The Second Coming of Aphrodite:
Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire
By Sandra M. Gilbert

The radiant ancient Venus, the Aphrodite born from the white foam of the sea, has not traversed the horrifying darkness of the Middle Ages with impunity... She has retired into the depths of a cave... lighted up by fires which are not those of the benign Phoebus.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, "R. Wagner & Tannhäuser in Paris," 1861

Then to me so lying awake a vision
Come without sleep over the seas and touched me,
Softly touched mine eyelids and lips; and I too,
Full of the vision,
Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,
Saw the hair unbound and the feet unsandalled
Shine as fire of sunset on western waters...

A. C. SWINBURNE, "Sapphics," 1865

I was born under the star of Aphrodite, Aphrodite who was also born on the sea, and when her star is in the ascendant, events are always propitious to me.

ISADORA DUNCAN, My Life, 1927

Swiftly re-light the flame,
Aphrodite, holy name...

return, O holiest one,
Venus whose name is kin
to venerate,
venerator.

H. D., Tribute to the Angels, 1945

Toward the end of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening there is a dinner party scene which has been ignored by many critics though it has fascinated and puzzled a few. On the verge of leaving her husband’s house for a nearby cottage that she hopes will become both a spiritual and
material room of her own, Edna Pontellier has invited a "select" group of friends to join her at a birthday dinner which will also be a ceremonial celebration of her departure from one household and her entrance into another. Splendid in gold satin and lace "the color of her skin," she presides over an equally splendid table, which is similarly decked in "pale yellow satin," lit by "wax candles in massive brass candelabra," and heaped with "full, fragrant roses." More strikingly still, "the ordinary stiff dining chairs" have been "discarded for the occasion and replaced by the most commodious and luxurious which could be collected throughout the house" while "before each guest [stands] a tiny glass that [sparkles] like a garnet gem," containing a special, magical-looking cocktail. Enthroned at the head of the table, Edna herself appears equally magical, for there is "something in her attitude, in her whole appearance, which [suggests] the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone." At the same time, however—even in the midst of gold champagne, crimson cocktails, and general merrymaking which climaxes in one of the women guests weaving a pagan garland of roses to crown the dark curls of the handsome young man beside her—we are told that Edna feels an "old ennui overtaking her . . . a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed," (chapter 30). Ranging as it does from sumptuous feasting to secret, inexplicable sadness, from gorgeousness to gloom, the dinner party chapter represents, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes, "one of the longest sustained episodes in the novel."

Perhaps it is because so many contemporary critics would agree with Lawrence Thornton's recent description of *The Awakening* as a "political romance"¹ that so few have paid close attention to this scene. Though in the last decade *The Awakening* has become one of the most frequently taught and persistently analyzed American novels, commentators on the book commonly describe Edna's party, if they discuss it at all, as just one more occasion when Chopin's half-mad housewife experiences and expresses "unfocused yearning" for romantic transfiguration or social liberation.³

¹ Since there are so many different editions of this novel, all references will be to chapter numbers and will be given in the text—Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,*" *American Quarterly,* 25 (October 1973): 463.


³ Thornton, "Political Romance," p. 64. Even those writers who analyze the feast more sympathetically tend to be perfunctory, bewildered, or both in their treatment of the event. Bernard J. Koloski, for instance, the first critic to identify the lines from Swinburne quoted by one of the dinner guests, finally reads the scene entirely in terms of those lines as Edna's Swinburnian "Song before Death." (See Koloski, "The Swinburne Lines in *The Awakening,*" *American Literature,* 45 [1974]: 608–10.) Only Per Seyersted, still Chopin's most perceptive critic, defines the party as "a sensuous feast with subtle overtones of a ritual for Eros." (See Seyersted, *Kate Chopin* [Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, and Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969], p. 157.)
Besides occupying an exceptionally elaborate chapter in a novel of economical, obliquely rendered episodes, however, Edna's dinner party constitutes an extraordinarily complex literary structure, a scene whose images and allusions as well as its dramatic plot suggest surprisingly rich veins of symbolic significance. What does it mean, after all, when the narrator of this apparently "realistic" work suddenly calls her heroine "the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone"? The vocabulary of such a description seems more appropriate to a fantasy, a romance, or a fairytale, and yet this mysterious definition seems also to evoke the narrator's next perception of the "chill breath" her queenly heroine feels, together with Edna's corollary, equally mystical and mysterious sense of "acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one." Who or what, indeed, is the oddly vague "beloved one"? And why, finally, does the enigmatically wise Mlle. Reisz take her leave of Edna with a French sentence—"Bonne nuit, ma reine, soyez sage"—that seems to confirm our feeling that this magical hostess is clothed in a paradoxical veil of power and vulnerability?

As a speculative explanation of these puzzles I want to argue that The Awakening is a female fiction that both draws upon and revises fin de siècle hedonism to propose a feminist and matriarchal myth of Aphrodite/ Venus as an alternative to the masculinist and patriarchal myth of Jesus. In the novel's unfolding of this implicit myth, the dinner party scene is of crucial importance, for here, as she presides over a Swinburnian Last Supper, Edna Pontellier definitively (if only for a moment) "becomes" the powerful goddess of love and art into whose shape she was first "born" in the Gulf near Grand Isle and in whose image she will be suicidally borne back into the sea at the novel's end. Thus when Victor, the dark-haired young man who was ritually draped and garlanded at the climax of the feast, tells his friend Mariequita that "Venus rising from the foam could have presented no more entrancing a spectacle than Mrs. Pontellier, blazing with beauty and diamonds at the head of the board," he is speaking what is in some deep sense the truth about Kate Chopin's heroine.

To see The Awakening in these terms is not, of course, to deny that it is also the work most critics and readers have thought it is: a "Creole Bovary," a feminist "critique of the identity of 'mother-women,' " a New Orleans version of "the familiar transcendentalist fable of the soul's emergence, or 'lapse' into life," "a eulogy on sex and a muted elegy on the female condition," "a turn-of-the-century 'existentialist' epiphany, and "a tough-minded critique of the Victorian myths of love."*4 Taken together, all of

these definitions of the novel articulate the range of political, moral, and philosophical concerns on which Chopin meditates throughout this brief but sophisticated work. What unifies and dramatizes these often divergent matters, however, is the way in which, for all its surface realism, The Awakening is allusively organized by Kate Chopin’s half-secret (and perhaps only half-conscious) but distinctly feminist fantasy of the second coming of Aphrodite.

To be sure, Chopin’s “Creole Bovary” has always been understood to be, like its French precursor, a novel that both uses fantasy and comments upon fantasy in order to establish the character of its heroine and the nature of her character. From the severest early reviewers to the most enthusiastic recent writers, however, most critics see such fantasies as, like Emma Bovary’s, symptoms of inadequacy, of an “over-idealization of love” and a “susceptibility to romantic codes.” People like Edna Pontellier and Emma Bovary, wrote Willa Cather in 1899, “are the spoil of the poets, the Iphigenias of sentiment.” Edna’s commitment to fantasy, concludes Cynthia Griffin Wolff in a somewhat extreme summary of this position, is the ultimate mark of the “schizoid” personality which causes her “disintegration.” I will argue, however, that the details of desire which the text of The Awakening records ultimately shape themselves into a tale of romantic transfiguration that not only uses and comments upon fantasy but actually becomes a fantasy, albeit a shadowy one. Both seriously and ironically this fantasy of Kate Chopin’s shows, from a female point of view, just what would “really” happen to a mortal, turn-of-the-century woman who tried to claim for herself the erotic freedom and power owned by the classical queen of love.

