

ROBERT BUTTEL

Wallace Stevens

The Making of Harmonium



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WALLACE STEVENS

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Harmonium

BY ROBERT BUTTEL

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*For Helen and Ed Thwaites
and Helen, Jeff, and Steve*

Preface

IN A STYLE that ranges from the exquisiteness of a miniaturist to the rhetoric of a bold comedian or the sober eloquence of a deeply thoughtful poet, Wallace Stevens took great risks. And though we are well beyond the time when a good many critics assigned his poems to the periphery of serious literature as merely the impeccable, opulent, and clever creations of a dandy, his style does present a challenge to the critic: even the most sympathetic readers must cringe occasionally when Stevens' effects seem finical or capricious or when rhetorical virtuosity seems to become an end in itself. But more often than not, the style is not divorced from substance, and the sensuous, urbane, dazzling, and initially perplexing surfaces of the poems—surfaces enjoyable in themselves—draw the reader into surprising depths of thought, emotion, and aesthetic pleasure. It is this that makes Stevens' voice a major one in twentieth-century poetry and his style worthy of study.

As Frank Doggett has said, "In Stevens' case, the beginnings of style are hidden between the undergraduate pieces and the maturity of *Harmonium*. There his style suddenly is, and it seems enough for some critics that it remain that way."¹ An examination of the undergraduate writings, plus ten poems that were published in *The Trend* in 1914 and the considerable amount of manuscript material generously made available by Stevens' daughter Holly, does help though to uncover those beginnings and make possible an analysis of Stevens' development as he achieved his first certain and mature style in the poems of *Harmonium*. There were, of course, variations and developments in the

¹ "Wallace Stevens' Later Poetry," *ELH* (June 1958).

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poetry beyond that volume, but they grew out of the early achievement.

To consider briefly the literary situation inherited by Stevens' generation is to understand why he demanded a new freedom within which he could experiment and discover techniques equal to his emerging view of poetry's high function; he would come to claim, in fact, that "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."² Not that he was the first to hold this attitude toward poetry; indeed, he was no doubt familiar very early with Pater's desire for a religion of art and Santayana's insistence on a greatly enlarged role for poetry and the imagination—in place of formal religion—as the means by which man could establish a harmony between himself and nature. Arnold and Ruskin, furthermore, had realized that the old cultural order was dying and that a new order was imminent. And yet the poets generally had not discovered satisfactory means for coping with the cultural and epistemological changes that were taking place.

Stevens began writing poetry at a time when realism and naturalism were profoundly altering the course of fiction but when American poetry for the most part lay becalmed in the doldrums of the genteel tradition, when the shadow of the Victorians and Romantics hung over American and British poetry. Swinburne, who anticipated Stevens in some important ways, was only partially successful in the results he derived from his inordinate emphasis on a music of poetry insulated from mundane discourse, as though this alone would compensate for the desolation he felt over life's brevity and the absence of an afterlife—a daring atti-

² "Adagia," *Opus Posthumous*.

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tude for him to assume at the time. The influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, who sought, in reaction to the ugliness of a materialistic age, a rarefied beauty combining art and a neo-medieval religiosity, was still strong. The English Parnassians and Decadents were responding to the example of French poetry, but the results were largely ephemeral. Stevens' early poems are marked by many of the poetic sentiments and practices of the era; indeed, even his later poems incorporate with subtle modulations some of the qualities drawn from these sources. But, aside from foreshadowings in his undergraduate work and manuscript poems, Stevens' authentic style did not really emerge until he felt the impact of the new movements in art and literature which attained full force in the period just before World War I. In his autobiography, Yeats, in referring to the effect on him of his sojourn in Paris, quotes Synge as saying to him, "Is not style born out of the shock of new material?" Stevens must have experienced such a shock when he saw before him the wealth of new material and techniques which he could seize upon and make his own. While Pound, in a letter to William Carlos Williams, said that he "sweated like a nigger to break up the clutch of the old . . . Harper's etc.," Stevens worked in his own way toward the same end, encouraged by his association with friends among the avant-garde and by the general explosion of the new poetry. He assimilated the innovations and influences that inspired many other experimental poets of the period, but this surely does not account for his distinctiveness. The chief concern is not the influences themselves so much as what Stevens did with them in shaping his own style and technique as he rose far beyond the level of mere experimentalism.

