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# The Whole of Harmonium Music in Relation to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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THE WHOLE OF HARMONIUM

MUSIC IN RELATION TO THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS  
(TITLE)

BY

MARY ALICE HOLLOWELL

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
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Praised and dispraised in widely divergent criticism, the poetry of Wallace Stevens has created a dissonance among thinking men for almost half a century. "The Whole of Harmonium," as the original title selected by Stevens for his collected poems, seems a paradox equal to that of the man himself, an executive-lawyer who wrote prize-winning poetry. But if theologians, philosophers, critics, and bemused scholars have learned anything from their study of Wallace Stevens, it is a habit of wariness in approaching his written word.

It is safe to assume that "The Whole of Harmonium" says precisely what Wallace Stevens meant to say about his collected poetry; moreover, that the title implies more than first meets the eye, the ear, or the mind. The rhetoric of implication has become the signature of Wallace Stevens in the world book of poets. While he shows the lawyer's finicking respect for the weight and freight of language; a legal eye for the clause in fine print; a practiced ear for the ambiguities of language, Wallace Stevens, the poet, turns this legal talent and training into the obscure language of poetry he himself termed "the acute intelligence of the imagination."<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is the eccentric poetry that fits none of the standard literary pigeonholes. The duplicity of words he used to imply poetic meanings. Hidden clauses became images in assigned contract between theory and poetry. The ambiguities of language became the resemblances,

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<sup>1</sup>"The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," in The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination, Vintage Books. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and Random House, Inc., 1951), p. 61.

the analogies, the life blood of his poetry. Then, we can be sure "The Whole of Harmonium" is an analogy, suggested by Wallace Stevens, and is, in some way, wholly related to his poetic work. Stevens endorsed a theory of language that insists meaning is available both in and through words. He uses words neither loosely, nor without full cognizance of their implications. By dictionary definition, "harmonium" is a reed organ in which air is compressed in a bellows and driven out through the reeds. The synonym is melodeon, and Stevens has written among his proverbs that "Words are the only melodeon."<sup>2</sup> Stevens, then, is relating music to words as an instrument of music. When he has defined poetry as words, the relationship of music to his poetry becomes significant. Clearly, Stevens considered the poem an instrument of music.

It is, however, undeniable that Stevens rarely, if ever again, reached the soaring lyric heights notable in the early poems of Harmonium, his first volume of poems, published in 1923. Although he has been cited as a lyricist, he also has been damned for abandoning his lyric gift and turning to poetry labeled philosophic, didactic, ponderous, and obscure. Many readers agree, over their unabridged dictionaries, that Stevens should have stayed with the music of poetry, leaving the theory to prose. While we must grant the increased intellect and the decreased lyricism of Stevens' poetry, we yet suggest that Stevens did not abandon the music of poetry; rather, that he deliberately changed the nature of his poetic music. Stevens

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<sup>2</sup>"Adagia," in Opus Posthumous, ed. by Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1966), p. 171.



describes this change in the essay "Effects of Analogy":

It is simply that there has been a change in the nature of what we mean by music. It is like the change from Haydn to a voice intoning. It is like the voice of an actor reciting or declaiming or some other figure concealed, so that we can not identify him, who speaks with a measured voice which is often disturbed by his feeling for what he says. There is no accompaniment. If occasionally the poet touches the triangle or one of the cymbals, he does it only because he feels like doing it. Instead of a musician we have an orator whose speech sometimes resembles music.<sup>3</sup>

Stevens states firmly, "the music of poetry has not come to an end";<sup>4</sup> his music, quite simply, has changed with the changing realities that make up his world. This concept is in accord with an aesthetic that allows for no absolutes in poetry; and undanishly, Stevens was "a poet for whom the theory and practice of poetry were inseparable," as Northrup Frye pointed out in a 1957 study of Stevens.<sup>5</sup> Hi Simons, in perhaps the most perceptive analysis of Stevens' poetic quality, has termed his poetry a "lyric of ideas," defining his genre as "the combination, an intellectual lyric framed on the Symbolist principle of implication."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>"Effects of Analogy," in Necessary Angel, pp. 125-126. Essay first read as a Bergen lecture at Yale and published shortly after, in 1948, in the Yale Review.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>5</sup>Northrup Frye, "The Realistic Oricle: A Study of Wallace Stevens," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 161.

<sup>6</sup>Hi Simons, "The Genre of Wallace Stevens," Ibid., pp. 52-53.

