



# Wallace Stevens's use of narrative markers in *Harmonium*

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## Abstract

### Wallace Stevens's use of narrative markers in *Harmonium*

*In this article Wallace Stevens's first published volume of poetry, "Harmonium" is examined in order to demonstrate that by his deployment of narrative markers in key poems of the collection his quintessentially modernist lyrics challenge the restrictive figurative range of hegemonic enlightenment cultural theory and practice. In so doing I advance the argument of my article on Sidney's sonnet sequence which suggests that awareness of strategic rhetorical figuration leads to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between lyric and narrative.*

## Opsomming

### Wallace Stevens se gebruik van narratiewe merkers in *Harmonium*

*In hierdie artikel word Wallace Stevens se eerste gepubliseerde poësiebundel, "Harmonium" ondersoek, om aan te toon hoe sy hoofsaaklik modernistiese lirieke, die beperkende figuurlike reikwydte van die hegemoniese kulturele teorie, en praktyk van die Verligting deur sy gebruik van narratiewe merkers in sleutelgedigte in die bundel uitgedaag word. Deur dit aan te toon versterk ek die argument in my artikel oor Sidney se sonnetreeks, wat aantoon dat 'n bewustheid van strategiese retoriese vormbepaling tot 'n meer genuanseerde begrip van die verhouding tussen die liriek en narratief lei.*

## 1. *Harmonium* and Modernism

Wallace Stevens's first published collection, *Harmonium* (1923) is regarded by many as a quintessential instance of modernist lyric poetry. It appeared at almost the same time as other great modernist works: Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Eliot's *The waste land* (1922) and Rilke's *Duino elegies* (1923). Like so many of his American contemporaries, Stevens had visited the watershed 1913 Armory show in New York, when post-impressionist works of Duchamp, Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Kandinsky, Munch and Brancusi, among others, were seen for the first time on that side of the Atlantic, and experienced the exhilarating liberation from what was thought of as the stifling complacencies of bourgeois culture.

Perkins (1976:293-297) quite rightly points out that poetic Modernism is varied and complex and cannot be understood as the reaction to any particular event at any one time. Its immediate roots lie in the late nineteenth century and its discontents. Even more significantly, perhaps, it can be traced back to the Romantic poets who resorted to the subjective in the face of what was seen as the increasingly oppressive headnotes positivism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but who largely still owed allegiance to assumptions about art as representational and the need to adhere to post-Enlightenment canons of sequential coherence.<sup>1</sup> But whatever its origins, the cultural elitism of the intelligentsia could no longer accommodate itself to the exhausted paradigms of a materialistic world seemingly bereft of coherence, which led to radical confrontations and challenges of artistic norms. Central to the project which we call Modernism was the perception and representation of fragmentation and alienation that often went hand in hand with an exuberance and élan at living unhindered in the technologically liberated twentieth century.

A poem such as "Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird", bears witness to an exuberant celebration of fragmentation. The sequence of thirteen haiku-like poems is centripetally connected by the motif of the blackbird (or should we understand this as the black bird, the melodious songbird that can also be thought of as a disturbing figuration of death and mortality?). Even though there is a clear liaison between the individual sections in terms of ideas of stasis and change, the beautiful and the sinister, and singularity, unity and

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1 The obvious exception to such a broad generalisation is, of course, William Blake.

multiplicity, for example, the evocative moments of each haiku wilfully refuse outright connections with the others. In that sense, the poem as a whole has much in common with the cubist fragmentation of Braque and Picasso, and most especially with the *jeu d'esprit* so characteristic of Duchamp.<sup>2</sup>

I  
Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the black bird.

II  
I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

III  
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV  
A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

V  
I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

VI  
Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow  
An indecipherable cause.

VII  
O thin men of Haddam,

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2 Unless otherwise indicated, all poems by Stevens cited are from *Harmonium*, 1923.

Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in a green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony  
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.

"The emperor of ice-cream", however, with its bizarre celebration of a funeral wake, attests to a robust rejection of conventional, bourgeois taste and values, rather than of modes of literary representation.

