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## Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*: Songs of Fancy and Imagination

### I

In February 1942 Stevens wrote to Hi Simons:

When a poet makes his imagination the imagination of other people, he does so by making them see the world through his eyes. Most modern activity is the undoing of that very job. The world has been painted; most modern activity is getting rid of the paint to get at the world itself. Powerful integrations of the imagination are difficult to get away from. (*Letters* 402)

The focus on imagination as a highly abstract notion is conspicuous in the essays Stevens wrote in the 1940s. The lecture entitled “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (read at Princeton in 1942) is a powerful critique of the Platonic and post-Platonic vision of imagination as spiritual and ethereal. In “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” (1943) imagination is given a privileged status, and it embraces both the aesthetic and the ethical: “It is the *mundo* of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of the reason” (*NA* 57-58).<sup>1</sup> In “Imagination as Value” (1948) Stevens speaks of “imagination as metaphysics” (*NA* 140), and this seems to be his final verdict on what he saw as a major factor determining one’s existence. In the three essays mentioned Stevens is preoccupied with a theory of the imagination as something absolutely central to the human condition. His late poetry cannot be understood without reflecting on the poet’s growing fascination with how the everyday world and the imaginative moment overlap.

The same may be said about Stevens’s first book of poetry. In a way, his poetic and critical texts of the 1940s provide an interesting supplement to the poems included in *Harmonium* just as they mark the passage from the early descriptive lyrics to such elaborate and glaringly imaginative meditations as “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” or “The Comedian as the Letter C.” If the *Harmonium* poems are fragmentary and tentative, both in

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations of titles of Stevens’s works are used throughout the essay: *CP* – *Collected Poems*; *NA* – *The Necessary Angel*.

poetic register and topical references, then the essays constitute a relatively consistent and coherent examination of the basic critical and aesthetic notions and offer multiple perspectives from which to evaluate his early poems. This applies also to his later poetry, especially *Owl's Clover* and *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, both of which explore the space outlined by the poet's sustained meditations on imagination and reality. No longer allusive and cryptic, the Stevens of the 1940s lectures helps us see his transition from Imagist impulses to the poetics drawing from British Romanticism in general, and Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular.

It was Coleridge's famous passages on primary/secondary imagination and fancy that drew Stevens's attention. What did the American poet find so fascinating about Coleridge's aesthetic? The context of *Harmonium* makes it clear that Stevens sought a kind of equilibrium between abstract imagination and chaotic reality. And this is what *Biographia Literaria* is about: for Coleridge both types or aspects of imagination point to the moment of unifying that which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates," while fancy is a "mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space" (167) and seems to subvert the very coherency of the mind. In other words, imagination is governed by the principle of abstract unification, while fancy is a free ebbing and flowing of images and associations. As such, the opposition of imagination and fancy is also the opposition of order and disorder, whole and fragment, reality and appearance, and it may be easily inscribed into a discussion of the Romantic sublime. A constant oscillation between decreation and recreation is alluded to in many fragments of the *Biographia Literaria* (as in the vision of imagination as both passive and active), and it would be evoked by Stevens as well.

The Romantic sublime may in fact be approached as fundamentally of imaginative quality. Wimsatt and Brooks quote Wordsworth's Longinian credo,

The Imagination also shapes and *Creates...* and in none does it more delight than in that of consolidating numbers into unity, and dissolving and separating unity into numbers, - alternations proceeding from, and governed by, a sublime consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers. (405-06)

As they add in their commentary, "In nothing did Wordsworth and Coleridge agree more wholeheartedly than in their association of the *imagination* with the vast, the infinite, the *shadowy ideal character*" (406). Thus, the sphere of imagination becomes sublime and infinite. This transition will appear and reappear in Stevens, culminating in Crispin the Comedian's voyage across the Atlantic.

