
Humanistic Vision in Wallace Stevens Harmonium and Other Poems

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Abstract

The history of American poetry is not easy to understand at all, and a considerable volume of American poetry published in poetic anthology forms between 1910 and 1945 appeared to be lost in the small circulation of political periodicals. It can be said that T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were perhaps the most persuasive and significant poets of the modern age during the First World War. Along with these two great figures of English literature, there were many African-American and female poets whose works were widely published and read in the very first half of the 20th century. In the 1960s, the young poets of the British Poetry Revival looked to their American predecessors as archetypes of the kind of poetry they wished to produce.

Towards the end of the millennium, American poetry had varied and diversified, as literary scholars began to focus simultaneously on poetry by women writers, African Americans, Chicanos, Hispanics, and other cultural divisions. From Anne Bradstreet to Elieen Miles, American poetry has garnered a great deal of attention over the years for its wide range of styles and its diversity of poets. It is reinforced by major poets such as Anne Bradstreet, Henry Longfellow, Walt Whitman, William Carols Williams, and Langston Hughes. One of the first recorded poets of the Colonies was Anne Bradstreet, who remains one of the first known female poets to write about political and religious issues in English. Phillip Wheatley was another famous voice in the colonial era who was a slave, and her poetic anthology, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), proved to be the well-known literary work of her time.

Key Words: Religious, Politics, Diversity, Morality, and Ethics.

Key Concept: The early poets in America from the first half of the 17th century came from the Puritan Colonies and were technically British, as Puritanism seemed to dominate America's early socio-cultural development. The first American poets were mostly British Protestants, such as Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672), Michael Wigglesworth (1631–1705), and Edward Taylor (1642–1729). As far as the style of writing poetry is concerned, their works can be categorized as metaphysical poetry that prevailed in America. The black slaves of America were among the first in the Southern part to pen poetry in English. Jupiter Hammon, a black American poet, spoke of the beginning of black poetry against the system of slavery in America.

The scope, 18th-century American poetry has witnessed the cumulative emphasis on the land of America itself, and the poems of that time reveal this aspect distinctively. In a nutshell, the gradual progress of American poetry in the colonies of America clearly reflects the expansion of colonies, as well as the urgency felt by the natives for independence from the shackles of colonial masters. The year before his death, Wallace Stevens was asked by a periodical reprinting some of his poems to provide a biographical note and a statement of what he considered to be the major ideas in his work. Poetry would have a vital significance. There are many poems relating to the interactions between reality and the imagination, which are to be regarded as marginal to this central theme. Behind these themes, and the tentativeness with which they are presented, give some indication of the demands Stevens made both on himself and on his readers. He is a difficult poet because, in the whole extent of his work, covering a period of some forty years, he was attempting to find or to make, the two processes cannot be separated, some kind of answer to the most profound and central of all human problems: the problem of belief. Such an undertaking has by no means always been required of the poet, or even among his concerns. As Stevens wrote at the beginning of his poem *Of Modern Poetry*, published in 1942:

Harmonium, Stevens's first poetic Anthology, was published in 1933. He had wanted to call it *The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae*. As late as 1938, after *Harmonium*'s second edition (1931) and the appearance of three more poetic Anthologies, *Ideas of Order* (1935), *Owl's Clover* (1936) and *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), he said: "The few things that I have already done have merely been preliminary. I cannot believe that I have done anything of real importance...I very much like the idea of something ahead; I don't care to make exhaustive effort to reach it, to see what it is!" This patient confidence turned out to be justified" (12). Stevens died in 1955, when he was

almost seventy-six, having produced the main body of his work, including most of his finest poems and almost all his prose, in the last fifteen years of his life. His extraordinarily fruitful old age was the result of a strenuous effort of thought and reorientation that he made in the middle years of his poetic career, an effort occasionally reflected in his letters, as in this passage of 1935:

When rare and minimum was in the making there was a time when:

I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together. I then believed in pure poetry, as it was called. I still have a distinct liking for that sort of thing. But we live in a different time, and life means a good deal more to us now-a-days than literature does. In the period of which I have just spoken, I thought literature meant most. Moreover, I am not so sure that I don't think exactly the same thing now, but, unquestionably, I think at the same time that life is the essential part of literature (23).

