The Hope of the Text
or,
The Comforts of Baroque

> …But to impose is not
> To discover. To discover an order as of
> A season, to discover summer and know it,
>
> To discover winter and know it well, to find,
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
>
> It is possible, possible, possible. It must
> Be possible….
>
> --Wallace Stevens, Notes toward a Supreme Fiction

In Homer's Odyssey the heroine, Penelope, tricks the suitors who have invaded her home and are looking to marry her in her husband's prolonged absence. Odysseus has been away from Ithaca for 20 years – 10 years fighting in the Trojan War, and then, after the Greek victory (engineered by him through the ruse of the Trojan Horse), 10 years trying to get home. Penelope spends her days weaving a burial-shroud for her aged father-in-law, Laertes. She has told the suitors that once the shroud is completed, she will choose one of them as her new husband. But every night she secretly undoes what she has done on the loom that day, hoping to delay the choice for as long as possible. In the event, her ruse succeeds (she is, after all, her husband's wife), and before the shroud is

finished, Odysseus returns home. With the help of his son Telemachus and the loyal swineherd Eumaeus, he handily (and gorily) slaughters the suitors -- and the servant girls who have been their concubines -- and regains control of his estate. Traditionally, Penelope has been taken as a figure – perhaps the figure – for the loyal, steadfast wife; though modern readers have seen her also as an example of a more independent resourcefulness, as well as a shrewd application of the survival instinct. But I think she is something else, too: an emblem of the ever-hopeful reader and writer, who keeps hope alive and finds reason to live through the text she creates.

Penelope's text, of course, is the burial-shroud. (The English word "text" is derived from the Latin texere, "to weave"; a textum is that which is woven.) There is no evidence that Penelope, or any woman -- or man, for that matter -- of the Mycenaean Age (ca. 1600-1100 BCE), was literate; writing only came to Greece in the eighth century BCE, which was also when Homer's oral epics were first written down. Penelope's creation is of the same cloth (so to speak) as her will to live, which takes material form in her particular tactic to resist the importunities of the suitors. Her text is an expression of her unyielding hope in the face of despair, and I identify with her. My own

texts – the books I read (and sometimes try to write), as well as other artifacts that have delighted me – have been sources of hope for me, too; and in some ways they still are. In the text that follows I will try to explain just how, and why, this came to be.

As I have suggested, Penelope's weaving and unweaving of her text provides a way for her to survive the threat posed by the suitors, and live with herself at the same time, without giving up the hope, distant as it must have seemed to her, that her man would someday return to her. But in the Minor Period (2004-2015 CE) I had no such hope, for my wife, Diane, was dead. And yet I found a kind of hope, too, a way of surviving her death, in various texts – read, written, woven and depicted – that helped keep me going, day after day, night after night. My texts kept me from despair, and helped give me reason to live. Of course they weren't the only things in my life that performed that function, or even the foremost. That would have been our son Zack (who was 16 when his mother died), followed by my friends, my students, and even some of my colleagues at Dowling, the obscure college on Long Island where I taught for 19 years (including all the years of the Minor Period) before it went bankrupt and had to close its doors in 2016.

But I should define my terms. What I am calling the "Minor Period" was the 11 years between when Diane died (2004) and when I met Julie (2015), who became my second wife. I call it the Minor Period to contrast it with the Major Period (ca. Jan. 1981-June 8, 2004), which is my name for the 23½ years that I knew Diane – the years we were together. The Minor Period holds a special place in my life – as special, in its own diminished way, as the Major Period. It is a place that, because it was painful to inhabit, had also its particular and peculiar comforts: not only the comforts sought in order to alleviate the pain of the Minor Period, but also the curious comfort that lay in the pain itself – what the French refer to as la nostalgie de la boue ("nostalgia for the mud"). The Minor Period was a time I now look back upon – like the bona fide "mud nostalgist" that I am – not without a certain fondness. It was a time that possessed a kind of Virgilian bittersweetness, as in the passage from Book One of The Aeneid, where the hero rallies his battle- and travel-worn compatriots after a storm at sea, and makes the famous proclamation: "…forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit" ("Perhaps someday it will be a help to you to remember even these things"). Can I say that my loneliness during the 11 years of the Minor Period was "a help" in that sense? Is

it over-romanticizing my suffering and sadness – to the point of narcissism, even -- to claim such a thing? Maybe; then again, romanticizing was always a strategy of the Minor Period. My own strategy of survival – or one of them. I like to think that Penelope would have understood. (Though to entertain such a notion is, no doubt, to "anachronize" – to impose, in this case, romantic imaginings upon a pre-classical, Mycenaean consciousness. Then again, the English Romantics were fond of imagining their way back into much earlier times; I am thinking here of the various inflections of Hellenism, medievalism and Elizabethanism in Keats, Shelley, Byron and Coleridge. I guess to be romantic means, in part, to idolize the past, both historical and personal.)

