THE CRY OF THE PEACOCKS
Fear of imagination in American literature

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Nota: his soil is man's intelligence.
That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find.

—Wallace Stevens, «The Comedian as the Letter C
IV. The Idea of a Colony»[1]

1. The Traces of a Fear

1.1. Doubt, Religion and Action

The degree of confidence the American individual could place on his mind —to what degree the mind could be trusted to offer guidance for one's relationship with reality— was a main issue in 19th century American literature. Preoccupations regarding truth and falsity, reality and fiction, dream and waking life were present during the century's literature, bearing witness to the problem. It could even be posed that such concerns became central from the very moment the Pilgrim Fathers disembarked from the ship onto the new continent and found their situation desperate. Actually, through WilliamBradford's account of this first encounter and Cotton Mather's later reconstruction of it,

[1] W. Stevens, «The Comedian as the Letter C», *Collected Poemas*, Faber and Faber, Boston, 1984, pág. 36.

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we can place ourselves in their shoes and picture the anxiety that must have then overcome their minds:

> But here I cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poors people present condition; and so I think will the reader, too, when he well considers the same. Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in their preparation [...] what did they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men [...]? If they looked behind them, there was a mighty ocean which they had passed and was now as a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world[2].

Later, William Bradford likens their situation to that of the Jewish as they searched for the Promised Land; he even asks the reader to judge their own state of affairs as even more dramatic:

> [It] is recorded in Scripture as a mercy to the Apostle and his shipwrecked company, that the barbarians showed them no small kindness in refreshing them, but these save barbarians, when they met with them [...] were readier to fill their sides full of arrows than otherwise[3].

Were we to conceive of a psychological state of mind to suit a situation as described by Bradford, and described also in other works such as *A People of God in the Devils Territories* and a section of *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, both by Cothon Mather, we would then encounter a phantasmagoric scenario made explicit, one which presents the first Americans fearing that they had arrived on the shores of a heathenish land. Indeed, the image of a nightmarish territory appears all over the literature of the time, though it does so always to serve as a contrast to the virtuous Pilgrim Fathers. My intent in this essay is to pursue the connections of that former fear, to explore the unconscious implications and unfold the whole realm of doubt that may be lying beneath a literature that, until the 19th century, was fully self-relying, reassuring. A special thought may have crossed the Pilgrims' minds, a thought consisting in the possibility that the guide that had brought them to the American inferno had been mistaken, like Columbus was. And who, but God, did they signal as the captain of their soul? Thus, at the heyday of despair, the American pilgrims could well have doubted whether it had been God's voice they had followed all the way from Europe through a ruinous voyage, or the voice of the Devil himself.

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[2] W. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, en N. Baym (ed.) *The Norton Anthology for American Literature, Sixth Edition*, W. W. Norton & Company, Nueva York, 2003, pág. 168.

[3] W. Bradford, *loc. cit.*

Undoubtedly, once on land, the previous lives in Holland or in England would have seemed to be far away in time as well as in space. Having left the departing harbor behind, the midst of unreality had taken over and veiled the suffering of their previous lives in their country of origin. The past would have acquired the fictitious element that memories have, whose actuality cannot rival that of the present. Among the wilderness of America, and overtaken by despair, the reasons which had brought them there could have seemed little justification, if any, for so disgraceful a voyage.

D. H. Lawrence had already complicated the whole issue of the Pilgrim's motives to leave for America in his *Studies on Class American Literature*, written in 1923. Having dismissed the possibility of their coming in search of freedom of worship, Lawrence questioned the human nature of these people, and he says:

> What did the Pilgrim Fathers come for then, when they came so gruesomely over the black sea? Oh, it was in a black spirit. A black revulsion from Europe, from the old authority of Europe, from kinds and bishops and popes. And more. When you look into it, more. They were black, masterful men, they wanted something else. No kings, no bishops maybe. Even no God Almighty. But also, no more of this new «humanity» which followed the Renaissance. None of this new liberty which was to be so pretty in Europe. Something grimmer, by no means free and easy[4].

After this, one can no longer remain exclusively within the boundaries of the religious explanation; even if one is unwilling to do away with the religious background of the Pilgrims, the overall vision can still be complicated simply by imagining that, on arriving on America, the Pilgrims may have become suspicious of their ability to be ministers and interpreters of God's message —which, as a reason for their voyage, Bradford listed in the fourth place. That is, they might have become suspicious of their innate disposition towards goodness and not evil, a fear which must be related to the question of God being the captain of their sea and soul, or rather the Devil.

Thus, that doubt emerged as a predominant state of mind in these colonizers seems feasible. Moreover, doubt hides a possibility of fear in itself, the fear of madness, since it can trigger suspicions of all kinds and become, finally, an obsession. Indeed, had the voyage been motivated by a *healthy* or virtuous, Christian purpose, all the penuries undergone, actions undertaken and deaths suffered could and would be justified. But the mere thought that other reasons underlay the motives for the voyage —that the winds of madness or evil had filled their sails— would seem something terrible and traumatic to accept.

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[4] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Doubleday Anchor Books, Nueva York, 1951, pág. 15.

Doubt, furthermore, can be considered from a theological perspective, as the cause as well as the expression of a deficient faith. As Bradford pointed out,

> [...] of all sorrows more heavy to be borne, was that many of their children, by these occasions and the great licentiousness of youth in that country [Holland], and the manifold temptations of the place [...] some wore courses tending to dissoluteness and the danger of their soul, to the great grief of their parents and dishonor of God[5].

