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Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate

Harold Bloom's Vast Accumulation — *Samuel French Morse* . . . 99

Cortege for Stevens — *Walter Albee* . . . 107

Harold Bloom's Wallace Stevens — *R. D. Ackerman* . . . 108

Bloom—A Commentary—Stevens — *Joseph N. Riddel* . . . 111

Wallace Stevens on the Podium:

The Poet as Public Man of Letters — *Peter Brazeau* . . . 120

Stevens' Revolutionaries

and John Addington Symonds — *Jan Pinkerton* . . . 128

Review . . . 130

News and Comments . . . 133

Current Bibliography . . . 136

Dissertation Abstracts . . . 139

Cover: Susannah and The Elders, Trinity College Cambridge Manuscript B. 11 7m (historiated initial). From *Susannah: An Alliterative Poem of the Fourteenth Century*. Edited by Alice Miskimin. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

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Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate¹ Harold Bloom's Vast Accumulation

SAMUEL FRENCH MORSE

Intolerance respecting other people's religion," Wallace Stevens once observed, "is toleration itself in comparison with intolerance respecting other people's art" (OP163). He also said, in answer to an inquiry about his opinion of "the results . . . and the general process" of the analysis to which his poems had been subjected:

. . . things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions very often take on a form that is ambiguous or uncertain. It is not possible to attach a single, rational meaning to such things without destroying the imaginative or emotional ambiguity or uncertainty that is inherent in them and that is why poets do not like to explain. That the meanings given by others are sometimes meanings not intended by the poet or that were never present in his mind does not impair them as meanings. On the inside cover of the album of Mahler's Fifth Symphony recently issued by Columbia there is a note on the meanings of that work. Bruno Walter, however, says that he never heard Mahler intimate that the symphony had any meanings except the meanings of the music. Does this impair the meanings of the commentators as meanings? Certainly this music had no single meaning which alone was the meaning intended and to which one was bound to penetrate. If it had, what justification could the composer have had for concealing it? The score with its markings contains any meaning that imaginative and sensitive listeners find in it. It takes very little to experience the variety in everything. The poet, the musician, both have explicit meanings but they express them in the forms these take and not in explanation.²

The first of these remarks, with only a slight modification of emphasis, is a reminder of the intolerance that any one critic is likely to feel respecting any other critic's view of a poet's art. The other suggests not only that all poems are ultimately written in the first person, but also that all poems are ultimately read and interpreted in the first person; and that the poet's view of his art is essentially different from the critic's view of it. It may also be that the poet's view and the critic's view are essentially irreconcilable and, as the last sentences of Stevens' comment on "meanings" imply, not altogether undesirably so. At any rate, this possibility leads to a familiar dictum in the "Adagia": "It is the explanations of things that we make to ourselves that disclose our characters: The subjects of one's poems are the symbols of one's self or of one of one's selves" (OP 164). To which it is only necessary to add that the work of any poet of stature is larger than any single view of it or the critical differences it is sure to engender.

"This book," Harold Bloom says in his Preface, "attempts a full commentary upon nearly all of what I judge to be Stevens' poetic canon"—although it actually begins on the preceding page with an academic joke: the last eight lines of "From the Packet of Anacharsis," which comprise an epigraph no other commentator can ever claim, and which conclude with a visionary imperative and imprimatur:

In the punctual centre of all circles white
Stands truly. The circles nearest to it share

Its color, but less as they recede, impinged
By difference and then by definition
As a tone defines itself and separates

And the circles quicken and crystal colors come
And flare and Bloom with his vast accumulation
Stands and regards and repeats the primitive lines.

Joking aside, however, and ambitious as his attempt is likely to seem to many of his readers, Bloom has found room for an opening chapter on "American poetic stances from Emerson to Stevens" and a concluding one intended as his "contribution to a theory of lyric poetry," devoted to the idea he calls "poetic crossing." His design requires some preliminary suggestions and explanation:

Since I map many of Stevens' poems in terms of their crossings or "negative moments," some readers may want to start with this [concluding] chapter, or to read it in conjunction with my analysis of specific poems. The deferment of theory is due to the dialectical relation that exists in the book between practical criticism and the use of paradigms: chapters 2-13 illustrate chapters 1 and 14, but are themselves illustrated by the two theoretical chapters. (p. vii)

Obviously, *The Poems of Our Climate* is not intended as "a facile exercise." Moreover, despite Bloom's effort to make his book "independent of [his] earlier work," the poetic theory set forth in *The Anxiety of Influence* and developed in subsequent studies provides the terminology and apparatus for his analyses here. Indeed, everything about *The Poems of Our Climate* suggests that he is, as he says of Emerson, "more in love with an idea of poetry than with any poetry actually written" (p. 4).