## II

Frank Kermode started his 1960 interpretation of *Harmonium* with a reference to the poet's distinction between the real world and the *mundo* of imagination (24). The critic mentioned Coleridge and at one moment quoted Marius Bewley's symptomatic words: "the Coleridgean imagination has become the theme of Stevens's poetry as a whole in a way it never became the theme of Coleridge's poetry as a whole" (37). Yet neither Bewley nor Kermode discussed in detail how Coleridge, and then Stevens, understood "imagination" and "fancy." Basically, Kermode approached the Stevensian imagination as a power transforming the otherwise dull reality: "*Harmonium*... is a volume of poems which live or die as physical objects radiating the freshness and pleasure of a transformed reality. They live; as one goes back to them again and again, having studied in Stevens' own school the physics of their world, the riches of *Harmonium* grow continually" (25-26). This is a rather vague description, although it does justice to the potential hidden in Stevens's early poetry.

In *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (1965) Joseph N. Riddel has a similar thing to say about *Harmonium*. For him, however, "the world of *Harmonium* is pierced by a doubt, by shadows which lengthen over the imagination, accentuating the poet's isolation from things" (63). Riddel perceives the *mundo* of imagination as intricately tied up to, and even constrained by, the reality from which the poet wanted to escape. In this, it seems to me, he looks forward to the Stevens of "The Noble Rider" and "Imagination as Value," where imagination is always thought of in the context of reality and its irresistible pressures. Such a context, Riddel argues, is already present in *Harmonium*: "These poems almost shiver of their own frailty, but they leave no doubt that the slightest expenditure of imagination is a remaking of the world" (63). Or, in stronger terms, "major poems of *Harmonium* argue against the exclusiveness of the subjective life, and more than once evince uneasiness at withdrawal into a Hoon-like egocentrism" (65).

Kermode's and Riddel's pioneering interpretations passed over the nuanced Coleridgean distinctions. "Imagination" is a very general term which may imply anything, and thus serve any reading that we want to impose upon a poem. For many critics the imaginative quality of *Harmonium* has stood for the book's vagueness, haziness, and imprecision, which in turn have been associated with Stevens' debt to such poets as Poe, Verlaine or Laforgue. Thus, Albert Gelpi comprehends the Stevensian imagination as bound to the poet's aesthetic inclination which, as it were, turns out to be "an inclination toward *poesie pure*" that "expresses itself first in the sensuous colors of the imagination – those nightgowns of purple with green rings, those exotic shimmers on the sea surface

full of clouds – but its final tendency... is to merge those colors into the pure whiteness of the ‘ultimate intellect’ – if not Platonic mind, then at least the abstracted mind of the dreamer lost to the world” (63). The point about *poesie pure* is repeated many times, and it seems to constitute the gist of Gelpi’s argument. The *modo* of imagination takes on a somewhat ephemeral and spectral character, becoming the sphere of artifice and decadent detachment from the real world.

However, Stevens’s first book cannot be reduced to “pure poetry” and aesthetic escapism. True, there are many poems which seem to focus upon themselves and engage in a kind of circular argument (a poem says something that is dictated by its own linguistic idiom). But the overall structure of *Harmonium* is not so easily done with. Individual poems refer to other poems and allude to the whole; images and quotations overlap; crucial tropes (wind, vortex, etc.) are approached from different perspectives and point to different ends. The linguistic dominant is ever changing; topical references and arguments contradict one another. If Stevens’s earliest poems include “direct treatment of the thing” (to evoke the first principle of Imagist manifestos), *Harmonium* consists of poems in which reality is mediated by way of different idioms and perspectives, falling in and out of focus. It is difficult to agree with Harold Bloom, whose interpretation of *Harmonium* is based solely on the idea of the Peircean “reduction to the First Idea” and whose main reference is the Emerson of “The American Scholar.” Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” refers to the stable and static mind, while the sublime mode of *Harmonium* is ecstatic, dynamic, heterogeneous. Marianne Moore described the volume in terms of its “kaleidoscopically centrifugal circular motion” (Lee 28), and this reading seems to do justice to the lushness and extravagance of the book. Indeed, the title itself includes at least two contradictory moments – of harmony and of discordance – which do not annihilate but rather reinforce each other, producing the final effect of a spectrum of voices and colors.