Thus, for those pilgrims —who among other things had been driven to America by the fear that their children were swerving from the paths of God— facing doubt as an experience concerning their own private realm could have meant a breakdown of their life project, too central to admit.

And finally, if, on the other hand, the religious background of the Pilgrims is set aside and the voyage to America is considered exclusively in its physicality —as the greatest action of the time— the context still favors the appearance of doubt. In this case, its emergence should be understood as inherent to taking a decision or carrying out an action. Were we to understand doubt's weight on one's conscience in direct proportion with the magnitude of the deed fulfilled, we could only but imagine the huge extent to which doubt installed in the pilgrims' minds. The specific quality of their action —a voyage— implies that it was charged with the aura of things ultimate and definite. Really, it was a voyage of no return that entailed a severing off from their previous lives and therefore a before and an after, a chiasm in the private history of each and every one of them, and of the people that came behind them. This explains the fact that the Pilgrim's theological preoccupation regarding whether their souls were to be saved coincided with that concerning the legitimacy, convenience and justification of their voyage, and even the success and destiny of the American colonies. Doubt necessarily participated of all of them since the nature of their voyage implied that it should not only determine their actual life, but their spiritual life also, since it was a religious action carried out in the name of God. Thus, the Pilgrim's conscience had to bear the strain of the *immigrant* or the *colonist* as well as that of the *religious man*. But not content with this double burden, they placed still another responsibility upon their backs: that of the *historical people*. For their action had historical relevance; this is why they traced back time in search of a mirror whereon they would recognize themselves. They picked the Jew's account in order to conceive of themselves as a repetition, so as to situate themselves in history.

By the end of this analysis we come to realize that both the eye of God and the eye of history were scrutinizing the Pilgrims lives, together with

[5] W. Bradford, *op. cit.*, pág. 160.

the eye of the mortal and individual men and women each of them was. The Pilgrims developed a schizophrenic frame of mind which made conflict inevitable among their different strata of consciousness, since the reasons to justify the actions of the historical or the religious man would not suit the earthly man. D. H. Lawrence posited a similar structure when he described the self-tormented American in terms of an *idealist* drive coming in conflict with a *sensuous* drive. As a result of this, the Pilgrims would always distrust themselves and the reasons that brought them here, and distrust would become, historically speaking, the prevailing feeling to describe America's relationship with itself —as a counterpart to self-reliance— and with the world.

1.2. Unreality and Sin: Repetition, History, Literature and the Devil

We might well say, then, that the conflict as it has been stated consisted in the irreconcilability between reality and fiction, and to which of these did history and religion belong. The issue is further complicated by the fact that those early historical accounts are read today as literature. To what extent wasn't the Pilgrims' reading of their voyage as the Jewish exodus to the Promised Land also a literary interpretation? Furthermore, didn't the Jewish chronicles themselves —the Pilgrim's justification, the mirror which reflected their image already inside history— form part of a book, the Bible? Indeed, the sacred book enjoyed a status different to all others, as if it had not formed part of imagination; but to what extent could their mind cling to belief and keep doubt at bay?

In the end, the Pilgrim Fathers let their lives be ruled by history and by religion, traveled to America, and in doing so they bestowed too important a role in their lives upon factors susceptible to be considered as forming part of imagination. This is complemented by the issue of modernity, for they were already modern people, conscious of being so; self-conscious of the circumstances, risks and dangers that surrounded their action to the point of creating a literature from it —which means they were to be held responsible. At one point they were afraid not only of the possibility of having carried a voyage which should have remained in the sphere of the imagination, but afraid that they had foreseen this and yet decided to go on with the voyage despite of all. If they had knowingly pushed themselves to a context of unavoidable doubt, they were creators of evil, for they had freely, willingly, sadistically, masochistically led themselves to the extreme of madness. To the degree that they had sold their souls to history, to consciousness or even to religion, they had consciously (and paradoxically) sold them to the Devil. It seems that, in completing the voyage, they bridged the gap that separated Hamlet from Faustus.

It is in this light that Hawthorne's tales such as «Ethan Brand» and «Wakefield» or even Melville's *Moby Dick* can be read as parables on the abstract nature of the journey, the voyage or action. The actions carried out by their protagonists are clearly associated to evil and the dark side, «perverse»[6] in words of Matthiessen, and an «Unpardonable Sin», in the mouth of the narrator of Hawthorne's story. We have read that Hawthorne isolated himself for twelve years in a room in his mother's house to do nothing but write, so he also went on a journey, not outwards but inwards. And yet he still connected the task of writing with the aiding forces of evil:

> When I get home, I will try to write a more genial book; but the Devil himself always seems to get into my inkstand, and I can only exorcise him by a pensful at a time[7].