He had been dissatisfied with *Harmonium* even before it came out. 'Gathering together the things for my poetic Anthology has been so depressing that:

I wonder at Poetry's friendliness. All my earlier things seem like horrid cocoons from which later abortive insects have sprung. The poetic Anthology will amount to nothing, except that it may teach me something...The reading of these outmoded and debilitated poems does make me wish rather desperately to keep on dabbling and to be as obscure as possible until I have perfected an authentic and fluent speech for myself (14).

Those, led by Ivor Winters in his celebrated essay Wallace Stevens or *The Hedonist's Progress*, who judge *Harmonium* to contain Stevens's best work have, one hopes, been effectively answered by Professor Kermode. Nevertheless Stevens himself in the above passages is misleadingly hard on it. *Sunday Morning* is scarcely a poem 'of images and images alone'; still less is it a 'horrid cocoon', 'outmoded and debilitated'. There is, admittedly, nothing else in *Harmonium* that has quite *Sunday Morning*'s degree of commanding excellence. But even without *Sunday Morning* there is enough poetry of very high quality in the volume to put it at least in the same class as the other great poetic Anthologies of English verse that appeared in the decade 1945,

When one compares Stevens's poetry of this period with the much more famous contemporary works of Pound and Eliot one finds some striking similarities. The major poetic efforts of all three show an intensely self-conscious, intensely sophisticated preoccupation with the finding of a role for the poet in a world that appears to be inimical to poetry. A text which illuminates the poems of them all at this time is the two sentences'

Stevens wrote much later in *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*: 'The pressure of reality is...the determining factor in the artistic character of an era, and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual. The resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the pressure so far as those individuals are concerned.' Pound is perhaps the clearest case. Both the *Homage* and *Mauberley* are, in their different ways, poems about the poet's resistance to the pressure of reality. 'By the pressure of reality', Stevens explained in *The Noble Rider*, 'I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation (19).' This is how Pound described his *Homage to Propertius* which he had written during the war and published in 1918:

It presents certain emotions as vital to men faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the British Empire as they were to Propertius some centuries earlier, when faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire... "If the reader does not find relation to life defined in the poem, he may conclude that I have been unsuccessful in my endeavour"(21).

Inseparable from the recommendation of 'certain emotions as vital' is, of course, the recommendation of one kind of poetry as opposed to another:

We have kept our erasers in order. A new-fangled chariot follows the flower-hung horses; A young Muse with young loves clustered about her ascends with me into the aether,...1 And there is no high-road to the Muses. Annalists will continue to record Roman reputations, Celebrities from the Trans-Caucasus will Maud Roman celebrities And expound the distention's of Empire, But for something to read in normal circumstances? For a few pages brought down from the forked hill unsullied? I ask a wreath which will not crush my head (23).

Throughout *The Homage*, as in this brief example, private love and the high private standards of the poet as craftsman. Pound's choice of Propertius as his vehicle, a love-poet in an age of belligerent imperialism, epitomized but also over-simplified the problems confronting Pound himself and his contemporaries. *Hugh Mir Mauberley*, begun in the early years of the war and completed, after the *Homage* in 1920, detaches from the conflict of private and public emotion the central ultimately separate question of whether the poet can resist or evade the pressure of reality without becoming a mere aesthete, writing only in order to write well and in the end abandoning every-thing real, everything human. *Mauberley* is one of the great poems of this century and it is of the highest significance that its answer to this question is in the negative. The despairing ironies of the short poems that make it up catch aspect after aspect of the complex army of forces that the modern world

