present quite persuasive philosophical arguments about some of life’s most important questions. In “Sunday Morning,” Stevens has provided cogent and persuasive arguments for a rejection of conventional religious beliefs; some of these stanzas read like beautiful and moving psalms for the humanist.

Beyond the aesthetic achievements and wonderful clarity of thought that make this pair of poems so appealing, however, it is also possible to see ways in which Stevens may either consciously or subconsciously have had Sybil Gage in mind as he was writing these poems. If this was indeed the case, then her role as his muse may go far toward explaining why he moved so quickly from writing the minor poetry of the Little June Books that he presented to Elsie before their marriage to writing poems that rank among the best in the English language.

I believe that strong evidence that Sybil did in fact become Stevens’s muse after his relationship with Elsie began to deteriorate can be found in the way that words or clusters of words that seem linked to Sybil Gage in “Dolls” and “An Odor from a Star” keep reappearing in some of his greatest poems: “Sunday Morning,” “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” “To the One of Fictive Music,” and “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” It is worth remembering at this point that Stevens once remarked, “Words are thoughts.” Certain words appear to have evoked for him the image of Sybil Gage. To begin my analysis, I wish to look at similar word patterns that occur in three lines from the sixth stanza of “Sunday Morning” and in “An Odor from a Star”:

Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
 Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
 The silken weavings of our afternoons,

* * * * *

An odor from a star
 Comes to my fancy, slight,
 Tenderly spiced and gay,
 As if a seraph's hand
 Unloosed the fragrant silks
 Of some sultana, bright
 In her soft sky. And pure
 It is, and excellent,
 As if a seraph's blue
 Fell, as a shadow falls,
 And his warm body shed
 Sweet exhalations, void
 Of our despised decay.

A search of the online concordance of Stevens's poetry reveals that the rather unusual words "spice," "spices," and "spiced" appear in only six of the over four hundred poems that he wrote, two of which are "An Odor from a Star" and "Sunday Morning." (In one of the other four poems, "The Comedian as the Letter C," the word "spiced" appears in the "And Daughters with Curls" section, which William Ford links to Sybil Gage.)

The words "silk," "silks," and "silken" appear in only seven Stevens poems, and three of those poems are "Sunday Morning," "An Odor from a Star," and "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Consider, for example, the following lines from the latter poem:

And thus it is that what I feel,
 Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk . . .

If Stevens did secretly celebrate his love for Sybil Gage in “An Odor from a Star,” one can see how the words “silks,” “blue,” and “shadow” from the earlier poem might have come together in his mind to produce the evocative phrase “blue-shadowed silk” in “Peter Quince at the Clavier.” Whether this kind of association, one that we will see again and again, arose from Stevens’s subconscious or was a carefully crafted effort on his part to leave in several poems a trail of clues referring to Sybil is a question there is no way to answer.

In a letter that Stevens wrote Elsie in September 1913 when she was visiting her family in Reading, he mentioned some work he had done on the baby grand piano that he had just purchased, telling her, “I play for 7 hours every night.” While his statement is obviously an exaggeration, it does indicate that Stevens, who took piano lessons when he was young, still enjoyed playing the piano. Thus it seems plausible that the Peter Quince who is playing the clavier while desiring a woman in blue-shadowed silk represents Stevens, whose college nickname was “Pete.” Peter Quince is, of course, the carpenter in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* who directs a play acted by a group of rustics. It seems unusual for Peter Quince, a carpenter who is directing a rustic play in the forest, to be seated at a clavier, just as it might seem surprising to see Stevens, an insurance executive and poet, playing a clavier.

There are various ways that Stevens’s choice of the character of Susanna from an apocryphal addition to the Book of Daniel in the Bible can be viewed as evidence that he was thinking about Sybil Gage as he was writing this poem. The names Susanna and Sybil both begin with the letter “s.” Susanna is part of the Byzantine world, which is the world of the caliph in “Dolls” and the seraph and sultana in “An Odor from a Star.” One of the reasons that Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, and other Renaissance artists painted Susanna may have been that the subject enabled them to include a nude woman in a religious painting. Stevens’s decision to describe Susanna bathing may have given him the opportunity to envision the woman he loved in a nude state, which he did in a gently erotic way that is reminiscent of the seraph unloosing the silks of the sultana in “An Odor from a Star.”