Moreover, literature's function in Puritan America may be interpreted from this point of view. The complexities of the Puritan natural depravity, according to which salvation was not acceded to by means of behavior nor of action (finally, God's desires were beyond human comprehension) made the realm of doubt inescapable. Lives were lived in doubt and fear and not until death should one know whether praying had served to invoke God or the Devil. Reassurance, thus, became a prevailing need, and literature served the purpose. For example, the *personal narrative*, as a genre, can only be understood if we take in consideration the needs of an anxious mind. Its underlying conflict would spread through the scope of American literature insofar as it would bestow its structure upon *captivity narratives* and even upon *slave narratives*, whose protagonists searched for a sign of providence that would assure them they were heading to any of the variants of salvation. But the problem comes when we become aware that literature could not and would not give answers to their questionings, for, insofar as it was unreal or fictitious, it offered no sounder basis for trust than for distrust. Literature, therefore, meant the escape forward of the doubtful mind, the imaginative action of a soul that had altogether relinquished the hope of achieving surety and had rather chosen to embrace the superficial respite offered by its own, autistic reassurance. The general Puritan awe to fiction could be seen, thus, as the conscious displacement of an unconscious awe towards the practice of literature itself. Cherishing imagination was at the origin of their fear, so, in principle, it could not dissolute it. Unreality could not connect them with the world, and so nobody could know if what they dreamt or wrote was in any way connecting them with God.

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[6] F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance. Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, Oxford University Press, Nueva York, 1968, pág. 228.

[7] N. Hawthorne, en F. O. Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, pág. 234.

1.3. Emerson: Self-Reliance and the Possibility of Virtuous Action

In analyzing doubt in relation to the context of sin, we can make reference to E. A. Poe's «Imp of the Perverse», for the dynamics plotted between the inward sphere of the individual and the outward sphere of action, as they are presented in such text, picture indeed a perverseness of mind such as could only have been devised inside the Puritanical tradition. For, once perverseness wormed into consciousness, there was no way to escape its moving the individual into action, which, in this precise case, meant perdition. Not only is this reminiscent of the consideration of the Pilgrim's voyage as a consciously self-torturing action; it also defines the fatal relationship (i.e. relation of necessity) which exists between the inward sphere of consciousness, or experience, and the outer sphere of action. Such unity must entail, consequently, a similar paralleling of *doubtful faith* to *active sin*, of *doubt* to *evil*, and bring us to the logical conclusion that no virtuous action could ever result from a doubtful people.

This last impossibility precisely is what Emerson attempted to overcome by avowing for *self-reliance*. The latter could, therefore, be understood as a reply to the fears that the Puritan dynamics of doubt stirred, and which could well have been responsible for America's late coming of age, which worried Emerson. He proposed that the Americans trust themselves, which meant swerving from certain aspects of Orthodox mechanisms of salvation and revelation towards confidence in the individual's moral sentiment. Emerson believed in the individual's ability to discern and access, though inspiration, virtue and God's truth. Because of this, he placed constant emphasis on the fact that self-reliance had to have a response in the sphere of active life. Such pragmatism, however, was determined by the nature of the inward experience, for the Emersonian doctrine of the *infinitude of the private man* —which critic Matthiessen commented on as most essential in his philosophy— accounts for a justified transition from the inward realm of personal experience to the ethical, politic and social realm of action. Once the individual was engulfed by the wave of the absolute divine, infinitude rested within him through the *oversoul*, which was itself present in everything that existed. Inevitably, any action arising from an inward experience of inspiration would partake of every man and woman, and even of nature, and would be justified. Though it stemmed from the Puritan context, Emersonian philosophy reconciled the inward with the outer sphere, *experience* with *action*. The latter became compulsory precisely because virtue was something unquestionable, so inaction —and that precisely is what Emerson lamented of Thoreau— would mean something like sparing one's goodness to an expectant world.

Insofar as the confidence in one's self, and not the practicality of one's actions, made one virtuous, Emerson had to trust whatever resulted from the individual's solitude, this being a symbol for the inescapable individuality

of man. Matthiessen explains it as follows: «The possible tragic consequences of isolation, the haunted reverberations of the soul locked into its prison, though not envisaged by his [Emerson's] optimism, were the burdens of Hawthorne and Poe»[8]. Indeed, if virtue were problematic with isolation, so would be the interpretation of reality by the isolated man, as well as his ability to distinguish truth from falsity. Actually, some of Hawthorne's and Melville's characters are defined by a Hamlet-like psychology that, at some point along their stories, doubt of their ability to interpret reality, even as it is being offered by their senses. This concern must be understood as a variant of the Puritan fear, related as it is to the human ability to come in contact with the world. And so is the myth of companionship, of friendship, of brotherhood, of the kindred spirits, which, though at another level, embodies the symbol of finally having transcended the self, overcome autism and touched the foreign realities as they rest inside other human beings.

1.4. Whitman and Melville

Therefore, Captain Delano, Giovanni from Hawthorne's «Rapaccini's Daughter,» and even Ishmael from *Moby Dick*, all belong to the array of 19th century literary characters that are often shown to be miscarried in their judgment of reality. Sometimes it is evident that what motivated their false discernment was an inherent bending on their part towards goodness, which was always their first option, such as virtue was most of the times in Emerson's transcendental logic. They were hiding evil from the world. As a reaction to this, examples such as Billy Bud's death-penalty place the balance and testify to injustice having a place in reality. Indeed, a sound man judging from reason could be unjust to another man.

