

# Imagination and the Sound of Words in Wallace Stevens' "The Comedian As The Letter C"

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## ABSTRACT

Wallace Steven (1879-1955) is one of America's major poets of the twentieth century who perfected critical theories about modern poetry writing and its subjects. Stevens' style is distinctive as modern in its revelation of both linguistic and poetic experimentations. His theories concerning imagination and reality and the use of poetic diction from the modernist point of view are found in many of his poems. Almost like all thinkers, Wallace Steven has his own view of imagination and reality. Many philosophers have affected him deeply in formulating his view point of the subject. The research is divided into two parts and a conclusion: the first part introduces nature of imagination from a philosophical point of view which Wallace Stevens finds embodied in harsh and intolerant American reality. Part two attempts to uncover how Stevens holds both poetic imagination and language to be of the most important tools that a poet should use to express the relation between imagination and reality. Addition, the research sheds light on the poet's creation of a mythical self through which he wishes to contain the diverse reality in order to re-adjust that self to it. Finally, the conclusion sums up the findings of the paper.

## Keywords

imagination, reality, philosophy, irony, sound of words, fate, illusion, Romanticism, cosmos.

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## PART I

The present research explores through Stevens' lengthy poem, "The Comedian As the Letter C," the phases of imagination and reality and the fusion of both through his mask character Crispin as well as his unique use of diction to articulate his ideas. The epic-hero-like protagonist of the poem, Crispin, sets out in a moral journey from presumably an old world in search of a new one. Throughout the journey, the socio-cultural scenes of the poem appear antagonistic to Crispin who decides in return to convert them into a better reality. At this stage, both poet and protagonist merge in the task of confronting reality.

Wallace Stevens is categorised as modernist Post-Romantic poet. His poetry, in general, is principally a philosophical exploration of the relationship between the self and the outside reality. In most of his poems, the relationship between the external world and Man's imagination is a central and recurrent theme. The theme is completely of a Romantic tradition of poetic expression. He shows a strong link between Nature and Imagination. A close reading of his poetry, however, does not show an exact Romanticism in its portrayal of imagination, by large, Stevens' output shows modes of existential agony and anxiety rather than a Romantic

standpoint which is, a characteristic of the early twentieth century.

If we want to trace imagination through history briefly, as a philosophical subject, we will find that it has gone through drastic changes and transformations with the emergence of Romanticism and transcendentalism in the United States of America. Plato's, for instance, "mimetic model of representation" was ousted by Immanuel Kant's "transcendental model of formation".

No longer a "mirror" that reflected some external reality but rather a "lamp" that projected its own light onto the surrounding world, its function switched from a mimetic to a productive one and it was invested with the quality of transcendence becoming "the immediate source of its own truth". In his first Critique, Kant asserted that "the a priori concepts of space and time are only creatures of the imagination, the origin of which must really be sought in experience". For Kant, the world was not divorced from human consciousness needing to be mediated into perception by means of imagination; rather, imagination was the ultimate, transcendental source of all human experience and knowledge. Wallace Stevens' philosophical attitude towards imagination echoes of Kant and Nietzsche. In

Stevens's poetry there is an attempt to locate imagination in relation to tensions of modern philosophy and the early twentieth century tradition.

But imagination was not merely a projection for the Romantics; it was the ultimate source of truth, transcending the worldly materiality and transporting the subject into a state of spiritual perceptiveness. And while Stevens did not indulge in the idea of divine revelation, his long poem "The Comedian As The Letter C" attesting to his belief in the finitude of the human mind and experience, he nonetheless celebrated the supremacy of the imagination: "Imagination is the value by which we project the idea of god into the idea of man... Imagination is the only genius" . Therefore, his poem is above all a celebration of the productive, generative power of creative thought and imagination, in spite of its earthly limitations. General speaking, most of Wallace Stevens' poems embark on the idea of imagination and its relation to reality. In "Key West", for instance, the speaker expresses his fascination with the imaginative capacity of the mind to "order words of the sea" and make "the sky acutest at its vanishing"—that is, to "transform the given appearances of things," to refer back to Kant .