It is impossible to separate the music of poetry, as Stevens has defined it, from the ideas expressed by the words. If Stevens has said, "words are the only melodeon," he also has said, "words are thoughts."<sup>7</sup> With few exceptions, the subject of Stevens' poetry is poetry itself, the lyric expression of his ideas about poetry. The poetic form is significant only as the instrumentality of ideas. But if poetic form "derives its significance from the whole,"<sup>8</sup> Stevens is endorsing organic form, or a unity of poetic form and content; and we may justifiably conclude that the "melodeon" is the instrument through which this unity is expressed: words, as thoughts, sounding through the musical reeds to produce the harmony of sound and thought that is Stevens' lyric of ideas.

Poetic form, of course, refers to the organization of the elements of the poem in relation to the total effect produced. This total effect is determined by the poet's particular style, the eccentric way in which he arranges and adapts language to express his ideas. This composite—the words chosen, their meanings, the sounds they make, the patterns into which the words are arranged, the ideas they express, and finally the interrelationship of all these elements—this composite creates the effect of the poem. The manner in which this is done we term the poet's style, the manifestation of his personality, the distinguishing quality by which we come to recognize the singular voice of the individual poet. Certainly, the rhetoric of implication can be

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<sup>7</sup>"The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in Necessary Angel, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup>"On Poetic Truth," in Opus Posthumous, p. 237.

cited as the distinctive feature of Stevens' style, his connotative use of language creating the total effect we identify as the poetry of Wallace Stevens. This use of rhetoric, which H. Simons terms "the Symbolist principle of implication,"<sup>9</sup> becomes the framework for Stevens' intellectual lyrics. It is at the juncture of form and content that we find Stevens' theory of poetic music activated in his poetry.

Music is assigned a definite function in poetry when Stevens defines the music of poetry as a "mode of analogy."<sup>10</sup> The connotative language of poetry Stevens bases on analogy; and he describes poetic images as the symbolic language of resemblance, or analogy. Thus, the poem itself "is almost incredibly one of the effects of analogy . . . the outcome of figures of speech or, what is the same thing, the outcome of the operation of one imagination on another through the instrumentality of the figures."<sup>11</sup> Then music, as a mode of analogy, is a method by which the imagination operates, a means to instrument the figures, or the symbolic language of poetry. The following passage from Stevens' essay "Effects of Analogy" answers his posed question, "What has this music to do with analogy?"<sup>12</sup> Having termed poetry an analogue, Stevens might have phrased the question, "What has music to do with poetry?"

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<sup>9</sup>See above, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>"Effects of Analogy," in Necessary Angel, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 117-118.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 126.



When we hear the music of one of the great narrative musicians, as it tells its tale, it is like finding our way through the dark not by the aid of any sense but by an instinct that makes it possible for us to move quickly when the music moves quickly, slowly when the music moves slowly. It is a speed that carries us on and through every winding, once more to the world outside of the music at its conclusion. It affects our sight of what we see and leaves it ambiguous, somewhat like one thing, somewhat like another. In the meantime the tale is being told and the music excites us and we identify it with the story and it becomes the story and the speed with which we are following it. When it is over, we are aware that we have had an experience very much like the story just as if we had participated in what took place. It is exactly as if we had listened with complete sympathy to an emotional recital. The music was a communication of emotion. It would not have been different if it had been the music of poetry, . . .<sup>13</sup>

Deciphering this analogy, we find Stevens has described certain functions of poetic music as an instrument of communication: music, as a method for controlling the movement, the tempo, the rhythm of the poem, is a unifying element of form through which the poem's total effect is achieved; music is a way to create new meanings, a technique for augmenting meaning through implication, or the associations of ambiguous meanings; music creates a heightened emotional awareness to give us a new sense of reality.

The index to The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens perhaps first makes us aware that music plays a significant part in Stevens' poetry. Among the titles are more than twenty direct references to music, while other titles are reminiscent of names for musical compositions. This reference to music continues through his last work published in

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<sup>13</sup>In Necessary Angel, p. 126.

Opus Posthumous. Even a casual reading of Stevens' poems yields innumerable words from the lexicon of music: choir, song, chorus, an orchestra of musical instruments, musical terminology ranging from prelude to pizzicato, composers from Chopin to Shostakovich.

Samuel French Morse, in his introduction to Opus Posthumous, lists among the miscellany of Stevens' reading The Musical Quarterly, remarking that the excerpts in Stevens' notebooks are based on his reading, and that they "reflect almost uniformly some aspect of 'the principle of order.'"<sup>14</sup> What, we must ask, is the relation between the musical knowledge revealed in Stevens' poetry and that reflected as a "principle of order" in his notebooks? We have noted earlier that the theory and the practice of poetry were inseparable for Wallace Stevens; hence, we expect to find theory translated into practice. How, then, did he instrument in his poetry his ideas of music as a principle of order?