And yet, in my opinion, the atmosphere of this tale —the final complicity between Billy and the captain— would bring Melville closest to Whitman's reconciled acceptance of the world. In this light, Melville's short-novel —his last known work— would mean a transition from *Moby Dick*, where I think the other 19th century alternative to Whitman was presented, as regards the final stripping of the Puritan obsession. In my opinion, not until Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* was the American individual able to cast off doubt completely. Whitman did so by accepting for America any destiny that shall come, be it salvation or doom. Moreover, he did so by reducing both of them to a lifetime. This necessarily had to imply a reconciliation of reality and unreality in the aesthetic level, according to the moral implications we have detected earlier in the essay. And indeed, as pointed out by Matthiessen, Whitman believed «'imagination and actuality must be united'»[9] in the work of art. Thus, *Leaves of Grass* gave linguistic expression to lived experiences, to science, to

[8] F. O. Mathiessen, *op. cit.*, pág. 8.

[9] F. O. Mathiessen, *loc. cit.*, pág. 264.

reality, dream and imagination. By doing so Whitman was able to put an end to the psychological torture the American mind had endured since Puritanical times —the doubt, as I have said, as to whether they had been brought by God's voice or the Devil's, the fear of being punished when the God of history would not recognize them as their sons. With Whitman, the American for the first time in history reconciled himself with the voyage, which is to say he did not feel any longer like an immigrant inside America, but felt at home. In this regard, D. H. Lawrence said of him he was «the fist white aboriginal»[10]. The American citizen did no longer journey in Whitman, but strolled; because his stroll was not pushed by any obsession or (more important) by any action or reaction, need of profit, success or assurance of salvation. While Thoreau escaped from civilization when he fled onto the forest, Whitman crossed from street to forest-path and prairie freely, willingly, keeping soul and verse-rhythm undisturbed. His walk, likewise, was not ruled by any prior history or previous expectation. Thus, whatever crossed his senses and his mind was welcomed and accepted as it was, without needing to alter neither imagination nor reality. Regarding the former, art admitted no constraint, since unreality was a sphere in its own right. As for reality, there was no need to fabricate it (or for art to yield to our private imagination), since the world needn't be turned into a token of God or of the Devil[11].

Also, Whitman's respect for reality entailed he must relinquish action for himself. As I have said, he did not act in the world, but only strolled. We could even state he did not act with words either, insofar as he did not force them into metaphors, but only called up names. Thus, his poems present to us a man whose happiness was not dependent on the world, for he was committed to his own happiness from the onset. In doing so, he had taken that burden from history and the outer world. Contrary to the stock of immigrants that until then peopled America, and to those which were arriving still, Whitman never carried a previous expectation with him, a *manifest destiny* his life had to fulfill in order to prevent the great doubt from appearing, doubt consisting in whether the past voyage hither —the great transoceanic action— had been worthwhile. Whitman needed not reaffirm himself, neither with ancestry, success or riches; he didn't live under the obligation of making a dream come true which would reassure him as son of God or elected member of the heavens, in contrast to sin, evil and madness. Therefore, despite the fact he sang the value, justification and worth of every past action and of all the actions to come —the American Revolution as well as feudalism, slavery (the American sin) as well as the war— he necessarily denied action for himself. Indeed, he only touched himself. Touching any other, acting over any other body or soul would entail for him a tiny trauma, a tiny harm he could find no way to justify.

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[10] D. H. Lawrence, *op. cit.*, pág. 186.

[11] Cf. L. S. Villacañas de Castro, «Some Notes on the Carácter of the American Hero, of the American Novel, and the Novel in General», *Analecta Malacitana*, XXXIX, 1, 2006, págs. 53-69.

It seems to me that by the 19th century the dichotomy consisting in confidence *versus* doubt had been stripped apart: the two poles in the opposition had dissociated into two radically different frames of minds. Emerson and Hawthorne, therefore, embody totalizing expressions of the world, since an all-abounding virtue in the former contrasts with the latter's impossibility to envision virtue at all. Two hundred years after the Pilgrim Fathers' arrival, doubt had been so strongly hidden that it became unconscious in most of Emerson's essays. On the contrary, when one reads Puritan's accounts, it is evident that they, the Puritans, had not forgotten it. Their obsessive reassurance betrays them. Hawthorne's writings no longer fear evil but rather accept its existence with ironic, nearly humorous sadness.

It seems American literature never quite left behind the obsessive frame of mind that had brought the Pilgrim Fathers across the ocean. Along with those literary works brimming with confidence and trust —those writings that foretell paradise arising in America, or already describe it—, we find apocalyptic works, ranging from the Puritans onwards, that consist in dark forebodings. One, for instance, is Wigglesworth's 1662 *The Day of Doom*, or the aforementioned Mather's *A People of God in the Devil's Territories*. These dynamics ranged into the 20th century and in some way continue today. The dark side of this undercurrent partakes of Ishmael's fear on the top mast, fear that there was no *haven ahead* (heaven ahead); that after all, America's voyage would have to end in absolute death, for they were pushed from the very start by a mad captain, a fooled explorer. If the Pilgrim Fathers had been lured by the voice of the devil, then the cruelest of punishments awaited the nation. For, while pretending to be the ministers of God, they were spreading evil around the world. There may be no more explanatory text to illustrate this than Thomas Harriot's following account:

> The disease also was so strange, that they neither knew what it was, not how to cure it, [for] the like by report of the oldest men in the country never had happened before... This marvelous incident produced in all the country [such] strange opinions of us, that some people could not tell whether to think us gods or men, and the rather because that all the space of their sickness, there was no man of ours known to die, or [be] especially sick. They also noted that we had no women amongst us, [and] that we did [not] take care for any of theirs.
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> Some therefore were of [the] opinion that we were not born of women, and therefore not mortal, but that we were men of an old generation many years past, then risen again to immortality.
>
> Some would likewise seem to prophecy that there were more of our generation yet to come [to this land] and kill their and take their places[12].