The complexity of Bloom's idea of a stance proper to the fulfillment of his intention is most apparent in the theoretical chapters, although both the theoretical chapters and the practical criticism seem almost to have been composed as analogues to the kaleidoscopic and receding circles described in "From the Packet of Anacharsis," as well as illustrations of his "vast accumulation." Chapter 1, in its first two pages, "[proposes] an antithetical

formula"—which is also a "Gnostic apothegm"—"as the motto for post-Emersonian American poetry," and continues with a definition of its "dialectic" (which "follows a triple rhythm"); a thumbnail sketch of the impact of Wordsworth on Emerson and "upon the later Coleridge, and on Ruskin and then Pater;" a paragraph on the "intellectual crises" suffered by Emerson and Whitman and the lack of such crises in Stevens; and a preliminary definition and testing of the workings of "poetic crossings" in the "crisis poem."

Density is one thing; but the attempt to pack into a single chapter of 26 pages the number of assertions and propositions Bloom includes runs the risk of alienating even the most amenable of readers, and is certain to suggest to those who are less tolerant an anxiety of influence as applicable to the literary theorist and critic as it is to the poet. Bloom's Emerson, for example, who he calls "the father of us all," represents a conscious "swerve" from the Emerson of "common literary and scholarly opinion" almost as a matter of principle; but it does not necessarily follow that his "strong readings" of Emerson are therefore superior to those expressed by more conventional critics. The Orphic Emerson speaks to Bloom's sensibility and bias; but of the Emerson who said, "I am not wise enough for a national criticism," he has little if anything to say, except in terms of Emerson's transformation of "the Romantic dialect of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* in Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson . . . into an American dialect that he called Fate, Freedom, and Power" (p. 3). He is equally reticent about the Emerson who longed for a poetry that could deal with "the barbarism and materialism of the times," "banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism," "our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, . . . our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing . . ."—that American experience so much at odds with what was acceptable to "the courtly muses of Europe."³ Of the poet whom Emerson expected to be "the timely man" and "the reconciler," and the founder of America's "new religion," he has nothing at all to say.

Even when Bloom seems to be most rewarding in his reading of Emerson, he seems equally compelled to tailor Emerson to an "endlessly elaborating" theory, and a "bewilderingly multiform series of substitute words" typical of "strong" poet-Emersonian poets. Thus the Emersonian dialectic (by virtue of Emerson's linguistic inconstancy) of "Fate, Freedom, and Power" can be metamorphosed into an equally Emersonian dialectic of "Necessity, Solitude, and Surprise," which in turn allows Bloom to say, "'Surprise,' as Emerson uses it, does not seem to mean to encounter suddenly or unexpectedly, or to take or be taken unaware. It means for him the *pathos* of Power, the sudden manifestation of the vital will. It means Victory and ecstasy, a seizure, as in the etymology of the word" (p. 5). Thus, "surprise is the American poetic stance," but "in the peculiar sense of surprise as the poet's Will-to-Power over anteriority and over the interpretation of his own poem," a phrase that requires still further glossing:

As Emerson says, in his very oddly named essay, *Compensation*: "The law of nature is, Do the thing and you shall have the power; but they who do not the thing have not the power." Yet this power is so dialectical as to be self-deconstructing, on the basis of what Emerson keeps saying, as here in the essay *The Over-Soul*, where the very title prophesies Nietzsche's Over-Man and where Emerson calls for an Over-Poet: "The great poet makes us feel our own wealth, and then we think less of his compositions. His best communication to our mind is to teach us to despise all he has done." (p. 6)

With all of this "troping," "stance" becomes some pages further on "something very precise and indeed traditional; . . . rhetorical stance as formulated first about 150 B.C. by Hermagoras. Stance is the major heuristic device for a poet; it is his way of path-breaking into his own inventiveness. . . ." The term for which Bloom has been preparing the reader is "metalepsis," characterized, but not defined, as the stance "which translates the orator's own belatedness into a perpetual earliness;" in still other words, "Whitman's stance."