## PART II

Published in twelve poetry journals and magazines such as: *Others*, *Secession*, *Rogue*, *The Soil*, *The Modern School*, *Broom*, *Contact*, *The New Republic*, *The Measure*, *The Little Review*, *The Dial*, and particularly in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, of Chicago, "The Comedian as the Letter C" appeared in *Harmonium*, in 1923; Wallace Stevens' first canon of poetry. Stevens' insistence to publish this 573-line six divisions poem without any edit leaves us with a message: the poem can represent Stevens' thought and his entire work about Man, and the Universe or Cosmos. The quest of the protagonist in Stevens' poem is very similar to that of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses*, who also appeared in Homer's *The Odyssey*, and finally Dante's *Inferno*. In Homer's and Dante's the protagonists are struggling to return home while in Tennyson's the case is different; a frustrated old man who yearns to sail again and explore the world.

Although the poem was written while all this legacy in Stevens' mind, it was also written in a time when all Stevens' contemporary poets were experimenting the technique of mock epic; such as T.S.Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound. But technically and thematically speaking there is a literary kinship with Eliot's "The Waste Land".

"The longest, most difficult, most ambitious, and, I think, most inadequate of the poems in *Harmonium*, 'The Comedian as the Letter C.' Here, the protagonist, condemned, once more, to a life of rich perceptions, is something of a poet. Thus he is in a position to reflect learnedly and at length on his situation and generally to resolve its meaning. The poem describes its protagonist's growth to artistic maturity and is thus a kind of projection in biography of the development of Stevens' poetics. The poet progresses from romantic subjectivism, to crude realism, to exotic realism, to a kind of local colorism, to a disciplined, mature and modestly imaginative realism. Because of his vocation, he comes to know, more than any other protagonist in the *Harmonium* poems, the potentialities and the limits of his own imagination and realises that his hopes for poetry in the New World—deriving apparently from his understanding of the role of poetry in the Old—must be muted.

Wallace Stevens is a poet whose language is always surprising, often whimsical and funny, yet remains rooted in the Romantic conception of the imagination of which he may be the last great exponent. "Poetry is the supreme fiction, madam," he winkingly informs a high-toned old Christian woman in his first volume of poems, *Harmonium*, published in 1923 when he was forty-four. That droll phrase, "supreme fiction," combines a faith in poetry's vitally metaphorical, world shaping powers with skeptical eye for its "still sustaining pomps," its intoxicating peacock tail. Stevens brought the rhythms of jazz and energies of slapstick to a language he had learned from Shelly and the French Symbolists, and with his faultless ear for the legato line he turned all this inheritance to witty music.

Poets have the capability to deconstruct reality in the way towards reconstructing it again according to their way of thinking. This is Stevens' view of poetic language and its relation to imagination which in the hands of a good poet play an empowering innovative weapon. To achieve this

objective, Stevens experiments in word sounds and in graphic, prosodic and figurative language inwrought with grammatical and lexical innovations. Besides, Stevens has a special interest for music and the tonal variations of it; a fact which makes itself obvious in the choice of Harmonium as a title for his first collection of poems. Beside language, Stevens considers imagination as another tool to address reality. Poetry, a cognitive activity as it is, is for Stevens, an "interdependence" between imagination and reality. In his reluctance to address reality outlined in its social, economic, cultural and political contexts, Stevens opts to unleash his imaginative powers to deconstruct and recreate that reality in his own terms. However, such an idiosyncratically created image of reality cannot go beyond the printed pages of his poems since it is no more than an image made by the tricks of the "supreme fiction". The crisis of evading and avoiding reality continues. The Poet, through Crispin's dilemma, admits and laments this breakdown of imagination. Crispin's powerlessness in the face of alienating reality forces him to manoeuvre the power of imagination, the tool to all good poets:

The book of moonlight is not written yet  
Nor half begun, but, when it is, leave room  
For Crispin, fagot in the lunar fire,  
Who, in the hubbub of his pilgrimage  
Through sweating changes, never could forget  
That wakefulness or meditating sleep,  
In which the sulky strophes willingly  
Bore up, in time, the somnolent, deep songs.  
Leave room, therefore, in that unwritten book  
For the legendary moonlight that once burned  
In Crispin's mind above a continent. (III. L.1-11)