We return to music as a mode of analogy, and to Stevens' description of today's music of poetry: "the voice of an actor reciting," or "a voice intoning."<sup>15</sup> We find Stevens using the musical form of the solo, or the a cappella recitative, to frame the poetic stage for the unaccompanied actor who recites in monologue or soliloquy. It was a technique frequently employed by Stevens to lend a conversational or meditative air to his poetry. "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" (p. 51),<sup>16</sup> "The Weeping Burgher" (p. 61), and "Evening

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<sup>14</sup>p. xciii.

<sup>15</sup>See above, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>References giving page number only are to The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1954). References to poems in Opus Posthumous are preceded by O.P.





that time, that the silence was largest." In these poems, the stanzaic divisions serve to structure the poem in a counterpoint of ideas, giving us a sense of argumentative give-and-take. The method allows Stevens to come at his idea from two perspectives, still within the unity of the poetic form. The meaning of the poem is thus accented, or underscored, by the form.

We find the fugue suggested by the countless poems developing a single theme in variations. As in "Six Significant Landscapes" (p. 73) and "Study of Two Pears" (p. 196), the stanzas seem related only through their relationship to a common theme, although the stanzas are usually similar in metric form. Each stanza, in these poems, is a development of the single theme, a variation of the idea Stevens is exploring. The poem, then, is structured by the stanzas as analogies, an arrangement of ideas whose music "affects our sight of what we see and leaves it ambiguous, somewhat like one thing, somewhat like another."<sup>18</sup> Variations of a musical theme are the analogies of music, the changes sounded on a main theme and bearing a resemblance, providing similarity without identity. Musical variations are related to the main theme through associated sounds, arranged to produce a new effect. We can think Stevens structured his poetry by such variations in analogy to achieve this very sense of changing and new realities.

At times, Stevens arranged the variations on a theme in a series of successive images within the stanza itself, producing an effect which Marie Borroff describes as "a series of affirmations of relationship run

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<sup>18</sup>See above, p. 6.



through as a pianist practices scales."<sup>19</sup> She cites "Anecdote of Man by the Thousand" as her example:

There are men of the East, he said,  
Who are the East.  
There are men of a province  
Who are that province.  
There are men of a valley  
Who are that valley. (p. 51)

Reading further, we find:

There are men whose words  
Are as natural sounds  
Of their places (p. 51)

and we recognize a man who practiced the lyrics of his ideas to sound his place as a poet.

The use of a refrain appears infrequently in Stevens' poetry, but he occasionally uses this device to telling purpose. As ever subtle, Stevens seldom uses a frank refrain, more often a semi-refrain, or similar lines with only slight variations in diction, repeated at regular intervals throughout the poem. Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, in her essay "Metamorphosis in Wallace Stevens," points to the use of a sentence in French for every twelfth line in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (p. 98). She explains the device as an implication of meaning, the regular shift to the sentence in French indicating "how the shifting selves of the observer remodel this 'fluent mundo' of sea and cloudy heavens. . . ."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Marie Borroff, "Introduction; Wallace Stevens: The World and the Poet," in Wallace Stevens, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup>In Wallace Stevens, p. 55.

Stevens likewise uses a refrain technique to imply meaning in his poem "The Brave Man" (p. 138). The five short stanzas are turned to a round by the repetition of "That brave man . . . That brave man . . . Run away . . . Run away," the two-beat lines alternately ending the five stanzas of the poem. The phrase "that brave man" also is repeated in first lines of two stanzas. The total effect becomes the sound of a child's poem. And who can hear this refrain without recalling "Three blind mice, three blind mice, see how they run, see how they run . . ."? The refrain here not only implies meaning, but acts as a unifying motif and helps to set the tone of the poem.

The foregoing discussion has pointed to poetic structures which borrow or suggest like structures of musical composition. In the refrain, we note the rhythm, as well as the structural use, helps us to find "some trophy that we ourselves gather, some meaning that we ourselves supply."<sup>21</sup> The cadence of music, as a technique of analogy, is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of music in Stevens' poetry. In his discussion of what is meant by music in poetry today, Stevens states that "it contains rhymes at irregular intervals and it is intensely cadenced."<sup>22</sup> Rhyme means much less to Stevens' poetic music than does his extensive and varied use of cadence. He was a versatile and an accomplished metricist, displaying a virtuosity Marie Borroff has termed "unflagging inventiveness," and "a Protean diversity of form

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<sup>21</sup> Stevens, "Effects of Analogy," in Necessary Angel, p. 109.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

in all its aspects."<sup>23</sup> Meter, line length, stanzaic patterns, syntax, and diction all effect the rhythms of a poem; and Stevens, through the skillful deployment of these devices, used cadence with the artistry of a composer arranging his musical scores to express his themes. As an improviser, he is inventive, disciplined, and sure in his techniques. He employs rhythmic devices only to achieve the certain effect he wishes to produce, in order to express his ideas in all the "multiplicity of associations."<sup>24</sup>

