CHAPTER V

HARMONIUM : THE ANECDOTES OF THE EARTH

The poems collected in Harmonium can perhaps be described as poems of the threshold, poems in which Stevens, though writing within the existing poetic tradition, moves beyond the tradition toward creating a new poetry. They manifest the threshold between a former, 'modern' experience of poetry and a new, imminent, what may be called 'post-modern' experience of poetry and reality. They are poems, not of a juvenile poet, but of a mature genius who had already intuitively arrived at his distinct understanding of poetry and was consciously developing it in his poetic practice. The poems of Harmonium are what the poet intended them to be, the "preliminary minutiae" to "the grand poem" (L, 237) toward which his entire poetic effort moves. Stevens seems to be groping in these poems for, as he wrote to Harriet Monroe, "an authentic speech" (L, 231) to articulate his grand poem. Before arriving at it, however, he attempts several ways of achieving it, which accounts for the rich variety of fine poems in the collection.

Harmonium was published in 1923, almost a year after

The Waste Land which marked a sensational event in the literary world and received great accolade from critics. Many of Stevens' poems were written in the 1910s when the Imagist poets were in the vanguard and a few poems had appeared in the numbers of Poetry along with some of the major Imagist poems. Yeats and Eliot were the dominant poets of the time, the chief architects of modern poetry and poetics. Nearer home, Marianne Moore, whom Stevens came to adore this side idolatry, and William Carlos Williams were creating their individual, indigenous poetry. But the impression created by the poems of Harmonium is that Stevens achieved a poetry which had the stamp of his own genius and could not be labelled as Symbolist, Imagist or Modernist poetry. Stevens, while 'making it new' in his own way, was already moving ahead of the tradition. Though he wrote what was then called 'pure poetry', that is, poetry that insisted on its own intrinsic value and depended for its effects mainly on images, sounds and a special use of the language, he did not share the modernist belief in poetry's creation of a realm separate from the actual, lived world. The Harmonium poems are, by and large, as this chapter proposes to show, an affirmation and celebration of the temporal existence and point to the possibility of creating a poetry that is capable of discovering the real world.

Such a maturing genius would no doubt be self-critical, if not devastatingly self-annihilating, as the major poems of the collection, "The Monocle de Mon Oncle" (CP, 13-18) and

"The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP, 27-46) suggest. "The Comedian," Stevens' first long poem about poetry, is the central poem of the collection as it covers the whole gamut of the poetic process, from the creation of fantastic sounds to the major formulations of Stevens' poetics. The poem, in a heavily ironic speech, points to the dangers inherent in extreme idealism and extreme realism, to the inadequacy of either the imagination or reality existing by itself and thus affirms, negatively through Crispin's failure, the poet's need to achieve an identity between the two. Though Stevens thought that he had yet to achieve his voice, he certainly seems to have sensed the poetic world he wanted to create.

In a letter written to Ronald Lane Latimer in October, 1935, Stevens, looking back on his early poetry, said: "When Harmonium 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" (L, 288). Indeed, the most distinguishing quality of Harmonium is the elegance and extravagance of the language, its most extraordinary and original use of images and sounds. The poems create their effect by apt words and images, by rhythm, alliteration, rhyme and manipulation of syntax. "Domination of Black" (CP, 8-9) is a fine example of how Stevens achieved pure poetry with images and rhythmic sounds of words. The poem concentrates on the revolving images, first the flames of the

fire, then the turning of the falling hemlock leaves, then the fanning tails of the peacocks, and finally the revolving of the planets in the dark night, until they merge into one another and are indistinguishable and fill the mind, the room, and the entire space with their moving. The verb "turn" is used eight times at the beginning of the line, and the repetition of the images of flames, leaves, peacocks and hemlocks creates a hypnotic effect and with their revolving makes their domination overwhelming and stupefying. As Stevens commented on this poem, a poem of this sort contains no ideas at all "because its sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images and sounds it contains. A mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it. You are supposed to get heavens full of the colors and full of sounds, and you are supposed to feel as you would feel if you actually got all this" (L, 251). Though the poem depends for its effect entirely on images and sounds there is nothing in it of the spatial and synchronic inclusiveness that one finds in pure Imagist Poetry, nor are the images part of some personal myth that transports us to another world. Rather, there is a feeling of the movement outward, from the self to the room to the expansion of the entire outer space in which the self becomes immersed, and by which it is intimidated, by the actual moving of the flames and the peacocks and the falling leaves and the revolving planets.

Another poem that depends entirely on the words and images for its effect is "Fabliau of Florida" (CP, 23). The

sailing of the ship at night, at the dissolving of the sea and the sky, is described in the variation of the color images. The deep humming sound at the sea-shore is changeless. It is juxtaposed with the feast of colors that awaits the ship if it sets sail into the open sea, "outward into heaven." Change is heaven. This is not only an exquisite specimen of pure poetry because of its images and hypnotic sound-effect, it also anticipates "Farewell to Florida" (CP, 117-118) because of its emphasis on change, giving thus, in turn, an idea of Stevens' own mode of pure poetry.

Stevens wrote of "Thirteen Ways of Looking At a Blackbird" (CP, 92-95) that it was "not meant to be a collection of epigrams or ideas, but of sensations" (L, 251). The poem presents thirteen ways of looking at the blackbird, but there are probably as many ways of looking at it as one can think of. The eccentric number of thirteen only warns us not to stick to just one way of looking at it and thus fix it into a symbol and thereby lose it. It is an actual, living bird which can be seen in various ways. Like the valley candle (CP, 51) or the jar (CP, 76), its being brings the whole surrounding within its horizon:

> Among twenty snowy mountains,
> The only moving thing
> Was the eye of the blackbird. (CP, 92)

It is not the imagined golden bird of Byzantine, the eternal

polis of art, but an actual bird walking around here and now in an actual surrounding:

> O thin men of Haddam,
> Why do you imagine golden birds?
> Do you not see how the blackbird
> Walks around the feet
> Of the women about you? (CP, 93)

Even the bawds of euphony at the sight of the blackbird "Flying in a green light" (CP, 94) would suddenly cease to be academic and express themselves sharply: "naturally with pleasure" (L, 340). The blackbird is one with the things it relates: "A man and a woman / Are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one" (CP, 93). Its movement in time is its creating and decreating existential space: "When the blackbird flew out of sight / It marked the edge / Of one of many circles" (CP, 93). The blackbird, finally, like the snow man, sitting in the cedar-limbs, beholds "the nothing" that is there:

> It was evening all afternoon.
> It was snowing
> And it was going to snow.
> The blackbird sat
> In the cedar-limbs. (CP, 95)

The blackbird is opposed to the bawds of euphony, the thin men of Haddam, the haunted man in his glass coach (XI) who live imprisoned in the narrow confines of the self. The bird, on the other hand, is an image of a way of being that creates and inhabits the external world.