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.  
Let be finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,  
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
On which she embroidered fantails once  
And spread it so as to cover her face.  
If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.  
Let the lamp affix its beam.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

The underlying optimism of these two poems is most obvious in "The snow man", which exemplifies and celebrates the imaginative capacity to jettison all human and cultural baggage.

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in 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, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The sense of disillusionment and malaise that we think of as characteristic of Modernism is largely absent from *Harmonium* as published in 1923, but it does emerge in a poem added to the volume in 1931. "The man whose pharynx was bad" (Stevens, 1997:81), for example, reminds us very strongly of Eliot's Laforgian "The lovesong of Alfred J. Prufrock" (Eliot, 1969:13-17).

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 wind attendant on the solstices  
Blows on the shutters of the metropolises,  
Stirring no poet in his sleep, and tolls  
The grand ideas of the villages.

The malady of the quotidian ...  
Perhaps, if winter once could penetrate  
Through all its purples to the final slate,  
Persisting bleakly in an icy haze,

One might in turn become less diffident,  
Out of such mildew plucking neater mould  
And spouting new orations of the cold.  
One might. One might. But time will not relent.<sup>3</sup>

What strikes most readers of poems such as these is their poise and extraordinary beauty. At the same time, they are enigmatic and elusive. It is as if they deliberately defy the reader's ability to apprehend them. This is clearly Stevens's intention: "a poem should almost successfully defeat the intelligence"; or as he (Stevens, 1997:472) put it in a late poem "Reality is an activity of a most august imagination"; "an argentine abstraction approaching form / And suddenly denying itself away." (It is tellingly characteristic of Stevens criticism that writers resort to Stevens's own words to talk about his poems.) For all their aesthetic appeal, the poems resolutely refuse conventional reading practices. At one level, this is what makes Stevens a modernist poet. There is, however, more. Stevens has a reputation for being an intractable and difficult poet, sometimes even a frivolous and trivial one, despite the fact that he is not an abstract intellectualist. As noted above, Stevens set out to defeat the intelligence,

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3 It is perhaps significant that this poem appeared in *The new republic* (14 September 1921), but was omitted from *Harmonium*; cf. Stevens, 1997: 996). The earlier version has four additional lines. After line 9 it inserts:

Perhaps if summer ever came to rest  
And lengthened, deepened, comforted, caressed  
Through days like oceans in obsidian  
Horizons, full of night's midsummer blaze;

These lines might have dropped out because of eye-slip over the repeated word "perhaps". By omitting them, the rhyme of the third stanza is lost.

the readiness we have to tie things into a ready-made, off-the-peg set of categories. The poems repudiate answers. There is a purpose to the jaunty, challenging titles, while the poems themselves resist paraphrase – a sure sign they are complexly figurative.

## 2. The design of *Harmonium*

Stevens, like so many other poets, has been a victim of his own success. His poems are for the most part encountered in selections and teaching anthologies, on the assumption that a poem can be read devoid of reference to its contexts (not even that of the selection or anthology itself, which is disdained and occluded), as if poems exist in a platonic realm of their own making. With this kind of presupposition, a volume like *Harmonium* becomes simply a miscellany of arbitrarily assembled individual poems. This, however, renders an ignorant disservice to poetic collections in general, and to this volume in particular, since it fails specifically to attend to the collection's invitation for it to be read as organised, integrated, *harmonious*.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, the series of poems lacks both narrative and clear biographical reference. The majority of the poems are either impersonal or written in the third person. When they are clearly narrative, as is "The comedian as the letter c", for example, the protagonist is a curiously named figure, Crispin. When the first person is used, as in parts of "Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird", the "I" is clearly that of the anonymous lyric voice. The individual lyrics, however, appear to have no chronological or thematic sequential principle to organise them. Instead, we need to think of poems as part of another, less obvious, and deliberately suppressed design, that of the Renaissance *silva* tradition.