I will argue, moreover, that to see this novel as such a shadowy fantasy or fantasy manqué is to begin to explain a number of qualities that have puzzled its severe critics as well as its enthusiastic admirers: its odd short chapters, its ambiguous lyricism (what Willa Cather called its “flexible iridescent style”), its editorial restraint, its use of recurrent images and refrains, its implicit or explicit allusions to writers like Whitman, Swinburne, Flaubert, and its air of moral indeterminacy. In addition, I will suggest more specifically that to see The Awakening as such a fantasy is to begin to grasp the purpose of some of the scenes in the book that have always appeared problematical—the often ignored or misrepresented episode of the dinner party, for example, and the even more controversial scene of Edna’s suicide.


Finally, I will show that in creating this realistically surfaced, generically equivocal fantasy, Kate Chopin was working in a mode of mingled naturalism and symbolism exactly analogous to the one explored by her near contemporary George Moore and his younger countryman James Joyce. Learned from such varied continental precursors as Turgenev and Balzac, Maupassant and Chekhov, this artful combination of surface and symbol evolved through Moore's The Untilled Field and Joyce's Dubliners to a famous culmination in Ulysses. But Kate Chopin in America, inheriting the same tradition and similar techniques, also began to give emphasis to the fantastic or mythic radiance that might at any moment flash through ordinary reality. Because she was female, however, she saw such epiphanies from a feminine point of view and in what we would now call feminist terms. Indeed, the next literary woman to employ the same mode and the same techniques would be Virginia Woolf, and she too would use them to valorize and mythologize femaleness.

Appropriately enough, Kate Chopin's portrait of Aphrodite as a Creole Bovary begins and ends at a seaside resort, on the margin between nature and culture, where a leisureed or, anyway, a lucky few may be given (as only a few have always been given) the chance to witness the birth of erotic power in the foam. To start with, however, despite the nearness of the sea and the incessant sound of its "seductive" voice, Chopin offers scenes that seem determinedly realistic, low-key, landbound. In addition, as if briefly but formally acknowledging Flaubert's influence, she opens her novel about a woman's fateful transformation by examining her heroine from a solid and stolid male perspective. Madame Bovary, of course, begins with a brief summary of Charles Bovary's history, including a description of the way Emma Roualt looks to the bovine but passionate young physician whom she will soon marry. Similarly, The Awakening's author-omniscient first chapter emphasizes the point of view of Edna Pontellier's conventional husband, Léonce.

Like Madame Bovary's husband-to-be, who at one point gazes at Emma as she stands beneath a parasol that colors "the white skin of her face with shifting reflections," Mr. Pontellier watches from a porch on the main building of Madame le Brun's Grand Isle summer colony as "a white sunshade [advances] at a snail's pace from the beach" with his wife Edna and her friend Robert Le Brun strolling "beneath its pink-lined shelter" (chapter 1). In both cases, the woman appears first as an object, and Edna in

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particular, whether she "is" herself or the walking sunshade that contains her, is presented as she seems to Léonce: valuable, even treasured, but nevertheless, a thing to be possessed and guarded rather than a person to be heard or heeded. Even this early in her novel, however, and even while acknowledging her debt to Flaubert, Chopin swerves from him by emphasizing this last point. For where the French novelist creates sympathy for Charles with his devastating portrait of the first Madame Bovary, a skinny pimpled Jocasta who is not only old enough to be the young doctor's mother but has actually been chosen for him by his mother, Chopin immediately characterizes Léonce as an impatient businessman who scrutinizes his wife for sunburn "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (chapter 1).

Most of The Awakening is told from Edna's perspective, with occasional editorial interpolations from the narrator, but despite (or perhaps because of) its unrepresentative point of view and its air of almost impressionistic improvisation, this opening chapter constitutes a surprisingly complete introduction to the problems and personae of the novel. As an overture, in fact, it includes many of the major leitmotifs of the work to follow: symbolic objects (houses, clothing, jewelry, food); symbolic activities (piano playing, swimming, housecleaning, gambling); symbolic figures, both human and inhuman (the birds, the lady in black, the twins, Edna and Robert, Mr. Pontellier, Madame Le Brun); symbolic places (the Gulf, the beach, the city, the summer colony on Grand Isle), and crucial relationships (husbands and wives, mothers and children). First encountered here, most of these ultimately extraordinary elements seem ordinary enough, or rather they seem as vividly literal as objects in a painting by Renoir or Seurat. It is only as one scene dissolves into another, as the narrative point of view gradually enters Edna's strengthening consciousness, and as objects and activities insistently recur, like elements of a protracted dream, that they begin to gain what eventually becomes an almost uncanny power. Porches and pianos, mothers and children, skirts and sunshades—all these are the props and properties of domesticity, the key elements of what in the nineteenth century was called "woman's sphere," and it is in this sphere, on the edge of a blue gulf, that Edna Pontellier is securely caged when she first appears in the novel that will tell her story. In a larger sense, however, she is confined in what is not only literally a "woman's sphere" but, symbolically speaking, the Woman's House—the place to which in civilized as in primitive cultures women are ritually assigned at crucial times in their lives. Here, therefore, every object and figure has not only a literal domestic function and a dreamlike symbolic radiance but a distinctively female symbolic significance.

The self-abnegating "mother-women" who seem "to prevail that summer at Grand Isle," the mutually absorbed young lovers who always appear in the neighborhood of the sepulchrally religious lady in black,
Edna’s own children trailed by their omnipresent quadroon nurse with her “faraway, meditative air,” awkward and imperious Mademoiselle Reisz in her “rusty black lace” and artificial violets, the Farival twins “always clad in the virgin’s colors,” the skirt-dancing little girl in black tulle, even Edna herself sharing out her husband’s gift of friandises—all seem like faintly grotesque variations on the figures from “La Vie D’une Femme” who appear in Charlotte Bronté’s Villette: the young girl, the bride, the mother, the widow. That the pension in which all these women have gathered is ruled by the pretty but powerful widow Madame Le Brun, who sews and oversees in a light airy room with a view at the top of the house, seems quite appropriate. At the same time, however, it seems quite appropriate that the novel begins with the comical curse of the caged parrot—“Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!”—and with the information that this same bird also speaks “a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking bird that hung on the other side of the door. . . .” For, as we shall see, these birds together prefigure both Edna’s restlessness and her irony, her awakening desire for freedom and her sardonic sense that freedom may ultimately be meaningless, her yearning for solitude and her skeptical worries about loneliness.