Rhythm in poetry, as in music, is a way to imply. As part of the music of poetry, cadence is vital to this musical mode of analogy. We have caught the rhythmic overtones in "The Brave Man," deriving a smile of pleasure from the implied relationship to "Three Blind Mice." The implication of "Yankee Doodle," riding through "The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade," gives the same pleasure of resemblance:

Wear the breeches of a mask,  
Coat half-flare and half galloon;  
.....  
Hang a feather by your eye,  
Nod and look a little sly.  
This must be the vent of pity,  
.....  
Of the real that wrenches, . . . (p. 103)

The singing rhythm of the pre-Revolutionary tune relates to the title of the poem, and accompanies Stevens' idea with a jaunty air. But it is instructive to note the subtlety with which Stevens uses this rhythmic effect, threading the implication through the stanzas like

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<sup>23</sup>"Introduction," in Wallace Stevens, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup>Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in Necessary Angel, p. 13.

"a play of thought . . . like a pleasant shadow, faint and volatile."<sup>25</sup>

Implication by the use of rhythm is often effected through the interruption of the poem's chosen metric scheme by stanzas or by single lines of a different cadence. The following stanzas from "Cortege for Rosenbloom" serve to demonstrate this technique:

It is the infants of misanthropes  
And the infants of nothingness  
That tread  
The wooden ascents  
Of the ascending of the dead.

It is turbans they wear  
And boots of fur  
As they tread the boards  
In a region of frost,  
Viewing the frost;

To a chirr of gongs  
And a chitter of cries  
And the heavy thrum  
Of the endless tread  
That they tread; . . . (p. 80)

The regular, marked cadence of the last two stanzas, with the strictly repeated two beats to each line, contrasts sharply with the irregular rhythm of the first stanza quoted. These marching stanzas tread heavily on their two feet, "the heavy thrum" unmistakably bearing the body of Rosenbloom, along with our grimly resounding sense of the funeral cortege. Almost as a prelude, Stevens has sounded a single line of only one accent in each of the two preceding stanzas. This sound effect occurs in the first stanza quoted above, as the third line booms dully after the longer three-beat lines. "That tread" is effective as a muffled drum beat in the building emotional quality of the poem.

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<sup>25</sup>Stevens, "Effects of Analogy," in Necessary Angel, p. 109.



Stevens has said, "The slightest sound matters. The most momentary rhythm matters."<sup>26</sup> A "momentary rhythm" introduced into the regular rhythm of a stanza can give us the sense of drums, of marching feet, of the sea rolling, or a river flowing. Through rhythm alone we gain the implied sense of the words, a heightened awareness through resemblance. This use of rhythm is a subtle form of onomatopoeia, a technique Stevens uses effectively not only to imply and to augment meaning, but to control the movement, or tempo, of his poetry. In the fifth stanza of "Forces, the Will, & the Weather," both effects are achieved by the compound clause of the third and fourth lines:

No large white horses. But there was a fluffy dog.  
There were the sheets high up on older trees,  
Seeming to be liquid as leaves made of cloud,  
Shells under water. These were nougats. (p. 229)

Here we find a change from iambic rhythm in the first two lines to the longer, rolling rhythm of the dactyl. The device slows the tempo momentarily to the drifting of clouds, and supplements the idea of "shells under water." The final trochaic beats in the last line, "These were nougats," is suddenly emphatic, almost startling, as a sharp voice waking us from a day dream. In the final stanza of the poem, Stevens uses a single trochaic foot like an exclamation mark: "It had to be right: nougats." Through the device of rhythm, with the "momentary rhythm" of the trochee, Stevens managed to punctuate the poetic idea effectively.

As we can see in the stanza quoted above, Stevens used punctuation to control his poetic rhythms, punctuation serving to regulate and vary

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<sup>26</sup>"The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Opus Posthumous, p. 126.

the tempo of lines in which the meter remains unvaried. In "Sunday Morning," for example, the meter is a fairly regular iambic pentameter throughout eight stanzas of fifteen lines each. Punctuation is used to vary the effect of the regular meter, and to change the dramatic tone of the stanzas. The smooth-flowing, even cadence is distressed by question mark and comma, changing our sense of contemplative thought to awareness of a mind darting from one thought to another. In the third stanza, we can feel the rise and fall of emotional pitch created by this technique:

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.  
 No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave  
 Large-mannered motions to his mythic mind  
 He moved among us, as a muttering king,  
 Magnificent, would move among his hinds,  
 Until our blood, commingling, virginal,  
 With heaven, brought such requital to desire  
 The very hinds discerned it, in a star.  
 Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be  
 The blood of paradise? And shall the earth  
 Seem all of paradise that we shall know?  
 The sky will be much friendlier then than now,  
 A part of labor and a part of pain,  
 And next in glory to enduring love,  
 Not this dividing and indifferent blue. (pp. 67-68)