[12] T. Harriot, *A Brief and True Report*, en N. Baym (ed.), *op. cit.*, pág. 86.

And yet, Amerindians were seduced by the English colonizers, just as one is seduced by men who carry out actions, who raise themselves beyond indeterminacy and decide to act or conquer. Such is the *charismatic* person, whose actions other people follow. The crew of the *Pequod*, for example, decided to support Captain Ahab whatever were his motivations, despite the fact he was leading them to shipwreck.

And so we return to Herman Melville, Whitman's counterpart in the struggle to destroy doubt. We see embodied in his captain the idea that every action is connected to an obsession, however small. And yet, in him we find no shadow of doubt regarding his own evil, for he acknowledges it in the same way that Hawthorne did acknowledge its having a place in the world. However, insofar as Ahab is no longer obsessed by the possibility of being damned, we do also see in him a transition from the Puritanical mood. Though in a different way to Whitman —who did nothing but write throughout his life, and heal some wounds—, Ahab has also stripped doubt. What is particular to him is that he did this through action; that is say, instead of paralyzing his subjectivity and the tendency to act, the obsessing doubt of evil became for him the moving force. His, therefore, is a crusade against the very God the Puritans feared would punish them for all their evil; against the judging principle that oppressed the continent.

2. Wallace Stevens

2.1. The Young, Fearful Poet (and Man)

Twentieth-century poet Wallace Stevens also felt this oppression, especially in the earlier stages of his poetry, as it is present in his first book, *Harmonium*. Moreover, I am of the opinion that Steven's poetry, and poetical and philosophical thought —undividable in the way theory and practice are, as we will see— may be understood in terms of a transition from Herman Melville to Walt Whitman, specifically as regards their understanding and solution of the problem of imagination, which is that of the emergence of the most basic of doubts. Essential referents in my treatment of Stevens will thus be the literary characters Captain Ahab and Walt Whitman, considering the latter as a figure (sometimes referred to, by Walt Whitman, as a *kosmos*) that embodies the poetic voice whose implications I have described above.

As Frank Lentricchia has pointed out in his essay «Patriarchy Against Itself: the Young Manhood of Wallace Stevens», the poet's youth conflict involved the reconciliation of his imaginative-poetic drive with the imperatives of capitalist society, a dichotomy in which capitalism would stand as the American modern God. Such God's «musts» had come to young Stevens incarnated in the parental advice for manhood. Through his father's voice, society reminded

Stevens that work he must; and yet, it was poetry he appreciated above all. As opposed to Captain Ahab, who broke the social and economical contract that attached him to the world of society and capital, Stevens knew he had to place the social or economic action before his artistic, intimate longings. He did not cling to Melville's model. Lentricchia, therefore, ends the first part of his essay stating that Wallace Stevens would wish, like Ahab did, to do away with the American Paternal God altogether, and return to the Mother-figure of imagination, to a «mother's breast that would, if granted, simply set aside all of his male obligations in the bourgeois world of capital»[13]. We might find the reasons why Stevens did not break his ties with reality, unlike Ahab did, in his 20th century portrait of a captain that could well be Ahab himself, as it appears in the last lines of the poem «Disillusionment of Ten o'Clock»:

> The houses are haunted
> By white night-gowns.
> None are green,
> Or purple with green rings,
> Or green with yellow rings,
> Or yellow with blue rings.
> None of them are strange,
> With locks of lace
> And beaded ceintures.
> People are not going to dream of baboons or periwinkles.
> Only, here and there, an old sailor,
> Drunk and sleep in his boots,
> Catches tigers
> In red weather[14].

It could be that here, in the this poem, an old Ahab still imagines he is hunting in a world that, like the waters of the Pacific Ocean, has turned red with blood. Even if pictured with an eccentric coloring, violence is still present in the poem, as if it was something inherent to the use of imagination. This observation would be in keeping with, and furthermore radicalize, the difficult ordination of imagination in reality. Thus, like the woman singing at the shoreline of Key West, in Wallace Steven's poem, Ahab is lonely, for «*there never was a world for* [him] *except the one* [he dreamt] *and,* [dreaming], *made*». The last time we read about him in the closing pages of *Moby Dick* he had fallen overboard, but now, having returned, he has rather fallen into America's oblivion, and nothing will ever be given to him again. The man with a charismatic imagination is here portrayed as a lonely drunkard who, from being a brave captain, passed to be a castaway and, finally, a social outcast. He must

[13] F. Lentricchia, «Patriarchy Against Itself—The Young Manhood of Wallace Stevens», *Critical Inquiry* 13, The University of Chicago UP, Summer 1987, pág. 747.

[14] W. Stevens, «Disillusionment of Ten o'Clock», en *Collected Poems*, pág. 66.

spend his life forever dreaming and catching unreal monsters in the rolling waves of some red wine.