Before these desires and fears become fully conscious, however, and even while it is slowly becoming clear that the domesticity of these early chapters is symbolically as well as literally important, Chopin begins to dramatize her heroine’s summer of discontent through a series of tradition-ally “realistic” interactions between Edna and her husband. Indeed, though the technique and structure of these exchanges may be derived in part from French writers like Flaubert and Maupassant, they are most thematically indebted to the female literary tradition in English, of which Kate Chopin was surely an heir. Thus, depicting Léonce’s casual self-absorption and Edna’s mild rebelliousness, the narrator of The Awakening at first seems primarily concerned to represent with Austenian delicacy a marriage on the edge of Eliotian fissures. Pontellier is not, of course, either a Casaubon or a Grandcourt, but that seems in fact to be Chopin’s revisionary point. For as she depicts both his power and his imperiousness in swift, understated domestic episodes—the scene in chapter three when he wakes Edna and the children, for instance, or his offhand gifts of money and friandises—she shows that he too is possessed by the possessive male will which speaks differently but equally in the tyrannical husbands of Daniel Deronda and Middlemarch. To begin with, therefore, Edna’s “awakening” is both domestic and prosaic. Like Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolyn Harleth, she awakens from the romantic dreams of girlhood first to find herself a married woman and then to find that the meaning of marriage is very different from what she had supposed. Like another nineteenth-century heroine—Emily Bronté’s Catherine Earnshaw Linton—she experiences what Chopin calls “an indescribable oppression” which seems to come at least in part from her
sense of herself as, in Brontë’s words, “the wife of a stranger; an exile, and outcast . . . from what had been [her] world.” For when, like the subject of one of Emily Dickinson’s poems, she rises to “His Requirements” and takes on “the honorable work of Woman and of Wife,” she seems to have accepted a spiritual confinement that excludes all visions of “Amplitude and Awe.”

For George Eliot’s comparatively docile Dorothea and her chastened Gwendolyn, even for Emily Brontë’s more satanically ambitious Catherine, such a recognition of domestic entrapment along with its corollary spiritual diminution is the climax of a long process of social reconciliation that must ultimately end in these heroines accepting their own comparative powerlessness. For Edna, on the other hand, this maritally-induced recognition of “her position in the universe as a human being, and . . . her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (chapter 6) is only the beginning of a more metaphysical awakening to all the visionary intimations and implications of her own femaleness. To be sure, once she has left her husband’s bed to sit on the porch and listen to “the everlasting voice of the sea,” she has already, like Eliot’s and Brontë’s heroines, acquired what her author ironically calls “more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.” But, like Emily Dickinson, Chopin wants to record not only the body’s rebellion at confinement but the soul’s “moments of Escape” (Johnson 512), along with the visions that empower such escapes. In addition, because she is a fiction writer, she wants to create a narrative that will enact and record those visions. After her first, realistically rendered discoveries of spiritual uneasiness, therefore, Edna’s “awakenings” become increasingly fantastic and poetic, stirrings of the imagination’s desire for amplitude and awe rather than protests of the reason against unreasonable constraint.

Paradoxically, however, it is just Edna’s realistic awakenings to domestic confinement and her domestic confinement itself that make possible these later, more visionary awakenings. Specifically, I would argue, Edna awakens to the possibilities as well as the problems of “her position in the universe” not only because she finds herself enclosed in woman’s literal sphere and inhabiting a figurative House of Women but also because she has come to spend the summer in what is both literally and figuratively a female colony, a sort of parodic Lesbos. In fact, though not many critics have noticed this, Madame Le Brun’s pension on Grand Isle is very much a woman’s land, not only because it is owned and run by a single woman and

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8 J. 732, in The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1955). All references hereafter will be to Johnson’s numbers and will be included in the text.
dominated by "mother-women" but also because (as in so many summer colonies today) its principal inhabitants are actually women and children whose husbands and fathers visit only on weekends. No wonder, then, that, as Chopin observes, "that summer at Grand Isle [Edna] had begun to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (chapter 7) and had begun to do so under "the influence" first of beautiful and sensual Adèle Ratignolle and, later, of more severe and spiritual Mlle. Reisz.

From the eighteenth century on, after all, middle-class women's culture has often been fragmented by the relegation of each wife to a separate household, by the scattering of such households to genteel suburbs, and by the rituals of politeness that codified visiting behavior and other interchanges between the ladies of these separate households. While husbands joined to work and play in a public community of men, women were isolated in private parlors or used, in brief stylized public appearances, as conspicuous consumers to signify their husbands' wealth. Only a few situations, most notably the girls' school and the summer hotel, offered the isolated lady any real chance to participate in an ongoing community of women, one based on extended experiences of intimacy with others of their own sex. And, as The Awakening shows, for married adult women of Edna Pontellier's age and class the quasi-utopian communal household of the vacation hotel must have offered a unique opportunity to live closely with other women and to learn from them. My use here of the word "colony" is, therefore, deliberately ambiguous. For if a summer colony like Madame Le Brun's pension is, on the one hand, a place where women have been colonized—that is, dominated and confined by men who have conquered them—in another sense this female-occupied pension is a place where women have established a colony or encampment of their own, an outpost of the lively dream queendom that Charlotte Perkins Gilman called "Herland."9

Finally, then, the punning phrase "the Bonds of Womanhood" that Nancy Cott wisely uses as the title of her historical study of American women is also useful here.10 For in this close-knit summer colony locks become links: bonds in the negative sense of "fetters" gradually give way to bonds in the positive sense of "ties." Given this transformation of bondage into bonding, moreover, it is inevitable that both Adèle Ratignolle, the antithetical "mother-woman," and Mlle. Reisz, the equally antithetical spinster/artist, facilitate Edna's passage into the metaphorically divine sexu-


ality that is her fated and unique identity. Responding to Adèle's interrogations in chapter seven, for instance, Edna begins to formulate her sense of the desirous quest for significant desire that has shaped her life. Similarly, responding in chapter nine to the implicit challenge posed by Mlle. Reisz's music, she becomes conscious that "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her . . . body."

The oceanic imagery embedded in Chopin's description of Edna's response to Mlle. Reisz's music is neither casual nor coincidental; rather it suggests yet another agency through which Mme. Le Brun's predominantly female summer colony on Grand Isle awakens and empowers this Creole Bovary. For Chopin's Aphrodite, like Hesiod's is born from the sea, and born specifically because the colony where she comes to consciousness is situated, like so many places that are significant for women, outside patriarchal culture, beyond the limits of the city where men make history, on one of those magical shores that mark the margin where nature intersects with culture. Here power can flow from outside, from the timelessness or from, in Mircea Eliade's phrase, the "Great Time" that is free of historical constraints; and here, therefore, the sea can speak in a seductive voice, "never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (chapter 6).

It is significant, then, that not only Edna's silent dialogue with Mlle. Reisz but also her confessional conversation with Adèle Ratignolle incorporates sea imagery. Reconstructing her first childhood sense of self for her friend, Edna remembers "a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean" in which as a little girl she "threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water" (chapter 7). Just as significantly she speculates that, as she journeyed through this seemingly endless grass, she was most likely "running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of." She was running away, that is, from the dictations and interdictions of patriarchal culture, especially of patriarchal theology, and running into the wild openness of nature. Even so early, the story implies, her quest for an alternative theology, or at least for an alternative mythology, had begun. In the summer of her awakening on Grand Isle, that quest is extended into the more formalized process of learning not to run but to swim.