Crispin seeks, then, an understanding not of himself but of his native landscape, and his native landscape is a temperate one, which does not offer the flamboyant and succulent excitement of Yucatan.... Having returned from Yucatan, [Crispin] hopes now to achieve the beatific pleasure reserved for the successful hedonist, not by extravagance of experience, but by honesty and accuracy of experience... He abandons his art, in order, as very young people are sometimes heard to say, to live.... Honest description renders the feeling appropriate to purely sensory experience, and is hence a kind of judgment of that experience. But if Crispin had realized this, he would have realized the whole moral basis of art,

and would have proceeded to more complex subjects; not realizing this, he lost interest in his simplified art, and found the art even in this simplified form to be the last element of confusion remaining in his experience: to achieve intelligent objectivity, Crispin is forced to abandon his description and merely enjoy the subject matter of his description...

As the title of the first section of the poem suggests; The World Without Imagination, reality for Crispin is seen nature and impact of revelation: Crispin has changed; the scene of the sea has changed him to a new 'Crispin':

Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new.

The imagination, here, could not evade,

In poems of plums, the strict austerity

Of one vast, subjugating, final tone.

The drenching of stale lives no more fell down.

Imagination must not evade but to direct itself to realism because Crispin's revelation enabled him to deconstruct and reconstruct nature around him. Words and their sounds are important factors in this respect.

Generally speaking, there are many unusual words in the poem. The diction of the poem is meant to maintain a communication between the communicative and imaginative language of the poem. When Crispin encounters the sea it out speaks him, but whether whispering, or bellowing, it is speech he cannot understand: Could Crispin stem verbosity in the sea,

The old age of a watery realist,

Triton, dissolved in shifting diaphanes

Of blue and green? A wordy, watery age  
That whispered to the sun's compassion, made

A convocation, nightly, of the sea-stars,  
And on the cropping foot-ways of the moon

Lay grovelling. Triton incomplicate with that  
Which made him Triton, nothing left of him,

Except in faint, memorial gesturings,  
That were like arms and shoulders in the waves,

Here, something in the rise and fall of wind  
That seemed hallucinating horn, and here,

A sunken voice, both of remembering  
And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain.

Just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved.  
The valet in the tempest was annulled. (I, L 36-53)

فَلَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفَذَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنْفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا) (سورة الكهف الآية 109)

Translated as:

(Say, if the ocean became ink for the words of my Lord, surly, the ocean would be exhausted before the words of my Lord came to an end, even though we brought the like thereof as further help.) (Surah Al-Kahf, 109)

“On the clopping foot-ways of the moon/Lay grovelling,” refers to moonlight shinning on the waves and is in description of the intangible Triton, who as an exhausting personification of the sea is a character without tangible identity, as the sea without meaning.

Throughout the “The Comedian As The Letter C” we can notice that Stevens has devoted the poem’s diction and its sound to the uses of the poetic imagination. While the poem uncovers Stevens’ wild and bright use of language as well as a subtly ironic interplay, it is also structured around a pretentious philosophical technique. The most immediately obvious illustration of this is seen in the opening lines of Part I and Part IV: “Nota; man is the intelligence of his soil” and “Nota: his soil is man's intelligence”. Thus, in a kind of dialectical fashion, the poem and the sounds of its words move between these two conceptual propositions; philosophy and subtle diction.

“The Comedian As The Letter C’s” diction is basically high-sounding and exaggerating. Much of the humour is in Stevens’ handling of the rhetoric throughout the poem. Frequently, however, this exaggeration is mockingly deflated. The following is an example of Crispin’s own pompous exclamation:

Portentous enunciation, syllable  
To blessed syllable affined, and sound  
Bubbling felicity in cantilene,  
Prolific and tormenting tenderness  
Of music, as it comes to unison,  
Forgather and bell boldly Crispin's last  
Deduction. Thrum, with a proud *douceur*  
His grand pronunciamento and devise. (VI, L. 1-8)

Language and style are the first striking notices one may encounter. Stevens’ control over English tongue as well as his own supreme, pleasure and excitement in using it is perhaps nowhere better displayed than in this poem. The diction is plainly chosen for its layer upon layer of blatant rhetoric. It ranges from words of American slang, like “shebang” and “hubbub,” to a heavy use of Latin

words and phrases: “*personae*,” “*lex*,” “*prinoipium*,” “*Sed Quaerltur*.”: German, “*ding an slch*,” and words which are obviously derived from the Italian, “*chiaroscuro*,” or French, “*douceur*”. Jules Laforgue\*, had a great influence on Stevens’ use of diction. Warren Ramsey says, through the “portentuous inflation of language .” He continues:

What Stevens wanted was a good name for a Romantic ironist, a willful fellow who would puncture all the balloons that Stevens would send up painted with his gaudiest language. He wanted, in short, a Pierrot, but he took care not to call him by that or any other of the Laforguan names.