In my opinion, this poem completes *Moby Dick* for it completes Captain Ahab as a character. It depicts a *post-strife* captain to whom ocean's baptism has transformed. Indeed, he has returned from the ocean clothed in a playful mood which is also the mood of the poem, so distant from the captain's previous obsessive and ambitious human state. Stevens has also distanced himself from the reflective frame of mind of previous, and also later, poems that so thoughtfully meander through the complexities of reality and the imagination as they impinge on each other, like the sea and the coast. But now he plays a simple game of language to make a simple poem; he toys with colors and carries out straight-forward variations. Ahab has likewise forgone any ambition in the real world and lives only in the imagination, closer to childishness than to madness. It is as if he had undergone King Lear's reincarnation, who from being a mad raving old man became undistinguishable from his own Fool. If we wanted to chase further this association, we could even ask ourselves the following question: who was the *Pequod's* jester, but Pip, the childish young man? Indeed, Melville also depicted a special connection between Pip and Ahab in his book: at the end of the voyage both of them came to share a destiny, with a great part of the crew. As we have come to know thanks to Stevens' poem, not only did the captain fall overboard like Pip before him, but furthermore he has come out of the clash of the ocean transformed into a small boy, like a baby from a cradle.

Likewise, Stevens knew he could not live inside Ahab's cabin, for

> [...] in the cabin was no companionship; socially, Ahab was inaccessible. Though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still alien to it. He lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settled Missouri. As when spring and summer had departed, that wild Logan of the woods, burying himself in the hollow of a tree, lived in the winter there, sucking his own paws; so, in his inclement, howling old age, Ahab's soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen claws of its gloom![15]

Stevens could not live secluded in a private, autistic-like chamber, amid the hectic ocean of New York —the «private space of his room [...] the psychic space of consciousness»[16], as Lentricchia calls it. This meant that poetry had to become a weekend practice for the weekend part of life, once the main toil was over. Day and night, action and inaction, toil and rest were, in Ahab's case, subject to one only purpose (hunting the whale), and it was then that the

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[15] H. Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby Dick*, The Library of America, Nueva York, 1984, pág. 955.

[16] F. Lentricchia, *op. cit.*, pág. 755.

obsession was complete. For even in sleep, when imagination could run fast and free, Ahab brooded upon the whale. Through feeding upon it, the man became himself the thought, and the individual self —which Emerson had believed was potentially infinite— was reduced to one idea. Then the minimization of the self was absolute, less than human.

As Lentricchia sustains, this issue had a corresponding bearing on the question of manhood. Madman or an infantilized man, Ahab or Pip, were the same to Stevens, insofar as both, in being less than human (from the Emersonian point of view, which was also defined in terms of manliness) were also less than a *man* should be. It stems from this why the poet connected his poetic practice with his female self or «lady-like, economically unproductive "she"»[17], as Lentricchia expresses it. Such a process of self-feminization should be interpreted, in my opinion, as a conscious or even unconscious defensive strategy on the part of Stevens to underrate whatever space imagination occupied in his life, in order not to come to terms with it and, thus, remain blindly loyal to his father's words and masculinity. This is to say, he repressed imagination as a constituent part of the self and of his manhood: like womanhood as regards patriarchy, poetry came to be associated to a false self.

We could posit, therefore, that two traditions shaped the outlook of the young Stevens. On the one hand, the Puritan fear of the imagination, which developed into a Calvinistic-rooted awe for idleness, inaction and non-profit. On the other, we find the young poet's disregard or even demonization of the female, not new in the western tradition, especially in the American continent. At some point in life, the preoccupation for one and the fear of the other may have come hand in hand, and Stevens would have seen them in the shape of an only whole.

2.2. The Cry of the Peacocks

And indeed, the fact that imagination became a fearsome burden for young Stevens is evident from an example in his earliest poetry. There, the use of poetic imagination seems to trigger apocalyptic forebodings. These are not directed to any outer object in particular, however, but rather to the use of imagination itself. Thus, the poet becomes afraid of the very poem he is writing, while he is writing it. In my opinion, the following poem, «Domination of Black», gives expression to the essential experience of the severed American mind by cutting through a psychological instant of fear. In doing so, it recalls the distrust, however inward or unconscious, that Puritans felt towards the voyage they were carrying out and while they were carrying it out. Really, it takes us back to the dynamics of insecurity suffered towards imagination and anything that sprouted from it. The poem goes as follows:

[17] F. Lentricchia, *loc. cit.*, pág. 746.

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves.
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding.
I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind, in the twilight wind.
They swept over the room,
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks

Down in the ground.
I heard them cry—the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?

Out of the wind,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks

I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks[18].

What can be the cause of the poet's fear? To whom do the peacocks direct their cries? Around exactly *what* are the planets gathering, closing upon, threateningly? The peacocks, that are the poet's creation, are crying against themselves, as Lentricchia said patriarchy turned against itself in Wallace Stevens; just as Americanism turns America against itself, and capitalism does

[18] W. Stevens, «Domination of Black», en *Collected Poems.*, págs. 8-9.

with the capitalist individual. This means that the peacocks are crying at the poet himself, for he was their maker. Not only the birds, but also the plants, and the planets, the whole universe, the whole realm of creation rebels and complains and stirs disturbed, afraid of its own substance. Imagination pervades the universe and so does the fear. The birds fear their own feathers, the poet fears the tales of the peacocks since they are also the leaves that turn in the wind outside, like the flames of the fire turn indoors, in the private space. And all throughout, the poet fears himself though fearing his own poetry. Will one day the actions of America turn against America? Will the world one day complain, shout, rebel against the man that changed it, dreaming it as part of himself? Will the outer world one day wake up from the dream it is living inside the human mind?