A similar variational scheme is at work in "Sea Surface

Full of Clouds" (CP, 98-102), a poem that was first published in 1924, and included in the second edition of Harmonium. The poem is perhaps the finest example of the purity that Stevens strove to achieve through the repetition of a theme and the long drawn-out rhythm that results from the repetition. In place of the brevity of the Blackbird, there are six expansive, almost identically organized verses, heavily repeating the central descriptive, skeleton structure so as to accentuate the various effects of the sea-scape. The poem plays on the variation of the adjectives and images that determine the changing atmosphere of the sea. The reflection of the sky and clouds in the sea at different moments creates different appearance of the sea surface full of clouds. The sea, accordingly, is seen as calm (I), tempestuous and then clearing (II), at night and at dawn (III), malicious and ominous, once again clearing (IV), and finally indolent and somewhat incongruous, until the sea and the sky "rolled as one and from the two / Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue" (CP, 102). The poem depends entirely on the repetition of images which create these fleeting, impressionistic moods of the sea. It is a fine example of the imagination's power to discover the ever-changing reality which cannot be fixed in a single image but which must be seen anew each moment.

Language in Harmonium is, in its characteristic mode, extravagant and fantastic in its use of the out of the way, strange, obscure words. There is a feeling of the exuberance of

words, which through their ambiguity and queer sound creations make the reading of the poems an overwhelmingly exciting experience. This gives the poems a richness and complexity that is inexhaustible. Stevens' love for these unusual, extraordinary words is not mere preciousness but as Blackmur has rightly observed, it is the most appropriate and precise language for Stevens' purpose.[1] It is perhaps, Stevens' safeguard against a too vaguely idealistic, romantic, or profusely subjective, traditional poetic mode, as is the element of the comic, or even the grotesque in these poems. Stevens seems to use language almost as a strategy of "decreation," to destroy the stale, conventional modes of perception of reality and create a fresh perception of it. The deliberate gaudiness of language and the unusual combinations of words are meant to fascinate and shock the reader into a new revelation of reality.

In Harmonium Stevens almost invents a language, or as Marianne Moore comments, "several languages within a single language."[2] It is pre-eminently his own idiom in search of his voice. Stevens wrote to Hariet Monroe that until he found his own voice, he intended to continue writing in the same vein: "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" (L, 231).

Harmonium abounds in the most unusual and inventive use of language. The poem, "The Ordinary Women" (CP, 10-12), is an excellent example. The poem illustrates, on a smaller scale, what is to be the central theme of "The Comedian as the Letter C," the inadequacy of living either in pure imagination or pure fact. But the poem resists intelligence completely as the words used are inexhaustible in their meaning. The phrase "The moonlight/Fubbed the girandoles" (CP, 11), for example, says perhaps something about the moonlight cheating the artificial light of the chandelier, being stronger than it, but its strange words and sounds make any attempt at looking for sense in it superfluous through their magical charm. In another poem the ill humors of "The Weeping Burgher" (CP, 61) are described in the most inconceivable imagery : "And ah! that Scaramouche / Should have a black barouche." The pompous, comic allusion deflates the sentimental sorrow of the burgher.

"Bantams in Pine-woods" (CP, 75-76) is again a poem that is entirely contained in its sounds. Though it has a semblance of syntactical unfolding, whatever literal, or even serious, philosophical meaning it has is shoved into the background, as the magnificent sounds, powerful alliteration and assonances, come into the foreground and occupy the space of the poem. The poem is about the "Chieftain Iffucan," a certain "universal cock" who intrudes upon the territory of the bantams, "inchlings" and is defied and shouted away by the pugnacious little inchling, fearless, bristling as he brandished a tuft of pines in his defence:

> Chieftain Iffucan Of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with hennahackles, halt!
>
> Damned universal cock, as if the sun
> Was blackmoor to bear your blazing tail.
>
> Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
> Your world is you. I am my world. (CP, 75)

The exotic cock is defined as a "ten-foot poet," "universal," whereas the inchling is a minor or a private or subjective poet who asserts, "I am the personal." But it is the sounds that dominate the poem and generate the opposition between cock and inchling. They are part of the outrageous speech of the inchling, and since he is a poet, and the poem, therefore, a poem about poetry, they are part of the subject of the poem.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (CP, 64) also depends for its effect on the powerful sounds and images it creates, or on what Stevens called "the essential gaudiness of language" (L, 263). The images of the "roller of big cigars, / The muscular one" whipping "In kitchen cups concupiscent curds," the wenches who "dwadle," the boys bringing "flowers in last month's newspapers" take away the sham sentimentality of the everyday, the commonplace, the ordinary, and simply let it be as it is, "Let be be the finale of seem." Similarly, the image of the corpse protruding horny feet in the second stanza, in the queerness of its expression, emphasizes the plain fact of the woman's death without sentimentalizing it. In both stanzas the final couplet with its force of wit fuses the two images of the living and the dead, implying that the only power worth

heeding is the power of the moment, of what is. The images thus "express or accentuate life's destitution" (L, 500). The extravagance of language prevents the description from being either romantic or realistic, and thus succeeds in laying bare things as they are. "Bantams in Pine-Woods" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," though leaning heavily on sound effect show also Stevens' movement toward his own poetic, his preoccupation with non-subjective view of things, his predominant interest in things as they are.

Stevens' use of "anecdote" in Harmonium is another of his innovations towards creating a new poetry, in achieving pure poetry on his own terms. There are several poems that bear the word "anecdote" in their title: "The Earthy Anecdote" (CP, 3), "Anecdote of Men by Thousand" (CP, 51-52), "Anecdote of Canna" (CP, 55), "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" (CP, 59), and "Anecdote of the Jar" (CP, 76).

Stevens' anecdotes, however, are not fabulous mental inventions. They may in fact be looked upon as his first gropings towards "fiction," his first definitions of the theory of poetry. "Earthy Anecdote" (CP, 3)contains what one may call, Stevens' idea of what poetry ought to be; it must be the poetry of the earth, or an extension of reality. The poem is a fit opening not only for Harmonium, but for the Collected Poems as

well, as it gives a definite character to the whole volume. The image of the firecat leaping to the right and to the left and bristling in the way, and of the bucks flying, clattering and swerving to the turning of the firecat have nothing of the symbolic overtones about them. In fact, they are intended to be actual, concrete animals (L, 209). And yet, the exact correspondence between the cat and the bucks is beyond rational explanation. This is the fiction of the cat and the bucks, which is not the making of the subjective self that projects its own meaning on it. And at the same time the actual animals are seen imaginatively, fictively, so as to accentuate their actuality, to discover them more truly.

"Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" (CP, 51-52) is also a poem about poetry. Poetry is not turning the visible into the invisible, not the soul's consuming of the external world into its atemporal, invisible world. It involves rather seeing the invisible in the visible. It is to be the poetry of the external world. "The soul, he said, is composed / Of the external world" (CP, 51):

> The dress of a woman of Lhasa
> In its place,
> Is an invisible element of that place
> Made visible. (CP, 52)

In "Anecdote of the Jar" (CP, 76) the jar is, if at all, a cipher for the creative act, the poem. In its being placed on the hill, it brings the whole wilderness within its horizon: "It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill." The order that the jar brings about in the surrounding is by bring-

ing the surrounding into being: "The wilderness rose up to it." It would have no existence but for the jar being there. Like the singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West" (CP, 128-130), who makes the world in which she sings, the jar "took dominion everywhere." Again, this is not the subjective self that through its self-projection imposes an order; rather, its domination is a creative act which first lets things come into being, which, without its dominion, would remain concealed and without an identity. The poem itself, in its bare, repetitive language, at once haunting and enigmatic, gives some idea of the poetic process itself.

"Anecdote of Canna" (CP, 55) is another poem about poetry, as it defines the exact relationship that exists between the imagination and reality. The poem occurred, as Stevens says, during a walk in Washington, looking at the beds of the terraces filled with canna (L, 465). In the poem, "X", "the mighty man," the President, perhaps, as Stevens suggests, dreams of huge canna. But his huge thoughts of canna in his sleep "may never meet another thought or thing" for they are part of a dream, of the imagination only, and "has not the benefit of the external" (L, 465). It is only when the "daybreak comes," that is, when he returns to reality, that he first feels the dewiness of the stones and feels the exhilaration of this while observing it with a "clinging eye":

X promenades the dewy stones,
Observes the canna with a clinging eye,
Observes and then continues to observe. (CP, 55)

As Stevens explained "the poem is an aspect of the idea that the imagination creates nothing.... Dreams are hash" (L, 465). The creative power of the imagination does not lie in abstracting the external into the self, but in the direct and immediate perception of things as they are. The eye of "X" clings to reality and "sates itself in it or on it" (L, 465). The imagination is a force that attaches the self to the external world of actual things, not the one that abstracts it from them.

There is a distinct comic strain in Harmonium that cannot be missed. There are not only poems that have comic element in their use of sounds and language, like "Bantams in Pine-Woods" (CP, 75-76) "Floral Decorations of Bananas" (CP, 53-54), but there are other poems in which the comic spirit acquires a greater significance. The two that stand out as masterpieces of the comic spirit in Harmonium are "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "The Comedian as the Letter C." In middle age the poet pauses to think about the nature of two important modes of life - love and poetry, viewing them in a comic perspective.

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (CP, 13-18), first published in 1918, takes love as its subject, the fate of mature lovers whose love, ironically, never matures. The poem perhaps looks

derivative in the free use of the conventional forms: the blank verse; the opening invocation; the echoes of the epigrammatic heroic couplet, as in "It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies" (CP, 16); its rather trite use of the metaphysical conceit in the comparison of apple and skull; the speaker's musing on the skull echoing Hamlet's meditations in the graveyard. But for all this, "Le Monocle" remains exceptionally original, in the rhetoric it employs, in its parables and its comic ironic strain. The poem concerns a young lover turning into a monocled, single-eyed, aging uncle of the title, an "amorist growing bald" (CP, 15). He is the speaker of the poem, who addresses himself to his lady in a monologue. The lady, whom he invokes in the beginning, is seen by Kermode as "the interior paramor," or "the one of fictive music," the muse of poetry.[3] To the extent that she inspires him to articulate his own thoughts, this may be true. But she seems to be more real than ideal, since Stevens insists that she too, once an Eve for her Adam, has been affected by age, and has turned into a rotten fruit, though she, unlike the conscious speaker, still persists in self-deceiving happiness, "with anecdotal bliss / To make believe a starry connaissance" (CP, 13). She is perhaps, after all as Stevens suggested, "somebody to swear by" (L, 251), a quiet, anonymous listener of Browning's monologues, who provokes the speaker into taking stock of the situation. The situation is simple. Love at forty is no longer

what it used to be in their adolescent days, it is exhausted and finished in a depleted marriage. This leads the speaker to pursue the "origin and course / Of love" (CP, 18).

It is not difficult to find a parallel of Prufrock in the speaker. A man at forty, growing bald, looking back at his life, turns self-introspective and breaks into a meditative discourse with "you". He shares some of Profrock's feelings, as,

> For me, the firefly's quick, electric stroke
> Ticks tediously the time of one more year (CP, 15)

reminds one of Prufrock's "I have measured my life with coffee-spoons."[4] But whereas Prufrock's self-introspection has almost a corroding effect on him and leaves him still an inhabitant of a sort of a wasteland, the speaker in "Le Monocle," has the strength to be objective and self-critical and mock at his fate at forty, and thus, paradoxically, "celebrate" "The faith of forty" (CP, 16).

The poem mocks love at forty in "the most magnificent measure" (CP, 13). The experience of love in middle age needs to be viewed with ironic detachment, if it is not to degenerate into a pseudo-romantic melancholia and become a "fugul requiem" (CP, 41). The lovers cannot experience love in their middle age since love is an experience deeply rooted in change, and having past their meridian they must take cognizance of the fact.

In mocking at the romantic notion of love as something eternal, as a transcendent bliss, the speaker is able to mock at his own fate also, in having lost the ability to live love in its change just because he is no longer young and thus preserve the genuine pathos of the situation.

The poem seeks to suggest that the nature of love is rooted in the living changingness of life. Love is the theme of earth, not of heaven, a "fluttering thing," that still has "so distinct a shadé" (CP, 18). It is a temporal experience, not a mystic experience transcending time and place.

The poem makes use of several parables to explain this from different points of view. The magnificent mockery of the initial apostrophe is the mockery of love that takes its abode in heaven, clouds, sun and moon:

> Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
> O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
>
> There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill. (CP, 13)

Love is rather as momentary and transient as "The radiat bubble" (CP, 13).