However, it wasn't the texts of the English Romantics – or the Homeric or Virgilian epics, for that matter -- that helped me during the Minor Period. I did teach all of these when I was at Dowling, in the World and English lit. survey and period courses we offered on a rotating basis. But it wasn't really any of the literary texts I read or taught during this time that made a difference -- with a couple of notable exceptions, like the novels of Anita Brookner (which I reread in their entirety over the summer of 2009, the "Summer of Depression", and from whose

atmosphere of unadulterated loneliness I derived comfort, if only in the form of confirmation of my own state), and the poetry of Wallace Stevens. (More of him later.) Rather, it was visual art and music that I relied on to chase the blues away – or at least keep them at bay. Specifically, the music of the Baroque Period (ca. 1600-1750), and decorative art of all sorts – particularly oriental carpets, and various designs, ornaments and patterns from the Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo. (I found that Moorish and Arab tile designs spoke to me, too.) Repeating patterns of any kind were pleasing to the eye; but I derived a special comfort and solace from the examples I have mentioned. These forms fed something in me that had discovered, apparently, that it needed them; and -- along with the sight of billowy, summer-afternoon clouds on the horizon, or out over the Long Island Sound, and small planes flying at night, glimpsed from open fields -- they gave me hope, and sufficient reason to live. These things – especially the things of nature, like clouds (even – no, particularly -- the low, solemn stratus clouds of autumn and winter), skies, and trees (both trees in leaf, and the bare branches of winter against a cold, gray sky) – made me feel less alone during the Minor Period, while at the same time confirming and reinforcing my widower's

state. Indeed, there was something not wholly unpleasurable in having that sad state acknowledged – or so it seemed to me -- by a kind of fellow-feeling in nature. Perhaps this was because in feeling alone and lonely, I came to recognize I had survived and was enduring Diane's death in whatever way I could -- was making a kind of life for myself, however incomplete, in her wake. Or maybe it was just the perverse self-gratification that lies in self-pity -- a dubious pleasure I confess I am prone to. In any case, these things of nature in all its moods and seasons seemed to reassure me that Diane, although she was dead, was yet not wholly absent from me -- if only because, when I experienced the things of nature, I inevitably thought of her, and sensed she was with me in my appreciation of them. In our appreciation of them, I should say, because in nature's beauties I felt also Diane's sensibilities and continuance.

If there was something vaguely mystical in my experiences of nature during the Minor Period, then my experience of Baroque music, pattern and ornament felt much more mundane and practical. These kinds of art made me feel more grounded, and even held out a sort of hope – though I would be hard put to say in what, exactly, this hope consisted. And maybe it wasn't even so much an influx

of hope that I felt as a lightening of my sadness – its leavening with some mysterious catalyst of mood change – which produced the encouraging effect. For it was a form of encouragement that I experienced through these various art forms, which performed a kind of art therapy for me. Music helped to break the extended silence of living alone, and Baroque music I found particularly heartening, as well as diverting; while the sight of pleasing, repeating graphic patterns and decorative designs provided companionable forms that felt almost cheering to me in my new singleton mode. Indeed, the decorations and the music seemed to work along the same lines: there was comfort in repetition, and Baroque music, in its familiar and predictable lines, and its ornamental variations, was like a pattern for the mind: mildly stimulating, unthreatening, evocative, and accessible. It has been said that Baroque music (with the exception of the sublime Bach, who is always sui generis) is like wallpaper: something to be registered in the background, like a higher grade of ambient music (of which I am also quite fond). This may be so, but in my opinion, the designation of musical wallpaper is no strike against it. (Think, for example, of the exquisite wallpaper and textile designs of William Morris & Co.)

