Wallace Stevens' Harmonium

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Biography

Wallace Stevens, Childhood

Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, on October 2, 1879. His parents were Garrett Stevens and Margaretha Catharine (Kate) Zeller. He had one older brother, Garrett, Jr. (Buck), and three younger siblings: John, Elizabeth, and Mary Katharine (Katharine). Garrett, Sr. was a practicing attorney and Kate had been a schoolteacher prior to their marriage. The heavy influence of the Pennsylvania Dutch settlers of German descent in the area helped to instill a work ethic in Garrett, Sr. and Kate which they passed on to their children. A normal level of competition existed between the Stevens boys, and this was given additional impetus between Wallace and his younger brother John after Wallace's first year at the Reading Boys' School in 1892. His grades not being up to snuff, Wallace was held back a year, and started the 1893 school year in the same class as John. Wallace became quite studious, even joining the editorial staff of the school's first newspaper, Dots and Dashes.

Harvard Years 1897-1900

Although Stevens completed more than the necessary credits at Harvard, he spent three years as a non-matriculated student, as did his brother John at the University of Pennsylvania. The family did not have enough money for either John or Steven to complete a degree program. Though Stevens studied English and French literature for pleasure's sake. One teacher and friend was the philosopher George Santayana. While attending Harvard Stevens wrote material that was put into the Harvard Advocate and Harvard Monthly.

New York 1900-1913

After leaving Cambridge, Massachusetts, Stevens moved to New York City. He became a correspondent for the New-York Tribune. Following his journalistic career, Stevens entered New York Law School, graduating in 1903 and subsequently admitted to the bar. In 1904, Stevens met his future wife, Elsie Viola Rachel Moll. He and Elise were married until his death; they had one daughter, Holly, who was born on August 10, 1924. Following his graduation, Stevens worked as an attorney at several firms, and finally in 1908 he held a full-time position with the American Bonding Company of Baltimore. From 1903 until 1913, Stevens suffered from fits of depression. Part of this malaise could have been worsened by the deaths of his father in 1911 and his mother in 1929. Stevens' depression eased when he began writing his more Mature Verses in 1913.

His happiness was furthered when he and Elsie moved to Hartford, Connecticut in 1916, where he began working for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Here Stevens became the Vice President and stayed in that position until he died. It was also around this time that Elise and Stevens began growing apart. They were never divorced, but Holly would later describe the detachment that characterized the Stevens marriage.

Harmonium Years (1913-1923)
Recollections of Stevens by Acquaintances

Robert DeVore:

"I first met Mr. Stevens in Philadelphia in 1928. We had a contractor who we were bonding to the Board of Education, guaranteeing the performance of his contract. The fellow went broke, and we had to contact the home office [of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Insurance Department in New York] to let them know we were in trouble with this man. Mr. Stevens got on the phone and told the manager that it was important enough that he felt he ought to come down to Philadelphia. He wanted me to meet him at the station, take him to the attorney's office, and when he came through I didn't have any trouble spotting him. Here was a fellow that matched the description the manager had given me: tall, austere, very dignified, an unusual-looking man. He said, 'Let's get on our way. We want to go to the attorney's office and get into this thing right away. We don't want to waste any time.' I said, 'No, sir!' Then he said, 'The attorney's office is down on Chestnut Street, so on the way down what do you say we get some cinnamon buns.' I said, 'Cinnamon buns?' 'Yes,' he said, 'I always, whenever I come to Philadelphia, buy these cinnamon buns at Lahr's.' I thought, This is strange to do before we're going to an attorney's office. He ordered a dozen to send to Hartford. I thought, Oh, that is it. Then he wanted a dozen more; they put them in a bag, and we started off. And I thought, My gosh, I wonder when he's going to eat those things. Well, we got to the attorney's office, and we went through the introductions and into the conference room. There were about seven of us. He opened up his bag, put it in the middle of the table, and said, 'Let's have a cinnamon bun.' Everyone, trying to be polite, agreed with him, and we all reached in and got a handful of goo. And we started the conference."

Wilson Taylor:

"I didn't know him as anything but a lawyer and a business executive [in 1931, when Taylor, an experienced surety lawyer, began working in the Hartford Accident and Indemnity's Insurance Department in New York]. To him [gallery going] was just part of life. And Stevens enjoyed life. I don't care what aspect of it, he enjoyed it. A few times we'd go over to some concert in the Times Square area; he used to like Stravinsky, and we'd go to some Stravinsky concerts over there. I don't think we ever went to a musical. I don't think we ever went to a play. He enjoyed things from Forty-second Street north to the Carlyle Hotel, and in between there were bistros and there were galleries; this, that, and the other. This is mostly on the East Side, up and down Madison Avenue. Sometimes he'd come down and he'd just walk around by himself. He loved to walk. [Once] he was walking down Madison Avenue, looking at the antique stores. This particular one was closed. He called me Monday morning, said he'd been [to New York from Hartford] Saturday, and he saw this lamp. He recognized it as a choice piece of pottery, porcelain I guess it was, and some kind of fancy shade on it. He wanted to know if I could go up there that day and see if I could buy it for him. So I went up and the price on this little old table lamp was two hundred dollars. That was a lot of money in the thirties. 'Oh, good God!' he said, but he sent the two hundred dollars down. He said, 'Make them pack it well, and they'll have to pay the cost of shipping.' And they did; they were probably darn glad to get two hundred dollars..."

