If a single poetic line encapsulates the mythopoeic motive in Wallace Stevens’ *Harmonium* (1923) it is: ‘Death is the mother of beauty’. It is evidence that Stevens had adopted Nietzsche’s tragic view of nature – ‘death’ signals the dissolution of the gods and beauty is a form of aesthetic salvation. In other words, death consciousness is the primary breeder of a secular, redemptive aesthetic. The title to Stevens’ first poetry collection, *Harmonium*, is a significant clue to the intermediate perspective that Stevens upholds as a necessary substitute for the loss of belief in God. In referring to a musical instrument (a type of reed organ), Stevens invokes the theme of Dionysian folk wisdom, so underscoring the spiritual quest for harmony, the balanced interplay, between human artifice and an anarchic impulse that concords with a godless natural order. For various critics, ‘perspectivism’ is seen to be key to the collection, implying there is no fixed point of view regarding a suitable art form for imagining a chaotic, godless, natural world. For example, William W. Bevis argues that the arrangement of *Harmonium* consists of antitheses, contradictions and subtle deflections of points of view, implying the dominant idiom is premised on perspectivism. However, I argue that Stevens moves through various ‘demonstrations’ of aesthetic conceptions, in order to arrive at a suitable post-religious metaphysic. Occasionally, he pictures the natural world functioning according to its own (anti-anthropocentric) law or logic, and elsewhere he emphasizes the active agency of human artifice that takes ‘dominion’ over nature. Stevens’ poetic concept of myth is integral to the shift in a spiritual
perspective from transcendent religion to a humanist re-imagining, as well as to the happy balance between an ordering imagination and a non-transfigurative order of nature. Furthermore, mythopoeia allows Stevens to position his secular spirituality between variations of the sublime aesthetic – between the ‘anti-sublime’ that exposes the emptiness of the transcendent, and the ‘Romantic sublime’ that completely immerses the self in the physical world by negating the reflective cogito. ‘Harmonium’ derives from the Greek ‘harmonía’ (joint, agreement, concord), and for J. Hillis Miller ‘harmony’ could stand for a unified view of the world that existed once in the primitive mind. Yet Stevens, whilst eschewing an atheistic denunciation of sublime possibility, does not privilege a mythological ideal – i.e. the total unification of the poetic mind and physical reality. In order to sustain an intermediate poetic – one that re-sacralizes nature and is anti-transcendent – the harmonious view does not submit to any act of belief. My argument is that we should read Harmonium as an intellectual journey through which Stevens does reach a definite or final aesthetic-spiritual point of view, and that the Nietzschean perspective of aesthetic-spiritual salvation is maintained throughout Stevens’ poetic career.

Generally, critics have argued that Stevens moved beyond the perspectivism of Harmonium, revealing a personal sense of frustration with the ways in which the ‘sacred’ is revealed through metaphorical playfulness. His later poetry suggests a turning towards the abstract or Christian mysticism, thus expressing nostalgia for the transcendent beyond the symbolic order. In other words, his later work conveys a more positive affirmation of spirituality that overcomes the non-committal perspectivism of Harmonium. For example, Edward Ragg argues: ‘For a poet so affected by the “death of the gods”, the lingering desire to capture the idea of “the infinite” or transcendent remained a strong feature throughout Stevens’ work.’ And Ragg further goes on to state that Stevens ‘sought an abstract idiom [ . . . ] which attempted to transcend the nominally impotent aesthetic of Harmonium’. Likewise for Frank Kermode, ‘Harmonium has little – but not quite nothing – to say of what Stevens later came to call “poverty” – meaning the absence of a fruitful union between imagination and reality’. ‘Of Mere Being’ (from Late Poems, 1950–5) has attracted much critical attention, prompting the question of whether