Water plays an important role in both “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” in which Susanna lies in clear green water, and in “Sunday Morning,” with its many phrases like “Winding across wide water,” “water without sound,” “that wide water, inescapable,” and “windy lake.” This may have occurred by chance, but it is worth noting that the Adirondack area where Stevens spent time with Sybil was on the shores of Indian Lake. It seems highly likely that Stevens and Sybil went rowing together on this large lake, and on these leisurely occasions he would have been looking at Sybil surrounded by water.

When they went their separate ways after that summer meeting, Sybil soon ended up in San Diego on the Pacific Ocean, yet another association with water. Her uncle and her husband owned the Sweetwater Fruit Company in the San Diego area, which would have been one more connection between Sybil and water. The scene of Susanna lying in the clear, warm water certainly evokes an image that could be termed “sweet,” and the woman in “Sunday Morning” speaks the word “sweet.” (When she spent time with him in the Adirondacks, Sybil may well have told Stevens about her uncle’s Sweetwater Fruit Company because she was planning to visit there before long. He could also have learned about the citrus farm from W. G. Peckham, who was a friend of both Stevens and Sybil.)

If Sybil Gage was indeed the inspiration for “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” then the ending lines are particularly meaningful. In describing “Susanna’s music,” the man at the clavier ends his reverie by saying:

Now, in its immortality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

Stevens may have thus indicated that his love for Sybil was now an integral and undying part of his life.

The word “clear” appears several times in various Stevens poems that might be linked to Sybil. Its use to describe a viol seems somewhat surprising, but the phrase “clear and warm” that Stevens uses twice in his description of Susanna lying in the water could have

influenced his choice of the word here. One also wonders if Stevens, with his penchant for wordplay and his propensity to use French phrases, might have been associating the word “clear” with its French equivalent “clair,” which suggests a “clairvoyant” (clear seer), or sibyl. The words “clear” and “clearest” appear five times in another of the greatest poems that Stevens wrote during this period:

TO THE ONE OF FICTIVE MUSIC

Sister and mother and diviner love,
 And of the sisterhood of the living dead
 Most near, most clear, and of the clearest bloom,
 And of the fragrant mothers the most dear
 And queen, and of diviner love the day
 And flame and summer and sweet fire, no thread
 Of cloudy silver sprinkles in your gown
 Its venom of renown, and on your head
 No crown is simpler than the simple hair.

Now, of the music summoned by the birth
 That separates us from the wind and sea,
 Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
 By being so much of the things we are,
 Gross effigy and simulacrum, none
 Gives motion to perfection more serene
 Than yours, out of our imperfections wrought,
 Most rare, or ever of more kindred air
 In the laborious weaving that you wear.

For so retentive of themselves are men
 That music is intensest which proclaims
 The near, the clear, and vaunts the clearest bloom,
 And of all vigils musing the obscure,
 That apprehends the most which sees and names,
 As in your name, an image that is sure,
 Among the arrant spices of the sun,

O bough and bush and scented vine, in whom
We give ourselves our likest issuance.

Yet not too like, yet not so like to be
Too near, too clear, saving a little to endow
Our feigning with the strange unlike, whence springs
The difference that heavenly pity brings.
For this, musician, in your girdle fixed
Bear other perfumes. On your pale head wear
A band entwining, set with fatal stones.
Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:
The imagination that we spurned and crave.

Not only does the repetition of the words “clear” and “clearest” suggest that Sybil is once again below the surface of this poem, the word “spices” recurs in the second stanza. Thus of the six Stevens poems in which the words “spice,” “spices,” and “spiced” appear, four are the poems we have just considered, “An Odor from a Star,” “Sunday Morning,” “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” and “To the One of Fictive Music.” Again, given the fact that Stevens wrote over four hundred poems, this strong association hardly seems coincidental.

Even stronger evidence links “To the One of Fictive Music” to Sybil. William Ford has pointed out that a copy of an early draft of this poem was rescued from the trash by Teresa Gay, who with her husband, the Rev. James Gay, owned the house at 735 Farmington Avenue in which Stevens and Elsie rented the second-floor apartment for many years. The fifth line in the second stanza originally read: “The vigil of a shadowy sibyl, none.” Thus we not only have Sybil’s name originally appearing in the poem, but it was preceded by the adjective “shadowy,” a word whose variants “shadow” and “shadowed” appear in the two erotic poems “An Odor from a Star” and “Peter Quince at the Clavier.” Although Stevens eliminated the word “sibyl” from the final version of the fifth line of the second stanza, he added the word “musing” to the third stanza, perhaps once again pointing us toward his muse, Sybil Gage.