Among the benefits of repeating pattern, whether in music or visual decoration, is the freedom it gives the mind to wander "where it will go" (see The Beatles' "Fixing a Hole") – to contemplate nothing in particular, and to experience the pleasures of that state. I call this phenomenon "contemplating about", where the "about" has the force of "around": your mind meanders around a pattern or motif, without attaching itself to any specific thought or idea. The mind daydreams, following the whims of its mood, which is – well, "contemplational". The Japanese have a word, boketto, that signifies the act of gazing into the far distance and thinking about nothing in particular. (Here I am indebted to Ella Frances Sanders' wonderful book Lost in Translation, which contains many such verbal treasures – accompanied by the author's charming illustrations -- that have no precise equivalents in English.) Baroque music, and the visual designs I have described, are conducive to "boketto-izing"; they provide relief and comfort for the mind. Relief from what, exactly? Mostly (in my case) from the labor of discursive thought. In that sense, these art forms work as a kind of aesthetic mood-stabilizer. (The question occurs, did I get into Baroque music before or after the mood-stabilzer Abilify was prescribed as a supplement to my anti-

depressant, Zoloft? I don't remember; and I'm not sure it really matters. In any case, I like to keep my pharmaceuticals separate from my aesthetics.) In its aura of stateliness and ordered formality, Baroque music evokes the sense of a bygone grace and gentility, and the very thought of this – not to mention the visceral effects of the music itself – is calming. Its form of escapism seems fundamentally conservative. It does not ask too much of you. It is easy to assimilate. It is soothing and grounding. And once again like the background decoration of a tasteful wallpaper, it does not require too much attention, but makes its presence felt. It is there for you. As I say, it is a companionable form. And companionability was a welcome feature for someone who was alone most of the time.

There is no doubt that musical and visual patterns, in the forms I have described, kept me company during the Minor Period. I have in mind a particular phase of the Early Minor Period (2004-2009): the fall of 2006, after Zack had left home for his first semester of college, and the winter of 2007, when he'd returned to school after Christmas vacation. It was in the wake of that first departure, and the cold hole it left in the house, that my obsession with oriental carpets began. I needed some area

rugs to cover the hardwood floors of the house we'd moved into the previous summer, and once I began exploring oriental rugs, I couldn't stop. ABC Carpets, just north of Union Square in Manhattan, became my mecca; and my vademecum for the journey was a book by Emmett Eiland, the owner of a rug gallery in Berkeley (my alma mater), on contemporary oriental rugs (Oriental Rugs Today: A Guide to the Best New Carpets from the East). No way could I afford any antique rugs; though a book on that subject, by Emmett's kinsmen Murray L. Eiland, Jr. and Murray Eiland III (Oriental Rugs: A Complete Guide), gave me the beginnings of an education in their splendor and varieties. I remember afternoon trips that fall into Manhattan to reconnoiter ABC Carpets, and have the salesmen in the showrooms unfurl their rich wares for my contemplation and perusal. (Those two forms of attention were quite different: the contemplation was dreamy, associative; the perusal was more focused, and a little greedy – it had a sumptuary motive.)

I'll admit there was a princely pleasure in all of this. I felt quite grand being waited on by the solicitous salesmen, and having all the carpets spread out before me -- so lavish in their variegated colors and patterns: each one different, and with a different mood and appeal; each

one comprising its own rectangular world (or mundo, as Stevens might say) of design. The carpets spoke to an evident craving in me that I hadn't known was there until I started reading the Eilands. (Texts on textiles -- a double delight!) I had some money to spend – more than I'd ever had when Diane was alive -- since I'd split the sale of my late father's house in Pacific Palisades (the house I'd grown up in) with his second wife, Chun-Ling, a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine. (My mother had died in '95, and my father, who remarried in '98, died just a month before Diane.)

Except for classical records and books, I'd never been much of a shopper; besides, those more "cultural" items had an edifying, ideational aspect that separated them, in my mind, from other kinds of merchandise. When I was buying books and records, I could feel exempt from the taint of materialism. After all, literature and music were aesthetic and educational, and I told myself that in buying them I was feeding my mind, and aspiring towards an ideal of excellence that escaped any charge of consumerism. Books and classical music held out the promise of virtue; they had the potential to make one a better person. At least that was the hope, and the justification. (And I felt I needed a justification for buying them; for I sensed

in myself a kind of intellectual materialism – a variant of the "spiritual materialism" that the Tibetan Buddhist monk and teacher Chögyam Trungpa wrote about in his book Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism.)