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Stevens' style arises out of his deeply felt need to discover valid ideas of order in an age of cultural change and confusion. Furthermore, he is a direct descendant of the Romantic poets in his unceasing exploration of the relationships between the inner, subjective, human point of view and outer, objective nature—or, as he so often stated it himself, between imagination and reality. The Romantic problem was intensified for Stevens, however, since science and the new philosophies had made it vastly more difficult to accept a transcendental solution; he recognized a naturalistic and changing reality, or what he called in "July Mountain" (*Opus Posthumous*) "an always incipient cosmos." For Stevens, then, the problem lay in reconciling the stasis of poetic art with this constant change. In his poem "Anecdote of the Jar," for example, the jar and the wilderness in Tennessee are interdependent. By placing an aesthetic object, the jar, in the midst of the tangled wilderness, he gives a focus to nature: "The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild." At the same time, he creates an order that accords with human value, "a momentary stay against confusion," as Frost put it. But the jar alone is a dead thing, "gray and bare": "It did not give of bird or bush." The poem, however, includes both the life and beauty of nature and the order and beauty of art, plus the wit and feeling of the human consciousness reflecting on their conjunction; here is the "blissful liaison, / Between himself and his environment" ("The Comedian as the Letter C"). This is what Stevens learned to demand of his poems, that as imaginative creations they contain and elicit the essence of reality itself. Of course, most art has this intention, but for Stevens it became a consuming imperative in an age which generally considered poetry irrelevant. For him "life and poetry are one" ("The Rela-

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tions Between Poetry and Painting," *Necessary Angel*). Consequently his development reflects the search for a style that demonstrates and dramatizes by its daring and refinement the power of the imagination to apprehend and order reality, making it a felt presence.

Tentatively at first and then with growing assurance, Stevens mastered the means of incorporating his feelings and perceptions in indelible forms. Characterized by bold, bizarre, and immaculate phrasing, imagistic concreteness, incisive prosody, and the pictorial and tonal effects of color, his poems achieve a remarkable vividness, a palpability; and with techniques derived from the Symbolists, he extended this mastery to the intangible, imbuing those areas of reality accessible only to the imagination with the same vividness. At the same time, by disarming ridicule with such forms of irony as an objective, amused view of self, and by a recognition of the banal as he sought those supreme points of identification with reality, he could succeed as a Romantic poet in the twentieth century. And, finally, although he freed himself from the "clutch of the old," he never really dispensed with the nobility of poetic tradition. With these stylistic elements at his command, he ranged from serious playfulness to the sublime in his desire to create poems which could withstand the hostile pressures of, and have meaning in, a materialistic age and naturalistic universe. Stevens' style, then, developed as an integral and organic manifestation or correlative of his central themes. The poem itself "is a nature created by the poet," said Stevens in "Adagia."

In reaching the point of poetic maturity, he evaded many tempting dead ends: a rarified aestheticism, the decorative arabesques and mordant ironies of the Decadents (akin to the followers of Art Nouveau in the other arts), the Sym-

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bolists' obsessive desire to penetrate the veil of the absolute through the magic of art, the limitations of Impressionism and Imagism, and the eccentricities of innovation for the sake of innovation. He flirted with all these dangers and others as well; but acquiring what he needed from the new, he maintained a balance that necessitates our reading him as a significant poet in the perspective of the whole English and American tradition. Contemporaries of Stevens faced many of the same problems and drew on many of the same sources of inspiration that he did, though few cast their nets so wide or brought their sources together for such concentrated thematic purpose. Although he was to reach his thirty-sixth year before achieving his mastery and uniqueness, it is in the Harvard writings that we see the first slight indications of his later style.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude to Holly Stevens—to put first things first—is profound, for by letting me use a large number of her father's early manuscript poems and other material she has made possible the kind of study I have undertaken. I am all the more grateful to her since she has allowed the manuscript poems to appear in print for the first time in this book even though they will become part of a projected edition of Stevens' juvenilia. Nor do her contributions to my book end here: she has patiently answered numerous questions and provided much crucial information and many clues and suggestions without my having to ask; furthermore, she has read portions of my manuscript and as a result saved me the embarrassment of many omissions and errors.