José Rodríguez Feo:

"He said he enjoyed Havana very much, but the thing he enjoyed most was the climate, nature, the sky, the natural aspect. Not the city, the tropics. And the air. He said he thought the air in Cuba had something very special about it. And I said, 'Are you saying about the air something similar to what is said in The Tempest?' It's a wonderful description of the air in the Bahamas. There's something soft and sweet about the air.' He said, 'Yes, and how funny that you should talk about The Tempest' because obviously he was remembering that, too. He always talked with nostalgia about the South and south Florida. And the climate, too. Of course, this is typical of the people who live in the cold country, but to him it was not going to Florida or going to Havana to get away from the cold. It was something sensuous in his appreciation of being in Florida: what he felt in the skin. He said that [there] you live with your senses more than when you live in a cold place. This has to do with his poetry; it was part of his personality."

Mary Jarrell:

"I believe that with a bucket of sand and a wishing lamp I could create a world in half a second that would make this one look like a hunk of mud" (Lensing 63). "Perhaps, it is best, too, that one should have only glimpses of reality - and get the rest from the fairy-tales, from pictures, and music, and books" (64). –Wallace Stevens

Stevens published *Harmonium* in 1923. The years leading up to the publication of this collection were full of development and meditation for Stevens, as he studied other writers and honed his own craft. There are many people that influenced Stevens' life during the "Harmonium Period". In late 1914, Stevens met the Patagonians - a group of writers comprised of Donald Evans, Allen and Louise Norton, and Carl Van Vechten, who named themselves after the Tehuelches. Although these writers encouraged Stevens' own literary pursuits, Stevens eventually drifted from the group. In the year 1914, Stevens became friends with Marianne Moore, E. E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams. At least ten later Wallace submitted poems under a pseudonym, "Peter Parasol," to Harriet Monroe for a competition in Poetry magazine. Although he did not win the competition he did have work published by Harriet Monroe in November. Sadly, *Harmonium* did not get good enough reviews for Stevens, and he stopped writing the year it came out; he published nothing more during the 1920's. In the second edition of *Harmonium*, written in 1931, Stevens added eight new poems.

*After Harmonium*

Stevens continued to work as the Vice President of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Stevens regularly traveled to Florida, Cuba and the Florida Keys as vacation spots. He began writing again in the 1930s and continued writing into his seventies. Stevens published *Ideas of Order, Owl's Clover, The Man With the Blue Guitar, Parts of a World and Transport to Summer*. In 1949, he was awarded the Bollingen Prize in Poetry from Yale University. In 1955, Stevens won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Collected Poems*. In 1945, he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Wallace Stevens died from cancer of the intestine on August 2, 1955. Although he questioned religion throughout his career, he had been baptized as a Catholic on April 10th, 1955, five months before he passed. His last words to Holly were, "Good night".
"The next morning we were at breakfast at the Yale Club. Randall was across the table, and I was somehow next to Stevens. We were talking generally, and I said something about seeing Ninotchka in New York with Randall. Stevens came alive immediately. 'Garbo!' he said. He talked about always wishing he could meet her and how beautiful she was, that she really was his favorite actress in the world. There was a pause. I knew Randall well enough to know that he was being a little audacious - here it was, a table full of people - but he had a direct question he wanted to ask Stevens. He felt that he was not going to be able to ask him this question if he didn't get on with it. So he just shifted the subject entirely to 'Sunday Morning' and I said, 'I've noticed that you have changed some lines in 'Sunday Morning.' How did you happen to do that?' Stevens pulled this famous Robert Browning thing. He began to look very vague and disbelieving, as if he hadn't remembered whether he changed them or not. He hesitated and started to say something about 'I don't know why.' Then he said, 'Let's talk about Greta Garbo again!'"

Florence Berkman:

"Every morning, like clockwork, he used to walk down Terry Road about nine o'clock, just about the time I was standing by my kitchen sink. I'd always get a thrill. In the afternoon, he'd walk back, this very slow stride of his. Usually, if it was summer or good weather, I'd be outdoors with some of the neighbors' children. I'd make them stop and look at him, and I'd say, 'I want you to remember this is a great poet.'