fields to defeat its poets. Against the collapse of standards, the demand for cheap realism, the defection of artists themselves toward fashionable raptures or quick financial returns or phoney drawing-room reputations, the poet's efforts seem as futile as the deaths of the soldiers dying 'For a botched civilization' in a futile war. In the concluding section of the poem, *Mauberley* 1920', we are shown the final failure of the poet whose devotion to his art. His true Penelope was Flaubert has led only to complete

withdrawal from reality:
Mildness, amid the neo-Nietzschean clatter,
His sense of graduations,
Quite out of place amid
Resistance to current exacerbations,
Invitation, mere invitation to perceptivity
Gradually led him to the isolation
Which these presents place
Under a more tolerant, perhaps, examination.
By constant elimination
The manifest universe
Yielded an armour
Against utter consternation,
A Minoan undulation,
Seen, we admit, amid ambrosial circumstances
Strengthened him against
The discouraging doctrine of chances,
And his desire for survival,
Faint in the most strenuous moods,
Became an Olympian apparel in
In the presence of selected perceptions (25).

So 'the artist's urge' is destroyed, and *Mauberley* vanishes into the blissful isolation of absolute silence.

This is not, of course, what happened to Pound himself. *Mauberley* records the perception of one path open to the modern poet, the path of aestheticism, of 'purely literary values'; it also records the realisation that such a path leads to a dead-end where neither the poet him-self nor his art retain any significant existence. With *Mauberley* Pound turned his back on the option that had seemed possible to Stevens at the 'time when [he] liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together'. With the Cantor

Pound, who had been for all his proclamations of revolution, the last notable apostle of 'art for art's sake', wheeled to confront reality with a poem whose enormous sprawling heterogeneity should be as limitless as the pressure of reality itself and has come to a term only with Pound's life. The attempt, held together only by an extra-ordinary wild consistency of technique, is a failure. In even the best stretches of this vast poem, the early cantos, written before 1930, and the Pisan cantos, written while Pound was imprisoned in a cage awaiting trial for treason in 1945, it is reality rather than the poet who is the victor. The political and economic obsessions that led him to that cage, the vituperative hatreds that erupt again and again, the furious ambition somehow to rescue by himself the relics of world civilisation from a universal conspiracy of fools and murderers — all this combines to swamp both the poet himself and his art almost as completely as the denial of reality had extinguished the fictional Mauberley. The poet of exquisite craftsmanship, whose solitary campaign for discipline in the writing of poetry so deeply influenced Eliot, Yeats and many others, is in the Cantos crushed by the violence of reality and the violence of his own responses to it. Again 'the first phase of the poet's problem is himself', and the best passages in the Cantos show an increasingly desperate realisation of this truth. It is in the end not the fulfilment but the defeat of the hope expressed in the recurrent line: "In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it" (27).

The poem illustrates the gold of the organising imagination does occasionally shine through the gloom, but not nearly often enough. Pound's mind is like a clouded kaleidoscope: the fragments of his own experience and of the civilisations, literatures and histories that have caught his attention remain a shifting heap of splinters until, now and again, the mirrors of the instrument suddenly clear and for a moment a pattern is revealed. In the tragic Pisan Cantos his own consciousness of weakness in the face of reality and the poet's necessary struggle with it is at its most apparent. Acre the recurrent line, equally wistful, equally defeated, is 'Le Paradise Artificiel', once followed by its bleak corollary 'L'enfer non plus'. One is re-minded of Stevens's lines from 'Esthetique du Mal' written at almost the same time (1944) as these Cantos: His firm stanzas hang like hives in hell Or what hell was, since now both heaven and hell. Are one, and here, Oterra infidel. But Pound could not summon the steadiness or concentration to move forwards from such a thought. His most fundamental weakness, the lopsidedness of his view of poetry and hence of his whole poetic ambition, is clearly visible in the Cantor. His emphasis in the many passages that refer to his own situation as a poet is always upon technique. Supremely aware of the poet's responsibility in respect of the disciplined use of language, he is hardly aware at all of the poet's responsibility in respect of thought. The problems of belief and value in a

world without established systems of truth, the search for 'what will suffice', the poet's task envisaged by such as Arnold and *Santayana*, concern him very little. In this sense he is a most un-modern poet.