Edna's education in swimming is, of course, obviously symbolic, representing as it does both a positive political lesson in staying afloat and an ambiguously valuable sentimental education in the consequences of getting in over one's head. More important, however, is the fact that swimming immerses Edna in an other element—an element, indeed, of otherness—in whose baptismal embrace she is mystically and mythically revitalized, re-
newed, reborn. That Chopin wants specifically to emphasize this aspect of Edna’s education in swimming, moreover, is made clear by the magical occasion on which her heroine’s first independent swim takes place. Following Mlle. Reisz’s evocative concert, “someone, perhaps it was Robert [Edna’s lover-to-be], thought of a bath at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon.” Appropriately, then, on this night that sits “lightly upon the sea and land,” this night when “the white light of the moon [has] fallen upon the world like the mystery and softness of sleep,” the previously timid Edna begins for the first time to swim, feeling “as if some power of significant import had been given her” and aspiring “to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (chapter 10). Her new strength and her new ambition are symbolically fostered by the traditionally female mythic associations of moonlight and water, as well as by the romantic attendance of Robert Le Brun and the seemingly erotic “heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near.” At the same time, however, Chopin’s description of the waves breaking on the beach “in little foamy crests . . . like slow white serpents” suggests that Edna is swimming not only with new powers but into a kind of alternative paradise, one that depends upon deliberate inversions and conversions of conventional theological images, while her frequent reminders that this sea is a gulf reinforce our sense that its waters are at least as metaphysical as those of, say, the Golfo Placido in Conrad’s Nostromo. Thus, even more important than Edna’s swim are both its narrative and its aesthetic consequences, twin textual transformations that influence and energize the rest of Chopin’s novel. For in swimming away from the beach where her prosaic husband watches and waits, Edna swims away from the shore of her old life, where she had lingered for twenty-eight years, hesitant and ambivalent. As she swims, moreover, she swims not only toward a female paradise but out of one kind of novel—the work of Eliotian or Flaubertian “realism” she had previously inhabited—and into a new kind of work, a mythic/metaphysical romance that elaborates her distinctively female fantasy of paradisiacal fulfillment and therefore adumbrates much of the feminist modernism that was to come within a few decades.

In a literal sense, of course, these crucial textual transformations can be seen as merely playful fantasies expressed by Robert and Edna as part of a “realistically” rendered courtship. I am arguing, though, that they have a metaphorical intensity and a mythic power far weightier than what would appear to be their mimetic function, and that through this intensity they create a ghostly subtextual narrative that persists with metaphorical insistence from Edna’s baptismal swimming scene in chapter ten through her last, suicidal swim in chapter thirty-nine. For when Edna says “I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one,” she is beginning to place herself in a tale that comes poetically “true.” Her dialogue with Robert, as the two return from their moonlit midnight swim in the Gulf, outlines the first premises of this story. “It is like a night in a dream,” she says. “The people
about me are like some uncanny, half-human beings. There must be spirits abroad tonight” (chapter 10). Robert’s reply picks up this idea and elaborates upon it. It is “the twenty-eighth of August,” he observes, and then explains, fancifully, that

on the twenty-eighth of August, at the hour of midnight, and if the moon is shining—the moon must be shining—a spirit that has haunted these shores for ages rises up from the Gulf. With its own penetrating vision the spirit seeks some one mortal worthy to hold him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into realms of the semiclestials. His search has always hitherto been fruitless, and he has sunk back, disheartened, into the sea. But tonight he found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps he will never wholly release her from the spell. Perhaps she will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence.

(chapter 10)

Fanciful as it seems, however, this mutual fantasy of Edna’s and Robert’s is associated, first, with a real change in their relationship, and then, with a real change in Edna. Sitting on the porch in the moonlight, the two fall into an erotic silence that seems to be a consequence of the fiction they have jointly created: “No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire” (chapter 10). And the next day, when Edna awakens from her night of transformative dreaming, she finds herself “blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility” (chapter 12).

The scenes that follow—Edna’s wakings of Robert in chapter twelve, their voyage in the same chapter to the Cheniere Caminada, their attendance at church in chapter thirteen, Edna’s nap at Madame Antoine’s cottage again in chapter thirteen, and their return to Grand Isle in chapter fourteen—constitute a wistful adult fairytale that lies at the heart of this desirous but ultimately sardonic fantasy. Journeying across the Gulf to Mass on the nearby island of Cheniere Caminada—the island of live oaks—Edna and Robert find themselves in the Fellini-esque company of the lovers, the lady in black, and a barefooted Spanish girl (apparently Robert’s sometime girlfriend) with the allegorical name of Mariequita. Yet despite all this company Edna feels “as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening,” and together with Robert she dreams of “pirate gold” and of yet another voyage, this one to the legendary-sounding island of “Grande Terre,” where they will “climb up the hill to the old fort and look at the little wriggling gold snakes and watch the lizards sun themselves” (chapter 12). When she finally arrives at the “quaint little Gothic church of Our Lady of Lourdes,” therefore, she is not surprisingly overcome by “a feeling of oppression and drowsiness.” Like Mariequita, the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes is named for the wrong goddess, and Edna inevitably struggles—as she did when “running away
from prayers” through the Kentucky meadow—to escape its “stifling atmosphere . . . and reach the open air.”

Everything that happens after she leaves the church further implies that she has abandoned the suffocation of traditional Christian (that is, traditional patriarchal) theology for the rituals of an alternative, possibly matriarchal but certainly female religion. Attended by the ever-solicitous Robert, she strolls across the “low, drowsy island,” stopping once—almost ceremonially—to drink water that a “mild-faced Acadian” is drawing from a well. At “Madame Antoine’s cot,” she undresses, bathes, and lies down “in the very center of [a] high, white bed,” where like a revisionary Sleeping Beauty, she sleeps for almost a whole day. When she awakens, for the fifth or sixth but most crucial time in this novel of perpetual “awakening,” she wonders, “How many years have I slept? . . . The whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up . . . and when did our people from Grand Isle disappear from the earth?” (chapter 13). Again she bathes, almost ceremonially, and then she eats what appear to be two ritual meals. First she enters a room where she finds that though “no one was there . . . there was a cloth spread upon the table that stood against the wall, and a cover was laid for one, with a crusty brown loaf and a bottle of wine beside the plate.” She bites “a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with strong, white teeth” and drinks some of the wine. Then, after this solitary communion, she dines à deux with Robert, who serves her “no mean repast.” Finally, as the sun sets, she and Robert sit—again ceremonially—at the feet of fat, matriarchal Madame Antoine, who tells them “legends of the Baratarians and the sea,” so that as the moon rises Edna imagines she can hear “the whispering voices of dead men and the click of muffled gold” (chapter 13).

Having bathed, slept, feasted, communed, and received quasireligious instruction in an alternate theology, she seems definitively to have entered a fictive world, a realm of gold where extraordinary myths are real and ordinary reality is merely mythical. Yet of course the pagan fictive world Edna has entered is absolutely incompatible with the fictions of gentility and Christianity by which her “real” world lives. Metaphorically speaking, Edna has become Aphrodite, or at least an ephebe of that goddess. But what can be—must be—her fate? Shadowing her earlier “realism” with the subtextual romance she has developed in these chapters of swimming and boating, sleeping and eating, Chopin devotes the rest of her novel to examining with alternate sadness and sardonic verve the sequence of struggles for autonomy, understandings and misunderstandings, oppressions and exaltations, that she imagines would have befallen any nineteenth-century woman who experienced such a fantastic transformation. If Aphrodite—or at least Phaedra—were reborn as a fin-de-siècle New Orleans housewife, says Chopin, Edna Pontellier’s fate would be her fate.
Because it is primarily a logical elaboration of the consequences of Edna's mythic metamorphosis, the rest of The Awakening can be summarized and analyzed quite briefly. Having awakened to her "true" self—that is, to a different and seemingly more authentic way of formulating her identity—Edna begins "daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world." Yet as the self-consciously fictive episode on the Chérière Caminada reveals, neither she nor her author are eschewing fictions and fantasies altogether. Rather, Chopin has allowed the moon, the sea, the female summer colony, and Madame Antoine to recreate Edna Pontellier as a quasilegendary character in search of a story that can contain her and her power. That such a tale will be both hard to find and hard to tell, however, is revealed almost at once by Robert Le Brun's abrupt departure from Grand Isle. As the would-be lover of a newborn goddess, the Hippolytus to Edna's Phaedra, the Tristan to her Isolde, even the Léon to her Emma, he consciously struggles to do what is both morally and fictionally "right," accurately perceiving that because he is a "good" man and not a seducer, the traditional plot in which he imagines himself enmeshed now calls for renunciation. By the end of the novel, Edna will have created a different story, one in which Robert plays Adonis to her Venus, and, "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not," she can declare that, like the Queen of Love, "I give myself where I choose" (chapter 36). But in chapter fifteen, as she struggles toward such an ambitious self-definition, she finds herself incapable of proposing any serious plot alternatives. Significantly, however, she does notice that Robert has announced his plans "in a high voice and with a lofty air [like] some gentlemen on the stage." Just as significantly, she retires to her cottage to tell her children a story that she does not, perhaps cannot, end, so that "instead of soothing, it excited them . . . [and] she left them in heated argument, speculating about the conclusion of the tale" (chapter 15).