I used to walk up and down Terry Road with our cocker spaniel; he wouldn't even look at me, wouldn't even talk to me. But he always talked to my husband: he used to work outdoors on Saturday and Sunday; Stevens would be going to the park. But one morning it was pouring. I drove out to the corner, and here was Wallace Stevens standing, absolutely soaking. I didn't know whether or not to stop because he never acknowledged [my] being on this earth. But I did stop, and I said, 'Mr. Stevens, would you like a ride?' He said, 'Oh, I'd love it.' He got in the car, and I thought I'd be very proper. 'Mr. Stevens, I don't believe you know who I am. I'm Florence Berkman. He said, 'I know who you are. You live in that little house. I've often thought I'd love to see the inside of your house. This was a carriage house. He talked at length on that trip. He was furious at the New Statesman, the English newspaper, which was very anti-American at the time. It would have been '46, '47, '48. I said, 'How do you get time to read? You're a busy man, and you do so much writing.' He said, 'I get up every morning at six o'clock, and I read for two hours.'"

Richard Wilbur:

"[After introducing Stevens at a 1952 reading at Harvard, my wife and I] drove him to his hotel in our '36 Ford, which was very uncomfortable for him. We said we hoped he would come and see us some time. 'I won't, but you're very kind to invite me.' There was no severity in that at all. He was just being honest. In the same way, during that day he spoke, not with any animus but with a certain firmness, of two classes of people: those who bother you with letters and those who do not. He didn't like people who wrote him letters and made him either answer them or feel guilty about not answering them. I had had a very brief postcard exchange [with him] once, and I recall him saying he thought the postcard was the ideal form, something like the sonnet, in which people could send each other signals without unnecessary pain.

Then we had another little exchange by postcard. I had been reading Gaston Bachelard, the Sorbonne philosopher and aesthetician. Bachelard says somewhere that the human imagination simply cannot cope with polar conditions, and so I shot off a postcard to Stevens. He wrote back some splendid sentence about Bachelard is wrong, most art is created out of a condition of winter."

Volumes of Poetry:

Harmonium (1923)
Ideas of Order (1936)
Owl's Clover (1936)
The Man with the Blue Guitar (1937)
Parts of a World (1942)
Transport to Summer (1947)
The Auroras of Autumn (1950)
Collected Poems (1954)
Opus Posthumous (1957)
The Palm at the End of the Mind (1972)
Collected Poetry and Prose, Frank Kermode & Joan Richardson, eds. (New York: The Library of America, 1997)

Prose:

The Necessary Angel (essays) (1951)
Letters of Wallace Stevens, edited by Holly Stevens (1966)
Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens & Jose Rodriguez Feo, edited by Beverly Coyle and Alan Filreis (1986)

Influences on Wallace Stevens' Harmonium Poetry

"To regard the imagination as metaphysics is to think of it as part of life, and to think of it as part of life is to realize the extent of artifice. We live in the mind." --Wallace Stevens

Imagination and The Self

Harmonium was published during an era of intense turmoil, as Joseph Riddell remarks in his article Wallace Stevens' Ideas of Order: The Rhetoric of Politics and The Rhetoric of Poetry, "Somewhere between 1918 and 1930 the world fell apart..." (328). 1923 represents a year where the consequences of World War I were still fresh, and the impending disaster of the Great Depression was lurking on the horizon. This is perhaps the root of Stevens' urge to live in the imagination. Looking toward the self and exercising one's imagination was the only retreat from the dismal present and impending future. An excellent example of this from Harmonium is the poem "Gubbinal." The poem reflects that the world appears according to how it is perceived individually. The speaker in "Gubbinal" addresses another person who thinks the world is ugly and unhappy, reminding them of beautiful and intriguing things. The multiple perceptions of reality, shifts of tone and odd vocabulary, including this poems title, are representational of Stevens' prescribed view on the relationship between reality and imagination on the individual level."
Riddell observes, "[Stevens] was fully conscious of the Agrarians' concern for disappearing values, and he embraces, as is evident in Harmonium, their desire to revive the spiritual source of order in a defined and coherent world, though his particular concern is articulated in a militant romanticism." (331).

Stevens reflected romanticism most closely by rebelling against the expected feelings of a poet writing after a World War, rejecting social criticism for an emphasis on imaginative possibility. As a "mandarin connoisseur of chaos aloof from the events of his time," Stevens remained detached. Seemingly untouched by the aftermath of war, Stevens created in his poetry a "supreme fiction," a vision that depends on the individual and strength of imagination. This resonates in his poetic philosophy through his tendency to discuss things objectively, rather than projecting his own ideas onto the reader.

**Stevens and Modern Art**

About 10 years before Harmonium was published, Wallace Stevens and others of his literary circle came face to face with an event that would introduce modernism to the arts. The Armory Show initiated avant-garde forms of art, and "served as a catalyst for American artists, who became more independent and created their own artistic language." Modern art forms surrounding Wallace Stevens included cubism, and according to Sean Socha author of Imaginari/Reality: Wallace Stevens' Harmonium and the Visual Arts there were several example of this form in Harmonium. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is a prime example of this; it "illustrates an idea about the fragmentation and/or subjectivity of reality and the importance of perspective by incorporating the Cubist technique of multiple perspectives." Modern art's multiple perspectives are indeed mimicked in almost every one of Harmonium's poems. You will rarely find Stevens pressing one perspective on his readers; more or less he favors the idea that there are numerous ways to perceive things. Another interesting idea investigated by Socha is the seemingly trivial combinations of colors like green and blue. He explains, "unnatural" combinations and juxtapositions of color, and the capturing of movement within a static medium are important; they reflect the new ways that the world can be viewed through modernism.