Coleridge’s distinctions are helpful here. If *Harmonium* is a book of Imagination, and I think the relevance of this term is unquestionable, then it is also a book of Fancy in its Coleridgean sense. For Stevens imagination was always connected with harmony and unification, whereas fancy concerned disintegration and dispersal. Adopting the Nietzschean terminology, one could say that imagination reflects the Apollonian spirit, while fancy is of a Dionysian character. “Peter Quince at the Clavier” contains both perspectives, and in this sense it may be considered the epitome of the book (all the more because “clavier” is a kind of “harmonium”). On the one hand, there is Peter Quince playing the clavier – and this image becomes symbolic when Quince says, “the selfsame sounds / On my spirit make a music” (CP 89), and “Music is feeling, then, not sound” (CP 90). On the other hand, Stevens introduces the biblical story of Susanna and the

elders, radically transforming the musical metaphor: “The red-eyed elders watching, felt // The basses of their beings throb / In witching chords” (CP 90). Thus, the clavier is a double-edged figure: it stands for the Apollonian balance and order, but at the same time it reproduces the Dionysian moments of desire, excitement, and ecstasy. The former preserves meaning and provides us with logical chains of images and arguments; the latter diffuses meanings and violently breaks with logic.

This dichotomy informs the bulk of *Harmonium*. Some poems question the very semantic principle upon which they are ostensibly based. First, there are poems which strike us as linguistically extravagant and exaggerated: “The Ordinary Women,” “Ploughing on Sunday,” “Depression before Spring,” or the wildest fragments of “The Comedian.” In those poems Stevens develops linguistic reveries that are apparently absurd, and truly “emancipated from the order of time and space” (Coleridge 167). It is significant, however, that even here one can sense a “rage for order” – the Stevensian fancy is never completely fanciful and meaningless (as it often is in Ashbery), but then Coleridge’s notion of fancy also left room for some, however distorted and parodied, sense.

Second, there are poems in which Stevens seems to undertake a much more serious and persistent critique of the semantic principle as the poem’s dominant. His usual poetic method consists in presenting different perspectives and then trying to show that all of them are equal and equally legitimate. This is excellently done in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird” and “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” where the same object is viewed from different points and at different times, and thus becomes spectral, its essence diffused and questioned. This strategy has been recognized by some critics. For example, in his *Early Stevens*, B. J. Leggett reads *Harmonium* in terms of what he calls “Nietzschean perspectivism,” taking as his departure point the assumption that we “cannot get outside our own perspectives and thus can never escape interpretation” (214).

Visual metaphors are central to *Harmonium*, and there are at least two emblematic ways in which they manifest themselves. On the one hand, there are images of turning, shifting, circling or spinning, which convey a sense of repetition and fanciful workings of memory. In “Domination of Black” the turning of leaves, colors, flames, and planets is synonymous with memory and a specific recollection of the cry of the peacocks, and it indicates the poet’s horror of reality. On the other hand, there are poems whose hallucinatory quality is stressed by the play of images and after-images. “Valley Candle” gives an accurate description of an after-image appearing after a candle has been blown out: “Then beams of the huge night / Converged upon its [the candle’s] image” (CP 51). The late Stevens would most probably analyze the relation of the fake candlelight to the perceiving consciousness and reality; the Stevens of *Harmonium* stops short of such gestures, satisfying himself with a description.

All of these figures are epitomized in “Anecdote of the Jar,” one of the most enigmatic pronouncements to be found in *Harmonium*. Apparently, this seems to be a poem of imagination. Howard Baker and J. B. Kirby, for example, interpreted the jar as, in Patricia Merivale’s paraphrase, “a worthy symbol of creative imagination” (Merivale 527). Accordingly, the jar becomes a symbol or a metaphor and may be interpreted according to the traditional protocols of hermeneutics or New Criticism. The same protocols inform Yvor Winters’s interesting point that the poem is basically about sterility and corruption (Merivale 527) – such a negative statement is embedded in the conventional New Critical matrix as it overlooks linguistic ambiguities and contradictions that subvert the poem’s semantic coherence.