Robert Pack, in his analysis of Stevens’ epistemological aesthetics, points out the vital harmony that exists between the poet internally and the world externally:

The inner weather of the mind and the outer weather of the world are related and interdependent, One cannot exist without the other, although as abstractions we can imagine them apart...This quality of beauty cannot be simply located in either the mind or in the object, for it exists only in the meeting of the two, and so it becomes apparent that the meeting of these two worlds creates a third, a world of correspondences.

The style and the sounds of the words in “The Comedian as the Letter C” are meant for effect; as well as the meter and rhyming. The rhythm of the lines follows no pattern, though the ten-syllable long line is consistent. Rhyming is rare though occasionally “*come*” set before “*planterdom*,” and “*rout*” before “*out*.” At times there is outright repetition at the end of lines: “*form*”- “*fora*” and “*long*”-“*long*,” for example. Cleanth Brooks has recognised Stevens generally to be “traditional and even highly ‘poetic’ in something of the old sense.”

The narration voice of the poem is not neutral or objective the poet, though wearing Crispin mask, is not distancing himself from the development of the narration action. We can hear the poet’s voice through Crispin in many occasions. The poet is playing with, though not identifying himself with, the attitudes of Crispin.

This method may be summarised as the assumption of an ironic mask or attitude, mock heroic in effect and wit, expressing a mixed mood, often by dramatic means. It indulges in self-mockery or ridicules serious feeling; it represents mixed reactions to things, the subjective mocked by the objective, the discrepancy between appearance and reality. It sees boredom and horror, the frustration or derision of latent feeling, the shams of modern life; It dissimulates sympathy for their victims.

It may be a little difficult to translate *The Comedian as the Letter C*. The sounds of the letter C, both hard and soft, include other letters like K, X, etc. How would it be possible to translate a line like *Chequering from Piebald fics unkeyed*, and preserve anything except the sense of the words?

The importance of the sounds of words here is relating to the letter C. In a letter to Hi Simons, dated January 12, 1940, Stevens engaged in his own title probing:

You know the old story about St. Francis wearing bells around his ankles so that, as he went about his business, the crickets and so on would get out of his way and not be tramped on. Now, as Crispin moves thru the poem, the sounds of the Letter C accompany him, as the sounds of the crickets, etc. must have accompanied St. Francis. I don't mean to suggest that there is an Incessant din, but you ought not to be able to read very far in the poem without recognising what I mean. The sounds of the Letter C include all related or derivative sounds. For instance, X, TS, and Z. To illustrate in "Bubbling felicity in Cantilene" the soft C with the change to hard C, once you notice it, ought to make that line a little different from what it was before. Sometimes the sound squeaks all over the place, as, for example, in the line 'Exohequering-' the word exchequering is about as full of the founds of C as any word I can think of.

Crispin, like Stevens, Is a poet and the concern of both Is the discovery of an aesthetic that adjusts imagination to reality. In short, the aesthetic problems confronting Crispin were not contrived by Stevens himself. Crispin, at the end of the poem, abandons his idea for the foundation of a colony based Upon the high poetic Ideals which

he had temporarily held; one sees the parallel with Stevens. After the composition of "The Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens did not publish again until 1930, a lapse of some seven years, except for "Red Loves Kit" and "Sea Surface Pull of Clouds," both in 1924.

To emphasise the poem as comedy is not to deny its final seriousness. As in most cases of laughter, one laughs at Crispin in recognition of his errors and in acknowledgement of an implicit correction. Harriet Monroe early discerned that this "azure laughter" in Stevens is always in movement over "hushed and sombre depths."

If Wallace Stevens means anything specific by the title of the poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C," indeed to dramatise, not only the C-sounds, and the recurring similar sounds; but the self-reducing comedy which characterises the role of Crispin.