The parable of the red bird in the second stanza juxtaposes the torrential choir of joy of the red bird and the

resigned choir of "farewell" of the middle-aged speaker. "It is a red bird that seeks out his choir / Among the choirs of wind and wet and wing" (CP, 13). Like the blue pigeon of the last stanza it is also a fluttering thing, and its song is composed of the external world of which it is a part, the spring with its wind and sky. The speaker, on the other hand, can no longer inhabit the world of spring, which is the source of love and joy. His lady, however, continues to live in illusion, because she seeks the origin of love not in the world around her, but in the heaven of eternal happiness, in "a starry connaissance" (CP, 13).

The speaker turns to history in the third stanza and ruminates on the elaborate coiffures that the barbers in China, Japan or England in different ages designed to beautify their women. They may have perished but the urge to beauty endures. The lady whom the speaker addresses comes, in spite of the coiffures of the past, "dripping" (CP, 14) in her hair, beautiful in her uncoiffed state and thus scoffing at the barbers. However, the questions posed in the stanza remain obscure and have not been answered, rather need not be answered in negative or affirmative:

> Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
> That not one curl in nature has survived?
> Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,
> Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep? (CP, 14)

The coiffures of the past beautified the women in the past, and as such they have not been in vain. And yet they are undone by the beauty of the uncoiffed hair of the lady. Beauty is, as Stevens says in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (CP, 89-92), immortal in the flesh: "The body dies; the body's beauty lives" (CP, 92).

The parable of the angels riding the mules, in stanza VII, "from beyond the sun" (CP, 15) makes the contrast between heaven and earth complete and final. There is no mixing of them. This parable amounts, in sense, to this:

> The honey of heaven may or may not come,
> But that of earth both comes and goes at once. (CP, 15)

The eternal bloom is denied: "Suppose these couriers brought amid their train / A damsel heightened by eternal bloom." It is a wishful hypothesis. If the damsel descended on earth, she would no longer be in the eternal bloom, but would find that her "bloom is gone."

This is the "way of truth" that is revealed by a "trivial trope" (CP, 16) of fruit in stanza VIII. The lover, now turned "a dull scholar," makes a facile comparison between love and fruit as they run their natural course and takes it to a grotesque exaggeration:

> It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies.
>
> . . . . . .
> Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
> Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
> Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
> Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque. (CP, 16)

The same fruit becomes the fruit of life, the Biblical fruit, Eve's apple in stanza IV, and is compared to the skull, for, it "like skulls, comes rotting back to ground" (CP, 14).

The deep affinity between love and earth is stated in stanza V:

> The measure of the intensity of love
> Is measure, also, of the verve of earth. (CP, 14)

Love's origin and course are to be found in and through earth, not beyond it. Time is its essence, not any atemporal eternity. Love lives through change. It is, therefore, a "theme for Hyacinth alone" (CP, 15), for youth, "for fiery boys... / And for sweet-smelling virgins close to them" (CP, 14). For men at forty, all these verves and fluctuations turn into "curriculum / Of introspective exiles, lecturing" (CP, 15), and all The "ephemeral blues must merge for them in one / The basic slate, the universal hue" (CP, 15).

In stanza XI, in an unexpectedly violent and grotesque manner, the speaker once again confronts the situation of facing love at forty. The stanza poses two questions : if sex is all,

and, if love is all. Of course, sex is not all, but at the same time our "Doleful heroics" of love, "pinching gestures forth / From madness or delight" cannot exist "without regard / To that first, foremost law" (CP, 17). The pseudo-romantic notion of love, expressed in the conventional images of lilies and the lake, is after all made ludicrous by the belching out of the hedious cry of the frog, for the odious frog at least possesses by nature what the lovers in their starry surrounding do not.

> Last night, we sat beside a pool of pink,
> Clippered with lilies scudding the bright chromes,
> Keen to the point of starlight, while a frog
> Boomed from his very belly odious chords. (CP, 17)

The speaker, however, has learnt to distrust the romantic mystique of love, and turned a yeoman poet:

> I am a yeoman, as such fellows go.
> I know no magic trees, no balmy boughs,
> No silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion fruits.
> But, after all, I know a tree that bears
> A semblance to the thing I have in mind.
> It stands gigantic, with a certain tip
> To which all birds come sometime in their time.
> But when they go that tip still tips the tree. (CP, 16-17)

The birds come at a certain time to the tree, and in their mutual belonging together they find their abode on the tree. But when they go, "the tip still tips the tree." Perhaps love also has an analogous course. Men like birds, come "sometime in their time" to dwell in love.

> It is this image of bird, rather than that of fruit,

that dominates, as it better explains, the experience of love. And the poem closes with another image of bird, a blue pigeon that flutters in the sky:

> A blue pigeon it is, that circles the blue sky.
> On sidelong wing, around and round and round. (CP, 17)

The speaker, like the white pigeon, perhaps, has grown tired of the flight. Yet, in the perception of a fluttering bird, he leaves the egocentric presumptions of the dark rabbi for a more certain vision of the rose rabbi, that "fluttering things have so distinct a shade" (CP, 18). The "origin and course/Of love" are grounded not in some unreal, eternal realm but in discovering and experiencing the essential beauty, "so distinct a shade" (CP, 18), of things that exist in and through change.

If "Le Monocle" is concerned with finding "a way of truth" (CP, 16) about love, "The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP, 27-46) is an attempt to find "the common truth" about poetry, as the excised lines from the original version suggest:

> The poet seeking the true poem, seeks,
> As Crispin seeks, the simplifying fact,
> The common truth.[5]

"The Comedian," Stevens' first sustained effort at a long poem, has a central place in Harmonium, as it is the finest example of the exuberance of fantastic language which is the distinguishing feature of the Harmonium poems, and at the same time it gathers together and articulates the major themes of Stevens'

poetry. Stevens here finally locates, or rather defines the 'site' of his poetry. "The Comedian" is a poem about poetry as in the description of Crispin. Stevens shows the failure of a poet who tosses between extreme idealism and extreme realism and never achieves a perfect balance between imagination and reality, between poetry and life, and hence fails as a man too, for he fails to dwell poetically on earth.

The poem adopts a narrative framework of Crispin on a voyage. Stevens makes use of the familiar motif of a poet's voyage. Crispin's journey, however, is not a romantic voyage through time to a timeless vision, nor a journey of a modernist poet inward into the self, but an inverse moving toward a perfect agreement with the external world which, however, in Crispin's case, ends in disaster.

