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Still Whipping Hullabaloos among Spheres

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Introduction
Still Whipping Hullabaloos among Spheres

BART EECKHOUT AND FLORIAN GARGAILLO

Allow,
Therefore, that in the planetary scene
Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,
May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.
—Wallace Stevens, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"

WALLACE STEVENS'S first book of poems, *Harmonium*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf on September 7, 1923, less than a month shy of the poet's forty-fourth birthday. It didn't exactly make a splash. Though Mark Van Doren in *The Nation* predicted that someday a monograph would be written about it (and other contemporary volumes), and that Stevens's work would be more "durable" than much of what "passed for poetry in his day," he still called *Harmonium* "tentative, perverse, and superfine," and wondered out loud, "What public will care for a poet who strains every nerve every moment to be unlike anyone else who ever wrote[?]" (40). Van Doren's skepsis about the book's ability to find an audience seemed to be borne out at first. Robert Rehder recalls how, "During the 1924 Christmas season, two young poets, Richard Blackmur and Conrad Aiken, found that the first edition had been remaindered in the basement of Filene's, the Boston department store, at 11 cents a copy." (The regular asking price was $2, the equivalent of $35 a century later according to the US Inflation Calculator.) Blackmur and Aiken

> recognized the book's merit and bought all the copies to send as Christmas cards to their friends. The poet took a more ironic view of the book's sales. Around July 1924, he wrote to Harriet Monroe: "My royalties for the first half of 1924 amounted to

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> $6.70. I shall have to charter a boat and take my friends around the world" (*L* 243). (Rehder 36)

Recognition was slow to arrive, then, but it did arrive over time. Today, a first printing of *Harmonium* fetches anywhere between $2000 for a copy in not very good shape and $6000 if it's in better condition and includes the rare dust cover jacket. Stevens's friends around the world typically gather nowadays in countries he never managed to visit himself, though they usually forget to charter a boat. A special commemorative issue such as this can even find itself edited by a Belgian and a Frenchman collaborating across two continents. Then again, Rehder's anecdote is telling not only for how it recalls the languishing copies of *Harmonium* in the belly of Filene's: it also reminds us how Blackmur and Aiken, as fellow poets, already knew better than to leave the remaindered books on the table. Another up-and-coming poet who had just published her own first volume, Marianne Moore, was simply bowled over by Stevens's idiosyncratic gifts. Her review of *Harmonium*, published in the January 1924 issue of *The Dial*, aligned Stevens's artistry resolutely with Shakespeare's "nutritious permutations" (51). Moore was quick to embrace, among other things, *Harmonium*'s "sharp, solemn, rhapsodic elegant pieces of eloquence" (48), the "riot of gorgeousness in which Mr. Stevens' imagination takes refuge" (49), the "masterly equipoise" of a poem such as "Sunday Morning" (50), the recurrent display of "precise diction and verve" (51), and Stevens's capacity to let the "expanded metaphor" in "The Comedian as the Letter C" become "hypnotically incandescent like the rose-tinged fringe of the night-blooming cereus" (52). From the start, *Harmonium* seemed primed to become at least a poet's poetry.

At the end of this introduction, we include the yellow-and-red dust cover jacket that was wrapped around *Harmonium*'s 1923 harlequin hardboard reproduced on our cover. The back of this dust cover jacket, too, adds a snippet of literary context that qualifies the sense of dismal failure we might derive from Rehder's selected anecdotes. Getting published by Alfred (and Blanche) Knopf as part of their Borzoi Poetry series was a promising imprimatur for a budding poet: in the same Fall 1923 season, it put Stevens in the company of Conrad Aiken, Robert Graves, Kahlil Gibran, Chinese poetry translated by Arthur Waley, and C. A. Dawson-Scott. Only the latter collection, coincidentally or not the cheapest at $1.50, was swallowed up by the fog of time. But Aiken and Graves have survived, like Stevens, as important poets from the first half of the twentieth century, and Gibran's *The Prophet* went on to become one of the greatest poetic bestsellers ever, with more than ten million copies sold and translations in over a hundred languages. Being such a slippery, intentionally resistant collection that sought to invent its own poetic idiolect, *Harmonium* essentially needed time before its voice and music could cast the kind of spell that made readers return to it over and over again. If the collection

would always appeal to a much smaller audience than *The Prophet*, its artistic status was likewise destined to overshadow Gibran's book within the elite circles of published poets, academic students of literature, musicians, painters, and highly educated amateur readers who developed a taste for it. Even so, Stevens probably couldn't have imagined that by the twenty-first century one particularly oracular Yale professor would be in the habit of proclaiming the book to be "the preeminent 'first volume' by any American poet since *Leaves of Grass*" (Bloom 267).