But the buying of expensive contemporary oriental rugs – not nearly as expensive as antique ones would have been, but still – could not be justified in this way. Carpets, unlike books and music, were not connected to virtue. Here it was a question of purely visual and tactile gratification, and therefore (in the neo-puritanical calculus that was a reaction to my sense of my own acquisitiveness) suspect, and a little discomfiting. Here I was, the Prince of Rugs, going about his pleasures. And the frisson of guilt I felt in the carpet showrooms only added to the illicit pleasure. There was also the feeling of captivation and bewitchment by the sheer luxury of the artifacts themselves, their richness of color, pattern and ornament. These things held out the promise of a mysterious satisfaction I call "refreshment" – a sensation also found in exploding fireworks, the deliberate popping of bubble-wrap, and the mesmerizing action of the wax blobs in a lava-lamp: so generally uniform, yet so minutely variable. So satisfying. The colors and patterns of oriental carpets were similarly refreshing to me. They had

a visceral effect. And there was also the draw – let us not forget my materialism – of the mere fact of possession. These patterns, with their rich and palpable pile (I was interested only in hand-knotted carpets, not kilims), would be mine – "All mine!" (cue the evil laughter) – to sit on and contemplate (and palpate) whenever I wanted. (As if one could own an experience, feeling or idea.) Highly dubious – but no less beguiling for all that.

Such were the solo strategies of the Minor Period. Some of them, anyway. They were my way of coping with the twi-night double-header of widowerhood and the Empty-Nest Syndrome. And there were other strategies, too – less sumptuary, perhaps, but no less gratifying. For example, solo museum-going, at night – Friday or Saturday nights, when the Met was open until nine. This pleasure always seemed slightly pathetic to me – like solo dining and movie-going; and that awareness gave the pleasure a slightly bitter flavor that was not distasteful, either. (The Italian aperitivo amaro of the Minor Period, you could say.) It was the complex, fraught flavor of self-pity, of feeling sorry for myself, of seeing myself as someone whose inner life could not even be guessed at by an outside observer (the matter of the "outside observer" has always been of interest to me; more on him too in a moment);

though I myself had often tried to guess at the inner lives of other singletons (singleta? Do we need the Greek neuter plural here? The Classics major in me says "Go for it!") that I had seen about the city. Well, now I was one of them. And there was something about this recognition that was -- as La Rochefoucauld might have said -- not entirely displeasing to me. (This feeling too was connected to self-pity, in its many permutations.)

It was on one of these lonely forays to the Met that I discovered Baroque tapestries. Though that is not strictly true. I had noticed the banners and posters for the exhibit – "Threads of Splendor: Tapestry in the Baroque" – while walking past the Met a week or two before I saw the exhibit itself. The phrase alone, "the Baroque", in its double force of designation and suggestion, excited me; and to that excitement was added the novelty of tapestry itself, which I didn't know much about. Though that is not quite true, either. I had been to another tapestry show at the Met – "Art and Magnificence: Tapestry in the Renaissance" – with Diane some years before. (The Baroque exhibit was apparently the sequel.) But the earlier show hadn't made much of an impression; and in any case, the fact that Diane was alive at the time – and maybe hadn't even yet been diagnosed with the breast cancer that would

later metastasize – would have made that earlier Major Period show very different from this Minor Period event. The Baroque show possessed an aura of loneliness – or rather, its specific atmosphere was felt against a background of loneliness – that, like a foil, set off my need for the companionable forms on display.

And those forms were indeed ones of "splendor", as the show's title declared. Some of the tapestries were huge – nearly floor to ceiling -- yet all were intricately worked: gold and silver threads woven in with the wool and silk, and all covered over with the muted patina of their antiqueness. The subjects were taken largely from classical mythology, and classical and European history: heroes and deities in battle and repose, amorous sport and dramatic struggle. But truth be told, I cared not much for the subjects, either historical or mythical; I cared mostly for the depicted frames (that is, the woven representation of frames that formed the borders of the tapestries; there were no actual frames -- the tapestries were hung loose), and the decorations – both the decorations within the frames (which, for some reason, were a source of particular interest to me) and those in the main subject panels. Decoration, after all, was where my refreshment lived at that time; and here was a rich harvest. Cornucopiae,

cartouches, crowns, coats of arms, escutcheons, scrolls, garlands, wreaths, festoons, shells, lozenges, draperies, tassels, egg-and-dart friezes, vegetal curlicues. The "whole apparatus of clouds, putti and radiances", as Anthony Blunt has it in his monograph, Roman Baroque. And the total gratuitousness of it all was especially pleasing. A Roman tent was anachronistically decorated with tassels. Horses were richly caparisoned (many tassels in evidence there as well). The depicted frame of a tapestry showing Christ and the miracle of the fishes was crammed with putti and sea-life. (The mixed metaphor gratified me, too.) Even the seat-pillow of Herod, with Christ brought before him, had a tassel depending from it. It was somehow soothing to follow all this riot of detail. You could get lost in it -- and it meant nothing. (Indeed, its elaborate meaninglessness was part of the appeal.) The main panels of course contained a narrative – sometimes several, simultaneously; but, as I say, it wasn't the panels that attracted me. It was the meaningless play of their depicted frames that I loved. Lightness, pleasure, delight in form for its own sake. The playfulness of it all was good company, too.