Music "is a speed that carries us on and through every winding, once more to the world outside of the music . . . When it is over, we are aware that we have had an experience very much like the story. . . ." <sup>27</sup>

Stevens also uses run-on and end-stopped lines to adjust the movement and the tone of his cadences. The run-on line literally runs on more smoothly, lending a conversational or thoughtful tone. Using the same meter in end-stopped lines effects a didactic tone. In the

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<sup>27</sup>See above, p. 6.

following stanza from "Stars at Tallapoosa," we feel the blunt edge of a voice striking out in flat statement:

The lines are straight and swift between the stars.  
The night is not the cradle that they cry,  
The criers, undulating the deep-oceaned phrase.  
The lines are much too dark and much too sharp. (p. 71)

Here Stevens has used the same iambic pentameter rhythm that we noted in "Sunday Morning"; but the movement and tone of the two poems are in diametric contrast.

Stevens demonstrates equal versatility and skill in his manipulation of the length of the poetic line, using even this device to instrument analogy. His poem "The Death of a Soldier" is composed of four stanzas, identical in form and meter. The first line of each stanza has four accents, the second line three, and the final third line only two accents:

Life contracts and death is expected,  
As in a season of autumn.  
The soldier falls. (p. 97)

This contraction, or diminution, of accents is likewise a technique of music, by means of which a theme is repeated in notes of smaller time value than those first used, to produce a diminished theme or motif. Stevens produces this effect in the poem, creating a sinking tone through the diminished cadence, as "When the wind stops" and "The soldier falls," the lines measure the poetic idea.

We have heard something of the same effect in "Cortege for Rosenbloom," cited earlier,<sup>28</sup> as the short, regular lines augmented the sense of a funeral march. "Botanist on Alp (No. 2)" (p. 135) is another

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<sup>28</sup>See above, p. 13.

poem constructed entirely by short, regular lines, each of four feet, the iambic meter here suggesting a chanted nursery rhyme. As the sing-song stanzas repeat themselves in identical order, we come to the closing stanzas convinced that this children's chant is precisely the effect Stevens wished to create, in order to imply the ideas he wished to present:

Chant, O ye faithful, in your paths  
The poem of long celestial death;

For who could tolerate the earth  
Without that poem, or without

An earthier one, tum, tum-ti-tum, . . . (p. 136)

This combination of rhythm and length of line comprised part of the technique Northrup Frye has called Stevens' "Imitative harmony."<sup>29</sup> If he could suggest a chant by this method, he could also suggest the old, classical methods of poetry and ways of thinking, making his point in the regular iambic pentameter cadences of blank verse, as we find its intonations in the poem "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds":

Eliciting the still sustaining pangs  
Of speech which are like music so profound  
They seem an exaltation without sound. (p. 55)

As Marie Borroff has recognized, "In cadence, 'Under the Eglantine' resembles Shakespeare's 'Under the greenwood tree.'"<sup>30</sup> And so, even the inimitable Shakespeare has been imitated in Stevens' "Anything Is Beautiful If You Say It Is" (p. 211). We are irresistibly reminded of Robert Burns by Stevens' "Poesie Abrutie," as we hear the abrupt, intensely cadenced lines:

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<sup>29</sup>"The Realistic Oriole," in Wallace Stevens, p. 175.

<sup>30</sup>"Introduction," Ibid., p. 19.



The brooks are bristling in the field,  
Now, brooks are bristling in the fields  
And gelid Januar has gone to hell.

The water puddles puddles are  
And ice is still in Februar.  
It still is ice in Februar. (p. 302)

How unlike Stevens' usual poetry, and how like "The lee-lang night, and weep, My dear--/The lee-lang night, and weep," from Burns' poem "The Farewell".<sup>31</sup> As always, form is the instrumentation of content, with music, as a mode of analogy used to express the ideas. Samuel French Morse, in noting "a tone akin to that of Pope" in Stevens' poetry, describes his use of imitative harmony as "an elegance and gusto in the exploitation of language that defines meaning in terms of style."<sup>32</sup>

Of course, rhyme is also an element of Stevens' style, and he has cited "rhymes at irregular intervals"<sup>33</sup> as part of the music of poetry today. The old, familiar end rhymes of poetry he used rarely; and when an end-rhyme scheme does occur, it is usually part of his "imitative harmony," as we have observed in "Poesie Abrutle." The irregular end rhymes of "Anything Is Beautiful If You Say It Is" evidently are used to suggest the old forms of poetry, in contrast to the new ways suggested by the slang words "Phooey! Phoo! Pfui!" Using conventional rhyme chiefly to instrument the intellection of his poetry, Stevens more often uses imperfect, or half-rhyme, as internal rhymes in his poems. "An earthier one, tum, tum-ti-tum," and "The lines are much too dark and

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<sup>31</sup>In The Oxford Book of English Verse, ed. by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 592.