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As Harold Bloom's bold proclamation illustrates, *Harmonium* is now indisputably ensconced in the canon of twentieth-century poetry in English. To return to the book on the occasion of its centenary isn't to strike new ground, then. This is literary soil that has been worked very well, and for quite a while. Already in 1967, Princeton University Press published the first study devoted solely to Stevens's collection and its extended genesis: Robert Buttel's *Wallace Stevens: The Making of* Harmonium. (Such attention to an individual volume continues to be exceptional: no monographs about a single one of the poet's later collections come to mind.) Elsewhere in this issue, the reader will find four tributes to Bob Buttel, who was this journal's longest-serving Editorial Board Member when he passed away at the age of ninety-nine—just shy of his own centenary—earlier this year. Bob Buttel's stars were aligned with those of *Harmonium* in more ways than one. When Stevens's debut appeared, Bob was a three-month-old baby, and when the adult Bob (who grew up to be as tall for his generation as Stevens had been for his) published his study of *Harmonium*, he was in turn in his forty-fourth year, just as Stevens had been when his first book came out. Because of these close ties between critic and book, and by way of a further editorial tribute, we thought we should take a brief moment to look back on Bob's study here.

Although one could justifiably expect an initial exploratory monograph to seem dated after more than half a century in which so many scholars have tried to dig deeper into *Harmonium*'s texts and contexts, this turns out to be anything but the case. To the contrary: Bob's book has aged gracefully. This may be due as much to what it contains as to what it could still afford to keep out of the picture back in the 1960s. Unsurprisingly for an academic study of a major poet published in those days, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of* Harmonium stakes everything on literary-aesthetic characterization. It's a work of intensely concentrated textual readings undertaken in a spirit of critical assessment that seeks to determine the place of Stevens within the emerging modernist canon. Largely excluded from such an investigation was a variety of concerns that would come to inform

especially later inquiries: not just the philosophical and theoretical (which were already dominant modes of reading Stevens at the time) but, more strikingly, the biographical, historical, socioeconomic, and political. While such exclusions would be a much harder academic sell today, their relative absence is outweighed, arguably, by the consistent perspicacity, good taste, and impressive scope of what this early study does choose to focus on. In some ways, Bob's work may thus be read as historical testimony to what poetry criticism of the highest caliber was capable of doing half a century ago—capacities that may not all have survived intact among subsequent generations.

It isn't just that a study such as *Wallace Stevens: The Making of* Harmonium, so elegantly narrated and expertly situated in literary history, still has the power to convey the excitement of fresh discovery, even after all the archival materials to which Bob gained access through Holly Stevens have become widely available in print. Nor is it simply the way Bob achieved a sense of balance and near-completeness by devoting entire chapters to the influence on *Harmonium* of French symbolism, of imagism, of the avantgarde aesthetic among members of the Arensberg group, of experiments in painting, of music and the metrical tradition, and of the literary history of humor, wit, and irony. It's especially the extraordinary breadth and detail of Bob's poetic and artistic expertise that continues to impress, and the self-assurance with which as a taste-master he was able to roam through literary and aesthetic antecedents or make comparisons with Stevens's contemporaries. How many poetry critics today, we wonder, are so knowledgeable that they can unfailingly detect echoes, and then precisely define Stevens's idiomatic inflections and adaptations, of not only Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, but also Tristan Corbière and Jules Laforgue (all read and cited in the original French); of not only Pound, Eliot, Amy Lowell, and H. D., but also John Gould Fletcher and F. S. Flint; of contemporary writings by Witter Bynner, Pitts Sanborn, and the editors of *Rogue*, Allen and Louise Norton; of Watteau, Fragonard, Lorraine, Monet, Renoir, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Duchamp, Matisse, Kandinsky, Picasso, Braque, Klee, and the whole gamut of -isms in the history of painting; of the specific music of Handel, Mozart, Stravinsky, and Debussy; of not only Dante and Shakespeare before the romantics, but also Jonson, Campion, Marvell, Donne, Milton, and Pope (all with very concrete connections to poems in the volume); of not only Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Whitman, Wilde, and Yeats, but also Longfellow, Beardsley, Housman, Donald Evans, Arthur Davidson Ficke, and Austin Dobson (the latter three at considerable length)? Such a list can sound like name-dropping in the long rhetorical question in which we've forced these figures here, but Bob detects significant and revealing links with them throughout, patiently detailing the many aesthetic genealogies that come together in *Harmonium* to build the inimitable amalgam of Stevens's styles. The groundwork Bob