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importance had not yet dawned on most academicians. Furthermore, it was because of a later conversation I had with Professor Tindall that I began this study.

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Wyncote, Pa., June 1966

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WALLACE STEVENS

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I. Part of His Education

WHEN Wallace Stevens entered Harvard in 1897, he was not an untutored provincial. True, Reading, Pennsylvania, was a provincial city, surrounded by fertile Pennsylvania Dutch farm country and by woods and mountains where Stevens was fond of hiking, but it was not without culture. It was a vigorous industrial city with a tradition extending back to William Penn, a city of burghers who nevertheless loved music and had a sense of pagantry, apparent, for example, in their annual evening festival on the Schuylkill River, with canoes and other boats floating downstream in a line, lighted by Chinese lanterns. More directly, Stevens' own home provided a favorable cultural environment. He was one of a family who "were all great readers," and his father, a lawyer who contributed poems to the *Reading Times*, was a man seriously concerned with his son's intellectual and aesthetic development, writing Stevens letters of sensible advice on his studies and the arts while he was at Harvard. Before he left for college, Stevens had demonstrated a flair for language by winning the *Reading Eagle* Prize for Essay and the Reading Boys' High Alumni Medal for Oration; he had also written some poetry.¹ He was, then, a young man ready by background, inclination, and ability to make his way in the

¹ The festivals on the Schuylkill are briefly described in editorial comment concerning some pictures of the Reading era in the *Historical Review of Berks County*, xxiv, iv (Fall 1959), 108. The rest of the information is from Michael Lafferty's article, "Wallace Stevens, A Man of Two Worlds" in the same issue, pp. 109-113, 130-132. Also, Stevens reflected Reading's interest in music: according to his daughter, Holly Stevens, he sang in a choir and a quartet.

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undergraduate literary circles at Harvard. In his sophomore year some of his poems and prose began to appear in the *Harvard Advocate*, the college literary magazine of which he would become president before he left Harvard in 1900.

With a literary interest already nurtured at home, Stevens was to find a further stimulus at Harvard, where under the elective system he took a high proportion of his courses in composition and literature, French and German as well as English.² The faculty itself was distinguished and independent-minded, encouraging and cultivating the able student. It could boast such men as Santayana, for example, whom Stevens got to know and whose thought, even though he did not have a course with him, would play an influential part in Stevens' own thinking.³ The *Harvard Monthly* and the *Advocate* were centers of lively student interest in writing, and Stevens formed friendships that would last beyond college with such students as Witter Bynner, Arthur Davidson Ficke, Walter Conrad Arensberg, and Pitts Sanborn. All were strongly interested in the arts; Arensberg, for example, according to a contemporary, "knew all that was to be known about Walter Pater."⁴

Stevens' undergraduate writing reveals the seriousness of his own interest in aesthetic matters at this early stage of his career. And yet, although this work manifests a growth in

² See Appendix 1 for the complete transcript of courses Stevens took at Harvard.

³ Any study of Stevens' intellectual development would have to take Santayana's work into account. As Frank Kermode says, "Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900) is a key book for the thought of Stevens." *Wallace Stevens* (Edinburgh and London, 1960), p. 81. See also p. 18 and note 12.