The tale of her own life moves just as haltingly to its strange conclusion. As Edna becomes increasingly aware that she is "seeking herself and finding herself," she struggles with growing ferocity to discard and even destroy the conventions by which she has lived—her wedding ring, her "reception day," even her "charming home" that has been so well stocked with Mr. Pontellier's "household gods." Yet though she stamps on her ring, "striving to crush it . . . her small boot heel [does] not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet" (chapter 14). And though she plots to move out of her big house on Esplanade Street into a smaller cottage nearby, a home of her own she fictionalizes as the "Pigeon House," her husband counters with a fiction of his own "concerning the remodeling of his home, changes which he had long contemplated, and which he desired carried forward during his temporary absence" (chapter 32).
Edna’s painting, her gambling, and her visits to the races as well as her relationships with Mlle. Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle, with the Flaubertian Alcée Arobin (clearly a sort of Rodolphe) and his friends Mr. and Mrs. Highcamp, constitute similar attempts at revisionary self-definition. Painting, for instance, allows her to recreate both her present and her past in more satisfactory forms. Mlle. Reisz brings her closer to Robert and to the oceanic passions and poetic ideas that had inspired her feelings for him from the first. Adèle Ratignolle reinforces her sense of the “blind contentment” implicit in the sequestered domesticity she has rejected (chapter 18). Her trips to the racetrack remind her of the freedom of her Kentucky childhood, when the “racehorse was a friend and intimate associate”—a spirit like herself, let loose in illimitable fields. And her rapidly developing sexual relationship with Arobin acts “like a narcotic upon her,” offering her a “cup of life” that drugs and drains her awakening egotism even while her choice to drink it down manifests the new freedom she is attempting to define.

Yet none of these relationships succeed in yielding what we might call an open space in the plot that encloses Edna. In fact, precisely because these entanglements participate in a mutually agreed-upon social reality that gives them “realistic” plausibility as therapeutic possibilities, none is equal to the intensity of what is by now quite clearly Edna’s metaphysical desire, the desire that has torn her away from her ordinary life into an extraordinary state where she has become, as Chopin’s original title put it, “a solitary soul.” Stranded in this state, having been visited by the Holy Ghost of the allegorical-sounding “Gulf,” who rarely vouchsafes so much “ponderous” wisdom “to any woman,” she can only struggle to make her own persuasive fictions, such as the story she tells at one point about “a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back. They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this” (chapter 23).

As Edna eventually realizes, however, even such a fiction defines desire through the banalities of second-rate romance, so that ultimately her dinner party in chapter thirty is the most authentic story she can tell and the one that is most radically revisionary. Here, as I began by noting, Edna Pontellier actually enact the part of the person she has metaphorically become: “the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone.” Yet of course, in terms of the alternative theology that haunts Kate Chopin’s story of this “solitary” heroine’s mythologized life, the story of Edna’s dinner party is the tale of a Last Supper, a final transformation of will and desire into bread and wine, flesh and blood, before the painful crucifixion of the “regal woman’s” inevitable betrayal by a fictional scheme in which a regenerated Aphrodite has no viable role. More specifically, it is a Last Supper that precedes Edna’s betrayal by a plot that sets both Adèle Ratignolle, the “mother-woman,” and Robert Le Brun, the conventional lover, against her. In one way or another, each of these characters will
remind her of her instrumentality—Adèle, exhausted by childbirth, whispering that she must "think of the children," and Robert passionately envisioning a transaction in which Mr. Pontellier might "set" her "free" to belong to him.

Finally, therefore, Edna can think of only one way "to elude them," to assert her autonomy, and to become absolutely herself, and that is through her much-debated suicidal last swim. Once again, however, our interpretation of this dénouement depends on our understanding of the mythic subtextual narrative that enriches it. Certainly if we see Edna's decision to swim into the sea's "abysses of solitude" as simply a "realistic" action, we are likely to disapprove of it, to consider it—as a number of critics have—"a defeat and a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic incapacity to accommodate... to the limitations of reality."11 But though this may appear almost perversely metaphorical, I think it is possible to argue that Edna's last swim is not a suicide—that is, a death—at all, or, if it is a death, it is a death associated with a resurrection, a pagan, female Good Friday that promises a Venusian Easter. Certainly, at any rate, because of the way it is presented to us, Edna's supposed suicide enacts not a refusal to accommodate the limitations of reality but a subversive questioning of the limitations of both reality and "realism." For, swimming away from the white beach of Grand Isle, from the empty summer colony and the equally empty fictions of marriage and maternity, Edna swims, as the novel's last sentences tell us, not into death but back into her own life, back into her own vision, back into the imaginative openness of her childhood.

It is significant, after all, that in depicting Edna's last swim Chopin seems quite consciously to have swerved from precursors like Flaubert and Pierre Louÿs as well as from such a descendant as Edith Wharton, all of whom not only show the beautiful and desirous Aphroditian woman dead but actually linger over the details of her mortification. Flaubert, for instance, follows his sardonic Extreme Unction with horrifying visions of Emma's dead mouth "like a black hole at the bottom of her face," pouring forth "black liquid... as if she were vomiting." Similarly, in *Aphrodite* Pierre Louÿs undercuts his Chrysis's triumphant epiphany as Aphrodite with a ghastly picture of her dead body, a "thread of blood" flowing from one "diaphonous nostril" and "some emerald-colored spots... softly [tinting] the relaxed belly." Even Wharton, in *The House of Mirth*, though she depicts the dead "semblance of Lily Bart" more gently, imagines her heroine's "estranged and tranquil face" definitively motionless and thereby, through that motionlessness, offering her watching lover "the word which

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made all clear.'''12 By contrast, Kate Chopin never allows Edna Pontellier to become fixed, immobilized. Neither perfected nor corrupted, she is still swimming when we last see her, nor does she ever in Dickinson's phrase, "Stop for Death." To be sure, we are told that "her arms and legs were growing tired," that "exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her" (chapter 39). It is clear enough that both reality and realism will contain her by fatiguing her, drowning her, killing her. Yet Chopin seems determined to regenerate Edna through a regeneration of romance, of fantasy.