undertook is so varied, extensive, and wide-ranging that his book remains the primary go-to study of Stevens's first collection, which later scholars have only ever been able to modify, reframe, expand upon, and complement.

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This special issue celebrating *Harmonium* on its one hundredth birthday has been put together with too much admiration for Bob Buttel's pioneering study to risk any claims for radical critical innovation. Instead, we want to honor Stevens's colorful and heterogeneous collection by offering a pleasant menu of very different courses. First off, we're presenting a practical tool that to the best of our knowledge isn't available yet. As an appendix to this introduction, we supply a straightforward chronology that should enable readers already familiar with the poems to ponder Stevens's aesthetic development during those nine years of writing (1915–1923) from which he gathered seventy-four poems into a book. *Harmonium* is the only collection by Stevens in which he went out of his way to shuffle poems around until the different steps in the book's genesis became invisible. For historically interested readers today, it can be useful, therefore, to be able to return at a glance to a timeline of these poems' individual as well as clustered first publication. At the same time, such a skeletal overview helps to remind us of Stevens's widespread involvement in the "little magazines" that were such a driving engine behind the experiments of literary modernism. Among the twelve magazines and one anthology in which most (but not all) poems included in *Harmonium* had previously been published (on twenty-five separate occasions), two venues stand out: the magazine *Others* for the early stages of Stevens's writing (with twelve poems in six different issues of the magazine and three poems in *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse*) and then increasingly *Poetry* (with twenty-five poems across three issues, together amounting to about a third of *Harmonium*'s corpus). The remaining poems were dispersed over *Rogue* (three); *Soil* (two); *The Little Review* (six); *The Modern School* (two); *Contact* (two); *The Measure* (two); *Broom* (three); *The Dial* (six); *The New Republic* (one); and *Secession* (one). There is still a rich story waiting to be told about Stevens and the little magazines.

As separate contributions to this issue we offer four different courses: a handful of poems, a personal reflection, four critical essays, and a graduate student roundtable. At our request, Rachel Burns opens the issue with a quartet of poems that respond variously to the language, imagery, and themes of *Harmonium*. The collective title under which her quartet appears, "Preliminary Minutiae," winks at the title Stevens originally suggested to Knopf for his debut: *The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae*

(*L* 237). "Nuances on a Theme by Stevens" playfully torques the title of "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" and proceeds to riff on an epigraph from "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage." "Things Off Season" pulls Stevens's favorite genre of nature poetry into the twenty-first century, and "Seven Scenes of Riverdale, New York" draws on the fragmentary structure and imagistic approach of "Six Significant Landscapes" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Finally, "Shabbos" echoes the Rabelaisian excesses of early Stevens, including exclamations, lush diction, and sound play: "What body boggles the imagined eye but I!"

The *amuse-bouches* of Burns's poems are followed by a personal reflection in which Lisa Goldfarb, concluding her long stint as President of the Wallace Stevens Society, thinks back to her first encounter with *Harmonium* as an undergraduate student and considers how Stevens's work shaped her as a reader of poetry. Specifically, Goldfarb writes that poems such as "The Snow Man," "Sunday Morning," and "Peter Quince at the Clavier" sharpened her attention to the complex musicality of Stevens's verse, and of lyric poetry more broadly. She identifies the qualities in Stevens that impacted her deeply and stimulated her scholarship over the years: not just his verbal extravagance but also the subtlety and ambiguity of his style. Fittingly for an essay that begins in the classroom, Goldfarb finishes by reflecting on the importance of *Harmonium* to her own career as a teacher of poetry.