I was aware, though, that these were rather sterile pleasures. Things, mere things, to fill the emptiness

inside, to keep me going. They were inadequate, of course – but what wasn't inadequate without Diane? But I had to keep going, regardless. I had no idea where, but it seemed important, as it did on my regular walks through the neighborhood on Long Island, just to keep putting one foot in front of the other. I was conscious, in the galleries, of being by myself – of drinking it all in by myself. (Of course there were other people all around me, including a number of singleta; I just mean I had no one to share my impressions with.) But I told myself that if this was all slightly pathetic, then at least I was aware that it was. I was trying to fill the emptiness, yes – but I was also "turning towards the pain" (as the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön once put it, in an interview in Sun Magazine that I read the autumn after Diane died, and that left a lasting impression). And this action, I also told myself, seemed to at least partly make up for the self-pity that I felt. Question, though: Was self-pity, if it was recognized by the self-pitier, a mitigated and therefore less deplorable form of the vice? Did consciousness of the sin help alleviate it, or did it only make it more deplorable?

And was this – this nocturnal, solo gallery-going – more or less what it was going to be like for me, from here on in? Would I continue to be alone, and to find ways –

most edifying, high-minded ways, to be sure – to bear my solo state? Actually, I didn't think so. I didn't really believe I would be alone for the rest of my life. (I had just turned 50 when Diane died.) That just didn't seem like my style. I was not by nature a loner. That state had been imposed on me -- and yes, there was that in me that did not find it wholly displeasing. But I didn't ever think my aloneness would last forever, and this thought helped me to apprehend it better, and even to appreciate the grim and somber boon of enforced inwardness that being alone brought.

Besides, I was not without female companionship – and even love – during this time. There were three women in my life (at different times) during the Minor Period. One (Yu-wan) I loved, and thought I wanted to marry; but she was already married, to a man back in Taiwan, and would not get a divorce. This was partly because, she said, she did not want to add to the shame of her leaving him the shame of divorcing him. But I don't think that was the real reason. I think that the real reason was that she was – unlike myself -- at heart a loner. She had never really wanted to get married in the first place – and she never wanted to be married again. So not getting a divorce was her security against this possibility. Another (Barbara) I

almost did marry; and one (Ann) I ended up – for a bunch of reasons I won't go into here – just being friends with. These relationships spanned eight years – nearly three-quarters of the Minor Period. Yet during all this time I still thought of myself as alone. This was not only because I was in fact alone most of the time (I never lived with any of the women I was involved with); I think it was also because I wanted to think of myself as alone, and maybe even wanted to be alone. Or at least something in me wanted to be. (A kind of proleptic "nostalgie de la boue", whereby I was imagining myself in the present as I might have seen myself from the future, looking back at this time – imagining my present self as a future memory, as it were.) Because when I was alone, I could think of Diane in a more sustained way. Being continually without her, and being continually aware that I was without her, was my default state – which meant that being sort of always with her was my default state, too. Except that now I could have her to myself in a way I never could when she was alive.

I knew, in seeking out and starting a relationship with Yu-wan only four months after Diane had died (though we didn't actually sleep together for another two years), that I hadn't mourned her properly – had failed to mourn

her properly. Was my wanting to be alone somehow a way of doing penance for this failing? Or was it rather in the natural order of things that the feeling of emptiness should assert itself over and against my attempts to cover it up by seeking out the company of other women? True, I was not by nature a loner – unlike Yu-wan; and yet the singleton state began to feel, if not natural, at least habitual. Besides, this state consorted well with my tendency towards self-pity. And it also seemed necessary – being alone seemed necessary for the work I had to do. The work of mourning. The work of remembrance. The work of "turning towards the pain". Which meant for me, also, the work of writing and reading.