Beyond such involuted analogizing, which at times comes dangerously close to reducing the language of criticism to pure self-expression, "misprision" need not go: having slain "the father of us all," Bloom can assert his own authority as reader and interpreter. Almost all that need be added here is the exasperatingly ambiguous assertion which provides the basis for much of the commentary comprising chapters 2-13:

Though Stevens read Emerson early and fully, and remembered much more than he realized, his Emersonianism was filtered mostly through Whitman, a pervasive and of course wholly unacknowledged influence upon all of Stevens' major poetry. (p.10)

Just how "fully" Stevens read Emerson remains to be documented, although it is possible that, in an Emersonian phrase, "he read better than he knew." As for Whitman's influence, it has been noted by Roy Harvey Pearce, and, in his own diffident way, by Stevens himself.

The text for Bloom's "full commentary" is, essentially, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. Within that framework, he proceeds more or less chronologically, but with the deliberate intention of showing "the interacting veins of life between the early and the late poems," as Marianne Moore put it in a famous phrase.⁴ Even within his chosen framework, however, he concentrates much of his attention on those poems which confirm his reading of Stevens, and which demonstrate most conclusively for him Stevens' "revisions" of Whitman and Emerson—and, to a lesser degree, Dickinson. He is almost equally concerned to place Stevens squarely in the debt and company of Shelley and Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Tennyson (in "Sunday Morning"), and Blake.⁵ Pater, Ruskin, Nietzsche, and Freud loom large in Stevens' background; but Santayana, Bergson, and Pascal get very short shrift. Bloom also makes T. S. Eliot the object of what

he calls Stevens' "polemics" in such poems as "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," III, and "The Creations of Sound;" and he finds in "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" that Stevens "more than answered in advance" "a covert attack" made on Stevens in Auden's "In Praise of Limestone," which is also "one of the most overrated poems of the century" (p. 223).

It seems surprising that in a "full commentary" Stevens' scepticism is glossed over, as well as his uneasiness at being known in the business world as a poet. The pragmatist and the idealist—the poet and the romantic, the man who delights in "make believe"—were inseparable in him, and one source of his poetic achievement as well as of his "failures." To isolate the poet from the pragmatist, and his poetry from its quotidian context, is ultimately to belittle him and his work. That Stevens did suppress much of his "everyday life" and "the mere business of living" in his poems is true; but his poems express a response to the visible world as well as the self: "For myself," he said, "the indefinite, the impersonal, atmospheres and oceans and, above all, the principal of order are precisely what I love" (OP xxxii-xxxiii). That he was not always consistent in his views, or that he liked paradox and play makes him Emersonian and Whitmanian in ways that Bloom is too solemn to acknowledge.

Both the poet and his poetry emerge as singularly humorless in this book; the only ironies which Bloom finds truly worthy of praise—as opposed to the lighter ironies he either deliberately misses or misrepresents—are Romantic ones, anguished and painful. Exuberance, panache, exhilaration, high spirits are all delusive and suspect in Bloom's view. Thus, "The Comedian as the Letter C" turns out to be, "conveniently, a poem in six parts, and it maps rather closely to the post-Wordsworthian crisis-poem model," that is, Shelley's "Alastor" (p. 72). Of the Atlantic which so greatly altered Crispin's sense of himself and of the world, "we need to ask, whose ocean is this anyway?" The answer is clear, but not simple:

As always, in Stevens, the ocean, like death, night, and the mother, belongs to Whitman, the Whitman of *The Sleepers* and the *Sea-Drift* pieces, just as the reference to the nineteenth century as "that century of wind in a single puff" acknowledges Shelley and looks forward to *The Course of a Particular* nearly thirty years, where the cry of the leaves is said to be not "the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes." (p.72)

A poem so composed, so derivative (consciously or unconsciously), and so prophetic of poems to come, could hardly be "comic;" and although Bloom allows that it is "funny in places, it is bitter almost everywhere, frequently to the point of rancidity. . . ." It is, however, "the most outrageous" modern poem (p. 70).

On this basis, the "comic" is limited to the "funny," as if the whole tradition of intellectual comedy were fraudulent, and Moliere, Congreve, and even Shakespeare were the victims of misinterpretation. In any case, "rancidity" seems a misplaced trope for the "bitterness" of "The

Comedian." It was suggested by a remark Stevens made in a letter to Harriet Monroe, to describe the effect on domestic life of his concentration on the poem that became "The Comedian": ". . . I have made life a bore for all and sundry since the announcement of the Blindman prize in your last issue. To wit: I have been churning and churning, producing, however, a very rancid butter, which I intend to submit in that competition . . ." (L 224).