Ford also points out that in this manuscript retrieved by Teresa Gay the working title was “To the Fictive Virgin,” but seven other possible titles were listed, five of which contained the word “Muse.” One of the two remaining alternative titles contains the similar-sounding word “Music,” which suggests that Stevens might have made an association between music and his muse, Sybil Gage. This possibility would fit nicely with “Peter Quince at the Clavier” and makes one wonder if there isn’t a linkage in many other Stevens poems between music and Sybil, his muse. At any rate, it’s worth noting that he chose to remove the word “sibyl” from the poem and the word “Muse” from the title, using instead in the title the more subtle stand-in, “Music.” By dropping the word “Virgin” from the title, Stevens made it less likely that a reader would think the poem was about a real woman, not an abstract philosophical concept. It is possible that he made these changes so that readers would not realize that this poem was about a muse who was inspiring his work.

It is important to note, however, that although it would appear that thoughts or visions of Sybil often floated through Stevens’s mind as he was writing poems like the ones above, she was undoubtedly only a peripheral, not a central, part of some of these poems. For example, it seems clear that Stevens wrote “Sunday Morning” to express his view that life can still be joyous and meaningful even if one no longer holds conventional religious beliefs. Nevertheless, hints of Sybil Gage are scattered throughout this poem, in addition to the ones noted earlier. In the second stanza in particular, these lines are relevant:

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: . . .

First, we note that “comforts of the sun,” “pungent fruit and bright, green wings,” and “balm or beauty of the earth” are rather suggestive of California, particularly the citrus orchards owned by Sybil’s uncle and husband. (The word “oranges” appears twice in the opening stanza.) And once again the word “shadows” appears. These lines also contain an echo of the poem Stevens wrote to Sybil after they spent time together in the Adirondacks in July 1902. In the latter poem, Stevens made fun of the educational theorists whom Sybil had quoted to him, saying, “Only in such as you the spirit gleams,” just as in the lines quoted above from “Sunday Morning,” Stevens says that the female protagonist should reject the teachings of religious theorists and realize that “Divinity must live within herself.”

Thoughts of Sybil may have also been present in Stevens’s mind when he wrote one of his greatest poems, “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” which was published in 1918 in the magazine *Others*. This poem was in part inspired by his poet-friend Donald Evans, who had adopted the pose of a dandy and had started wearing a monocle. In this work Stevens used wry humor to explore the self-doubts of a man turning forty, as he himself was.

LE MONOCLE DE MON ONCLE

“Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
 O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
 There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
 Like the clashed edges of two words that kill.”
 And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
 Or was it that I mocked myself alone?
 I wish that I might be a thinking stone.
 The sea of spuming thought foists up again
 The radiant bubble that she was. And then
 A deep up-pouring from some saltier well
 Within me, bursts its watery syllable.

II

A red bird flies across the golden floor.
It is a red bird that seeks out his choir
Among the choirs of wind and wet and wing.
A torrent will fall from him when he finds.
Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?
I am a man of fortune greeting heirs;
For it has come that thus I greet the spring.
These choirs of welcome choir for me farewell.
No spring can follow past meridian.
Yet you persist with anecdotal bliss
To make believe a starry *connaissance*.

III

Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese
Sat tittivating by their mountain pools
Or in the Yangtse studied out their beards?
I shall not play the flat historic scale.
You know how Utamaro's beauties sought
The end of love in their all-speaking braids.
You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
That not one curl in nature has survived?
Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,
Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?

IV

This luscious and impeccable fruit of life
Falls, it appears, of its own weight to earth.
When you were Eve, its acrid juice was sweet,
Untasted, in its heavenly, orchard air.
An apple serves as well as any skull
To be the book in which to read a round,

And is as excellent, in that it is composed
Of what, like skulls, comes rotting back to ground.
But it excels in this, that as the fruit
Of love, it is a book too mad to read
Before one merely reads to pass the time.