I mentioned earlier that the poetry of Wallace Stevens was important to me during this time. In a humorous but also barbed exchange, Robert Frost once accused Stevens of writing poetry about "bric-a-brac". (Stevens had first teased Frost for writing poems about actual "subjects", which, in Stevens' hyper-sophisticated aesthetic judgment, was probably an unforgivable lapse of poetic taste.) In the Minor Period, Stevens' poetry – above all Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, but also shorter "bric-a-brac" poems like "Sunday Morning", "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" and "The Poems of Our Climate" – had somewhat the same effect on me

as the other artifacts I have mentioned, providing not only comfort and diversion, but also – to employ a Stevensian word – transport, and through transport, a kind of hope. (The 1947 collection in which "Notes" first appeared was titled Transport to Summer.) The poetry of Stevens – above all his language (even his language alone: the cadence of his sentences, the inflections of his syntax, the fineness of his diction, and the curious, compelling impact all of these things taken together as a whole – "The Whole of Harmonium", as he first wanted to title his Collected Poems) – Stevens' poetry was another kind of beautiful design that drew me and bound me in its contemplational spell. I could not account for its effect on me – I hardly knew what any of it meant; but then meaning was hardly the point. I knew only that it set something going in the region of my solar plexus, which is where I feel the poetry that most affects me. (It was where I had felt Wordsworth's Prelude too, the first time I read it.) In other words, the effect was almost totally visceral – which is to say, basically incommunicable. And it gave me hope. Like decoration, ornament, design, and Baroque music, Stevens' poetry gave me a kind of hope. I couldn't account for this hope either, but I didn't have to. I felt it, and that was enough. I had a hunger for Stevens' language –

that formal, suggestive, elegant and curiously exciting language – that was like my hunger for the Baroque, in its various forms. (It seems to me that one could make an argument for Stevens' poetry being a form of the "modern Baroque"; but such an argument will not be attempted here.) His language pleased me deeply; and the fact that I could not say why made it please me all the more. The "bric-a-brac" of it all was sort of like the ornamentation on the depicted frames of Baroque tapestries, or the music of Corelli, discerned in the background. If I tried to focus too hard on the specific meaning or significance of any of Stevens' lines, or images, or sounds, the effect went away. The language of the poetry, like the other artifacts that spoke to me during the Minor Period, also had to be discerned in the background, as it were, through a kind of averted vision of the imagination. Attention must be paid (to quote the plea of Linda Loman, Willy's wife, in Death of a Salesman -- that stark tragedy of the common man that seems so far from Stevens' rarified material; yet there was a tragic sterility and sadness in the life of the insurance executive, too; and maybe it was even his life's sterility, come to think of it, that made his poetry bloom so floridly) – attention must be paid, yes; but not too deliberately. And if you were patient, and let the curious

language work its ways on you, a kind of hope would presently arise. The hope that I was not really alone – and that came from not really being alone. Diane abided. She was there, somehow – if only in memory, nature and imagination. "If only"! Ha! Because memory, nature and imagination were almost everything to me (besides Zack) during the Minor Period. It is no surprise that the two writers who spoke to me most urgently at that time (besides Anita Brookner and Philip Roth – and odd couple if there ever was one!) were Wordsworth, the poet of nature and memory, and Stevens, the poet of the imagination. For there, in addition to Diane, abided faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these, for me, was hope.

That was what I got from Stevens' texts, and from all the other beautiful decorations I surrounded myself with in the Minor Period. The relationships I had with Ann and Barbara, and even the impossible love I shared with Yu-wan, over the seven years we were (sort of) together – none of these things brought me hope. I was still mourning Diane -- though it might not have looked that way. I slept with women; I did my work and met with my colleagues at the college where I taught; I went out with friends and lovers – into the city, to movies, restaurants, museums, the opera even. I ate; I drank; I was sometimes – despite the

Biblical injunction that I took so to heart – even merry. But I was still in mourning. And it was in this secret life – the secret life of mourning – that my hope lay. I could not have explained it – I still can't – any better than I could explain the appeal of Stevens, or Baroque music or design. But I knew that my abiding sadness was not divorced from hope, that thing with feathers that perches in the soul. It perched, and waited, and spoke to me, in the language of poetry. It said: "It is possible, possible, possible. It must be possible." Now I know it is an outrageous anachronism to say such a thing as I am about to say, but I cannot help it. I cannot help thinking that the burial shroud that Penelope wove for Laertes for 20 years – her own Minor Period, if you will – was decorated all over with Baroque ornaments of curious design. That's another reason it took her so long to weave.