What makes Stevens afraid of imagination is the infinite possibilities of being it enables, for these (the possibilities of imaginary being) are at the root of mistake, of unreality and thus of doubt, madness and obsession. Literature, imagination and doubt are thus unified. «Domination of Black» could express the fear of the metaphoric process. Inasmuch as the latter is present in the poem through the «like» and «as» clauses —in comparisons— or as a direct identification in the form of metaphors, the poet is scared at his own poem. Stevens and the peacocks shout at the metamorphosis which transforms one thing into a different one, subject to predicate. It underlies the transition from bird to leaf and leaf to a flame burning in the fire of the wind. The poet is afraid at the very possibility of poetry while he plays with it. For the infinite possibility of the imaginary being encloses the infinite possibility of language, of the very language the poet has at the reach of his hand and employs. Likewise, to discover the possibilities of the imagination also involves becoming aware of the possibilities of history, of the future life to come and of that one proposition that will contain the judgment of posterity. What has here opened up to Stevens in a sort of poetical, metaphysical and existential revelation are in fact the possibilities of his own life, as they are contained in language. As a writer and a young man, he intrudes the realm of life and literature no longer as a juvenile, passionate voice but in possession of consciousness. At this point, the light of imagination is no light at all but rather floods the world with darkness.

2.3. Silencing the Peacocks: the Conquest of Normality

Stevens knew that imagination enclosed a problem as well as a solution. As we have read, the last remnant of imagination in the world of capital was also a remnant of madness, idleness and infantilism which, like femaleness, did not enjoy the status of manhood. These were embodied in the eccentric figure of the drunken captain, or Ahab's last metamorphosis. Against him, but also against raw capitalism, Stevens desired to find a space of equilibrium that

should become, too, the place of normality. Contrary to Emerson (who had drawn an uninterrupted line running through harmony, normality and free-flowing spontaneity), other 19th century American fiction writers' diagnosis of the dynamics of imagination had been that it was totalitarian (not democratic), obsessive (not harmonic), and extreme to the point of disabling a smooth relationship with reality and society. Stevens, therefore, knew that normality was something that had to be conquered rather than acquiesced to.

Here we have to make a parenthesis in the treatment of imagination and reality, or contemplate it from another angle, that of the son and father relationship. Really, the complexities of one are those of the other. For Stevens desired to be his father's son and be so spontaneously, and he desired that this should not entail having to relinquish the possibilities of his own imagination. That is, being son to Garret Stevens should not demand a harmful effort on his part, an exercise of repression, let alone an internal fight against himself. The problem is that it *did*. Stevens had to hear his father disapprove of his writing and place harmful limits to it, which reproduces the Oedipal riddle. The paternal voice implied an order to the son: that he set aside his writing in order to become a man (his son). The opposite would entail his failure as a father, inherent in the failure of his son. It is interesting to note how, on the contrary, the Mother-figure Stevens longed for, according to Lentricchia, consisted in supreme imagination, but also supreme love, for She —signifying abstract Womanhood or Femaleness, in this context— would be nothing in herself but pure potency of (imaginary) being, willing to transform herself to suit her love.

Lentricchia's study of Stevens reaches up to here, for he was only concerned with his young manhood. In ending at this point, however, he leaves Stevens' problem unsolved. Indeed, this idealized figure of femaleness was as inadequate as the figure of manhood that was forced upon him by the world of capital and his father, insofar as it was its exact counterpart. We come thus to understand that, since manhood entailed repression for Stevens, it stirred inside him the corresponding longing for an all-accepting, idealized mother-figure that, however, was also unreal. Moreover, if Stevens was to develop as a poet as well as a man, he would have to make his way across these two extremes, which depicted Femaleness and Maleness, on the one hand, and imagination and reality, on the other, as totalizing spheres. This crossing would become his conquest of normality. Hadn't he completed it, he would never have overcome «Domination of Black».

Thus, it is in this context when Freud's workings on a line from Goethe's *Faust*, namely that *the son must conquer for himself the legacy of his parents*, become indeed essential. They conceive of a father / son relationship that, just like that of imagination and reality, must be thought of and worked over through the conquest of consciousness. Indeed, there is a subtle difference between «fighting against oneself» as expressed by Lenticchia, and Freud's

«conquering for oneself». This difference is, I think, central to an understanding of Stevens' unfolding as a writer that came nearer to Whitman.

When we try to understand the anatomy of Stevens' conquest, we are drawn immediately to his prose essays. In some way, it is in the realm of theory where the main moves of the conquest were developed. Being true that theory was to some extent present both in his essays and his poems (sometimes philosophy and poetry become one), nevertheless, it is my opinion that the possibilities of whatever poetry there was in his poems, and whatever poetry there was in his essays, depended upon the very possibilities that philosophy opened up for him in the bare realm of theory. His theory is contained in the philosophical essays gathered in a short book, the *Necessary Angel*.