V

In the high west there burns a furious star.
It is for fiery boys that star was set
And for sweet-smelling virgins close to them.
The measure of the intensity of love
Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.
For me, the firefly's quick, electric stroke
Ticks tediously the time of one more year.
And you? Remember how the crickets came
Out of their mother grass, like little kin,
In the pale nights, when your first imagery
Found inklings of your bond to all that dust.

VI

If men at forty will be painting lakes
The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one,
The basic slate, the universal hue.
There is a substance in us that prevails.
But in our amours amorists discern
Such fluctuations that their scrivening
Is breathless to attend each quirky turn.
When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink
Into the compass and curriculum
Of introspective exiles, lecturing.
It is a theme for Hyacinth alone.

VII

The mules that angels ride come slowly down
The blazing passes, from beyond the sun.
Descensions of their tinkling bells arrive.
These muleteers are dainty of their way.
Meantime, centurions guffaw and beat
Their shrilling tankards on the table-boards.
This parable, in sense, amounts to this:
The honey of heaven may or may not come,
But that of earth both comes and goes at once.
Suppose these couriers brought amid their train
A damsel heightened by eternal bloom.

VIII

Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love,
An ancient aspect touching a new mind.
It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies.
This trivial trope reveals a way of truth.
Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.
The laughing sky will see the two of us
Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

IX

In verses wild with motion, full of din,
Loudened by cries, by clashes, quick and sure
As the deadly thought of men accomplishing
Their curious fates in war, come, celebrate
The faith of forty, ward of Cupido.
Most venerable heart, the lustiest conceit

Is not too lusty for your broadening.
I quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything
For the music and manner of the paladins
To make oblation fit. Where shall I find
Bravura adequate to this great hymn?

X

The fops of fancy in their poems leave
Memorabilia of the mystic spouts,
Spontaneously watering their gritty soils.
I am a yeoman, as such fellows go.
I know no magic trees, no balmy boughs,
No silver-ruddy, gold-vermillion fruits.
But, after all, I know a tree that bears
A semblance to the thing I have in mind.
It stands gigantic, with a certain tip
To which all birds come sometime in their time.
But when they go that tip still tips the tree.

XI

If sex were all, then every trembling hand
Could make us squeak, like dolls, the wished-for words.
But note the unconscionable treachery of fate,
That makes us weep, laugh, grunt and groan, and shout
Doleful heroics, pinching gestures forth
From madness or delight, without regard
To that first, foremost law. Anguishing hour!
Last night, we sat beside a pool of pink,
Clipped with lilies scudding the bright chromes,
Keen to the point of starlight, while a frog
Boomed from his very belly odious chords.

XII

A blue pigeon it is, that circles the blue sky,
 On sidelong wing, around and round and round.
 A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground,
 Grown tired of flight. Like a dark rabbi, I
 Observed, when young, the nature of mankind,
 In lordly study. Every day, I found
 Man proved a gobbet in my mincing world.
 Like a rose rabbi, later, I pursued,
 And still pursue, the origin and course
 Of love, but until now I never knew
 That fluttering things have so distinct a shade.

The words “her” and “she” in the first stanza of “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” alert us that this may be yet another poem relating to Sybil Gage, and the two words of her name are likely candidates for the “two words that kill.” The last five lines of the first stanza are especially revealing:

I wish that I might be a thinking stone.
 The sea of spuming thought foists up again
 The radiant bubble that she was. And then
 A deep up-pouring from some saltier well
 Within me, bursts its watery syllable.

The lines “The sea of spuming thought foists up again / The radiant bubble that she was” are particularly fascinating because they seem such an apt description of the way in which Stevens’s “foaming” and “bubbling” subconscious may have kept pushing up the image of Sybil Gage, who was indeed radiant in his memory. No wonder Stevens says, “I wish that I might be a thinking stone,” seeming to want to stop his thoughts from obsessively returning to the woman he can never have. The word “bubble” not only sounds rather like “Sybil” but also symbolizes something that is exquisitely beautiful,

but fleeting. In the last lines of the verse, the syllable, or Sybil, bursts and thus escapes Stevens.

This is not the only place in Stevens's poetry where the word "syllable" seems to be associated with Sybil. The word appears twice in the "And Daughters with Curls" section of "The Comedian as the Letter C" that William Ford linked to Sybil. The use of the word "syllable" is particularly notable in the short poem with a saturation score of 100 for the letter "s" that Stevens chose to end the second edition of *Harmonium*:

TO THE ROARING WIND

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocalissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it.