No wonder, then, that as she enters the water for her last swim, this transformed heroine finally divests herself of "the unpleasant, pricking garments" of her old life as a "real" woman—a wife, mother, and mistress—and stands "naked under the sky . . . like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known." Together, her ceremonial nakedness, the paradoxically unknown familiarity of the world she is entering, and the "foamy wavelets [that curl and coil] like serpents about her ankles" (chapter 39) tell us that she is journeying not just toward rebirth but toward a regenerative and revisionary genre, a genre that intends to propose new realities for women by providing new mythic paradigms through which women's lives can be understood. Even in the last sentences of Chopin's novel, then, Edna Pontellier is still swimming. And how, after all, do we know that she ever dies? What critics have called her "suicide" is simply our interpretation of her motion, our realistic idea about the direction in which she is swimming. Yet as Chopin's last words tell us, that direction is toward the mythic, the pagan, the aphrodisiac. "There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air." Defeated, even crucified, by the "reality" of nineteenth-century New Orleans, Chopin's resurrected Venus is returning to Cyprus or Cythera.

This reading of The Awakening is of course hyperbolic, so that it is certainly not meant to displace those readings which honor the text's more obvious intentions. Rather, it is meant to suggest the argument between realistic and mythic aesthetic strategies that complicates and illuminates Chopin's brilliant novel. More, it is meant to make a few points about the literary history as well as the poetical significance of the goddess Aphrodite in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, it is intended to clarify the dialectical relationship into which Chopin, as a pioneering feminist mythmaker, entered with such crucial precursors as Flaubert, Whitman, and Swinburne.

To take the last point first, I want to emphasize how important it is for us to remember that Chopin was a woman of the nineties, a writer of the fin de siècle. What did it mean, though, to be a woman, a female artist, of the fin de siècle, with all that such a faintly exotic, voluptuously apocalyptic French phrase implied? Superficially, at least, the fin de siècle meant, for literary women as for literary men, a kind of drawingroom sophistication—smoking Turkish cigarettes, subscribing to The Yellow Book, reading (and translating) French fiction, all of which Kate Chopin did, especially in the St. Louis years of her widowhood, which were the years of her major literary activity. More centrally, the fin de siècle was associated, for women as for men, with artistic and intellectual revolutionaries like Beardsley and Wilde, together with their most significant precursors—Swinburne, Pater, Whitman, Wagner, Baudelaire. For women, however, the nineties also meant the comparatively new idea of “free love” as well as the even newer persona of “The New Woman.” In addition, to be a woman of the nineties meant to have come of age in a new kind of literary era, one whose spirit was, if not dominated by literary women, at least shared and shaped by female imaginations. For it was only in the nineteenth century, after all, that women entered the profession of literature in significant numbers.

Such a sharing of the literary terrain had, however, double and mutually contradictory consequences. On the one hand, a number of male writers consciously or unconsciously perceived this commercial as well as aesthetic strengthening of the female imagination as a threatening cultural event. Belated heirs of a long patrilineage, they feared that with the entrance of women into high culture, history’s originatory male center might no longer hold; lawless and unsponsored, the female imagination might fragment or even ruin civilization. On the other hand, women writers for the first time experienced the validation of a literary matrilineage. The earliest heiresses of a brief but notably enlivened cultural past, they now felt empowered to imagine a powerful future. At the same time, though, they had to contend against the male anxieties that saw them as the ruinous daughters of Herodias, rousing terrible winds of change and presaging apocalypse.13

Given these cultural developments, it became inevitable that a work like The Awakening would enter into a complicated dialectic with contextual works by both male and female artists. If we once again compare Chopin’s novel to its most obvious precursor, for instance—Flaubert’s Madame Bovary—we can see that where the French writer dramatizes what he considers the destructive power of the female imagination, Chopin struggles to articulate what is positive in that power, never copying Flaubert (the way

13 Oscar Wilde’s Salome (1894) and W. B. Yeats’s “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” are only two of many works that focus on a desirous female as a sign of imminent apocalypse. For further discussions of this figure, see Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
Cather and others thought she did) but always responding to him. Thus, for Flaubert, water is, as D. L. Demorest noted in 1931, “the symbol of Venus the delectable” (as it is for Chopin) but what this means in Flaubert’s case is that throughout Madame Bovary “images of fluidity” dissolve and resolve to “evoke all that is disastrous in love.” Emma’s girlish sentimentality, for instance, is represented in what the writer himself called “milky oceans of books about castles and troubadours” while the final destructive horror of her imagination pours as black liquid, a sort of morbid ink, from her dead mouth, as if she were vomiting the essential fluid which had inscribed the romantic fictions that killed her and would eventually destroy her uxorious husband. Such Flaubertian images slowly filter the very idea of the fluid female imagination—the idea, that is, of female fluency—through what Sartre called “a realism more spiteful than detached” (and it is possible to speculate that they are general defensive strategies against the developing cultural power of women as well as specific defenses by which Flaubert armored himself against Louise Colet, a woman of letters on whom he felt helplessly dependent, defenses—to quote Sartre again—“in the diplomacy of Flaubert with regard to this pertinacious poetess”14). Whatever the source of Flaubert’s anxieties, however, Chopin vigorously defends herself and other literary women against such Flaubertian defenses, for she consistently revises his negative images of female “fluency” to present not a spitefully realistic but a metaphysically lyric version of the seductive mazes of the sea from which her Venus is born, substituting the valorizations of myth for the devaluations of realism.

But of course Chopin was aided in this revisionary struggle by aesthetic strategies learned from other precursors, both male and female. Surely, for example, she learned from Whitman and Swinburne, both of whom she much admired, to see the sea the way she did—as, implicitly, “a great sweet mother” uttering “the low and delicious word ‘death’” even while rocking her heroine in life-giving “billowy drowse.” In a sense, in fact, her Edna Pontellier is as much a cousin of the twenty-eight-year-old “twenty-ninth bather” in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” as she is a niece of Flaubert’s Emma Bovary. “Handsome and richly dressed,” Edna, like Whitman’s woman, has had “twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome,” hiding “aft the blinds of the window,” and now, “dancing and laughing,” she comes along the beach to bathe in the waters of life. Yet again, much as she had learned from Whitman, Chopin swerves from him, less radically than, but almost as significantly as, she had from Flaubert, to create a woman who does not enter the sea to “seize fast” to twenty-eight young men but rather to seize and hold fast to herself. Similarly, she swerves

14 D. L. Demorest, [“Structures of Imagery in Madame Bovary”], in Norton Critical Madame Bovary, p. 280; Flaubert, letter to Louise Colet, 3 March 1852, ibid., p. 311; Jean-Paul Sartre, [“Flaubert and Madame Bovary: Outline of a New Method”], ibid., p. 303, fn 3.
from Swinburne to create an ocean that is not simply an other—a "fair, green-girdled mother"—but also a version of self, intricately veined with "mazes of inward contemplation" and sacramental precisely because emblematic of such subjectivity.15