The fact that some of these writings were posterior to a great part of his poetry results from the paradoxical structure of the human nature, embodied, I think, in the two meanings of the word «conquest», hence the convenience of the term. In this light, writing poetry like «Domination of Black» participated in the process of the conquest only insofar as it showed Stevens' living and coming through the conflict itself, doing the war, fighting in a space he didn't yet possess. The special circumstances of the poet's situation at this point in his career, his being in a place that was not his own (which fact shall recall what I said earlier in the essay, regarding the American before Whitman), would account for the poet's doubts and preoccupation as to whether he was justified to occupy that very space or not, as well as the feeling, so present in the poem, that the poet lives within a conflict. But, on the other hand, the conclusions he arrives at in his philosophical, theoretical essays, especially in «Imagination as a Value», participate in the conquest not only as the process or the fight, but as the space that has been already taken over by consciousness. Only then, Stevens was able to associate the practice of poetry to peace and harmony.

Maybe, in order to make my argument clearer it might be worthwhile to approximate the logic of the essay «Imagination as a Value». In it, Stevens' main move consists in his avoidance to make imagination synonymous with poetry; that is to say, in not considering imagination only as an artistic category, but rather as a metaphysical one. Imagination is an all-pervasive «activity that diffuses itself throughout our lives [...], [for] we live in the mind»[19]. This means that one does not choose between reality and imagination when deciding between economy and poetry, for example, since imagination is inescapable. Far from being opposed to imagination, the truth is that ethics, morals, politics, economy, etc., are really products of it[20]. All of these disciplines are summoned in the essay only as a particular use of imagination. This needs have a bearing on whatever we say of Stevens' poetry. Defining it as meta-poetical is

[19] W. Stevens, «Imagination as a Value», en *The Necessary Angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, Vintage Books, Nueva York, 1951, pág. 140.

[20] W. Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, págs. 146-147.

not precise enough, even if the young poet himself might have considered it so before arriving at the conclusions expressed in the essay. In the same way, had Stevens' motivation for writing «Imagination as a Value» been to explore the relationship between imagination and reality, by the time he came to grasp the main thesis as it is there defended, it would have dawn upon him that the title betrayed its purpose. The same could be said about the second part of the book's title: *Essays on Reality and Imagination*. And this is so because imagination, being indivisible from reality, had no other value than being itself reality. That which was at work in his poetry and essays, thus, was rather a meta-imaginative imagination: nothing different to his imagination imagining its own possibilities (for only imagination can conceive of itself). Nothing different, also, to his work imagining its own possibilities of poetry, his own life imagining its own possibilities of living, its own possibilities of normality and abnormality.

So we return to normality. For, logically, both normality and abnormality are in the same way akin to imagination, insofar as both of them form part of its possibilities. However, Stevens' belief (or should be refer to it just as an opinion?) was that imagination's commitment had to be with normality. For it was its option. As he intelligently claims in page 156 of his book of essays,

> To be able to see the portal of literature, that is to say: the portal of the imagination, as a scene of normal love and normal beauty is, of itself, a feat of great imagination [...] [T]he chief problems of any artist, as of any man, is to bear the problem of the normal and he needs, in order to solve them, everything that the imagination has to give[21].

Contrary to many writers before and after him, who led a life of drugs and excesses so as to transfer excess to their poetic imagination, Stevens here states that imagining normality is —indeed— as imaginative as anything to be imagined, as imaginary as anything to be lived.

Only now is imagination humanized, for terms such as freedom and responsibility can have a bearing on it. Only now, likewise, can normality enjoy the transition that shall bring imagination from being a matter of obsessing doubt to becoming, simply, an aesthetic and moral category. Just like his poems, Stevens' theoretical, philosophical essays form part of imagination. However, only in them does the imagination (re)conquer itself, for they are self-reflective. By exploring the sphere of the imaginative, Stevens uncovers what underlies the literary. Thus, while some compositions in the literary tradition imagine «scenes of normal love and normal beauty», others, like «Domination of Black», *Moby Dick*, etc., imagine abnormal ones. However, only in these essays does imagination imagine itself. It is worth noting that even if this

[21] W. Stevens, *loc. cit.*, pág. 152.

holistic vision of the human life consisting in different spheres of imagination may not seem substantially different to the dualist, confronted vision of the world that challenged Stevens during his young manhood, it surely is. Despite the fact variety remains, there is no conflict, which means that neither imagination is the all-caring, accepting, loving female mother, nor is manly capitalism lacking in imagination.

And now we become aware of the fact that the processes that took place in American literature also unfold in Stevens' particular case. Only after having unfolded the theses exposed in «Imagination as a Value» could Stevens, like Whitman, feel at home within a space he had been occupying for years. That is, only then could he feel in control of the whole range of possibilities that the realm of imagination offered. Only through imagination's (re)conquering of its own space and possibilities could peace and poetry prevail and harmony become the predominant concept underlying Stevens' poetry. The brilliant tranquility of thought and metaphor that so characterizes his best poems, could not have taken place without the theses defended in his philosophy.

Besides, the paradoxical scheme connected to the category of conquest, or (re)conquest, has characterized, also, the history of the American continent. More than any other nation, America is a space of the imagination, the name of an idea that imagination has conquered, reconquered, redefined from its very origin, and will continue to do so. The Pilgrims imagined it long before they set foot on it, recognized it as theirs (with or without justification) long before they knew what it really consisted of. Whitman was fully aware of this, and hence the unity of reality and imagination that had to characterize the art fit to describe the continent.