The main course of this issue consists, as usual, of a handful of more conventional scholarly essays. These focus on very different aspects of *Harmonium* and its context. After decades of writing about Stevens, during which he has always insisted on the lyrical innovations to be found in the poet's first collection (more perhaps than in later volumes), Charles Altieri considers again what, in his view, makes *Harmonium* "the most intelligent and possibly the most intensely moving of the founding poetic texts in American modernism." He surveys five exemplary poems from the volume: "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "The Plot Against the Giant," "Earthy Anecdote," and "Nomad Exquisite." These to him reveal a distinctive quality of the book: Stevens's "responsiveness to sensation" in ways that resist empirical rationalization. For Altieri, *Harmonium* brilliantly demonstrates "what imagination can do with just the facts, especially the bare fact of our mortality."

Andrew Osborn's critical ambition is no less capacious, though he builds his argument on two very short aphorisms from *Harmonium*'s longest poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C": "man is the intelligence of his soil" and "his soil is man's intelligence" (*CPP* 22, 29). Osborn explores the broader significance of "soil" to Stevens's thought, seeking to establish how the poet's thinking about the concept reveals the extent of his materialism. In Osborn's erudite reading, Stevens saw the soil as "a stable conceptual repository," always "available for cultivation and settlement." Yet the poet also felt the soil to be so selective that it only permits to flour-

ish those who have the moral bearings to withstand its challenges. At the same time, Osborn demonstrates that although Stevens viewed intelligence as deeply linked to the cultivation of soil, he saw genius—notably in the concept of *genius loci*—as fully autonomous, to the point that it holds transformative power over the environment.

If Osborn displays a strong interest in looking forward to determine how elements of Stevens's early poetics in *Harmonium* also shape his later oeuvre, Jonathan Ivry primarily traces lines backward. In the tradition of Bob Buttel, he returns to Stevens's student days at Harvard to flesh out a neglected double inspiration—that of Plato's writings as inflected by the philosopher's nineteenth-century translator, Benjamin Jowett. Ivry shows how important Jowett was as a Victorian reformer and liberal theologian who envisioned a Christianity without dogmatism and propagated a scientific approach to reading the Bible. In doing so, Jowett substantially contributed to an ongoing secularization process and even the rise of atheism that Stevens joins, especially in *Harmonium*'s more mocking anti-religious poems. Among other things, Ivry pursues the genealogy of the word "concupiscence" from the King James Bible and Jowett's translation of Plato to its iconic manifestation in the form of "concupiscent curds" in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream."

In our fourth and final long essay, Kathryn Mudgett rereads Stevens's poetry composed in response to the First World War (some of which was kept out of *Harmonium*) alongside the war poetry of contemporary Ukrainian writers. The position of these poets is fundamentally different, of course: Stevens was a civilian poet who didn't face the destruction of warfare directly, unlike many of the Ukrainian authors considered in Mudgett's essay. However, both sought language that would somehow suffice to convey their subjective emotions and experiences, and to transform the destructiveness of war into words that have the potential to elucidate. Without claiming any direct line of influence from Stevens to contemporary Ukrainian poets, Mudgett demonstrates how the two sets of poems that she plays off against each other illuminate one another in valuable ways and share a common purpose.

Our special issue concludes with a duet of shorter essays drawn from a graduate seminar on the question of the neighbor, set up under the direction of Douglas Mao at the Johns Hopkins University. We invited these graduate students to write up their ideas to give a sense of how a generation of budding literary scholars approach Stevens's century-old collection in 2023. According to Julia Houser, Nora Pehrson, and Griffin Shoglow-Rubenstein, who collaborated on the first essay, Stevens in *Harmonium* envisions the world as populated with neighbors of various stripes, from animals to objects and events. For Stevens, they find, it is precisely by meeting such neighbors that the world can be revitalized. Abdul-Karim Mustapha, Jonah Shallit, and Jungmin Yoo turn their attention, finally, to Stevens's attempts to "capture the interrelations between ephemeral mo-