<sup>32</sup>"Introduction," in Opus Posthumous, p. xxv.

<sup>33</sup>See above, p. 11.

much too sharp," lines quoted earlier, exemplify Stevens' characteristic use of irregular rhyme. Even more customary is Stevens' use of repeated words, the repetition of sounds serving as a gesture toward rhyme. This usage is demonstrated by the repetitions in "Poesie Abrutie": field-fields, February-February, and ". . . go, go slowly, but they go." Repetition lends tonality to the poem, emphasizes the ideas expressed, and adds the same extra measure of pleasure we experience when repeated themes in music surprise us to happy recognition. As a resemblance of sounds, rhyme partakes of the affects of analogy; and in the terms of Stevens' aesthetic, ". . . it is not too extravagant to think of resemblances, and of the repetitions of resemblances as a source of the ideal."<sup>34</sup>

For Wallace Stevens, we must believe the ideal is represented by the fully round expression of ideas, the complete circumference of meaning brought about by the harmonic union of form and image in poetry. In his own words, "the unity of style and the poem itself is a unity of language and life that exposes both in a supreme sense."<sup>35</sup> To this purpose, then, he created and repeated resemblances, through every technique of language at his command. And his command of language was brilliant. We have seen his deliberate and masterful exploitation of structural devices, of rhythm and rhyme as techniques for achieving more complete expression. Repetition, in all its variety, is a common musical stratagem Stevens put to repeated poetic service. By this device he ordered stanzas or complete poems, composing variations on a theme and arranging these parallel analogies by serial formation.

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<sup>34</sup>"Three Academic Pieces," in Necessary Angel, p. 81.

<sup>35</sup>"Two or Three Ideas," in Opus Posthumous, p. 216.

Repetition also appears as parallel clauses, as in "Stars at Tallapoosa":

Wading the sea-lines, moist and ever-mingling,  
Mounting the earth-lines, long and lax, lethargic. (p. 72)

Each clause, beginning the two lines, is a rhythmic variation in the meter of the poem, catching our attention by the change of cadence. The parallel repetition increases our awareness of the contrast drawn between "lines long and lax, lethargic," and "lines straight and swift between the stars," the chosen motif for the poem. This exercise in repetition has served to augment and to underscore Stevens' meaning.

We note here, too, the choice and repetition of the participle forms, wading, mingling, and mounting, the longer, flowing verb form an additive to our sense of meaning. The two lines just quoted also exemplify the use of alliteration, the repeated M and L sounds implying the murmur and roll of "sea-lines," the long, curving "earth-lines" of longitude and latitude. The effect heightens our awareness of Stevens' meaning, adds to the round sense of the complete reality he is creating in and through the words of the poem.

In a letter discussing "The Comedian as the Letter C" (p. 27), Stevens explains that he orchestrated the poem by the sound of the letter C and its allied sounds.<sup>36</sup> Again, in "The Snow Man" he remarks sound as a unifying force. The unseen orator of the poem muses and recognizes sound as a keynote:

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<sup>36</sup>Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. by Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 351.

. . . the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener . . . (p. 10)

The sound of poetry is the sound of words, and these are the notes that Stevens orchestrates to create the poetic harmony of thoughts, the music of ideas.

To read Stevens' poetry is to stand in awe of his poetic diction. Morton Zabel has proposed the description, "verbal luxuriance,"<sup>37</sup> but the scope of Stevens' language all but defies description. A phenomenal English vocabulary is extended by his use of Latin, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Greek, and Sanskrit; and when these fail him, he invents his own words to better serve his purpose. His language is enriched by an incredible variety of imagery, showing a sustained and inventive brilliance that has been said to out-distance the virtuosity of schooled imagists in an age of avowed imagists. His poetic language is the symbolic language of connotation, or analogy, a complicated metaphor compounded by words worked to shadows and shades of meaning. If implication is a subtlety of ideas, analogy is the technique; ideas played in counterpoint. This is the sound of Stevens' rhetoric of implication, and the mode for his lyric of ideas. One critic has termed the poetic sound of Wallace Stevens, "the luminous melody of proper sound."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Morton Zabel, "Wallace Stevens and the Image of Man," in Wallace Stevens, p. 154.

<sup>38</sup>Harold Bloom, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction; A Commentary," in Wallace Stevens, p. 94.