In this last respect, indeed, the sea of Chopin's *Awakening* has much in common with the mystically voluptuous ocean Emily Dickinson imagines in a love poem like "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!" For when Dickinson exclaims "Rowing in Eden— / Ah, the Sea! / Might I but moor—Tonight— / In Thee!" (Johnson 249), she is imagining an ocean of erotic energy that will transform and transport her, an ocean that exists for her and in some sense is her. More, in identifying this sea with Eden, she is revising the vocabulary of traditional Christian theology so as to force it to reflect the autonomy and urgency of female desire. Such a revision is of course exactly the one that Chopin performed throughout *The Awakening*. Thus where the Extreme Unction that Flaubert intones over the corpse of Emma Bovary (stroking the oil of reductive metaphor over her no longer impassioned eyes, nostrils, lips, hands, and feet) functions as a final, misogynistic exorcism of the ferocity of the imagining and desirous woman, Kate Chopin's redefined sacraments of bread and wine or crimson cocktails function, like Dickinson's, to vindicate female desire in yet another way. For in creating a heroine as free and golden as Aphrodite, a "regal woman" who "stands alone" and gives herself where she "pleases," Chopin was exploring a vein of revisionary mythology allied not only to the revisionary erotics of free love advocates like Victoria Woodhull and Emma Goldmann but also to the feminist theology of women like Florence Nightingale, who believed that the next Christ might be a "female Christ," and Mary Baker Eddy, who argued that because "the ideal woman corresponds to life and to Love . . . we have not as much authority for considering God masculine as we have for considering Him feminine, for Love imparts the clearest idea of Deity."16 Finally,

15 See Swinburne, "The Triumph of Time," line 257; Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," line 168, and "Song of Myself," line 452, ll. 199–224; and "The Triumph of Time," line 265. Portions of this last poem do, however, foreshadow the dénouement of *The Awakening*: disappointed in love, the speaker dreams of a suicide by drowning, and imagines himself first casting off his clothes and then being reborn in the sea:

This woven raiment of nights and days,
Were it once cast off and unwound from me,
Naked and glad would I walk in thy ways,
Alive and aware of thy ways and thee;
Clear of the whole world, hidden at home,
Clothed with the green and crowned with the foam,
A pulse of the life of thy straits and bays,
A vein in the heart of the streams of the sea.
(lines 281–88)

therefore, Chopin’s allusive subtextual narrative of the second coming of Aphrodite becomes an important step in the historical female struggle to imagine a deity who would rule and represent a strong female community, a woman’s colony transformed into a woman’s country.

To be sure, men from Wagner (in Tannhäuser) to Baudelaire (writing on Wagner), Swinburne (in “Lais Veneris,” “Sapphics,” and, by implication, his version of “Phaedra”), Beardsley (in “Under the Hill”), and Pierre Louÿs (in Aphrodite and Songs of Bilitis) had begun to examine the characteristics of the goddess of love, who had in the past, as Paul Friedrich points out in his useful study of The Meaning of Aphrodite, often been “avoided” by poets and scholars because they found her female erotic autonomy both “alarming” and “alluring.” But for the most part even these revolutionary nineteenth-century artists used Aphrodite the way Flaubert used Emma Bovary—to enact a new anxiety about female power. For Chopin, however, as for such feminist descendents as Isadora Duncan and H. D., Aphrodite/Venus becomes a radiant symbol of the erotic liberation that turn-of-the-century women had begun to allow themselves to desire.

The source of Aphrodite’s significance for this revisionary company of women is not hard to discern. Neither primarily wife (like Hera), mother (like Demeter), nor daughter (like Athena), Aphrodite is, and has her sexual energy, for herself, her own grandeur, her own pleasure. As Friedrich observes, moreover, all her essential characteristics—her connections with birds and water, her affinity for young mortal men, her nakedness, her goldenness, and even her liminality, as well as her erotic sophistication—empower her in one way or another. Her dove- or swan-drawn chariot enables her to travel between earth and sky, while her sea-birth places her between earth and sea. Naked yet immortal, she moves with ease and grace between the natural and the super-natural, the human and the inhuman, nature and culture. Golden and decked in gold, she is associated with sunset and sunrise, the liminal hours of transformative consciousness—the entranced hours of awakening or drowsing—that mediate between night and day, dream and reality. Almost inevitably, then, she is the patron goddess of Sappho, whom that paradigmatic literary feminist Virginia Woolf called “the supreme head of song” and whose lyric imagination famously fostered and was fostered by unique erotic freedom. Inevitably, too, she became a crucial image of female divinity in the increasingly feminist years of thefin de siècle, and almost as inevitably Kate Chopin (perhaps half-consciously, perhaps


consciously) made her a model for a "regal" sea-borne, gold-clad, bird-haunted woman whose autonomous desire for freedom, and for a younger man, edged her first out of a large patriarchal mansion into a small female cottage and then across the shadowline that separates the clothing of culture from the nakedness of nature.

It is no coincidence, after all, that Kate Chopin imagined her Venus rising from the foam of a ceremonial dinner party in 1899, the same year that another American artist, Isadora Duncan, was beginning to dance the dances of Aphrodite in London salons while the feminist classicist, Jane Ellen Harrison, who would soon recover the matriarchal origins of ancient Greek religion, chanted Greek lyrics in the background. Within a few years, Duncan, haunted by her own birth "under the star of Aphrodite," was to sit "for days before the Primavera, the famous painting of Botticelli" and create a dance "in which I endeavoured to realise the soft and marvelous movements emanating from it; the circle of nymphs and the flight of the Zephyrs, all assembling about the central figure, half Aphrodite, half Madonna, who indicates the procreation of spring in one significant gesture."20 Musing on the "sweet, half-seen pagan life, where Aphrodite gleamed through the form of the gracious but more tender Mother of Christ," this prophetess of the beauty of female nakedness was struggling, as Chopin had, to see the power of the pagan through the constraints of the Christian and the triumph of the female through the power of the pagan. She was striving, as H. D. would, to "relight the flame" of "Aphrodite, holy name," and of "Venus, whose name is kin / to venerate, / venerator." And she was laboring, as Chopin had, to define the indefinable mythic essence of "a familiar world that [she] had never known."

Like Chopin's and H. D.'s, too, Duncan's revisionary program marked an apex of feminist confidence in the female erotic autonomy of Aphrodite. But even as these artists struggled to reimagine and reappropriate the ancient powers of the Queen of Love, a few literary women who were their contemporaries or descendents had begun to formulate darker counterimaginings, visions of Venus in which the old feminine mistrust of female sensuality surfaced once again. Most notable among these visions is Willa Cather's sardonically brilliant "Coming, Aphrodite!," a retelling of Louys' Aphrodite which seems also to revise and subvert the allusive terms of The

20 See Jill Silverman, "Introduction to 'Andre Levinson on Isadora Duncan,' " *Ballet Review* 6, no. 4 (1977–78): 4. Silverman notes that Harrison also "guided the young dancer through the Greek collections at the British Museum," and adds that "Harrison's . . . glorification of matriarchal structures in archaic Greece . . . undoubtedly influenced the early development of Duncan's art" (loc. cit.); see also Isadora Duncan, My Life, (New York: Liveright, 1927), p.114. Another connection between Duncan and Chopin is suggested by Elizabeth Kendall, who points out that the dancer's mother, Mary Dora Grey Duncan, was a "bold-minded St. Louis Irish girl about the same age as . . . Kate Chopin." ("Before the World Began," *Ballet Review* 6, no. 4 [1977–78]: 24.)
Awakening, and to do this so dramatically that it might almost be considered an extension of Cather's earlier censorious review of Chopin's book. Specifically, Cather's story presents us with an ambitious Illinois farm girl named Edna Bowers who, along with devouring "Sapho" [sic] and "Mademoiselle de Maupin," has resolved to become a great actress-singer named "Eden Bower." Just as important, she has easily and casually stepped outside of ordinary social confinement and made herself erotically autonomous. When the story begins, she is being kept (entirely for her own convenience and in the furtherance of her career) by a handily absent Chicago millionaire in a New York flat next door to a studio occupied by Don Hedger, a struggling artist. Tracing the stages of their romance, Cather splits Chopin's erotic and artistic Edna into two characters: the metaphysically awakened painter, who falls in love with Eden by peering at her through a hole in the wall of his closet, and the physically awakened Eden, whom he watches as, like a latterday Isadora, she exercises naked before a mirror until, like both Edna and Isadora, she takes on a mythic radiance. Thus, at the tale's most intense, Hedger thinks of her body "as never having been clad, or as having worn the stuffs and dyes of all the centuries but his own. And for him [Eden has] no geographical associations; unless with Crete, or Alexandria, or Veronese's Venice. She [is] the immortal conception, the perennial theme" (page 22).