Crispin is a valet, whose archetype in seventeenth-century French comedy is a person basically timid but capable of adapting himself to various roles such as those of a musician, scholar, poet. Crispin likewise can be a "lutanist of fleas," or a "lexicographer" of mute "greenhorns" (CP, 28) and can adjust to his changing vicissitudes. He is on a simple jaunt : "Bordeaux to Yucatan, Havana next, / And then to Carolina" (CP, 29). His journey, however, is a journey from vain romanticism to stiff and stifling realism. From an "insatiable egotist" (CP, 30) in his native land Crispin ultimately

ends up being an "indulgent fatalist" (CP, 44) when he succumbs to the pressures of reality. The movement of Crispin's life is the movement of anybody's life. Stevens explained it in a letter to Hi Simons: "... the way of all mind is from romanticism to realism, to fatalism and then to indifferentism, unless the cycle recommences... At the moment, the world in general is passing from the fatalism stage to an indifferent stage: a stage in which the primary sense is a sense of helplessness... what the world looks forward to is a new romanticism, a new belief" (L, 350).

The poem, in an indirect way, in describing Crispin's failure in an ironic comic way, points to "a new belief" which for Stevens would really suffice. Crispin meets a "haphazard denouement" (CP, 40) because he tosses between "tumbling verse" (CP, 37), and "essential prose" (CP, 36) but never realizes what the poem reveals, as it reaches its climax at the end of part III, namely, that the "essential prose" does "wear a poem's guise at last" (CP, 36). He never arrives at this inclusive vision. The revised poem, over which Stevens took a lot of pain, included the last two parts and described the consequences of Crispin's apprenticeship to the rankest trivia. The poem thus divides itself into two fairly balanced parts, the first three sections showing the inadequacy of the imagination not rooted in reality, and the last three sections the inadequacy of reality when divested of the imagination. The

poem hints at the possibility of the mutual belonging of the two when it states its central proposition:

> The natives of the rain are rainy men. (CP, 37)

This is the perennial, central theme of Stevens' poetry, "the amassing harmony" (CP, 403), the mutual belonging together of the self and the world, the imagination and reality. Crispin, however, is a victim of extreme romanticism and extreme realism. Either he evades reality in the "poems of plums" (CP, 30), or, he clasps to "The plum (that) survives its poems" (CP, 41). But he never discovers the plum become the poem.

In the first section, Crispin's romantic, egotistical self is ridiculed and shattered to pieces to the point of total annihilation. The incongruity and absurdity of the opening proposition that "man is the intelligence of his soil" (CP, 27) the transcendent subject that rules the external world is exposed and ridiculed in phrases like "Socrates / Of snails, Musician of pears" (CP, 27). His sovereignty over trivia is inversed when the vast subjugating tone of the sea turns him into a "merest minuscule" (CP, 29). Crispin at the sea is a man deprived of all mythologies, Stevens' famous image of man in a barren world, a godless universe: "Nothing of himself / Remained, except some starker, barer self / In a starker, barer world" (CP, 29). Crispin, either as "The sovereign ghost" (CP, 27), or the simple, homely,

godfearing man "of simple salad-beds / Of honest quilts" (CP, 27), feels uprooted at the sea because the image of the transcendent self or god is destroyed by the strange alien reality. The experience at the sea is annihilating. The bare and alien world with its austerity, "with a speech belched out of hoary darks" (CP, 29), intimidates, causes existential anguish as it overwhelms, and since there is no going back, Crispin turns into "an introspective voyager" (CP, 29). But this confrontation, and the consequent destitution, liberates Crispin who is finally severed of his egotistical self and strives to "make whole among / The ruses that were shattered by the large" (CP, 30).

Crispin next finds himself in the exotic tropical environment of Yucatan. Now as a typical modern man, or modern poet a "Sonorous nutshell rattling inwardly" (CP, 31), he rebels against the sentimental, conventional "sonneteers" in Yucatan who still "to the night-bird made their plea" (CP, 30). Crispin once belonged to them as he "wrote his couplet yearly to the spring, / As dissertation of profound delight" (CP, 31). But "his vicissitudes had much enlarged / His apprehension" (CP, 31). Crispin, therefore, turns into an avant-guardist and creates an indigenous, aesthetic, the fables of "mint and dirt" (CP, 31). But Crispin in Yucatan replaces the 'romantic' with the 'fabulous'. Yucatan appeals to him because it provides him exotic material. Crispin as "the affectionate emigrant" (CP, 32), is enamoured of the new material, yet never feels at home in it, and is once more

chastened by "the quintessential fact" (CP, 33) of the vast force of the thunderstorm, and set free by it.

If in the first section his romantic self is purged by the sea, and in the second his fabulous aesthetic by the storm, in the third section Crispin denies himself the poems of the moon in favour of the actual things that meet his eyes. The moonlight liaison seemed "Illusive, faint, more mist than moon, perverse, / Wrong as a divagation to Peking, / ... Moonlight was an evasion, or, if not, / A minor meeting, facile, delicate" (CP, 34-35). The moonlight legends of Carolina, imaginary and unreal, divorced from reality, may be seductive but Crispin abandons them for "the visible, circumspect presentment drawn / From what he saw across his vessel's prow" (CP, 35). Towards the end of the section Crispin comes closest to the "relentless contact" (CP, 34) he desires, when he is exposed to the trivia with all their "arrant stinks" (CP, 36). Finally stripped of the subjective evasions of the imagination, he feels "purified" as he takes his first lessons as a "marvellous sophomore" in "the essential prose" (CP, 36).

The first three sections involve Crispin ridding himself of the romantic, the fabulous and the illusive. They show the inadequacy of the imagination when it lives by itself. The purpose of Crispin's "ongoing progress" is to root the imagination

in external reality. But paradoxically, in gripping more closely the essential prose, he gradually and slowly succumbs to its hold and loses the power of imagination in the process. The poem arrives at a midway halt, and begins a reverse movement in section IV.

The initial proposition of the fourth section that "his soil is man's intelligence" (CP, 36), that is, reality determines man's being is a contrast to "man is the intelligence of his soil" (CP, 27) of the first section. It opens up, however, a possibility for a perfect contact with reality that Crispin seeks. The purpose of Crispin's pilgrimage is to find "A still new continent in which to dwell" (CP, 37). In the first flush of his new relationship with the environment, Crispin writes the prolegomena "his first central hymns" (CP, 37) that "The natives of the rain are rainy men" (CP, 37). He begins with the idea of a colony where such a harmonious relationship is possible.