Stevens himself has said of the poet, "You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound";<sup>39</sup> and it is this exactness that we recognize in Stevens' use of language. This statement seems, perhaps, paradoxical, in reference to the connotative language of metaphor, "the object slightly turned,"<sup>40</sup> the objective being an effect of ambiguity, leaving perception "somewhat like one thing, somewhat like another."<sup>41</sup> Still, listening more intently, we come to understand that Stevens used every rhetorical skill, exploited the far reaches of language, bent his entire poetic effort toward the achievement of "the exact sound" of words that are thoughts, words that compose the "huge, high harmony that sounds/A little and a little, suddenly" (p. 440) in poetry. And we come to know "By means of a separate sense. It is and it/Is not and, therefore, is. . . ." (p. 440)

The nonce words of his poetry are, perhaps, the supreme effort in Stevens' attempt to give us the particular and exact sound of thought. He has stated, "A new meaning is the equivalent of a new word."<sup>42</sup> It would be difficult, even for a poet of Stevens' incredible vocabulary, to express in conventional words the complete sense we find in his lines:

The water runs away from the horses.  
La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la,  
Dee, dum, diddle, dee, dee, diddle, dee, . . . (O.P., p. 8)

Stanza VII in "Poems from 'Lettres D'un Soldat'" is composed almost

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<sup>39</sup>"Adagia," in Opus Posthumous, p. 179.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>See above, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup>"Adagia," in Opus Posthumous, p. 159.

entirely of nonsense syllables, whose sounds and cadence express for us the soldier's regimented life, the regimental drums, the marching drill, the habit of war, and suggest a war giant that swallows up generations of men in its greed. Listening to those lines, we must wonder at Stevens' genius for implying so much in the arrangement of a few syllables of sound:

Rich John, and his son, rich John,  
 And his rich son's John, and-a-one  
 And-a-two and-a-three  
 And-a-pom-pom-pom, and-a  
 Wise John, and his son, wise John,  
 And his wise son's John, and-a-one  
 And-a-two and-a-three  
 And-a-fee and-a-fee and-a-fee  
 And-a-fee-fo-fur--  
 Voila la vie, la vie, la vie,  
 And-a-rummy-tummy-tum  
 And-a-rummy-tummy-tum. (O.P., p. 15)

These are meanings translated into sounds, an arrangement of new words in music, as a mode of analogy. Samuel French Morse, in a penetrating analysis of Stevens' poetry, declares, "His feats with nonsense syllables and animal and bird sounds are something more than demonstrations of virtuosity; at his best, he manages to make them part of 'life's nonsense' that 'pierce us with strange relations.'"<sup>43</sup> We remember Stevens' words, "... the structure of reality because of the range of resemblances that it contains is measurably an adult make-believe."<sup>44</sup> And we remember too:

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<sup>43</sup>"Introduction," in Opus Posthumous, p. xxv.

<sup>44</sup>"Three Academic Pieces," in Necessary Angel, p. 75.

. . . coo becomes rou-coo. How close

To the unstated theme each variation comes . . .  
In that one ear it might strike perfectly . . . (pp. 356-357)

We can understand that Stevens is trying for the exactness of sound, for the degrees of resemblance that approach the ideal. In "The Search for Sound Free from Motion":

All afternoon the gramophone,  
All afternoon the gramophone,  
The world as word,  
Parl-parled the West-Indian hurricane. (p. 268)

And we know exactly why Stevens, to create the reality of the world for us, "Repeats its vital words, yet balances/The syllable of a syllable." (p. 268) His make-believe words are the language formative of our make-believe reality. As poet, he has turned to "an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning."<sup>45</sup>

Stevens once commented, ". . . the imagination, while it may have led him (the poet) to purities beyond definition, never yet progressed except by particulars."<sup>46</sup> It is these particulars that he presents to us, again and again, in the connotative language of his poetry. It is these particulars that we realize from the precision of his words, in the aptest phrase, the exact image with which Stevens created "the supreme fiction" (p. 59), the poetry that is "merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel," the analogy between nature and the imagination; "a rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in

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<sup>45</sup>"Irrational Elements in Poetry," in Opus Posthumous, p. 226.