⁴ See Lafferty, p. 113. Also, William Ivins is the contemporary who referred to Arensberg's knowledge of Pater: see Fiske Kimball, "Cubism and the Arensbergs," *Art News Annual*, xxiv (1955), 117.

experiment and discovery, he was to remark on a later visit to Harvard that when he was a student there, "it was commonplace to say that all the poetry had been written and all the paintings painted."⁵ Surely there was a general sterility in English and American poetry at that time. The early poems of Yeats were still permeated with the style and mood of Pre-Raphaelite verse; the poetry of Hardy and Housman was not significantly changing the direction of poetry at large. Such Decadents as Wilde, Symons, and Dowson were reduced to mocking and shocking middle-class moral attitudes while they celebrated art for art's sake in the ivory tower Tennyson had warned against in "The Palace of Art"—thus marking the end of an era and at the same time contributing to the poetry of the era to come by helping to introduce French Symbolism into English poetry. In America, the sweeping innovations of Whitman and the incisive wit and haunting suggestiveness of Emily Dickinson were largely ignored. Edmund Clarence Stedman, the well-known poet, critic, and editor of his day, spoke of the time when his *An American Anthology* appeared (1900) as a "twilight interval."⁶ Poetry seemed less and less significant in a world of science, industrialism, and middle-class culture. The Decadents and aesthetes responded by establishing a cult of artifice and beauty, while at the opposite extreme the realistic and naturalistic writers were making a determined effort to explore the actual world, sordid though it might be. The ever-recurrent problem of reconciling art and life, a problem recognized and

⁵ Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," ca. 1937, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 218. This book will be referred to hereafter as *Opus*.

⁶ See Horace Gregory and Maria Zaturenska, *A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940* (New York, 1942), p. 10.

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worried over by the Romantics and Victorians, had by the end of the century become especially acute.

The French poet, Henri Regnier, in a series of lectures given in the spring semester of 1900 at Harvard and other American colleges and universities, noted that the Symbolists had faced this conflict between the two extremes, which he put in terms of idealism and realism (or naturalism):

- . . . In the early eighties followed the reaction of idealism against realism. The new movement was headed by Paul Verlaine, Mallarmé, and others. With them slowly arose the new school of poets called "decadents" or symbolists.
- . . . Villiers d'Isle Adam was held in great respect by the young school, who considered him as a living protest against the naturalistic tendencies of the time, and as a living incarnation of idealism.
- . . . Poetry in France had been in great peril from the ever-rising wave of naturalism and realism, to which all poets were making concessions.⁷

Whether or not Stevens attended these lectures, he had already become sensitive to the nature of the conflict; in several prose pieces antedating Regnier's visit, he had developed his plots in terms of the contrasts between ideal beauty, art, and the imagination on the one hand and coarseness, disorder, and reality on the other. In these stories and sketches Stevens emphasized both the lifelessness of beauty and art detached from the actual world and the futility of the actual world ungraced by the imagination.

⁷ From summaries printed in the *Harvard Crimson*, xxxvii, 15 (Friday, March 2, 1900), 1; 17 (Monday, March 5, 1900), 1; and 23 (Monday, March 12, 1900), 1.

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More and more his Harvard work juxtaposed the world of imagination and the world of reality, and thus began his lifelong meditation on their interrelationship. Out of his constant awareness of this interrelationship evolved all the later, more specific variations of that theme and the experiments with style and technique which were refined and developed into the mature poetry of *Harmonium*.

BETWEEN THE fall of 1898 and the spring of 1900, many of Stevens' poems appeared in the *Harvard Advocate*, several in the *Harvard Monthly*, and one in *East and West*, a short-lived New York periodical. Also, ten short stories and sketches were published in the *Advocate*, not to mention many editorials after Stevens became its president.⁸ As one might expect, many of the Harvard poems are typical of the undergraduate and magazine verse of the era, verse in the ebbing Romantic and Victorian traditions. But following the appearance of most of his prose exercises, in which Stevens not only concentrated on the theme mentioned above but also anticipated some elements of his mature style, three of his later undergraduate poems show among other qualities a new wit, irony, sophistication, and forcefulness.

In the very early Harvard poems Stevens was fond of the sonnet and quatrain forms, but whatever skill he displayed in versification, the poems suffer not only from their dated stylistic qualities but also from their tendency toward sentimental effects. Indeed, most of the undergraduate poems, not just the earliest ones, are little more than competent exercises in the prevailing poetic fashions of the time. A

⁸ See Appendix II for a full chronological index of the Harvard poems and stories.