ments and grand narratives." In his first collection, they argue, Stevens "break[s] down the grand narrative of history and its steady, onward-moving temporality into recurring moments of ephemerality lived and felt at the level of the everyday." Thus, he is able to present poetry "as an alternative historical method in its own right." On our part, we're inclined to think that *Harmonium* is alive and thriving if young readers a century later believe that the poems collected in it continue to speak to fundamental questions of history, time, and our ability to cohabit on this planet. Stevens's hullabaloo, it would appear, is still resounding among the spheres.

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Belgium

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Chronology of Poems in the 1923 Edition of *Harmonium*

The following list reorganizes the seventy-four poems included in the first edition of *Harmonium* in the order of first publication or, when the poem was not previously published, probable writing. The list has been compiled on the basis of the following sources included in the Works Cited: Bates; Cook; Edelstein; Lensing; Longenbach; and Richardson.

Published while Stevens was still living in New York City:
March 1915 in *Rogue*:
"Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et les Unze Mille Vierges"
"Tea"
August 1915 in *Others*:
"Peter Quince at the Clavier"
"The Silver Plough-Boy"
September 1915 in *Rogue*:
"Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock"
November 1915 in *Poetry*:
"Sunday Morning"
March 1916 in *Others*:
"Domination of Black"
"Tattoo"
"Six Significant Landscapes"

Published after Stevens moved to Hartford:
July 1916 in *Others*:
"The Worms at Heaven's Gate"
January 1917 in *Soil*:
"In the Carolinas"
"To the Roaring Wind"
October 1917 in *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse*:
"Explanation"
"Theory"
"The Plot Against the Giant"
December 1917 in *Others*:
"Valley Candle"
"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"
"The Wind Shifts"
June 1918 in *The Little Review*:
"Anecdote of Men by the Thousand"
"Metaphors of a Magnifico"
"Depression Before Spring"
July 1918 in *The Modern School*:
"Earthy Anecdote"
mid-1918, simultaneously with "Earthy Anecdote" (see Lensing 113):
"The Jack-Rabbit"

December 1918:
in *The Modern School*:
"The Apostrophe to Vincentine"
in *The Little Review*:
"Architecture"
"Nuances of a Theme by Williams"
"Anecdote of Canna"
in *Others*:
"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"
1919 (see Bates 103, who notes that the poem appeared on the back of a postcard to Harriet Monroe):
"Nomad Exquisite"
July 1919 in *Others*:
"Life Is Motion"
October 1919 in *Poetry*:
"Fabliau of Florida"
"Homunculus et la Belle Étoile"
"The Weeping Burgher"
"Exposition of the Contents of a Cab"
"Ploughing on Sunday"
"Banal Sojourn"
"Anecdote of the Jar"
"Of the Surface of Things"
"The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician"
"The Place of the Solitaires"
"The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage"
"Colloquy with a Polish Aunt"
January 1921 in *Contact*:
"Invective Against Swans"
"Infanta Marina"
March 1921 in *The Measure*:
"Cortège for Rosenbloom"
October 1921 in *Poetry*:
"Palace of the Babies"
"From the Misery of Don Joost"
"The Doctor of Geneva"
"Gubbinal"
"The Snow Man"
"Tea at the Palaz of Hoon"
"The Cuban Doctor"
"Another Weeping Woman"
"Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds"
"Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb"
"The Load of Sugar-Cane"
"Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores"
December 1921 in *Broom*:
"The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws"
summer 1922 (see e.g. Richardson 522 and Longenbach 90):
"The Comedian as the Letter C"
June 1922 in *Broom*:
"Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion"
"Stars at Tallapoosa"

July 1922 in *The Dial*:

"Bantams in Pine-Woods"
"The Ordinary Women"
"Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs"
"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"
"O, Florida, Venereal Soil"
"The Emperor of Ice-Cream"

November 1922 in *The New Republic*:

"To the One of Fictive Music"

1922–1923:

"Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" (see Richardson 181; for 1923, see Bates 116)
"Two Figures in Dense Violet Night" (see Richardson 523 for 1922, Lensing 115 for 1923)