<sup>46</sup>"Honors and Acts," Ibid., p. 241.

words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verballity."<sup>47</sup>  
 In the final analysis, his poetic diction, as analogy, "is primarily a discipline of rightness."<sup>48</sup>

With a true sense for the "right joining, a music of ideas" (p. 465), Stevens delights us, gives us a fresh reality filled with "the shiddow-shaddow of lights revolving" (p. 279), and the "squiggling" of saxaphones (p. 59). He has peopled this world with "the red-eyed elders," who felt

The basses of their beings throb  
 In witching chords, and their thin blood  
 Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna. (p. 90)

He has given us the lecturer who "hems the planet rose and haws it ripe" (p. 429); the concubine who "whispered, 'Pfui!'" and shouted, "Hey-do-i-o!" (p. 211); the "liquid cats" that "moved in the grass without a sound" (p. 178). He has created and filled a world with

The elephants of sound, the tigers  
 In trombones roaring for the children, . . . (p. 278)

the brass of "tom trumpet" (p. 278) and the "ai-yi-yi" of a blue guitar, as "that-a-way he twirled the thing" (p. 178). It was his genius and his purpose "to tick it, tock it, turn it true" (p. 166). Through the music of words, Stevens has given us, for remembrance, the ineffable harmony

. . . that has endured  
 As April's green endures; or will endure  
 Like her remembrance of awakened birds,  
 Or her desire for June and evening, tipped  
 By the consummation of the swallow's wings. (p. 68)

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<sup>47</sup>Stevens, "Effects of Analogy," in Necessary Angel, p. 118.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

These are the poetic words of Wallace Stevens, "the words that we remember and make our own."<sup>49</sup> They are words of "intense choosing,"<sup>50</sup> whose music, "played on the terraces . . . of the moon," was composed "to produce an agreement with reality."<sup>51</sup> According to Wallace Stevens:

Poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world. . . . Their words have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence. It is a transcendence achieved by means of the minor effects of figurations and the major effects of the poet's sense of the world and of the motive music of his poems.<sup>52</sup>

Throughout this study of Stevens' poetic theory and practice, we have traced the effects of music as a mode of analogy. Taking a note from Stevens, we have progressed by particulars, hoping to create the full understanding of music in relation to his poetry. There can be little doubt that music is a significant particular of Stevens' reality, and a vital part of Stevens' sense of the world. Moreover, we recognize that music was instrumental in the creation of that world. We come to know that music and the poem are inseparable in the world of Wallace Stevens. He freely interchanges the words and ideas of music with the words of and about poetry; and as often, he equates the musician with the poet, music with the poem: "The mind begets in resemblances . . . as the musician begets in music. . . ."<sup>53</sup> "So, when we think of arpeggios, we think of opening wings. . . ."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>"Effects of Analogy," in Necessary Angel, p. 130.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Stevens, "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet," Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>52</sup>"Effects of Analogy," Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>53</sup>"Three Academic Pieces," Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 80.



Understanding the logical workings of Stevens' mind, the most obvious procedure, in examining the relation of music to his poetry, is to begin with the poem as words, and words as sounds. Since music, by dictionary definition, is "the art of producing significant arrangements of sounds, usually with reference to rhythm, pitch, and tone color,"<sup>55</sup> then music may be considered the art by which poetically significant arrangements of words, as instruments of sound, may be produced. Since Stevens recognized words as both instruments of sound and as thoughts, the poem, with its rhythm, emotional pitch, and tone color, becomes the musical arrangement of both sound and thought. By the particulars of definition, Stevens progressed to the idea of music as the art by which the poem is produced.

We have examined, at some length, the artistry with which Stevens arranged the words, or sounds, of poetry, to effect meaningful arrangements: sounds composed into varied rhythmic patterns, with shaded subtleties of tone, meaning, and wide-ranged emotional pitch. We have noted the disciplines of music, effectively and affectively used to imply, to express, to unify, and to create. We have watched Stevens use music as a technique of poetry, to drive out, through the vibrating reeds of the word-melodeon, his music of ideas. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens eloquently expresses this union of music and poetic words:

I do not know of anything that will appear to have suffered more from the passage of time than the music of poetry and that has suffered less. The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are

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<sup>55</sup>Funk & Wagnalls, Standard College Dictionary, 1963.

all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them.<sup>56</sup>

We sense, "a little and a little, suddenly,"<sup>57</sup> that music is more than a technique of poetry for Wallace Stevens.

. . . The sound of that slick sonata  
Finding its way from the house, makes music seem  
To be a nature, a place in which itself

Is that which produces everything else . . . (p. 286)

For Stevens, sound is creation. Somewhat curiously, The Gospel According to St. John begins with a like conclusion: "In the beginning was the Word."<sup>58</sup> It is not beyond reason for us to believe the mysterious, beginning "Word" of creative power was, for Wallace Stevens, music. If, as he believed, poetry can create a world, and if poetry is a revelation that helps men to live their lives in that world, then the words of poetry may create an ideal harmony:

. . . to the sound  
Of right joining, a music of ideas, the burning  
And breeding and bearing birth of harmony,  
The final relation . . . (pp. 464-465)

For Wallace Stevens, this was "The Whole of Harmonium."

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<sup>56</sup>In Necessary Angel, p. 32.

<sup>57</sup>See above, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup>St. John 1:1, in the Bible.

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