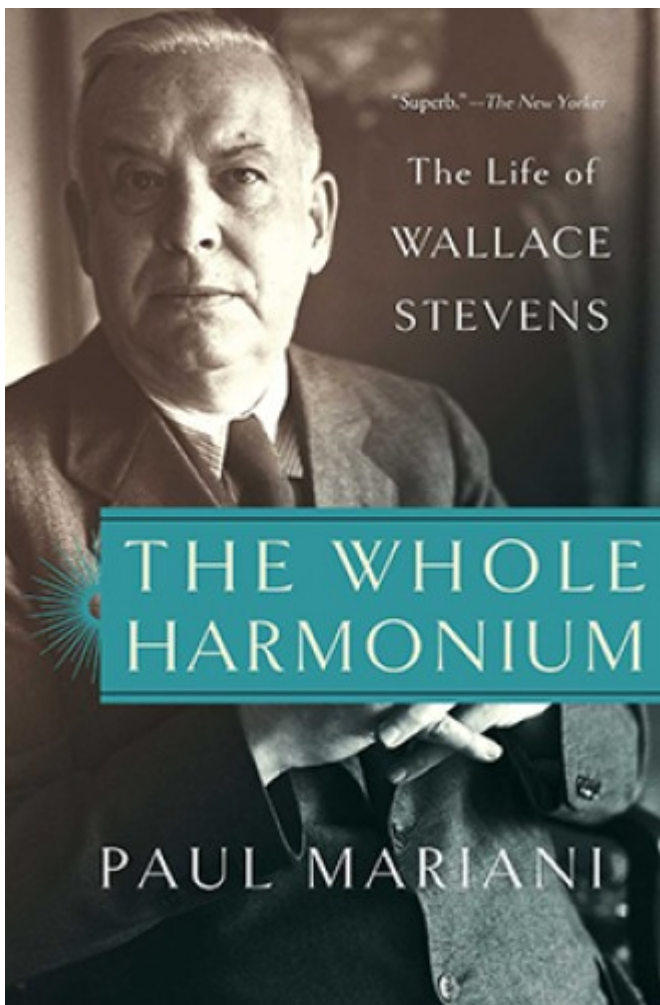


The isolation of Wallace Stevens

A new biography reveals the poet's devotion to his vocation. It also reveals his loneliness.

by [Jeffrey Johnson](#) in the [April 26, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Whole Harmonium

The Life of Wallace Stevens

By Paul Mariani
Simon & Schuster

Readers familiar with the poet Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) might know “Sunday Morning,” an early poem that rejects biblical faith in favor of “divinity within,” or “High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” which places poetry above faith as the “supreme fiction.” Others might know that when Stevens cleaned out his childhood home in Reading, Pennsylvania, he threw out his Sunday school Bible, reporting later that he was happy to have the silly thing out of the house.

Biographer and poet Paul Mariani sets these pieces and the rest of Stevens’s substantial body of work into a thick and valuable biographical context. Thoroughly researched, carefully documented, and held together with cogent commentary and lyrical descriptions of the poems, the book does justice to Stevens’s achievement and fills out his singular and somewhat secret vocation as a poet.

To his neighbors in Hartford, Connecticut, Stevens was a Harvard-educated, New York-trained corporate lawyer and insurance executive. But he is remembered today for his achievement as a modernist poet. Mariani places Stevens “among the most important poets of the twentieth and the still-young twenty-first century, sharing a place . . . with Rilke, Yeats and Neruda.” Christian readers have reason to grapple with Stevens not only for the chime and luster of his abstract poems but also for his lifelong, disciplined dedication to the vocation of poetry, the intensity and aim of which might be compared to that of a biblical prophet.

Walter Brueggemann has written that the poetic importance of ancient Israel’s prophets is in their redescribing, reconstruing, and reimagining of human life lived before God. Stevens’s vocation could be described in similar words—but the reference to God would be replaced with his own trust in the unconscious, which, according to Mariani, meant the imagination.

Early in his adult life, Stevens decided that although he needed the daily routines of life in an upper-middle-class suburb and the mundane duties of a respectable job, life would come to him through the pure oxygen of the imagination. In the exercise of imagination Stevens isolated sounds, discovered and rediscovered meanings in words, and refracted and intensified sensory experience.

Like a prophet of Israel, Stevens occupied a lonely place within his society. Most of his acquaintances did not understand his poems. His funeral was a simple service in

the chapel of a Hartford funeral home with only a handful of mourners present. One of his insurance company coworkers explained that most of the other employees did not like Stevens. They thought he was aloof and superior.

Stevens's poetry, while inaccessible to most of the people in his life, was his retreat. In the evenings alone in his study, he could shut out the world around him and create another world: one in harmony with the actual world, one in which he could mediate the darkness of the unconscious through his imagination and write abstract poems that faithfully and fearlessly presented an artistic vision for his age.

"St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," a poem from Stevens's last volume, describes the walls of a church. Beneath the building, pressed down with time, is an imagined darkness and a stage for the poet's imagination. Glimpses and flashes of an alternate world appear in his poems. The walls of the church building could be crumbling, but life is not crumbling: "That which is always beginning because it is part / Of that which is always beginning, over and over." In "American Sublime," from the same volume, one can hear the poet-priest reaching for the words that might make life worthwhile: "What wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?"

It should come as no surprise that a poet as philosophically informed and artistically ambitious as Stevens would intersect the concerns and claims of faith, and that his biographer would describe the poet's inspirations and aims in religious terms. Color, light, and sounds from nature and other places Stevens knew fill his poems. But the memory of childhood Bible readings, sounds of organs, symbols and impressions of Catholic churches, and the quiet hours of a monk's devotion are there as well.

Describing the last days of the poet's life, when there were no more poems to be written and a final darkness was about to fall on him, Mariani depicts a man more or less at peace. Stevens told a friend that he did not believe in the God of his childhood but he was not an atheist. A chaplain who visited him saw a copy of the New Testament at the poet's bedside. A crucifix and a medal of St. Christopher rested on the pillow of his casket, where Stevens had asked them to be placed.