The dramatic development of the poem proceeds in logical discourse, from a situation to another modified situation. Very similar to Alexander Pop's *Essay on Man* it sets its principles and doctrine. However the poem proceeds in a narrative and comic not expository:

Invented for its pith, not doctrinal  
In form though in design, as Crispin willed,  
Disguised pronunciamento, summary, (VI, L. 73-5)

The narrative style that the poet used in the poem leave us with the impression of a literary biography of the poet as well as the protagonist of the poem, a kind of a history of the poet's mind, and way of thinking and how he sees the outer world. But the narration style of the poem has as action this action is the voyage of the fictive character of Stevens' Crispin who works as a mask for the poet himself not to distance himself from the action of the poem but to appear more objective and neutral. 'The Comedian as the Letter C' takes the form of an epic, narrative and symbolic of modern Man's distorted, episodic, and vague experience. Modern Man is an illusionist while searching for reality. Crispin's aim is not to just achieve a description of reality but rather to achieve harmony with the outside life, with the other, and even with himself and arrive at "new intelligence" creating an imaginary

world of his own in which inhabitants are in harmony since he lost contact with the real world:  
Of honest quilts, the eye of Crispin, hung  
On porpoises, instead of apricots,  
And on silent porpoises, whose snouts  
Dibbled in waves that were mustachios,  
Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world. (I, L. 11-15)

.....

To make a new intelligence prevail? (IV, L 15)

He decides finally against the moon; it is a pale reflection of reality, while the sun is the source of life. He has abandoned the practice of merely annotating reality and will now attempt fully to understand it. Part IV shows this new intelligence at work.... [His] decision, as we note in Part V, has drained him of his energies; the sun is a hard taskmaster, leaving him with 'The blue infected will'... So that (Part VI) Crispin, in risking a return to the sun, has had to abandon his project and has been left a victim of the reality he sought to understand. He decides that his experience is material enough for a 'doctrine'....

Thus he conceived his voyaging to be  
An up and down between two elements,  
A fluctuating between sun and moon,  
A sally into gold and crimson forms,  
As on this voyage, out of goblinry,  
And then retirement like a turning back  
And sinking down to the indulgences  
That in the moonlight have their habitude.

فَلَمَّا جَنَّ عَلَيْهِ اللَّيْلُ رَأَى كَوْكَبًا قَالَ هَذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَا أُحِبُّ  
الْأَفْلِينَ، فَلَمَّا رَأَى الْقَمَرَ بَازِعًا قَالَ هَذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَئِن لَّمْ  
يَهْدِنِي رَبِّي لَأَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الضَّالِّينَ، فَلَمَّا رَأَى الشَّمْسَ بَازِعَةً  
قَالَ هَذَا رَبِّي هَذَا أَكْبَرُ فَلَمَّا أَفَلَتْ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ إِنِّي بَرِيءٌ مِّمَّا  
تُشْرِكُونَ} (سورة الأنعام، الآيات 76-78)

Translated as:

(So when the night covered him [with darkness], he saw a star. He said, "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "I like not those that disappear."

And when he saw the moon rising, he said, "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "Unless my Lord guides me, I will surely be among the people gone astray."

And when he saw the sun rising, he said, "This is my lord; this is greater." But when it set, he said,

"O my people, indeed I am free from what you associate with Allah.) (Sura, Al- An'aam, 76-78)

Crispin has been stopped by his efforts to reconstruct his senses and thus to decrease the confusion. He failed to become a victim of his senses. So, the standpoint of the poem is Man's relation to the world, the universe, or the cosmos, not his art 'man is the intelligence of his soil' and the dramatic development of them poem depicts the poet as an imaginative man trying to search for reality. The narrative technique of the poem is basically concerned with the poet as a type of imaginative man searching for two things through his hero Crispin: reconciliation with nature and searching for reality.