January 1923 in *Secession*:

"Last Looks at the Lilacs"

April 1923 in *The Measure*:

"Floral Decorations for Bananas"

September 1923 (see Lensing 239):

"Jasmine's Beautiful Thoughts Underneath the Willow"

Of uncertain date:

"The Virgin Carrying a Lantern"

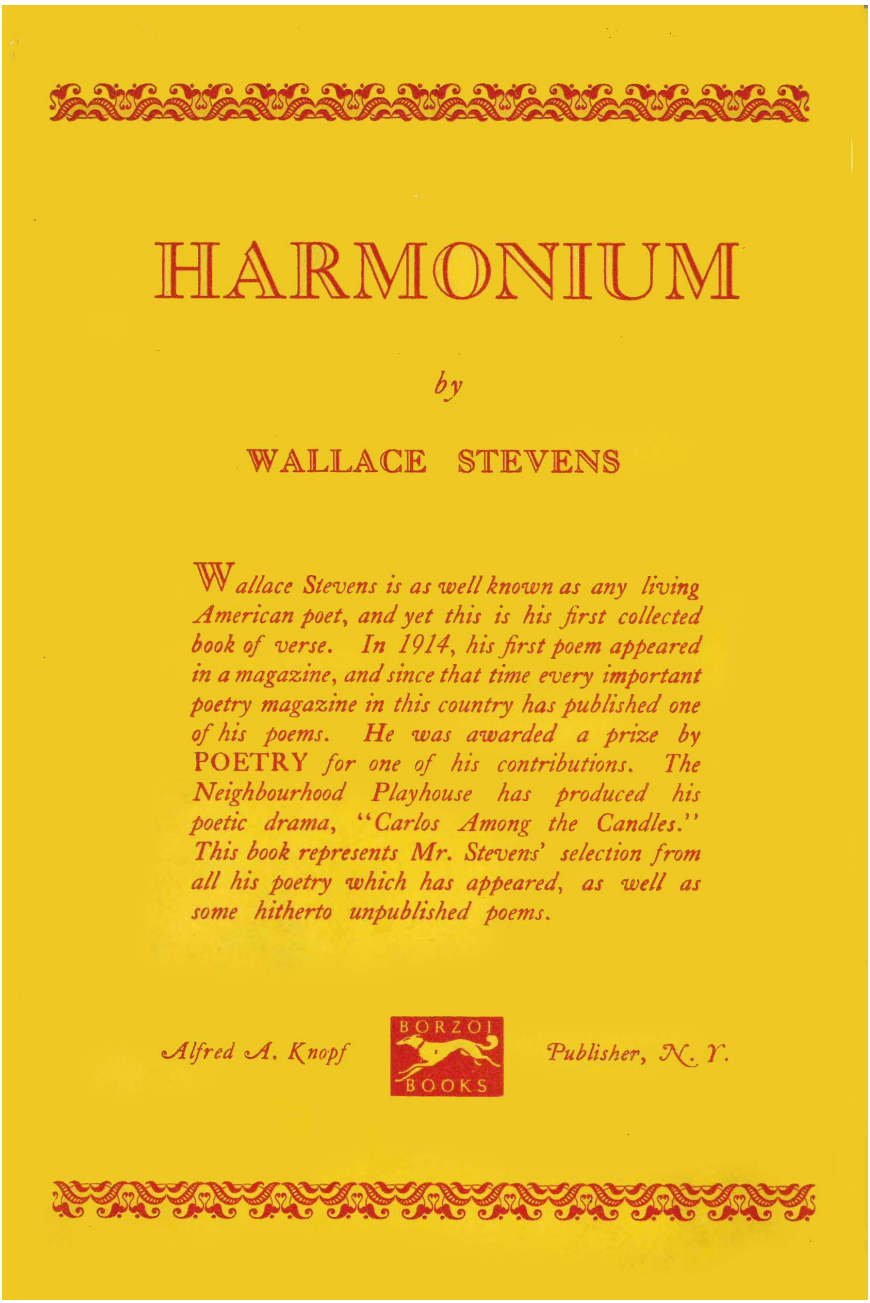

Fig. 1. Front of dust cover jacket, original 1923 *Harmonium* edition. Red lettering on yellow background. Image retouched by Faye Serio. Courtesy of Joseph M. Finnerty.