**Comparisons with Modern Painting**

One telltale indicator of modern art involves the enhanced visibility of the artist. The way modern art calls attention to its creator's imaginative role can be directly compared to Wallace Stevens literary art. Within his poetry of Harmonium he inventes alternate realities, reflecting real life itself from different perspectives. As a modern artist Stevens once said, "What our eyes behold may well be the text of life brought to one's meditations on the text and the discourses of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality." In essence the idea expressed here-that looking at something, pondering it, as according to the individual perception, are all equally important-lives within Wallace Stevens Harmonium poems and other modern paintings. Take the examples given in by Socha in his article. There is an undeniable connection between Stevens' poet "Sunday Morning" and Edouard Manet's Woman with Parrot on canvas painting. Both focus on women who seem to be poised in thought, seemingly in a trance somewhere between reality and the imagination, indulging in a delicate orange next to an exotic bird. A second example can be seen between the cubist painter Georges Braque's Still Life with Violin and Pitcher and Stevens "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon". Both forms of art are unclear, changed by the artist so the subjects are viewed or understood by the audience differently. Socha observes brilliantly about the separate pieces, "reality gets imaginatively reworked by a single ordering consciousness to create a new vision, wholly one's own, but no less real or recognizable."

**The Influence of Nietzsche**

Although Stevens denies that Friedrich Nietzsche influenced his writing, the poems in Harmonium seem to reflect many of the philosopher's ideas. These include restraint verses unbridled passion in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "perspective over fact" in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (Rader, 178). To explore the hypothesis of philosophical impact, author B.J. Leggett wrote Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext. This novel compiles conclusive research using intertextuality to prove that Stevens' poetry includes concepts Nietzsche was famous for introducing into the mainstream population. "Nietzschean's writings, like that of Stevens, have engendered interpretations that are frequently at odds with each other." Two of the biggest consistencies between the poet and philosopher are that both rely on interpretation instead of fact, and subsequently, Nietzsche's questioning of the truth is similar to Stevens' "supreme fiction" - the idea that speculative beliefs are the only truth and reality is simply what the imagination constructs in response to its environment. Supreme fiction seems to tie in closely to solipsism, and together these ideas create a world based almost solely off the individual.

A perfect example of possible Nietzsche influence can be found in the Stevens' poem "Sunday Morning". The detailed writing portrays a woman enjoying the secular beauty and sensual joy of the natural world. "What is divinity if it can only come/ In silent shadows and in dreams?" the poet states. "Shall she not find in comforts of the sun/ In pungent fruit and bright green wings, or else/ In balm or beauty of the earth" (Stevens, 17-21). These lines seem to insist that the current existence is more important than the possibility of the next, using natural beauty as proof. This nearly mirrors a quote taken from page 52 of Nietzsche's The Birth Of Tragedy, "Only as aesthetic phenomenon can the world be justified to all eternity." The quote continues, "Although our consciousness of our own significance does scarcely exceed the consciousness a painted soldier might have of the battle in which he takes part." Life is an illusion human creat - a supreme fiction based off visual perception translated into fact. As Leggett states on page 251 of Early Stevens, "The truth must remain veiled in the riddles and enigmas of appearance" (Rader, 179).

**The Influence of William Carlos Williams**

"This is not to say that his poetry is like theirs, nor should one confuse the identities of seven poets, but it is true that the reading of one of the seven would open a door, however small or well-concealed, to a reading of the others" (Doyle, 209).

Wallace Stevens is believed to have first become acquainted with William Carlos Williams and his poetry in 1915 while living in New York City. At the time, Stevens was thirty-six year old lawyer and business man who had not yet published his first collection of poetry, Harmonium. The thirty-two year old Williams was living in Rutherford, New Jersey with his wife, Florence Herman, and spending weekends in the city visiting his artistic and literary companions. A common interest in modern art and French literature brought the men together when both became members of the literary societies that produced the magazines "Rouge" and "Others". Of these modernists, Williams is the only contemporary of Stevens whose personal advice is documented as having directly influenced Stevens' poetry. One year after their meeting, their first letter was exchanged in June of 1916. William critiqued Stevens' poem, "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," including specific references to how the last lines should be altered. This advice was taken by Stevens' and a series of critiques followed, with Stevens' also contributing his thoughts on Williams' work.