But the idea of a colony, of a "world", which man can truly inhabit, soon degenerates as he finds himself entangled in rituals and ceremonious celebrations of things around him. "These bland excursions... / Related in romance to backward flights, / However prodigal, however proud, / Contained in their afflatus the reproach / That first drove Crispin to his wandering" (CP, 39). They were another kind of "counterfeit," "fictive flourishes" (CP, 39), as such ceremonies and rituals predetermined

his response to things turning him into a 'civilised' social man. Crispin's emprise to "colonize" a polar "planterdom" (CP, 40) soon disappears, and finally 'preferring "text to gloss" he decides to serve "grotesque apprenticeship to chance event" (CP, 39). The original version "From the Journal of Crispin" which Stevens wrote for Poetry ended with Crispin's resolution to write "Veracious page on page" (CP, 40), that is, with the end of section IV,[6] perhaps with his intention to show the need for a return to reality from the romantic evasions. The revised, extended version shows the fatal consequences and dangers of a facile surrender to reality, and a giving in to its pressures. Crispin, meets a "haphazard demouement" (CP, 40) because he never comes to terms with reality.

Crispin makes himself "a nice shady home" (CP, 40), and his vision shrinks from the continent to the narrow confines of his cabin. "Now this thing and now that / Confined him... as if the suzerain soil / Abashed him by carouse to humble yet / Attach" (CP, 40). He succumbs to the realism of the quotidian. His journey comes full circle. He returns to the salad-beds and honest quilts, but sans the illusive joy of the initial position. Crispin of course is not to write "fugul requiems" (CP, 41)) to his tragic denouement. The rhetorical questions, posed to inquire how Crispin was to meet his denouement, contain in them the answer - the fatalistic, compromising attitude Crispin adopts toward his situation. What makes him really pathetic is not that he does not sing heroically of his final

extinction, but that he cannot trumpet his acceptance of things as they are with joy. Instead he turns into a stiffest realist and succumbs to the quotidian.

"The return to social nature, once begun" (CP, 43) overwhelms him with four daughters with curls cramming his cabin. Amazed "by his own capacious bloom" (CP, 44) "Four questioners," he yet finds in them "four sure answerers" (CP, 45). He accepts life "Without grace or grumble" (CP, 45), the life of an "indulgent fatalist" (CP, 44). Crispin's story comes to and end, the "relation comes, benignly, to its end" (CP, 46). It is a benign end, ironically, because Crispin, having lost the will to even question or protest against his situation, has finally turned a total indifferentist, who accepts his fate without the least resistance.

Stevens insisted that the comedian of the title, the letter C, was not the cipher for Crispin, but the sound of the letter C. In a letter to Hi Simons, he wrote: "As Crispin moves through the poem, the sounds of the letter C accompany him... You have to read the poem and hear all this whistling and mocking and stressing and, in a minor way, orchestrating, going on in the background..." (L, 352). The use of the sound C running all over the poem, serves to give a structural unity to the poem, but mainly to help create the character of Crispin. As Stevens intended, he "deliberately took the sort of life that millions of people live, without embellishing it except by the

embellishments in which I was interested at the moment: words and sounds" (L, 294). Or, as he explained to his Italian translator, Renato Poggioli, "the central figure is an every-day man who lives a life without the slightest adventure except that he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do" (L, 778). Crispin, as Stevens said, is an anti-mythological figure. He is a passive sufferer. Things happen to him. He is given over to a life of chance. The exaggeration of sounds and words in the poem juxtaposes the ordinariness of his experience and the caricatured perspective in which it is seen, and thus sharpen the irony latent in his entire enterprise. The effect of the sounds of C is to highlight the ironic element which forms the bedrock of the sarcastic composition. The verbosity in the description of Crispin is matched by the loquaciousness of the narrator, whose grave, insightful remarks are no less ironical when placed in the context of Crispin's adventure.

The ironical treatment of Crispin's story gives Stevens an opportunity to look at the poet's way with the world in a detached manner. Critics have often identified Crispin with Stevens.[7] In fact, Crispin is what Stevens would not like to be. At the time when he was groping for a poetry of his own, Stevens seems to have found in Crispin an objective correlative of a poet who never arrives at a proper poetry because he never quite attains the equilibrium between poetry and reality. In showing in an oblique, ironic way that neither imagination, nor reality

suffices in itself, Stevens seems to have hinted at his own search for a poetry that would suffice only in their mutual belonging together. His writing of "The Comedian" was perhaps a way of purging himself of the poetry he did not want to create. But before bidding farewell to it, Stevens seems to have made the fullest use of the creative exuberance for once and reassured, if not himself, at least the reader, that he was a powerful poet of his own making.

Crispin fails both as poet and as man. The reason of his failure is his inability to root his imagination in reality and to dwell poetically in reality. There are minor variations of this theme in other poems of Harmonium, dealing with men who share Crispin's predicament. "The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad" (CP, 96), is also sapped by "the malady of the quotidian":

> The time of year has grown indifferent.
> Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
> Are both alike in the routine I know.
> I am too dumbly in my being pent.

The man feels "diffident" because he has lost the power of imaginative perception and thus identify with the being of the winter: "Perhaps, if winter once could penetrate / ... to the final slate, / ... One might in turn become less diffident" (CP, 96).

"Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs" (CP, 78) tells of a man who lives in his cabin and tends his field but is powerless to make the world really inhabitable for himself: "The hours of his indolent, arid days, / .... Seemed to suckle themselves on his arid being" (CP, 78).

The man in "Hymn From a Watermelon Pavilion" (CP, 88-89) also lives in a dark cabin and is unable to see things as they are in the sun and celebrate them. He is a

> ... dweller in the dark cabin,
> To whom the watermelon is always purple,
> Whose garden is wind and moon,

who, like Crispin, lives in the legendary moonlight, in a world of imagination divorced from reality. Confined to the dark cabin, he does not even perceive or participate in things of the open and bright surrounding, the blackbird "spread its tail, / So that the sun may speckle, / While it creaks hail." Like the man in "The Anecdote of Canna" (CP, 55) the things in his dream have no reference to the external world. The poem then ends with an exhortation to the dweller in the dark cabin to awaken to the external world, to perceive it and feel the exhilaration of the experience:

> You dweller in the dark cabin
> Rise, since rising will not waken
> And hail, cry hail, cry hail.

All these dwellers of the cabin, Crispin and his kin, fail to attain an imaginative perception of, and dwelling in, the external world, what their later analogue, the island man in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" attains (CP, 393).

The woman in "Sunday Morning" (CP, 66-77), for all her nostalgia for the dead divinity and her questioning of the meaning of life, remains resigned, between two worlds, one dead and the other not yet born for her. The poem, while it maintains the elegiac undulations of the woman's meditations, however, contains the resolution to her situation. When she is still dreaming of "silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulchre" (CP, 67) as the pungent oranges and green wings of the cockatoo on the rug, that make for a comfortable, complacent Sunday Morning for her, fade into the things of the past, a voice, less definite, more anonymous, tells her that Christ is dead. "The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering. / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay" (CP, 70). But her reverie though interrupted, is not totally shattered and she shares the fate of Crispin for she is not able to achieve a perfect resolution to her dilemma.