In the preface to his *Ariel and the Police*, Frank Lentricchia questions such interpretations. For him, “Anecdote” is a Poundian poem which eludes any formalist network and does not cohere into any stable message or argument (8). Lentricchia refers to the third section of “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery”:

It was when the tress were leafless first in November  
And their blackness became apparent, that one first  
Knew the eccentric to be the base of design.

(CP 151)

Having quoted this passage, he comments, “The ‘eccentric,’ or uncentered, as subversive foundation of ‘design’ understood as intention without prior conception, purpose, plan, project, scheme, plot: intention somehow unintended” (14). He also attracts our attention to the generic qualification as given by the poet: “if we learn anything from Plato about ideal things we learn that there is no time in them or for them: ideal entities are part of no story. In anecdote, however, we must have narrative and the temporal dimension” (8). That is to say, the anecdotal poem should be local, finite, stratified, and particular. It cannot be stripped of its contexts: “It took dominion everywhere” (CP 76), to quote the last line of “Anecdote of the Jar.”

Patricia Merivale recognizes the Coleridgean strain of “Anecdote” and discusses the poem within this very framework. Interestingly, she points to the Canon Aspirin section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” where she finds echoes of the Imagination/Fancy debates. For Merivale, Canon resembles Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* as he “imposes orders” that make up his own sonorous reality. The decisive line reads, “But to impose is not / To discover” (CP 403). An act of discovery, of attending to the order of the world, is of the Coleridgean mode: it epitomizes both primary and secondary imagination. To discover an order – to adjust to it, find it within oneself, identify it as an inherent part of

one's nature – can be compared this to primary imagination as “a repetition,” and to secondary imagination as “an echo of the former.” Now, the jar depicted by Stevens is evidently a figure of imposing rather than discovering the order of things:

It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.

(CP 76)

This is how the jar invents its own world and its own mythology, finally closing in upon itself in a kind of claustrophobic nightmare (this effect is invigorated by the equally claustrophobic vocabulary which centers on its own circularity: “round,” “surround,” “around,” “ground”). Merivale highlights her point by a reference to Stevens's postulate of a Supreme Fiction: “In short, to impose [order] is fanciful; to discover, imaginative. There is a Supreme Fiction, and it is the creative imagination doing its job of *discovering*.... But the Jar is rather evidently not such a Supreme Fiction; it is one of the many statue-like impositions of dead, rigid myth” (531).

### III

According to Helen Vendler, *Harmonium* is “by no means a harmony: all of Stevens is in it, and not in embryo either; but although its tonal spectrum is as diverse as the one we find in *Decorations*, it is less shocking because the tones are presented in separate units, not heaped together ruthlessly in one poem” (65). This is a decent assessment as it leaves room, and accounts, for the variety of voices, registers and tones in *Harmonium*. Stevens's tonal spectrality manifests itself in the poet's openness to the ways in which the mind can either discover or impose the order(s) of reality. Like Coleridge, Stevens privileges neither imagination nor fancy; instead, he points to the dynamism of the thinking (and thus artistic) processes that are due at the same time to the active and passive aspects of the mind. This duality permeates the poems of *Harmonium*: some of them are fanciful and disintegrate themselves and their subjects from within; some are imaginative in the sense that they move toward a discovery of the principle of unity and coherence. It is the interaction – interplay, give-and-take – of the two movements that makes *Harmonium* so rich and evocative.