The discussions of the two men focused on the broad sense of whether or not the a poem could be recognized as "good", as their differing views on specific elements which define poetry prevented them from coming to mutual conclusions regarding the purpose of their works. MacLeod cites these differences as a, "familiar point of contention between them. Williams could joke about this because he was sure of Steven's friendship" (77). Williams was known as an outspoken supporter of the imagist movement, a cause which advocated a definition of the proper use of form. Stevens, contrasting, was indifferent regarding the use of form, and refused to discuss its relevance within his works. The men also disagreed on the significance of place to poetry. Williams found this to be the key element of a work while Stevens advocated that place and emotion must coexist as equals.
The Influence of Marianne Moore

"The web of friendship between poets is the most delicate thing in the world--and the most precious." -- Wallace Stevens to Marianne Moore two years before his death (Shulze 1).

Stevens friendship with Marianne Moore was more than just a companionship. The two shared a unique bond—a bond that inspired Stevens. Stevens believed that without Moore's support, his creative attempts would have failed. Moore had an extremely influential role in his poetic progress. Together, the two represent two threads that weave a very valuable web (Shulze 1). Both poets reviewed each others' work, published many exchanges between each other, and also interacted through unpublished letters, diaries, etc. They shared both a poetic and personal relationship (Shulze 2).

While many authors ridiculed Stevens for his bashfulness and reserve, Moore attributed such reticence to both his creative passion and artistic frustration. In a conversation with Archibald MacLeish following the publication of Harmonium, Moore said "Well I think that [his refusal to talk about about his work] is the result of a really acute and intensely concentrated interest in the work...I think I understand his aloofness, although I've never met him" (Shulze 40). This conversation took place before Moore's and Stevens' relationship had actually begun to develop.

As Moore became more familiar with Stevens' work, and the two became acquainted, their friendship truly flourished.

Themes in Harmonium

"The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have." --Wallace Stevens

Elegiac and Anti-Elegiac Themes

According to Jahan Ramazani, author of Elegy and Anti-Elegy in Stevens' Harmonium: Mockery, Melancholia, and the Pathetic Fallacy (listed as an attachment), Stevens' focus on imagination is compensation “both for the disappearance of the gods and for the loss of a non-violent reality” (568). The Great War brought about death in greater numbers and with more powerful weapons than mankind had seen in previous wars. It was obvious new technology was inclined towards destruction instead of altruism. From this conclusion sprouted a yearning for the kinder past, and Wallaces's tendency toward elegiac notions. Two works in Harmonium, “The Death Of A Soldier” and “The Snow Man”, are perfect examples of Wallace's lament for the dead, using simile and metaphor proposed through seasons. The latter of the poems invokes pathetic fallacy to reflect the elegy, citing the “misery in the sound of the wind,/ In the sound of a few leaves,” (Stevens, 8-9).

Despite obvious elegiac intentions, "Stevens represents himself as an anti-elegist" in several well-known Harmonium works (Ramazani, 569). "The Emperor Of Ice Cream" is the best model for this style, since it describes odd persons in society as facetious mourners to attend a deceased seamstress' funeral. "Wench's" hang around the parlor, flirting with the boys who bring them flowers, both parties oblivious to the poor woman's feet sticking out from the sheet that covers her body, cold and naked. The lack of sorrow and ridiculous literary wordplay (“in kitchen cups concupiscient curds” (Stevens, 64)) emphasize Wallace Stevens' satire of religious burial rituals. The elegiac and anti-elegiac themes, while they seem at odds, both create suitable responses to the disasters of the Great War - one wishes for idyllic days of yore, while the other admonishes the public for thinking humanity could ever become civilized.

Death and Nothingness

Death and nothingness are themes in three of Wallace Stevens' famous poems. These poems are "Domination of Black", "The Snowman", and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird". “Domination of Black” is a poem that explores the differences between perception and imagination, and it does so through the “black aspect of reality” (Burney, Ch 1). Death is an emotional subject for anyone, so naturally it is very difficult to keep as a perception before it turns to pure emotion. This poem is full of visual representations of perception. The poem not only illustrates the colors inside of the room but outside as well. "When Stevens uses the image of a room with a window, he is thinking of the mind with some form of perception, characteristically visual" (Burney, Ch 1). The lack of color throughout this poem just further emphasizes the black and nothingness that he is trying to convey.

The fire inside of the house correspond with the falling leaves outside. These two are in constant conflict with the striding hemlocks throughout the poem. The two images of the fire and the falling leaves brings about the memory of the cry of the peacocks. The cry of the peacock in this poem start out as just a memory, but do eventually become audible when they are not able to do anything to stop the hemlocks. "The importance of this poem is that there is something about the absence of light, and therefore the absence of color, that the mind cannot name, and therefore cannot tame" (Burney, Ch 1).

According to Burney, the end of “Domination of Black” is transformed into the element of cold. This element also appears in Stevens' "The Snowman". Burney discusses that black and cold were two qualities that were indistinguishable to Stevens. Collectively, cold, nothingness, and death tend to dominant the endings of Stevens' works. However, the element of cold appears in the beginning of "The Snowman". The poem stresses the frozenness of the soil and sap. This deep freeze leaves nature creating nothing but a sound of bareness, symbolizing nothingness. (Burney, Ch 1).