*Silva* may be translated as *wood* or *forest*, and is thus implicitly contrasted with *hortus* or garden, and so is intended to signify a rough, uncultivated multiplicity, or at least the appearance of it. In keeping with the Renaissance ludic spirit of *sprezzatura* or nonchalance, however, the appearance of carelessness belies the reality, for the collections of poems are complexly and polyvalently designed, as

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4 There is much more to the title, of course. A harmonium is a small, treadle-driven reed organ of the kind found in country churches and in many late nineteenth-century bourgeois homes. The word *harmonium* thus resonates with associations of ideas of music in domestic and unhierarchical religiosity and spirituality. Its use by Stevens is thus not without irony.

Alastair Fowler (1982:163-180) has demonstrated. One of the most important features of a *silva* collection is always the initial poem. For this reason it might well be called the portal poem. In the case of *Harmonium* the portal is "Earthy anecdote".

### 3. "Earthy anecdote" as portal poem

Every time the bucks went clattering  
Over Oklahoma  
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,  
They went clattering,  
Until they swerved  
In a swift, circular line  
To the right,  
Because of the firecat.

Or until they swerved  
In a swift, circular line  
To the left,  
Because of the firecat.  
The bucks clattered.  
The firecat went leaping,  
To the right, to the left,  
And  
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes  
And slept.

Helen Vendler (2000:228) is quite correct to see the poem, by virtue of its position in the collection, as "some sort of manifesto", but, as she speculates, "of what was it the proclamation?" Her attempted answer to this question does not convince me, though she is quite right, I think, to characterise the poem as a piece of conceptual art.

This 1918 poem offers no elaboration of its stubbornly repeated plot – that of a daily contest between deer (fiercely charging straight ahead) and a mountain lion (named by its folk appellation, 'firecat') that obtrudes itself in the path of the bucks ...

The firecat's only purpose in his waking hours is to make the bucks swerve. The game goes on all day, conceived and prolonged by the bright eyes of the firecat, and it comes to an end only when the firecat sleeps. Had the firecat not 'bristled in



the way' the bucks would have unswervingly clattered over the plain of Oklahoma in an unimpeded straight line.

At least one way of reading this little parable is to see it as an enacting of the response of the mind's original inertia when it encounters new hypotheses and then contradictions of these very hypotheses. Once our thoughts are set on an inertial straight path, they will not become inventive unless blocked: and one can see the bucks as a form of uncreative life forced into creativity by the bright-eyed obstacle of intelligence. In Stevens, the obstacle that forces the swerve is dialectically self-created: and *ors* and *buts*, with their bright-eyed queries, force the mind into alternative paths. I believe that this apparently trivial little poem revealed to Stevens, as he wrote it, how much his art depended on obstructions and the consequent swerves provoked by them, and that he therefore gave 'Earthy Anecdote' pride of place both in his first volume and in the final collection of his poems. (Vendler, 2000:227-229.)<sup>5</sup>

The poem almost successfully defeats the intelligence of one of Stevens's most acute and perceptive readers, because she comes to it with a set of preconceptions and theses. Let us begin with the title, which locates the poem within a narrative genre. We tend to think of parables (Vendler's term) as figurative tales with a moral or spiritual point to make, and this would narrow and so miscue our reading. Stevens uses "anecdote", and does so polysemously. We are invited to entertain simultaneously the etymological sense of an unpublished, and so arcane, even esoteric, private narrative, as well as that of narrative of a detached incident considered adventitiously interesting or striking in its own right, with the implication that it is possibly amusing. As well as establishing a complexity of tone, Steven signals that the narrative does not have a palpable design upon his reader. The adjective "earthy" is used with a matching complexity: the anecdote is of, or about, the earth (both the soil and the world we inhabit); it could also be down to earth, direct, robust, lusty and uninhibited; and being these, it could also be unrefined and coarse.<sup>6</sup>

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5 I have cited the earlier version of this essay, a Wharton lecture to the British Academy. The later publication, in *Representations*, is part of a festschrift for Paul Alpers (Vendler, 2003).