Throughout the tale, however, Cather hints that when this naked Aphrodite ceases to be paradigmatic and becomes personal, or to put it differently, when she refuses to be merely an artwork—a "conception" or a "theme"—and asserts herself as an autonomous being, she becomes not an embodiment of Eden but a troublesome and anti-Edenic Eve. Early on, for instance, she threatens Hedger's masculinity by scorning his phallic bulldog, Caesar (who does, in fact, "seize her" and is in return seized and silenced by his master, who has himself been seized and stupefied by desire). Later, when Hedger tells an extravagant story about a sexually voracious Aztec princess who gels and enslaves a captive prince, we understand the fable to be a monitory one: the power of female desire may be castrating, even murderous. Finally, therefore, Cather separates the lovers with the sugges-

21 Willa Cather, "'Coming, Aphrodite!'" in Youth and the Bright Medusa (New York: Vintage, 1975). All references hereafter will be to the Vintage edition and will be included in the text. It is important to note, however, that this story also exists in a somewhat bowdlerized version which was published as "'Coming, Eden Bower!'" in the Smart Set (August 1920). For a detailed study of variants between these two texts, see the appendix to Uncle Valentine and Other Short Stories: Willa Cather's Uncollected Short Fiction, 1915-1929, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973). Perhaps the two most significant changes are the title change and the change in the opera that Eden Bower stars in: in the Smart Set version, she sings Clytemnestra in Strauss's Elektra, while in the book version she sings Aphrodite in Erlanger's Aphrodite, based on Louys's novel. Both changes suggest Cather's consciousness of the erotic centrality of Aphrodite in the story she really wanted to write. (For further background information, see Slote's introduction to Uncle Valentine, pp. xxi-xxii.)
tion that Eden’s sensual desirousness also implies a material greed that would ruin the aesthetic career of Hedger, the “true” artist. And indeed, by the end of the tale this anti-Edenic Eve’s autonomy and ambition have led to a death of the soul even more terrible than the dissolution Cather associated with Edna Pontellier’s erotic dreams. Now a major international star, scheduled to sing in an operatic version of Louï’s’s Aphrodite, Eden has learned that Hedger, whom she hasn’t seen in twenty years, has become an originary figure, “decidedly an influence in art,” and it is plain that he has become this by freeing himself from her influence. As she drives off in her luxurious car her face becomes “hard and settled, like a plaster cast; so a sail, that has been filled by a strong breeze, behaves when the wind suddenly dies. Tomorrow night the wind would blow again, and this mask would be the golden face of Aphrodite. But a ‘big’ career takes its toll, even with the best of luck” (page 63). Cather’s point seems clear: as in Louï’s novel and as in Hedger’s fable of “The Forty Lovers of the Queen,” female erotic autonomy, imaged in the golden nakedness of Aphrodite, is inexorably doomed to rigidify and reify, killing not only any lover unlucky enough to remain captive but also the shining queen of love herself.

There is no doubt, of course, that Willa Cather had a number of personal motives for writing a story like “Coming, Aphrodite!” which reimagines Aphrodite so bitterly. These motives probably included both a deep anxiety about heterosexual desire and a deep identification with the closeted artist who admires and desires the naked girl next door.22 When we look at the tale as a revisionary critique of The Awakening, however, we can see that the creator of Edna/Eden Bower(s) is withdrawing unsympathetically from Chopin’s Edna precisely because the earlier Aphrodite had to swim away from the solid ground of patriarchal reality and die into what was no more than a myth of erotic power. As Mlle. Reisz tells Edna, the artist “must possess the courageous soul. . . . The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (chapter 21), but Edna, naked and defeated on the beach, is haunted by a bird with a broken wing, “reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (chapter 38). Given her own anxieties, Cather must have needed to clarify this problem for herself; and after all, her anxieties about female eroticism were representatively female even while they had personal origins; more, they were anxieties that accurately (if paradoxically) summarized Chopin’s own wounded reaction to the hostile reviews The Awakening received from, among others, Willa Cather. Thus, Cather implicitly decides in “Coming, Aphrodite!” that Edna Pontellier cannot be an artist because she is desirous; art, which requires courage and demands survival, must be left to the (male) Hedgers of this world, who hedge their bets by renouncing desire and protecting themselves against

women with a snarling canine Caesar. Yet as Chopin keenly understood, it is precisely because she is desirous that Edna becomes an artist in the first place, and her art, as at her dinner party, is as much an art of eroticism as it is a "pure" aesthetic activity.

What is the way out of this vicious circle? Even so recent a descendent of Chopin, Cather, Duncan, and H. D. as Anne Sexton could see none. In a posthumous volume, Words for Dr. Y., her daughter Linda Gray Sexton prints a piece called "To Like, To Love" in which the poet addresses "Aphrodite, / my Cape Town lady, / my mother, my daughter" and admits that though "I dream you Nordic and six foot tall, / I dream you masked and blood-mouthed," in the end "you start to cry, / you fall down into a huddle, / you are sick . . . because you are no one." It is as if for women, struggling to recapture the autonomy of desire, there was one moment of Aphroditean rebirth—the neo-Swinburnian moment, say, when Edna enthroned herself in gold satin at the head of a fictive dinner table and Isadora Duncan theatrically brooded before Botticelli's Primavera—and then, as Virginia Woolf wrote of the erotic in a slightly different context, "the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over—the moment." 23 "Realism," declares Cather, may be more than a fictional mode; it may in fact reflect a social reality in which the golden Aphrodite is no more than a metal mask.

Perhaps it is not insignificant, then, that among recent poets it is a male artist, Wallace Stevens, who would have responded most sympathetically to the desire implicit in the allusive structure of the tale Kate Chopin's The Awakening tells, for he would have been free from the anxieties that serious identification with a mythic figure necessarily entails, free as Swinburne, for instance, was, and as neither Chopin nor Cather could ever be. Certainly when Stevens's "paltry nude" starts, like Edna Pontellier, on her early voyage, he too imagines a second coming, not of a rough beast like the slouching nightmare creature of Yeats's visionary apocalypse, but of a "gold-ener nude," a more triumphantly secular goddess, "of a later day." 24 Still, because Chopin was a woman writer, her imagining was at least as different from his as his was from Yeats's. She, after all, painfully dreamed a surrogate self into that visionary nakedness. Imagining (even if failing to achieve) transformation, she was haunted by her longing for a redeemed and redemptive Aphrodite, who would go "like the centre of sea-green pomp" into a future of different myths and mythic difference.