The element of cold, also in the form of snow, is also seen in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird". The poem focuses on the prolonged disturbance of the eye of a blackbird. Moreover, this eye appears to be watching its the individual observing it, rather than being watched by the observer. Throughout the poem, the concept of threat, as well as the concept of death, bounce back and forth between the observer and the bird. The observer worries about his death, and the blackbird's death. His emotions transform from involved to indifferent. In addition, themes from the previous poems appear as it is revealed that it will continue to get darker, and it will continue to snow. (Burney, Ch 1).

These ideas of blackness and coldness symbolize the concept of death and nothingness. This concept is nameless, palpable, dominant, and constant. The mind can not tame it.

"Death is the mother of beauty"
Stevens’ idea that “death is the mother of beauty” is one of the most studied and well-known concepts to appear in Harmonium. In order to trace the origins of this concept, one must first look at “Peter Quince at the Clavier”, an early example of Stevens' theme of the importance of physical beauty versus the possibility of an afterlife. In this poem, “a beautiful woman's humiliating encounter with lustful elders becomes a meditation on the nature of beauty (and the beauty of nature)” (Poetry Foundation). The poem submits that the woman's physical beauty is incredibly permanent, and is part of a natural cycle. The woman's beauty “exists forever in memory and through death in the union of body and nature: ‘The body dies; the body’s beauty lives. / So evenings die, in their green going, / A wave, interminably flowing’” (Poetry Foundation)."

The line “Death is the mother of beauty” comes from Stevens’ poem “Sunday Morning”. “‘Sunday Morning” is an attempt to reconcile humankind's position in the universe as both a spiritual and earthly manifestation while at the same time casting off the tattered cloak of ecclesiastical dogma that has for so long controlled and constrained the imaginative and ephemeral side of humanity that is the soul” (Associated Content). The poem begins with a great deal of peaceful imagery. However, as soon as the speaker contemplates religion and the sacrifice of Jesus, her outlook becomes decidedly pessimistic, losing sight of the beauty around her. This is an excellent example of Stevens' feelings on religion and the metaphysical, first hinted at in “Peter Quince at the Clavier”. For Stevens, it is death rather than God that is the source of all beauty: “Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dream and our desires.” Without death, there would be no appreciation for life or beauty, as they would be ever-present, no longer fleeting - the appreciation of these things would be completely lost. Susanna's beauty is, therefore, eternal.

Life and Imagination

Keeping in mind Stevens’ ideas behind Susanna's eternal beauty presented in “Peter Quince at the Clavier”, a number of new ideas begin to manifest themselves to the reader throughout many other poems throughout Harmonium. The best example of this is in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”. The poem ends “It was evening all afternoon. / It was snowing / And it was going to snow. / The blackbird sat / In the cedar- limbs.” Armed with the idea behind Susanna’s transcendent physical beauty, the reader is able to sense that the poem's wintry tone is an optimistic one. After all, winter brings about the death of the majority of vegetation in most areas - and, as Stevens has pointed out earlier in Harmonium, “Death is the mother of beauty.” Adding to this train of thought, it is important to note that Stevens placed “Peter Quince at the Clavier” before “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”, suggesting the likelihood that Stevens intended for his readers to enter the latter with the mindset conveyed in the former. Several critics have also noted that Stevens borrowed the name Harmonium from “a small parlor organ used in family hymn singing” (Morris, 29). This seems an ironic choice, as so much of the poetry included in Harmonium deals with anti-religious messages.

Contrast

Throughout Harmonium, in both the arrangement of the poems and within the poems themselves, Stevens juxtaposes his own ideas and creates paradoxical statements. These contrasts become a theme in this collection and are exemplified in “The Emperor of Ice Cream”, “The Comedian as the Letter C”, and “To the One of Fictive Music”, as well as in the placement of “Depression Before Spring” and “Banal Sojourn”. One of the most obvious and well known contrasts is in the line “Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.” from “The Emperor of Ice Cream”, which juxtaposes the fresh and new flowers with the old and stale newspapers (Bevis 456). Bevis also points out the contrasts in the portrayal of the color green in “Banal Sojourn” and “Depression Before Spring”, which appear directly across from each other. “Banal Sojourn” uses the color green a “strong image of despicable rank growth” as it is associated with a malady, a problem, and as something to be damned. The green color right after in “Depression before Spring” presents green as the opposite, as being desired and associated with the “slipper green” of the queen that the writer fantasizes about as an answer to his problems (457).