6 This third constellation of significance is not immediately apparent, but swims fleetingly into view in the course of the poem.

The complex potentialities of the title, anticipate those of the poem itself. This is not a narrative about a particular time, nor is it a narrative about "all day", but one about "every time", with the conditions for what constitutes those occasions not stipulated. What happens is that "the bucks" "clatter". They are not necessarily deer and they certainly do not "go charging straight ahead". Stevens is deliberately keeping his options open. The "agents" here could well be thought of as deer or antelope, but they could also be Native American males (see *OED*<sup>2</sup> "buck", *n*<sup>1</sup>, 2d), and, perhaps more interestingly, given Stevens's other concerns, "gay, dashing fellow[s]; dand[ies], fop[s], 'fast' m[e]n" (see *OED*<sup>2</sup> "buck", *n*<sup>1</sup>, 2b), and we have no licence to settle on a precise equivalence. More important, they "clatter", they make a noise that is associated with movement, but no sense of direction or purpose is attached to that noise; in fact, the verb used rhymingly brings "scatter" to mind. The location of the activity is also simultaneously precise and impossible. Oklahoma is too vast a state simply to be "clattered" or galloped over, so we are being asked to think about the idea of Oklahoma, its name derived from the Choctaw for "red people", located in the Great Plains (cf. Wright, 1936: 156), and so part of the imaginary of the untamed frontier landscape, an association which reinforces one of the meanings of "bucks".

The location is imprecise and the repeated "encounters" (one of the standard features of lyric poetry) add to the imprecision. If Stevens had wanted to talk about a mountain lion, he was capable of using that term, but he deliberately avoided a name which would allow a one-to-one correlation with reality. The term is *polyvalent*, and this allows it to be reticulated through a series of permutations in the course of the poem, without settling on any one of these, though the suspension of signification allows for a continuous morphing characteristic of symbol. The poem defines the range and limits of its significance. Stevens's deployment of symbol is reminiscent of William Blake's, especially that in "The tyger". Blake's symbol of creative, impulsive energy and even of the imagination is also linked to fire: "Tyger, tyger, burning bright". But the fire is in the name of the figure, not in its eyes (the conventional way of figuring the intelligence of reason). The firecat functions by "bristling" in the way. The verb itself is interestingly intransitive, suggesting a state of alarm, surprise and excitement rather than goal-directed activity. Once again, Stevens leaves the possibilities open.

In the second and third sections the bucks are described as invariably clattering except when the firecat bristles in their way. Then

their movement takes on a shape reminiscent perhaps of the eighteenth-century “line of beauty” (thus suggesting that “clattering” does have a sense of arbitrary, undirected movement). These encounters amount to nothing more than a shaping of the movement of the bucks, but it is this shaping that is important. The shaping is, however, neither inevitable or perpetual. The firecat can simply close its eyes and sleep, and presumably the bucks resume their random clattering. There is something playful about the events and the way they are presented, especially if one makes the connection with another bafflingly whimsical but philosophically challenging feline figure, Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire cat.

Other poems by Stevens enter into conversation with this poem. In particular, “The idea of order at Key West”:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
The water never formed to mind or voice,  
Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,  
That was not ours although we understood,  
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.  
The sea was not a mask. No more was she.  
The song and water were not medleyed sound  
Even if what she sang was what she heard,  
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.  
It may be that in all her phrases stirred  
The grinding water and the gasping wind;  
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
She measured to the hour its solitude.  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,  
Why, when the singing ended and we turned  
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,  
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,  
As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,

Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

The female figure in this poem, who might be characterised as the muse, or the embodiment of the poetic imagination, brings order to the indifferent, materially random sea, traditionally an image of change and chaos. "Anecdote of the jar" (itself in *Harmonium*) explores much the same ground, though not so much in terms of the poetic imagination, but in terms of creative installation that might well have been familiar to Stevens's contemporaries after Duchamp's installation of a china urinal.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.  
The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The wilderness of yet another American state takes on an interim order this time in response to the presence of a jar rather than of a bristling firecat, but this poem clearly explores the same imaginative concern as "Earthy anecdote".<sup>7</sup>

