



The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens

Paul Mariani

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A perceptive, enlightening biography of one the most important American poets of the twentieth century—Wallace Stevens—as seen through his lifelong quest to find and describe the sublime in the human experience.

Wallace Stevens lived a richly imaginative life that found expression in his poetry. His philosophical questioning, spiritual depth, and brilliantly inventive use of language would be profound influences on poets as diverse as William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery. *The Whole Harmonium* presents Stevens within the living context of his times, as well as the creator of a poetry which has had a profound and lasting impact on the modern imagination itself.

Stevens established his career as an executive even as he wrote his poetry, becoming a vice president with an insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut. His first and most influential book, *Harmonium*, was not published until he was forty-four years old. In these poems, Stevens drew on his interest in and understanding of modernism. Over time he became acquainted with the most accomplished of his contemporaries, Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams among them, but his personal style remained unique. He endured an increasingly unhappy marriage, losing himself by writing poetry in his study. Yet he had a witty, comic, and Dionysian side to his personality, including long fishing (and drinking) trips to Florida with his pals and a fascination with the sun-drenched tropics.

People generally know two things about Wallace Stevens: that he is a “difficult” poet and that he was an insurance executive for most of his life. Stevens may be challenging to understand, but he is also greatly rewarding to read. Now, sixty years after Stevens’s death, biographer and poet Paul Mariani shows how over the course of his life, Stevens sought out the ineffable and spiritual in human existence in his search for the sublime.

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