One reason for the contrast in Harmonium is the inner dichotomy of reality and imagination in Stevens' poetry as a whole. Bernard Heringman says "The World of Wallace Stevens' poetry has always been two, 'things as they are' and 'things imagined'”(325). He cites the contrast in “To the One of Fictive Music”, where the poet claims poetry or music must come from and reflect reality, yet claims it is the "strange unlike", the "imagination that we spurned and crave." Stevens claims real art, real poetry is both reality and imagination, and that paradox is one that runs throughout his work (Heringman 326). The perfect example of this particular contrast between real and imaginary as well as the contrast in Harmonium in general can be found in the poem “The Comedian as the Letter C”. As a whole, the poem is the “hero” Crispin’s “search for a valid esthetic” in which he alternatively searches between reality and the physical nature, sun, summer and south that symbolize it and imaginary and the art, moon, winter and north that symbolize that (Heringman 325). The very first line of the poem, “Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil” is contradicted throughout the rest of the poem, most directly in the beginning of Part IV with the line “Nota: his soil is man's intelligence”. There are two opposing endings to the poem and the middle is a series of contradictions and confusions throughout Crispin’s journey. Overall, “The Comedian as the Letter C” is obviously, insistently, built on contrast.” (Cook 193).

Harmonium consists of contrasting ideas and overarching contradiction that mark much of Wallace Stevens' writing. Stevens says, “the law of contrast is crude” (Letters 445), and he creates a world accordingly full of confusion and searching with few definitive statements or unconstrained extremes.

Contemporary Critics on Harmonium

Although Harmonium was Stevens’ first full-length publication, he was not unknown to the literary world before 1923. Many of his poems, including the well received “Peter Quince at the Clavier” appeared singly in literary magazines as far back as 1916. There was a debate circling Stevens’s fans as to whether or not he should publish a volume as “being afraid...that he might not glitter in the bulk” (Van Doren 400). These fears were allayed after Harmonium was released due to its warm critical reception. Reviews of Stevens’ work appeared in The Nation, Bookman, Boston Evening Transcript, Freeman, and Springfield Republican. The most shining review exalted Harmonium as it “places its author high among those wits of today who are also poets - T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Maxwell Bodenheim, Alfred Kreymborg, William Carlos Williams, Aldous Huxley, Sacheverell Sitwell, and Robert Graves” (400).

Reviewers praised Stevens for his “living roundness of diction” (CTC 5) and having a “unique pungency” (Bookman 58), but they also said he “will never be much read “ (Van Doren 402). His work was popular amongst literary scholars, but he was not widely popular amongst the laity. As J.G. Fletcher of the Freeman wrote, his work was “more important than the externals from the knowledge of the crowd” (Fletcher 8). Fletcher also acknowledged that Stevens was “the most accomplished and not one of the least interesting of modern American poets” (8). Mark Van Doren completes Fletcher’s assessment by commenting "some day there will be a monograph on him and his twentieth century kin who ranged their restless faculties over at the deserts and hill-tops of the world to inaugurate a new era...which may be short and may be long. That monograph will pay particular tribute to the pure phrasing of Mr. Stevens... and it will not be wrong if it finds him more durable, even with all his obscurity, than much of the perfect sense and the perfect rhyme that passed for poetry in his day; if it represents his work as driving permanently, like frozen chords, through certain memories - the overtone of our droll, creedless time" (Van Doren 402). Van Doren predicted that even though Stevens was not appreciated widely in his time, his influence and poetry would survive to be studied, as it certainly is, today.
In an attempt to delineate the use of "sensualism" and the significance of poem arrangement in Harmonium, contemporary critics have offered numerous explanations and theories supported by primary information (such as personal correspondences), and rhetoric sustained by textual analysis. A few examples of the comprehensive spectrum of contemporary criticism surrounding Harmonium follow.

"Verbal and Erotic Excess"

Charles Berger's article, "A Book too Mad to Read: Verbal and Erotic Excess in Harmonium" analyzes Stevens' ability to "achieve intimacy with his audience" by using reticent female figures in the poetry of Harmonium while the male speakers often go "unanswered" to create an atmospheric silence in which only the reader can fill in with their intuitions and speculations. Berger dissects "Peter Quince at the Clavier" through the lens of interpenetration between the speaker and Susanna due to the "resentment produced by feelings of untouchable excess" (176). Another poem discussed is "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," which poses verbal excess as a substitute to insatiable "erotic demands" (176).

Literary Transitions

Frank Doggett's article, "The Transition from Harmonium: Factors in the Development of Stevens" attempts to delineate the motivation behind Stevens' literary transitions while compiling Harmonium through personal letters as a form of explication. Doggett mentions Stevens' intention of creating "true poetry" in which ideas and images exist uniformly and independently. Doggett points out this idea through a correspondence between Stevens and Ronald Lane Latimer. "As soon as people are perfectly sure of a poem they are just as likely as not to have no further interest in it; it loses whatever potency it had" (122). The ambiguity in Harmonium could be a result of Stevens' efforts to write in accordance with the precept of "pure" or "true poetry".

Poem Arrangement

Stevens' placement of poems appears to be random. Before Harmonium, Stevens had previously published sixty-seven of the seventy-four poems. There was an apparent arrangement to these poems, as he published these poems mostly in groups of two, based on theme (Bevis). He does not base their placement on subject, style, or assumption. In "The Arrangement of Harmonium," Bevis argues that Stevens' juxtaposition of dissimilar poems in the arrangement of Harmonium aids one another in illuminating obscure images or symbols. His poems differ from one other with contrasting features such as antithesis, contradictions, changes of tone and perspective. One section of this article examines in depth, the theme of "green" between "Banal Sojourn" and "Depression before Spring". "In 'Banal Sojourn' Stevens mixes two metaphor patterns, summer versus unnamed seasons, and Earth versus sky" (462). "Green" in the context of "Banal Sojourn" is the enemy of the spirit whereas "green" suggests the spirit itself in "Depression before Spring" (463).