Seeking Sybil in the distances of sleep may well have been something Stevens occasionally did. It is worth noting that he arranged the order of the poems in his books with great care, so his placement of this short poem at the end of the second edition of *Harmonium* may have served as a private indication that Sybil was indeed his muse as he was writing *Harmonium*.

One use of the word "syllables" that is particularly poignant if it does indeed refer to Sybil occurs in a passage about memory found in the third stanza of "Sombre Figuration," which is a section of Stevens's long poem, "Owl's Clover."

The future must bear within it every past,
Not least the pasts destroyed, magniloquent
Syllables, pewter on ebony . . .

Other hints of Sybil keep recurring in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." In the third stanza, the "old Chinese" who "studied out their beards" call to mind the "greybeards" of the poem "Dolls," which appears to contain a cipher of Sybil Gage's name. Eve appears in the

fourth stanza, and tellingly enough, appears in only one other Stevens poem—"Dolls." In the fifth stanza, the star and "sweet-smelling virgins" remind us of the poem "An Odor from a Star," with its words "spiced," "fragrant," and "sweet."

The seventh stanza with its mules coming down "blazing passes" seems quite disjoint from the rest of the poem, which is perhaps an indication that Stevens inserted it not for aesthetic or logical reasons but as one more concealed tribute to Sybil. Angels are riding the mules, and we recall that Stevens referred to Sybil as an angel in his letter to Richard Eberhart. Sybil seems a likely candidate for the "damsel heightened by eternal bloom." Stevens also used the word "bloom" twice in the "And Daughters with Curls" section of "The Comedian as the Letter C," where the daughters are Crispin's "own capacious bloom," and he used the phrase "clearest bloom" twice in "To the One of Fictive Music." (We recall that in his reading of "The Comedian as the Letter C," Ford believes that Crispin represents Sybil Gage's father.)

The beginning lines of the last stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" have always resisted interpretation. One possibility worth considering is that the blue pigeon represents Sybil, who was associated with the color blue in "An Odor from a Star" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier." The blue pigeon, evincing its strength and independence, and perhaps also its unattainability, "circles the blue sky . . . around and round and round" in the same way that thoughts of Sybil keep circling through Stevens's conscious and subconscious mind. White, on the other hand, is a color Stevens associated with Elsie. In a letter of May 26, 1909, written shortly before a visit to her in Reading, he said: "Don't forget to wear the white dress on Saturday evening. That's the one I like best. Well, I always like you in white best, for all that." It is not hard to see Elsie in the lines: "A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground, / Grown tired of flight."

Stevens is obviously saying many things in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," and they are not necessarily consistent. (For example, the warty squashes of the eighth stanza seem to represent Stevens and Elsie more than Stevens and Sybil.) Until the last stanza, one wonders if Stevens isn't trying to say that at age forty it is time to turn away

from his obsession with Sybil Gage. In the last three lines of the poem, however, he states that he will “still pursue, the origin and course / Of love.”

There are several other Stevens poems that offer tantalizing hints of Sybil’s presence. At any rate, it may not be a coincidence that four of his greatest poems—“Sunday Morning,” “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” “To the One of Fictive Music,” and “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”—all seem permeated with veiled references to Sybil. Stevens’s enduring love for this beautiful, gracious, and highly intelligent woman may well have released emotional feelings and a psychic energy from deep within himself that inspired him to write these magnificent poems. And as he wrote in his journal when he was only twenty, “It is a great pleasure to seize an impression and lock it up in words: you feel as if you had it safe forever.” Writing great poetry about Sybil may have been one way of keeping his love for her safe forever.

Lest we pity Stevens too much, however, because he loved a woman he could never possess, we should recall, as noted earlier, that he wrote when he was thirty:

But I do like to sit . . . and think of pleasant things—chiefly of things I’d like to have and do. . . . For all I know, thinking of a roasted duck, or a Chinese jar, or a Flemish painting may be quite equal to having one.

And in a letter written when he was seventy-three, Stevens stated:

I am one of the many people around the world who live from time to time in a Paris that has never existed and that is composed of the things that other people, primarily Parisians themselves, have said about Paris. That particular Paris communicates an interest in life that may be wholly fiction, but, if so, it is precious fiction.

Stevens was probably well aware that Sybil was a precious fiction in his life, the One of Fictive Music.