When one is oriented beforehand towards 'Nature' and 'Objectively' measured distances of Things, one is inclined to pass off such estimates and interpretations of disconnection as 'subjective'. Yet this 'subjectivity' perhaps uncovers the 'Reality' of the world at its most Real; it has nothing to do with 'subjective' arbitrariness or subjectivistic 'ways of taking' an entity which 'in itself' is otherwise. The circumspective disconnection of Dasein's everydayness reveals the Being-in-itself of the 'true world'-of that entity which Dasein, as something existing, is already alongside. The experience of modern Man is fused with skepticism, 'that the only thing we can really know is that the consciousness of the moment exists.' There is a sense of 'hopelessness of finding Truth,' .

The protagonist of the poem, Crispin is in confront with the universe when he first encountered sea. He is a European came to America. As Wallace Stevens says he is ordinary man: "an every-day man who lives a life without the slightest adventure." In that moment he realised the universe is vast and beyond Man's imagination and realisation:

...Sed quaeritur: is this same wig  
Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,  
Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea  
Created, in his day, a touch of doubt.

Crispin is seeking an understanding of the Universe; he wants to belong to it and there is no way to belong except exploring. The first line in the poem this idea of belonging:

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,  
The sovereign ghost.

'The Comedian as the Letter C' is mainly a comic poem. Crispin is the comedian, the comic figure of the poem. The letter C "merest minuscule" as he described in the poem the poet is both an abstraction representing the comic standpoint and an example of comic fate. Stevens has made a view point on three different occasions of the c sounds repeated throughout the poem as a kind of comic as symbolic device. Contemporary poets were troubled by the corruption of language and "something" lost its vision. Here, too, Stevens is deeply concerned - not in the retreat of the age, but with the aesthetic development of the twentieth century poet (man), in the search for truth in language as well as in personal experience. Modern epics are difficult to read. Broken structures reflecting the mind and experience of the period require corresponding energy on the part of the reader to supply the missing associations and generalisations. Stevens is hard to read, too, and for similar reasons. Stephens's poetic form separates pictures within lines and within phrases, so his poetry is dense and difficult (it is difficult also because his vocabulary includes words an average dictionary does not). Its form is otherwise traditional. His language is anagrams and onomatopoeia. His line is an empty verse. He was rightly accused of being a threat. Daniel Fox explains and establishes this accusation in relation to this poem as follows:

The verse of the poem is indeed that of a dandy. Hypercivilized, ironic, and unique, it assiduously attempts to suffuse into modern life a vividness, a gaudiness, a gaiety which it sadly lacks. Stevens' striking vocabulary, a kind of Brummell American, a mixture of the latinate and the colloquial, the precious and the wild, is a joyous yet nervous answer to the national sameness. A connoisseur in discontent and expert in the knowledge of boredom, the dandy contrives the most ingenious and affected ways to transform this reality into something splendid. Stevens' verse, in this poem and in many of the other early poems, is an example.

Irony in Wallace Stevens's "The C-Comedian" is more than one component of pitch, more of a position the author assumes at the moment of the poem. Sarcasm is the substance of the poem: the poem begins and ends in the irony. Sarcasm

reveals the basis of existence in the poem. Irony exposes incompatibility of the hero with the outer world. It shows the shadow of the self against challenges of reality. In "The Comedian As the Letter C" almost everything is shown to be absurd: character and plot, philosophy and poetry. Crispin is the epic narrative "hero," but still he is an absurd persona. But in what way he represents absurdity? What are his flaws? How does Stevens achieve this character? Taking for example his name: Crispin. The choice of the name has a historical background. Other comic antecedents from French and English comedy have been suggested. Crispin, as the central character in the poem, is comic in his inability to handle a situation. He is inadequate, but aspiring. But if he is the wrong person in the wrong time and place, he is unashamed, insistently demanding that the other should recognise him perfectly. Here is a typical characterisation:

The lutanist of fleas, the knave, the thane,  
The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak  
Of China, cap of Spain, imperative haw  
Of hum, inquisitorial botanist,  
And general lexicographer of mute  
And maidenly greenhorns, now behind himself,  
A skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass.  
(ll. L. 22-28)

A central character:

He could not be content with counterfeit,  
With masquerade of thought, with hapless words  
That must belie the racking masquerade  
With fictive flourishes that preordained  
His passion's permit, hang of coat, degree  
Of buttons, measure of his salt. Such trash  
Might help the blind, not him, serenely sly.  
It irked beyond his patience. Hence it was,  
Preferring text to gloss, he humbly served  
Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event,  
A clown, perhaps, but an aspiring clown.  
(ll. L. 360-370)

Even his honesty is called into question. As a whole he is presented as a bold if not impressive protagonist, pressing ever onward to his own reality and essence. However there is a consistent irony directed toward the purity of his quest.

