CHAPTER 4

“Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!”: Wallace Stevens’s Figurations of Masculinity

In a 1935 letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Wallace Stevens makes a rare direct mention of pastoral. Although Stevens wrote several early poems with titles such as “Eclogue” (1909), “The Silver Plough Boy” (1915), and “Ploughing on Sunday” (1923), and referred pointedly to poets as “shepherds” in early correspondence, nowhere does he address the topic at any length. In the Latimer letter, Stevens reflects upon whether or not one’s everyday life and poetry might be of a piece, and by way of example cites a study by an art historian that attributes the linearity of Dutch painting to the flat Dutch countryside. Stevens then appears to dismiss the topic, observing: “You know, the truth is that I had hardly interested myself in this (perhaps as another version of pastoral) when I came across some such phrase as this: ‘man’s passionate disorder’, and I have since been very much interested in disorder.” While the “this” that is the “version of pastoral” has a slightly indeterminate referent, it seems to refer to the very idea of order, that is, the direct correspondences between life and art, the world and the imagination, the poet as man and the poet as creator of a linguistic universe, that intrigued Stevens throughout his career. Despite Stevens’s avowal of disinterest in the topic, it would emerge repeatedly in his poetics as a crucial counterpoint to the very “disorder” he imagined to have displaced it.

Even the rather precise example of pastoral “order” that Stevens uses to make his point resonates on several different levels in terms of Stevens’s own biography and its possible links to his poetics. The example of a Dutch painting, coupled with references to Stevens’s own compulsive orderliness in the same letter, bring to mind the poet’s youthful fascination with his Dutch
and Germanic background, which he first teasingly celebrated in a 1909 letter to his future wife, Elsie Kachel: “I said I was German to the uttermost…. Peasants are glorious. Think. Who inhabited Arcady?” (Letters, 120). This stolid peasant figure was often an attractive one for Stevens, and sufficiently “pastoral” insofar as it evoked hearty shepherds in the countryside. However, the image of boisterous men in the fields seems at odds with Stevens’s concurrent sense of himself—noted in his journal in 1902—as a relatively refined poet, distinguished from the urban riffraff, for whom “an Arcadian flute is better after all than a metropolitan corn-cob” (Letters, 58). Stevens would later describe this opposition as a contrast between the older “outsider” returning to the land of his youth and the “native” or “insider” who never left. Both of these model, “pastoral” selves, however, were a far cry from the “Crack-A-Jack” lawyer and successful businessman that his father admonished him to become, just as neither quite fit the “strenuous” type of man Stevens attempted to embrace on long weekend walks throughout rural Pennsylvania and New Jersey during the early 1900s and 1910s, when he would “cover[] about twenty miles or more” in an effort to escape the effects of too much “tobacco + food” (Letters, 20, 69). Stevens’s letters and poetry from the turn of the century through the 1940s reveal a poet concerned with stressing his “manhood” and affiliation with “virile” “man-poets,” yet confronted with a bewildering variety of modern masculine identities to emulate. The notion that pastoral suggests a certain natural “order,” after all, in which a man could easily locate his proper role and place in society, is contradicted by the context of the reference: the “pastoral” mentioned in the letter evokes not only poetic order but the orderly landscape painting as observed by a male art critic—surely not the most “manly” of occupations in a nation terrified that its elite males were becoming increasingly effete and unfit to save their society from genetic “degeneration.”

The many models of masculinity encoded in Stevens’s direct and oblique references to “pastoral” reflect his desire to reconcile within himself many versions of the modern man and to figure himself as a model, representative American male, speaker, and citizen. The most frequent form that this self-imagination took in Stevens’s famously abstract prose and poetry is, perhaps surprisingly, the body. While at times conforming to the ideal male bodies most in vogue from the 1890s through the 1940s, the imagined, often vague poetic bodies of his texts also suggest the physical manifestation of alternative, at times racialized and feminine, orders and creative disruption. Among the most intriguing, and disorderly, of self-images for Stevens are those of the “Large Man,” “Jumbo,” or the “Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!” body of “Bantams in Pine-Woods,” all of which recall a personal physicality that both embarrassed him (“That monster, the body!”) and was an anomalous...