Both Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom draw attention to the homogeneity and totality of *Harmonium*. Thus, they see the volume as a work in which the fanciful is inferior to, or repressed by, the imaginative. This is particularly true of Bloom's reading, which is a part of his radical reinterpretation of British and American poetry from Milton to Ashbery and Ammons. Bloom describes *Harmonium* as a reduction to the First Idea and analyzes it in the context of the Emersonian "Sublime emptiness or great American repression" (61) which, in the act of self-negation, strips imagination of itself and becomes a "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (CP 10). It is indeed impossible to account for all of Bloom's formulas, yet it is obvious that the "First Idea" is the idea of imagination and that the stripping down of all redundant attributes and features implies the process of rejecting the fanciful and the casual. Appropriately, Bloom selects for interpretation the poems that carry within themselves the principle of their unity and are reducible to indivisible "first" elements: "The Snow Man," "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," and "The Comedian as the Letter C." The first two texts are "counterpoems" (63), the former marking the process of reduction, and the latter pointing to the moment in which the self is re-imagined and re-born. "The Comedian" includes both moments and is the ultimate pronouncement of Stevens's American Sublime, "Sublime" being for Bloom synonymous with "Imagination."

Bloom's stress on the imaginative grandeur of *Harmonium*, and "The Comedian" in particular, seems justified. What is hardly acceptable, though, is his insistence on the teleological character of the volume – this also applies to his reading of "The Comedian" as a poetic *Bildungsroman* and expression of the American Romantic Selfhood in its steady, if outrageous, progress (74). Such a vision of Stevens's *oeuvre* results in a rather idiosyncratic definition of the American Sublime as a moment, however decisive, in the long and labored development of the self. For Bloom, imagination and sublimity are synonymous with repression and re-birth. Evidently, it is the fanciful – the casual, the supplementary, the redundant – which needs to be repressed as it does not contribute to the progress of the self. These imperatives can hardly be applied to the world of *Harmonium*. Not that the book does not promote imagination as an invigorating power which mediates between reality and the mind. Nevertheless, equally invigorating and important are the workings of fancy. "[O]ne first / Knew the eccentric to be the base of design" (CP 151), which is to say that the eccentric and the concentric (design) are never to be reconciled, and that the mind is "never-resting."

"The Comedian as the Letter C" is a poem in which Stevens not only reevaluated and redefined the Coleridgean notions but also insisted on the Americanness of imagination and fancy as due to a new concept of the Sublime. This bizarre work has attracted much critical attention, which has largely been directed to explaining the poem's ambiguities

and obscurities. Its first readers – Hi Simons cites Blackmur and Moore – seemed perplexed and hardly knew what to do with Stevens's tormented diction (Simons 98). Frank Kermode and Roy Harvey Pearce were skeptical about the poem. For the former “The Comedian” was a “fantastic performance: it is a narrative of obscurely allegorical intent, harsh and dream-like; and its manner is a sustained nightmare of unexpected diction” (45); the latter approached the poem as “the most difficult, most ambitious and... most inadequate of the poems in *Harmonium*... its technique is of a kind which can only inhibit the emergence of [its] meaning” (387). What is common to both Kermode and Pearce is the assumption that it is Stevens's diction and imagery, and not subject, that makes the poem unreadable. What they did not try to see was that the atmosphere of obscurity was part of the poet's purpose.

It was Kermode who noticed, somewhat incidentally, Stevens's preoccupation with the imaginative and the imaginary as the background for an alternative reading of the poem: “This is not autobiography in fancy-dress, but steps toward the necessary relation with reality. The sea cures Crispin of his feebler imaginative habits” (47). Kermode's point is clear: “The Comedian” provides us with a poetic transition from the purely Coleridgean imagination, the imagination of High European Romanticism, to the American reality which asks for a re-imagining of the world and oneself. To put it in Bloom's terms, the poem is a record of Stevens's introspective journey toward his new self which in fact exceeds an ordinary self and moves against the self (74). What is important here is that the poet crosses both the ocean and the European tradition – Stevens was determined to show the farcical and the irrelevant inherent in poetic conventions. As his determination is clearly present in the other poems of *Harmonium*, “The Comedian” may be seen as an emblem or epitome of the volume, the archetypal crossing which gives momentum to the whole of *Harmonium*.