But Crispin was too destitute to find

In any commonplace the sought-for aid.  
He was a man made vivid by the sea, . . .  
(ll. L. 97-9)

Into a savage color he went on.  
How greatly had he grown in his demesne,  
This auditor of insects! . . .  
(ll. L.102-5)

His violence was for aggrandizement  
And not for stupor, . . .  
(ll. L. 117-8)

### CONCLUSION

“That he was not content to rest in aestheticism is clear as early as ‘The Comedian as the Letter C,’ which he once called his ‘anti-mythological poem.’ Perhaps the most serious and important effort to deal directly with the question, What can poetry do in an age of science? In our poetry of this century, ‘The Comedian’ comes very close to ending in the conclusion that William James said even ‘Pyrrhonic’ skepticism itself left standing, that the only thing we can really know is that the consciousness of the moment exists. Very close to this, I said; but, in terms of what can only be called hope, not quite to this conclusion. For Crispin, the barber-valet-poet, recognising his absurdity and the hopelessness of finding Truth, still preserved his ‘integrity,’ and in doing so suggested the possibility of a development in Stevens’ thought that came about only very much later... Crispin ends, that is, by becoming a ‘realist’ poet; but with this difference, that he leaves open the possibility that at some time in the future the ‘prose’ truth ‘to which all poems were incident’ might wear a different aspect, one which would seem less inimical to the values of poetry. In literal truth, he decided, lay his only integrity... Stevens’s own integrity as man and poet is suggested by the many years he endured the despair implicit in ‘The Comedian’ while continuing to nourish the hope that prose truth might wear a different guise at last. Throughout *Harmonium*, the truth Stevens desired is contrasted principally with religion, which is understood as man’s principal illusion.”

“The Comedian As the Letter C” explores with intricate style the depth of the poet’s crisis as it manifests itself in his attempts to decipher the complexity of contemporary American scene. The poet faces the temptations of poetic imagination and the potentials he musters to recreate reality in a better form. However, these potentials prove

more than once to be inconsistent and illusive. Crispin, Stevens’ persona, tastes the bitter failure as he condemns imagination in the face of an indomitably dehumanising, a social and a cultural reality. The squalid matter-of-fact contemporary American scene has become negatively “ vast, subjugating, final” ( L.83).

The significance of the last part of *The Comedian as the Letter C* lies in its cyclical movement which ends up in a stress on the human bonds as the central function of poetry, imagination and poetic self. These should jointly work to perfect this theme as the only possible option left for poets to accept reality as it is. Crispin readjusts himself to this form of reality which he finds truer and much practical in its poeticism than any other imaginary reality:

The chits came for his jiggling, bluet-eyed,  
Hands without touch yet touching poignantly,  
Leaving no room upon his cloudy knee,  
Prophetic joint, for its diviner young.  
The return to social nature, once begun,  
Anabasis or slump, ascent or chute,  
Involved him in midwifery so dense  
His cabin counted as phylactery, (VI. L. 9-16)

Instead of perfecting and achieving his dreams of changing reality, Crispin walks on his dreams as mere fictions of a falsely augmented self. As the poem approaches its end, we realise how Crispin bitterly washes his hands of his aspirations to unravel the mystery of reality ; he develops instead a less mythical self antithetical to the one he promises his readers at the onset of the poem. As a married man, fixed to one single ground, Crispin ends his epic in bathos. He confesses his inability to look the Medusa-reality in the eyes. The unattainability of Crispin’s project to neutralise the sway of reality is Wallace Stevens’ himself, impersonated in the protagonist’s character. *The Comedian As the Letter C* is a manifesto-like poem underlining the failure of poetry, poetic imagination and poetic self to create a reality other than the one we daily live. The positive point regarding this crisis is displayed in the last part of the poem where Crispin as a married man accepts—in a manoeuvre of psychological re-adjustment—the very reality he vows to fight at the beginning of his journey ( the moral and ideological one). In this respect, the crisis of reality does not totally end.



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