The vanishing of gods is the initial experience of the search for a poetry that will suffice. The experience is final and total, stated in a stark, matter-of-fact way in another poem, "Cortege For Rosenbloom" (CP, 79-81), without the elegiac

lament of Shelley, or even the bravado of Nietzche: "Rosenbloom is dead." He is buried "In a place in the sky" (CP, 81), for, as "Of Heaven Considered as Tomb" (CP, 56) says, with the death of gods, heaven is no more than an icy tomb. The sky is no longer seen as paradise, as the abode of the "inhuman birth" (CP, 67) of Jove, as the mark of separation between man and god, "this dividing and indifferent blue" (CP, 68).

The experience of the death of the gods motivates the creation of poetry that can take the place of the gods. "Poetry is the supreme fiction," the poet tells "A High-toned Old Christian Woman" (CP, 59). This fiction that suffices has its origin, however, not in the divine, but in the things of the earth:

> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth.
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven? (CP, 67)

Poetry, then, returns to actual things, things that grow and change and perish, and celebrates the presence of the things present. The experience of direct, immediate, imaginative apprehension of things is spiritual and mysterious, not because it transmutes them into a timeless world of religion or art, but precisely because it preserves their mystery in their actual being. Stevens, in this poem, one of his very first ("Sunday Morning" was published in 1915), seems intuitively to have

sensed his poetic world. Poetry does not transform temporal things into an atemporal eternity, but responds to and discovers things as they are. Stevens' most powerful and celebrated image of the sun, of the mystery of the visible things, which is both a presence and a thing present, occurs, with its fullest force in this poem:

> Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
> Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
> Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
> Not as a god, but as a god might be,
> Naked among them, like a savage source. (CP, 69-70)

The joyous and liberating participation in, and the celebration of, the sun, no less powerful and mysterious than the gods, and yet naked as a thing men can see with their own eyes and at the same time see in its nakedness, discovering its essence, the "savage source," is an instance of how poetry, taking the place of religion, helps us to live, as it reveals the mystery that resides in visible things.

"The Snow Man" (CP, 9-10), one of the finest and most perfect poems in Harmonium, anticipates, in its bare, minimal imagery and the experience it conveys, what is to follow in Stevens' later poetry. The poem is about the self's total immersion in the external world, so that the self may for a moment experience it in its being, and find joy in that experience. Stevens explained the poem as "an example of the necessity to identify

oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it" (L, 464):

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow. (CP, 9)

One must have a mind of winter, that is, one must be in complete intimacy with the world around him, so that, as a very late poem says, "a scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind" (CP, 534). It is an experience of "regarding," of looking at something, as if piercing to the very centre of the things looked at, and of "beholding," of direct and immediate perception in their entirety, as they in their essence really are. The perception here is an experience of open responsiveness to what is out there in the external world, without the least intrusion of the self. The self must desist projecting its own images on that world,

> and not ... think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves. (CP, 10)

The listener is "nothing himself" because he claims no superior will to power over the external scene by giving it the imprint of his own subjective self. His being "nothing himself" is not an experience of self-annihilation. Rather, he is nothing himself/because he identifies with the state of winter, he is a "snow man," his mind is that of winter. It being so, he

"beholds / Nothing that is not there," nothing extraneous to the experience, nothing that is actually not there, least of all his false conceptions about the things, so that he can behold "the nothing that is," that is, the essential blankness of the winter scene, the things in winter as they are in their true being, and feel the joy of that experience. "The nothing" is again not a negative term, an absence of things, but rather the positive bareness, the minimum, that is the essential being of the season of winter, which is manifest and experienced in "the junipers shagged with ice," and "In the sound of a few leaves,"

"The Snow Man" contains what is central in Stevens, the need to heed the things of the external world without any intervention or imposition of the self, to "decreate," in other words, all the false conceiving of it - to behold "Nothing that is not there" - so that one may behold the things in their being, may dis-cover "the nothing that is."

"Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (CP, 65), written in 1921, almost at the same time as "The Snow Man," complements it in a way for, if "The Snow Man" insists on the decreative process that is necessary to discover things in their true being, the poem of Hoon focuses the creative experience that follows it. The creative act, the poem seems to suggest, makes possible the apprehension of things in their true being. Creation and discovery are simultaneous. Hoon discovers the world in creating it:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

The poem, far from being an expression of a solipsistic self, imposing itself on the outside world, as has been observed by some critics,[8] is an example of how the creative act brings about the world which is there, but which otherwise remains closed and nonexistent. This poem, like "The Snow Man," also looks forward to Stevens later poetry, especially to "The Idea of Order at Key West" (CP, 128-130). What is most significant about this experience of the mutual belonging together of imagination and reality, of words and world, is that, in discovering the world the self discovers also its true being: "And there I found myself more truly and more strange." Creation and discovery of the world are the creation and discovery of the self too.

The world that the poems of Harmonium seek to create is the world of real, existential space and time. Unlike the poetry written at the time by some of the best modern poets who sought to achieve the ideality of 'pure poetry' independently of the real world, Stevens' poetry is the poetry of the earth. The woman in "Sunday Morning" is asked to find things to be cherished "in ... comforts of the sun,.../ In any balm or beauty of the earth" (CP, 67). "Le Monocle De Mon Oncle" finds the experience of love deeply rooted in earth: "The measure of the intensity of

love/ Is measure, also, of the verve of earth" (CP, 14). The entire purpose of Crispin's sojourn, though he fails miserably, is to discover the essential co-existence of poetry and reality. Poetry celebrates the secular joy of "Ploughing on Sunday" (CP, 20). In other words, all creative endeavour of man is rooted in and returns to the earth. The creative act cannot exist in and by itself. "Of the Surface of Things" (CP, 57) illustrates this:

> In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;
> But when I walk I see that it consists of three
> or four hills and a cloud.

Cognition is not an enclosed, spatial, atemporal act, but an experience in lived space and time. The world never completely gives up its meaning to the mind that seeks to reduce it within the confines of its images. It requires, rather, an embodied participation of the spectator in the scene he perceives. "Anecdote of Canna" also disapproves of the imagination that exists by itself and insists that it fulfils itself only when it clings to actual things.