Sensualism

Charles Altieri's article, "Intentionality as Sensuality in Harmonium" touches upon Stevens' fascination with the marriage between the senses and the ability to articulate these sensory experiences through poetry, surpassing the "confining artistic ambitions" of the modernist era of impressionism. Altieri analyzes "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" much differently than Berger. Instead of addressing the intemperance of the speaker's language as Berger does, Altieri comments on the function of sensory perception in the poem and "how distant even personality can become from its own immediate needs and desires" (164). Altieri finds Stevens a significant and study-worthy poet "because he could exemplify what happens when poetry accepts the imperative that whatever art might claim for spirit has to be based on a radical commitment to the primacy of the senses" (165).

Syntactical and Printing Errors

William Heyen's article titled "The Text of Harmonium" indicates syntactical and printing errors both minor and major in Stevens' Harmonium. He acknowledges the second publishing of Harmonium by Alfred A. Knopf as being the most faithfully reproduced edition of Stevens' collection of poetry. Heyen chooses not to discuss these errors in significance since "too many varying articles are involved" (147). The poems specified are listed in alphabetical order: "The Comedian as the Letter C," "Infant Marina," "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," and "Stars at Tallapoosa".

Poetic Ingenuity

Deatt Hudson's short article titled "Wallace Stevens" praises Stevens' work for surpassing the "super-cliché" conventionalities of modern American poetry during the first half of the 20th century. Hudson argues that at this point in history, the rational and materialistic American frame of mind was so preoccupied with economic and political chaos that sensualism was almost entirely disregarded. Stevens' remarkable ability to internalize the "realities of his time have acted only as springboards to the lush worlds of the imagination" (138). Hudson extols Stevens' poetry for capturing the richness of "these nuances, these harmonies, and these subtle shadings of experience" (137).

Vicissitudes of Criticism

Riddel's book-length article titled "The Contours of Stevens' Criticism" calls for a reevaluation of Stevens' work through the vicissitudes of criticism while surpassing T.S. Eliot's ability to embody the voice of the "modern American man" (106). One critic named Dr. Williams judged Stevens' poetry through the lens of contemporary American history as being adversely affected by the "failures of poetry, the disintegration of the modern imagination, and the rout of the self" (117). Riddel examines the crests and troughs of Stevens' criticism in numerous essays such as in William York Tindall's which "violates contexts, confuses continuity, and runs amuck with puns at the expense of Stevens' more relevant ambiguities" (127). By doing so, Riddel wishes to preserve the intrinsic value Stevens' Harmonium and canon have to offer to future generations of literary criticism.

The Imagination

Roy's in-depth article titled "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination" terms the human condition as the "predicament of man," or the inability of the modern American man to disassociate himself with the trivialities of his society; to embrace the sensual aspects in life through the discernment of experience and imagination. Roy contrasts the styles in Transport to Summer and Harmonium through an epistemological lens where the "awareness of the texture of reality functions as a factor at once for the enriching and for the limiting of experience" (562) whereas Transport to Summer is a "journey on which we are carried to the clear light of the sun, to reality" (570). Roy attempts to address the majority of poems in both collections as well as mentioning the poems in Ideas of Order (1935,1936) in section II of his article. The epigraph in this article that speaks of the metaphorical war between the sky and the mind is referred to quite often throughout as an engendered quality of Stevens' poetry—striving for the comprehension of the "full life of the imagination" (582).
Stevens' "New Mythology"

Sexon's article "The New Mythology of Wallace Stevens" pays a tribute to Stevens' poetry for finding the modern world's new mythology based on "a new faith, a new belief based not upon the past, but upon the present, a belief beyond belief that will suffice in this humanistic and skeptical age" (9). This "skeptical age" is fairly reminiscent of Deatt Hudson's article where sensualism finds no place in the preoccupied state of the chaotic and rational mind of the modern American man. Although this article doesn't focus entirely on Harmonium, Sexon provides an interesting argument within sections divided by mythological terms or "noble truths" (10). Sexon uses "The Comedian as the Letter C" to indicate Stevens' dispelling of the ancient traditions of the gods and doctrines. The next section delineates the new mythology's function of disillusionment from the heavens and man's modern duty to "confront the real" (11). Other topics of concise discussion include the landscape's use, the complete discarding of the old mythology, and the inexorable clutch of myth on mankind where Sexon's *circulus in probando* leads to the conclusion: "the new mythology of Wallace Stevens, it turns out, is really the old mythology expressed in terms of a different view of reality and known to be a mythology" (17).

Works Cited:


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