The portal poem of *Harmonium* can thus be seen as one which invites (and suspends) the reader's attention to a consideration of Stevens's recurrent concern, the relation between reality and the imagination. More importantly, the mode in terms of which it functions guides us in ways of reading the poems which are to

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7 The bareness of the jar which does "not give of bird or bush", is surely Stevens's response to the Keats's *Ode of a Grecian urn*.

follow. In much the same way, Robert Herrick (1648) placed “The argument of his book” as the first poem in *Hesperides*, and Robert Frost (1971) insisted on “The pasture” at the forefront of his poems.

#### 4. Further narrative markers in *Harmonium*

The opening poem of *Harmonium* (1923) is not the only poem with a narrative marker in its title. There are five others, spaced at intervals through the collection: “Fabliau of Florida” (p. 18), “Anecdote of men by the thousand” (p. 41), “Anecdote of canna” (p. 44), “Anecdote of the prince of peacocks” (p. 46) and “Anecdote of the jar” (p. 60-61). Of these, the first is the most challenging, and is best left for consideration at the end.

In the “Anecdote of men by the thousand”, Stevens challenges us with what is initially an anonymous third-person speaker whose gnomic utterances are reported (there is hardly a narrative).

The soul, he said, is composed  
Of the external world.

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.

There are men whose words  
Are as natural sounds  
Of their places  
As the cackle of toucans  
In the place of toucans.

The mandoline is the instrument  
Of a place.

Are there mandolines of western mountains?  
Are there mandolines of northern moonlight?

The dress of a woman of Lhasa,  
In its place,  
Is an invisible element of that place  
Made visible.

By the end of the poem this displacement of the speaker is elided, and is subsumed into a univocal, though nevertheless parenthesised, lyric assertion. The poet explores, by way of generalising, a

concern broached in the opening poem: the relationship between the imagination and a particular locale. Here he invites the consideration that the imagination is not subjectively divorced from the actual, but consists of the manner in which humans are realised in their *habitus*.

"Anecdote of canna" makes the connection between an agent and locale even more particular, while simultaneously refusing to endorse that particularity, so that the flowering plants that grow on the terraces of the capitol in Washington DC, are suggested, but not referred to.

Huge are the canna in the dreams of  
X, the mighty thought, the mighty man.  
They fill the terrace of his capitol.

His thought sleeps not. Yet thought that wakes  
In sleep may never meet another thought  
Or thing ... Now day-break comes ...

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

The same refusal of specificity applies to the identity of the "X ... the mighty man". Stevens multiplies identifications: the hero, the poet, the great statesman, and even perhaps George Washington (since it is "his capitol") – or all of them, since this is what is possible in allegory, where one thing can become the image of another. The poem also reconnoitres the Stevensian concern with the transitions between the subjective and the actual: the poem moves from X's dreams of cannas to his observation of them.

Unlike some of the generically marked poems, "Anecdote of the prince of peacocks" is truly a narrative, but a narrative of the kind of encounter that is essentially lyric in nature, one that ends without logically satisfying closure.

In the moonlight  
I met Berserk,  
In the moonlight  
On the bushy plain.  
Oh, sharp he was  
As the sleepless!

And, "Why are you red  
In this milky blue?"

I said.  
“Why sun-colored,  
As if awake  
In the midst of sleep?”

“You that wander,”  
So he said,  
“On the bushy plain,  
Forget so soon.  
But I set my traps  
In the midst of dreams.”

I knew from this  
That the blue ground  
Was full of blocks  
And blocking steel.  
I knew the dread  
Of the bushy plain,

And the beauty  
Of the moonlight  
Falling there,  
Falling  
As sleep falls  
In the innocent air.

We are not even sure whether the anecdote is in the voice of the anonymous first-person speaker of the lyric and is about Prince of peacocks, whose name is Berserk; or whether the first person speaker is the Prince of peacocks who encounters Berserk. What matters in this disturbingly bizarre poem is that we are presented with a figuration of the unnerving idea of disruptive threats to the symbiotic relationship of the imaginative and the real.