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good example is the sonnet "Vita Mea," the second Stevens poem to appear in the *Advocate* (December 12, 1898):

With fear I trembled in the House of Life,
Hast'ning from door to door, from room to room,
Seeking a way from that impenetrable gloom
Against whose walls my strength lay weak from strife,
All dark! All dark! And what sweet wind was rife
With earth, or sea, or star, or new sun's bloom,
Lay sick and dead within that place of doom,
Where I went raving like the winter's wife.

"In vain, in vain," with bitter lips I cried;
"In vain, in vain," along the hallways died
And sank in silences away. Oppressed
I wept. Lo! through those tears the window-bars
Shone bright, where Faith and Hope like long-sought
stars

First gleamed upon that prison of unrest.

It is a melodramatic utterance to be sure, but at the same time, it displays proficiency in the development of the house-prison imagery, the fulfillment of the rhyme-scheme, and the not ungraceful use of the basically iambic pattern—with such effects as "and sank in silences away." Also, a faint glimmer of Stevens' later boldness of metaphor is apparent in "raving like the winter's wife" (though the effect seems unintentionally humorous here).

The movement, imagery, and diction of the poem are distinctly Victorian and a reminder, for example, of Tennyson's *Maud*, Part Three, which proceeds from Stanza 1: "My life has crept so long on a broken wing / Through cells of madness, haunts of horror and fear, . . ." to Stanza 5: "It is better to fight for the good than to rail at the ill; / . . . , / I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assigned."

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The central metaphor in "Vita Mea" echoes the title of Rossetti's sonnet sequence, *The House of Life*. One notes also a similarity to lines in James Thompson's "The City of Dreadful Night": "I paced from room to room, from hall to hall, / Nor any life throughout the maze discerned." Such imagery, diction, and tonal quality were simply part of the poetic atmosphere of the time. Santayana, for example, while teaching at Harvard in the Nineties, was writing more controlled sonnets, but in a mood and style like that of "Vita Mea," as the following passage from his "Though utter death should swallow up my hope" suggests:

Yet have I light of love, nor need to grope
Lost, wholly lost, without an inward fire;
The flame that quickeneth the world entire
Leaps in my breast, with cruel death to cope.

And E. A. Robinson had included in his *The Torrent and the Night Before* (1896) not only many distinctive departures from conventional verse but also such poems as "Credo," which with its mixture of despair and idealism is close in effect to "Vita Mea."

I cannot find my way: there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;

.

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
The black and awful chaos of the night;
For through it all,—above beyond it all,—
I know the far-sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the Light!

"Vita Mea," with its own unaccountable shift to hope at the end, was anthologized in *Harvard Lyrics* (1899) by

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alumnus C. L. Stebbins; it is in company with a number of other student poems whose overwrought speakers insist on a vague idealistic answer to their despair over the darkness of Life. No wonder Stevens was to say many years later, "Some of one's early things give one the creeps" (*Opus*, p. xvii).

Another "Sonnet" in the *Advocate* (April 10, 1899) echoes Keats' "Bright Star." It is formally competent and as effective as its conventional and imitative manner allows.

There shines the morning star! Through the forlorn
And silent spaces of cold heaven's height
Pours the bright radiance of his kingly light,
Swinging in revery before the morn.
The flush and fall of many tides have worn
Upon coasts beneath him, in their flight
From sea to sea; yet ever on the night
His clear and splendid visage is upborn.

Like this he pondered on the world's first day,
Sweet Eden's flowers heavy with the dew;
And so he led bold Jason on his way
Sparkling forever in the galley's foam;
And still he shone most perfect in the blue,
All bright and lovely on the hosts of Rome.

It, too, is similar in style to several poems in *Harvard Lyrics*. Compare its imagery, for example, with that in a student poem called "Worth" in that volume:

I saw the old white moon above the trees
That shone on Adam in his paradise,
That shines on the everlasting rise
And fall of realms and races, land and seas.