On the surface, “The Comedian” is a poetic travelogue which records impressions of a fantastic trip from “Bordeaux to Yucatan, Havana next / And then to Carolina” (CP 29). But already in the first part Stevens calls his Crispin “an introspective voyager” (CP 29). It should be noted, then, that the transition described in the poem takes place in consciousness, and that the space outlined is the space of the self. Also, it should be added that Crispin's journey is a search for a new identity – the Atlantic ocean “Severs not only lands but also selves” (CP 30). In this respect, Crispin resembles the quester of *The Waste Land*: both start in the world of conventions and move through echoes and reflections of received meanings and ideas. The starting point is Bordeaux in France (*crispin* is the French for *comedian*). Stevens entitled the first part “The World without Imagination” but his “without” is a synonym of “after” – Crispin turns to the sea because the world he has lived in is now stripped of imagination. Crispin's quest is a search for “a

new reality” and “a new intelligence,” and he must reject “his manner to the turbulence” (CP 29) of the ocean. The latter is a scene of what Bloom calls “reduction to the first Idea,” and what Stevens describes as a process of rebirth:

He was a man made vivid by the sea,  
A man come out of luminous traversing,  
Much trumpeted, made desperately clear,  
Fresh from discoveries of tidal skies,  
To whom oracular rockings gave no rest.  
Into a savage color he went on.

(CP 30)

The last line contains a farewell: like Crispin, Stevens says goodbye to the European self which places itself at the centre of the world (this is clearly a Coleridgean moment), and becomes the Cartesian “intelligence” separated from the physical reality (“soil”).

The Atlantic is a scene of the necessary self-annihilation: Crispin is “washed away” and “dissolved in shifting diaphanes / Of blue and green” (CP 28). In one of the most puzzling moments of “The Comedian,” Stevens repeats the formulas used in “The Snow Man” and anticipates his late poems:

Crispin, merest minuscule in the gales,  
Dejected his manner to the turbulence.  
The salt hung on his spirit like a frost,  
The dead brine melted in him like a dew  
Of winter, until nothing of himself  
Remained, except some starker, barer self  
In a starker, barer world...

(CP 29)

After such repression, what knowledge? Having arrived at Yucatan, the “affectionate emigrant found / A new reality in parrot-squawks” (CP 32). The second part of the poem is an extended description of America as the land of savage colors where Crispin discovers his real self:

His mind was free  
And more than free, elate, intent, profound  
And studious of a self possessing him,



mind's endless journey as a process in which nothing is given, and anything is possible. What remains is a certain dynamism of the searching mind, the oscillation between "intelligence" and "soil." In *Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty* Herbert J. Stern writes:

The imagination, reacting against the inadequacies and negative pressures of reality, strives to create for itself a pleasure palace... Achievement of this goal, however, is equivalent to total detachment from things as they are.... If poetry is to be more than hallucination, it is necessary that the imagination be checked by reality.... Fluctuating, then, between the imagination's desire for the harmonious forms it envisages, and the reason's insistence that the poem must be a reflection of truth, the poetic process is a process of interminable conflict. (109-10)

As for "The Comedian," Stern adds: "the task before Crispin is to invent and perfect a truly native American poetry that can at once satisfy the imagination's craving for the fabulous and the reality-principle's incidence on an undistorted vision of things as they are" (153). Having this "at once" in mind, one can understand the logic and value of the last two parts. Crispin tries to achieve a kind of equilibrium between the pressure of imagination and the pressure of reality – significantly, the word "equilibrium" would appear in the 1942 essay "The Noble Rider" (*NA* 9) – and he seems to do so by yielding to the American reality and, at the same time, contesting the reality and showing its insufficiency. It is possible that Stevens was not ready to draw general conclusions from his poetic vision but he realized that the American Sublime was not a simple reversal of the Neoclassical model, and that the sublime mind – the mind in the process of re-imagining and re-creating the reality – was never satisfied. So even if the poem is, as Helen Vendler puts it, "a tale of false attempts and real regrets" (54), still it arrives at a knowledge that would encourage the poet and help him survive the long period of silence after the publication of *Harmonium*.

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