“Anecdote of the jar” is the last of the spoor of poems with generically marked narrative titles. It can perhaps be seen as the summation of the series, since for the first time the allegory is not simply about the encounter between the imagination and the actual, but about an embodiment of this intersection in a work of art apprehended not simply as an object, but as a kairic activity. The emulatory allusion to Keats, which I suggested earlier, ensures that Stevens’s poetic project is not only abstract, changing and pleasure-giving,<sup>8</sup> but proceeds on terms which are uniquely his own. All the

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8 These are the aspirations for poetry set out in the titles of the three sections of “Notes towards a supreme fiction”.

preceding "anecdote" poems inform our understanding of this one, and this poem reciprocally resonates in them.

This brings us to "Fabliau of Florida".

Barque of phosphor  
On the palmy beach,

Move outward into heaven,  
Into the alabasters  
And night blues.

Foam and cloud are one.  
Sultry moon-monsters  
Are dissolving.

Fill your black hull  
With white moonlight.

There will never be an end  
To this droning of the surf.

Technically, a fabliau is a medieval French genre: a comic, often ribald, story about an incident in middle class life. To that extent, the title is clearly a miscue, but it is unlikely that it arose out of ignorance, since Stevens was proficient in French and studied the literature at Harvard. Instead, what we have is yet another instance of challenging suspension which invites the reader to explore tangential possibilities. As usual, the narrative implication of the title directs the reader to the allegorical mode, especially because there is no narrative in the largely imperative mood of the verbs of the poem. Like other poems in the "anecdote" series, the title is syntactically ambiguous: the poem could be a fabliau about something taking place in Florida, or it could be a fabliau about Florida itself. If it is the latter, then the exotic nomenclature with its misdirection would be more appropriate: consider the massive peninsula of Florida as a barque sailing magically and perpetually on into the moonlit night where cloud and surf are one, is the suggestion. Unlike the "anecdote" poems, the concern is not with an imaginative encounter in a locale, but with the locale itself as the imaginative encounter.

## **5. Stevens as allegorist**

Each of the series of poems to which I am drawing attention seems to be placed as regular reminders to the reader of the appropriate manner of attending to their tangential but seductive evasiveness. Each, in its own way, refuses to succumb to literal reading and re-