Stevens' poetry establishes the validity and the inevitability of the external world for the existence of the self. The self is not conceived as a pure, transcendent subjectivity, a "sovereign ghost" (CP, 27), which wills its power over things, it rather exists insofar as it embodies the external world. "I am what is around me," states "Theory" (CP, 86). This is the

central experience of many poems in Harmonium. "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" (CP, 51-52) is an excellent elaboration of this experience. "The soul, he said, is composed / Of the external world." The self does not compose the external world according to its projections, but is defined only in terms of its belonging to the circumambient world. The experience that Crispin never realizes for himself, yet nevertheless proposes, is that "The natives of the rain are rainy men" (CP, 37). Such men are "responsive" (CP, 38), they respond to the external world, "hail" (CP, 89) it, and celebrate it.

The external space, then, is not withdrawn into an inner space, nor is it merely the empirical, naturalistic space that poetry reproduces. The profound necessity for poetry lies in the fact that the poetic act brings into being, discovers and thus orders the external space which otherwise lies nonexistent. "The Anecdote of the Jar" (CP, 76), "The Valley Candle" (CP, 51), "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (CP, 65) are enactments of such a creative act.

The external world that poetry calls into existence, that is, discovers while creating it, is thus temporal. It is here that Stevens' poetry from the beginning distinguishes itself from other modernist poetry that tends to spatialize existential time. "Life Is Motion" (CP, 83), and the purpose of the dance or the poem is to celebrate "the marriage / Of flesh and air."

The poems of Harmonium insist on the temporality of things as the essential condition for the creative experience. "Death is the mother of beauty" (CP, 69). It is things which perish that are the source of our joy and belief. Transcendence is to be found not in the timeless world of religion or art, but in things about us, in our ability to perceive "That fluttering things have so distinct a shade" (CP, 18). Stevens' use of 'weather' illustrates the profound importance he attached to time and change which are "the origin and course" of poetry. Weather is Stevens' most potent image of incessant change and temporality which is "The Motive For Metaphor" (CP, 286). One finds exhilaration in change, both in "The bough of summer and the winter branch" (CP, 67). "There is no spring in Florida," the poem "Indian River" (CP, 112) says, anticipating "Farewell to Florida" (CP, 117-118), because, paradoxically, there is always spring there; there is no change of season there. The ennui of the lack of change is reflected also in "Banal Sojourn" (CP, 62-63), a poem of what Stevens called "exhaustion in August .... of any experience that has grown monotonous" (L, 464), when "one damns that green shade at the bottom of the land" (CP, 63). "Depression Before Spring" (CP, 63) describes a similar experience. On the other hand, "The Snow Man" illustrates the joy one finds in winter, in "junipers shagged with ice" and "the sound of a few leaves" (CP, 10).

"Metaphors of a Magnifico" (CP, 19) perhaps best describes the kind of poetry Stevens is moving towards. The poem concerns the precise relationship between the imagination and reality. It opens with an apparently simple, clear statement of twenty soldiers crossing a bridge in a village. The picture of the soldiers marching repeatedly in a rhythm, as in an old ballad, is highly evocative. But evocative, one may ask, of what? If metaphor meant mainly the substitution of one thing for another, then it would make one see the scene in innumerable ways. Are the twenty men really one? Or, is one bridge really twenty different bridges?

> Twenty men crossing a bridge,
> Into a village,
> Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
> Into twenty villages,
> Or one man
> Crossing a single bridge into a village.

The simple, chanting reiteration of these lines shows the bewilderment of the mind whose every attempt at giving a meaning to the scene is frustrated. What remains is not a single, conceptual vision of the real scene but a process, a song "That will not declare itself....," something that cannot be pieced together in any fixed pattern of signification.

The poem perhaps shows Stevens' distrust of the inadequacy of imagination, which, in its power to conceive things, seems to exist in itself as all powerful. Though it creates its

own mental worlds of "twenty bridges" or of one, with symbolic "one man," which may rival the real world, yet remain only mental constructs, it cannot succeed ultimately in making meaning of it. This is the limitation of the symbolist/modernist imagination that tends to construct its own world which has no roots in the real world, that insists on its own intrinsic existence. But, as the poem declares,

> Twenty men crossing a bridge,
> Into a Village,
> Are
> Twenty men crossing a bridge
> Into a village.

The imagination cannot exist merely by trying to re-invent it in its own constructs, by forming a net of words and symbols. The very act of signification is, in fact, a sign of failure on the part of the poet. By fixing the object as a nexus of signification in his own structure of words, he shows that the real object eludes him. Such an act is not an apprehension of the object but its violation, for it gives us a mental fiction, not a living thing.

But, paradoxically, in giving up the effort to make meaning of the scene, to put together the soldiers, the bridge and the village into a pattern of mental construction, to make a symbol out of them, the poet, perhaps, participates in the real scene more fully. If he doubts the imagination's power to unify them into a fixed meaning, he nevertheless delights in its power to perceive something of the real scene:

The boots of the men clump
On the boards of the bridge.
The first white wall of the village
Rises through fruit-trees.

The poem that fails to find meaning of the whole scene, paradoxically succeeds in having a glimpse of the real scene, after all.

In describing the limitations of the symbolist/modernist imagination which while creating its own arbitrary mental constructs misses the real world, Stevens is also defining the scope of his own poetry that moves to appropriate it in imaginative apprehension. The imagination cannot and must not evade the real by turning it into a mental fiction. The creative act must direct itself to the discovery of the real.

In the poems of Harmonium Stevens creates his distinct poetic world. The insistence on the return to earth, the self's rootedness in the existential world, the experience of the immediate perception of things and the affirmation and celebration of temporality are the central notions of Stevens' phenomenological poetics which are present in these poems. The volume's central poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C," is Stevens' first sustained effort at pointing to the identity of poetry and reality. The seminal poem, "The Snow Man" anticipates not only Stevens' later poetry but also the basic ideas of Heidegger's Being and Time which was published in 1927: the paradox of being which is nothing in itself but which manifests itself in what appears; the idea of

decreation or destruction of all conceptual encrustations; and the self's concernful involvement with the surrounding world. Of course, the main strength of the poems lies in the freshness and eloquence of their language. Yet the language is mainly employed as a decreative strategy that destroys the habitual ways of seeing reality and reveals reality afresh. Stevens confessed that his main interest at the time was to write 'pure poetry'. But his pure poetry is in no way identical to, say, Valéry's. In fact, the poems serve as a critique of the Symbolist/Modernist aesthetics which attained pure ideality in its abstraction from the lived existence and creation of independent, atemporal world of art. Though Stevens wrote pure poetry, he achieved it within the context of his own understanding of poetry and poetics. The poems of Harmonium are characteristically 'anecdotes' but they are anecdotes of the earth, poems of the real world.