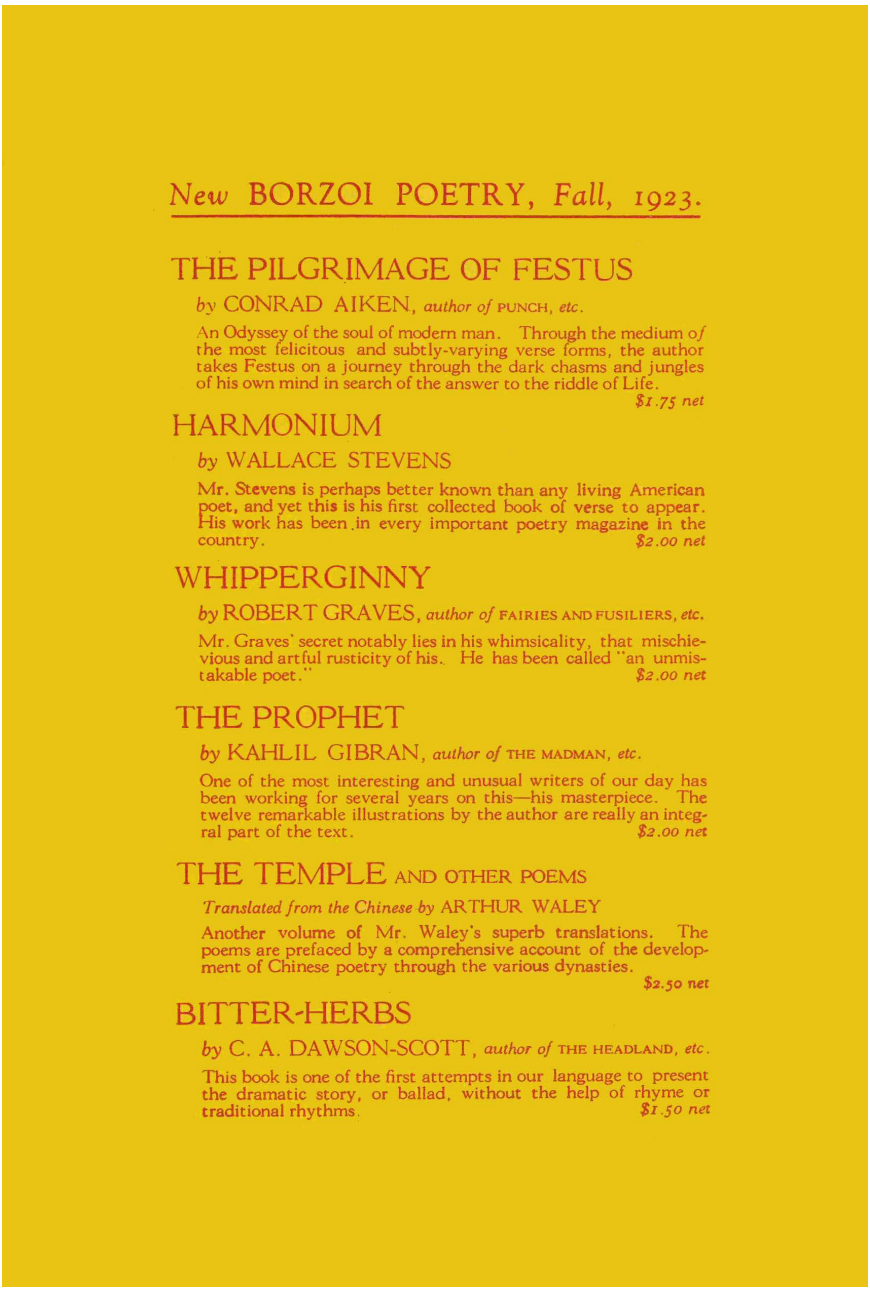

Fig. 2. Back of dust cover jacket, original 1923 *Harmonium* edition. Red lettering on yellow background. Image retouched by Faye Serio. Courtesy of Joseph M. Finnerty.