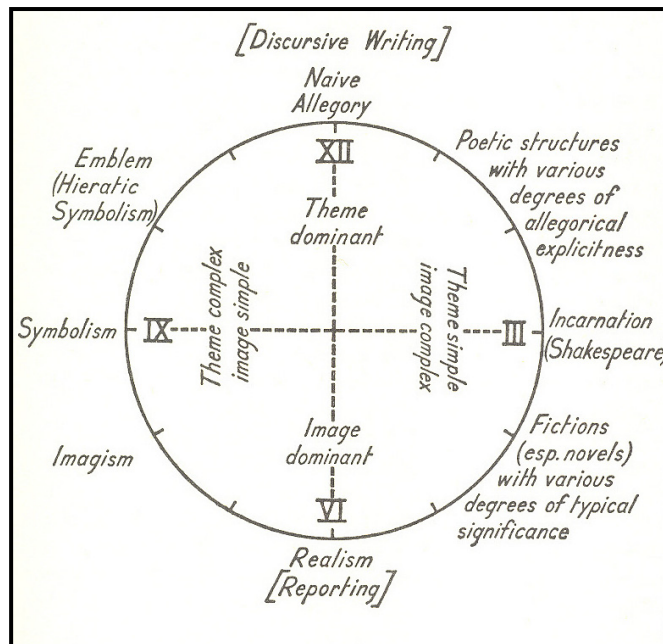


joices in a ludic, almost skittish figuration. The figurative narrative reading I have been attempting is, as I have already suggested, an allegorical one. As a mode, allegory has largely fallen from grace, and to some extent that is a consequence of the success of one particular work, Bunyan's (1678) *Pilgrim's progress*. This evangelical work functioned with a very diminished and limited understanding of the complexity of allegory, and fostered the notion that the figurative mode consisted simply of a one-to-one relationship between a narrative vehicle and a specific moral or spiritual tenor, and that a reading of allegory consisted of a facile translation of the presented figuration into the absent literal. In these terms, allegory is simply a mode of concealment, a figure of avoidance. The demise of allegory also coincided with Enlightenment and positivist assumptions about knowledge and representation. If one should, however, choose to challenge the hegemony of realistic representation, what better way than to recuperate a mode of reading that challenges those preconceptions: allegory. This is what I think Stevens sets out to do.

In describing the poem as an anecdote, Stevens points us in the direction of narrative, while at the same time disavowing the ambitions of epic. The poem itself is presented as a significant tale, but repudiates all attempts to read it literally. Instead, it invokes all the resources of the figurative mode which prismatically presents only the vehicle while leaving the tenor unstated and unspecified. Most importantly, it does so in a rhetorical context, in that part of the response to the representation includes an awareness of the ludic play of significance, the tone with which the author presents the representation, and anticipates a reader's decorum of response.

In his *A preface to "The faerie queene"*, Graham Hough (1962:107) provides a helpful schematic representation of the place of allegory in literature (see Figure 1). The diagram enables us to see a continuum that runs from naive allegory to realistic reporting, and then again from realism via symbol to allegory again. What is important about the schema is that we are made aware that representation is fluctuating and unstable, and that the whole range of these allegorical clock positions might be engaged within a single work. "Earthy anecdote", for example, is covered by the whole spectrum from about eight o'clock until two. What is absent from the clock is the rhetorical dimension, the one in which I believe the lyrical is located, a dimension that is not at variance with the plane of representation figured in Hough's schema (though the tendency has been for the lyric commonly to emerge more readily from the left hand side of the clock than from the right).

Figure 1: The place of allegory in literature



As I have suggested in the discussion of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (Gouws, 2010:61-78), a mimetic or representational paradigm fails to deal with lyric. As such, a representational conception of narrative is so categorically different from lyric that lyric and narrative can and do coexist without incompatibility. The fact is that lyric and narrative easily intersect and coexist, witness the medieval *chanson d'aventure*, or the standard lyric formula of the blues: "Well, I woke up this morning ...". Even more important are the rhetorical strategies for *ethos* (the plausibility of the speaker) and *pathos* (the appeals to emotion), and the strategic deployment of larger, more complex figurations such as *aporia* (of which the *gestalt* of narrative induced by a sequence of lyrics might be considered an instance), irony, the assemblage of related figures of substitution (metonymy, synecdoche and *metalepsis*) and, as I have suggested in relation to Stevens, allegory. All of these cut across the lyric/narrative divide induced by a subscription to Enlightenment and positivist presuppositions.

## 6. Conclusion

To return to Stevens: I am suggesting that the difficulty ascribed to his poems arises from a failure to attend to some very obvious features of *Harmonium*, his very first collection. The poems are deliberately arranged to guide the reader into how Stevens wants to be read. The most important indication of this is a series of lyric poems

whose titles declare them to be narratives, even when some of the poems are clearly not narrative. Of these poems, the most important is the initial, or portal, poem, “Earthy anecdote”, which invites the reader to read it in the complexly figurative mode of allegory. Readers who are unaware of the resourcefulness of allegory, have been blinkered by restrictive generic assumptions of allegory as mere narrative, or locked into post-Enlightenment presuppositions concerning thought and representation, would be challenged, if not defeated, by Stevens’s innovative reinvigoration of an ancient poetic resource; but those who allow Stevens to have his way will know the distinctive access of delight which sets Stevens apart from other poets. There are many good readers of Stevens, but none has made explicit the poet’s conscious resurrection of allegory, one of the major figurative modes that straddles the narrative/lyric divide.

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**Key concepts:**

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**Kernbegriffe:**

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silvatradisie

Stevens, Wallace