His most powerful response to the modern world is disgust; his most powerful emotion is nostalgia. *Maunderley* shows that he was able to realise that the poet in the modern world must be more than a fine craftsman, but nothing in his work shows that he himself was able to achieve the more that *Maunderley* could not manage. He loathed first the America he abandoned and then the Europe he adopted for failing to provide him with a sufficient publicly-accepted role as a poet, and, failing to construct a sufficient role for himself, he turned longingly to civilisations of the past which seemed to him to justify his own poetic efforts. 'Out of key with his time', as he wrote in *Maunderley*, he could neither resign himself, like, say, Robert Graves, to the minor lyric perfectionism, careless of fame and influence, that is celebrated in *Homage to Sexists Properties*, nor find the intellectual and moral strength to brave the issues that in the end must confront the more than minor poet. He took refuge in bitterness, in Fascism, in hopeless yearning for the moral support of more congenial times, and in a poetic technique that should somehow protect him from responsibilities he could not cope with.

Conclusion: The modern poet's task has perhaps never been so well described as in these lines. The 'sound which is not part of the listener's own sense', the new affirmation that has to be made amid desolation and decay and the collapse of ancient structures, is the affirmation of 'what will suffice'. The poet who can achieve it will conclude his efforts with the serenity of Stevens's late poems and of the last sections of 'East Coke? *Harmonium* is usually thought as a volume of gaudy and confident exuberance after which Stevens retreated or advanced, according to the point of view,' into the more abstract metaphysical world of his later poetry. It is certainly true that the marvellous luxuriance of language which distinguishes *Harmonium* and runs to fantastic riot in its longest poem *The Comedian as the Letter C*, is later much restrained. It is also true that as Stevens's thought gradually progressed his poems collected an increasing weight of meditative subtlety. What is misleading is the idea that the *Harmonium* poems represent the assumption of a positive relation between the poet and reality which Stevens later relinquished in favour of philosophical enquiry. In fact, the desolation of existence without reconciling structures of belief, *The Waste Land* for which Stevens' word was 'poverty', is recognised and accepted in *Harmonium* as definitely as it is in Eliot's early poetry.

The real difference between the two poets at these periods is that whereas Eliot, in disgust and despair, was making his poetry out of *The Waste Land* itself in its most

dispiriting aspects, Stevens was already more concerned with the possibility of affirmations that the poet might be able to construct in defiance of it. The affirmations of *Harmonium* are no more than provisional hence Stevens's wish to call the poetic Anthology *The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae*, and the satisfaction it caused him. These poems are skirmishes at the beginning of the battle that Stevens was to wage for the rest of his life, his fundamental object being to make his affirmations no longer provisional but sufficient. But what *Harmonium* establishes, as clearly as his poem and with a more optimistic courage, is the nature of the enemy. *Harmonium* was greeted with little critical acclaim and less public enthusiasm. Ten months after its publication. In England at least, and perhaps still partly because *Harmonium* came out at the right time in the wrong continent, it is even yet not generally recognised. Among those to whom Joyce, Eliot, Valet and R Like are familiar spirits or, at any rate, familiar points of reference, Stevens's name often evokes only puzzled frowns and faintly ringing bells. And yet or perhaps this is also part of the reason for his comparative lack of fame of all the great writers of his generation he was producing his best work the most recently. Possibly it is just that while in English poetry the political 'thirties were followed by the hysterical 'forties and the drab 'fifties, this remote, prosperous, sane old man, having failed to be noticed as part of the great 'twenties, thereafter simply failed at every turn to be where most people were looking. Had they looked a little further they might have followed the whole course of a remarkable creative achievement in their own language. The eight or so years of poetic effort that *Harmonium* represents had ended with the ambitious and not very satisfactory *Comedian as the Letter C*. Its fantastic devices and moments of splendour do not conceal an irresolution and a staleness that are explicit in a poem written the year before (1921),

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