Although the "Romantic mythology of self still counts," and for Bloom makes Stevens the poet he is, the emphasis upon this aspect of his poetic character leads to grave distortions, however "strong" Bloom's "misreadings" may be. The most extraordinary of these occurs in his commentary on "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "which is the bringing up to date of the crisis poem of the *Intimations* ode or *Tintern Abbey* kind" (p. 37). The sexual implications of the poem provide Bloom with the opportunity to suggest that the question "Shall I uncrumple this much crumpled thing?" "refers to Stevens' own sexual organ, with about as bitter a humor as Stevens ever attempts"—a remark that must have been designed to titillate an undergraduate seminar (p. 39).

Bloom's word for a number of his readings is "outrageous;" and few readers are likely to gainsay him. Such special pleading is understandable in a critic who argues in essence that "poems misread earlier poems," and that a critic's task is to "prove" John Hollander's statement, "All is trope save in games." It is no wonder, then, that he finds little place in his commentary for remarks which suggest that poetry has any significant source in the "extra-poetic." A parenthetical observation that "Stevens writes just before the major elm blight of the 1950's" (p. 333) in discussing canto xxix of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," may be an exception, although it is difficult to understand what this fact has to do with the canto. Perhaps it is Bloom's revenge on those who endorse "organic" theories of poetry. He also confirms at some length the accuracy of Stevens' description of the aurora borealis in a bit of autobiography, to which he adds the "extra-poetic" information that "Stevens plays upon the aurora's supposed cause, in charged particles of solar origin, when he implicitly associates the auroras with an ultimately menacing First Idea, since for Stevens all First Ideas are necessarily ideas of the sun" (p. 255).

These few examples—"instances," Stevens might have said—only faintly suggest the drift and argument of *The Poems of Our Climate*. It seems unlikely, moreover, that there is much to be gained here from a multiplication of instances. To the true believer, *The Poems of Our Climate* is likely to provide satisfactions that are the equivalent of poetry itself. To those not elect, the book will seem to exploit its ostensible subject impertinently and incoherently. Such readers will resent the multiplication of terms to describe that "conscious pursuit of originality" which is characteristic of all Romantic poets; and they are equally unlikely to be so unsophisticated as to find Stevens' vacillations from the discursive to the self-expressive use of language, or his shifts from the mimetic to the meditative mode, so much in need of the kind of explanation Bloom provides.

In his final chapter, Bloom finds himself, as he says,

compelled to clarify or perhaps even revise my own notion of misprision, to make a misprision of misprision, as it were. Misprision is the process by which the meanings of intentionality trope down to the mere significances of language, or conversely the process by which the significations of language can be transformed or troped upward into the meaningful world of our Will-to-Power over time and its henchman, language. (pp. 394-395)

His "clarification," however, in turn involves the acceptance of a complex of assertions, not so much on behalf of poetry as on behalf of "our quest after images for the act of reading poems." That we can return from his revivification of the ancient identity between rhetoric and psychology, not with one *aporia* or negative moment or crossing, but with three, would seem to please him most of all, since we thus go his colleague and rival Paul de Man "two better" (p. 397).

All of this is very remote indeed from the poet who said in "The Irrational Element in Poetry":

All of us understand what is meant by the transposition of an objective reality to a subjective reality. The transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet is precisely that. A day or two before Thanksgiving we had a light fall of snow in Hartford. It melted a little by day and then froze again at night, forming a thin, bright crust over the grass. At the same time, the moon was almost full. I awoke once several hours before daylight and as I lay in bed I heard the steps of a cat running over the snow under my window almost inaudibly. The faintness and strangeness of the sound made on me one of those impressions which one so often seizes as pretexts for poetry. I suppose that in such a case one is merely expressing one's sensibility and that the reason why this expression takes the form of poetry is that it takes whatever form one is able to give it. The poet is able to give it the form of poetry because poetry is the medium of his sensibility. This is not the same thing as saying that a poet writes poetry because he writes poetry, although it sounds much like it. A poet writes poetry because he is a poet; and he is not a poet because he is a poet but because of his personal sensibility. What gives a man his personal sensibility I don't know and it does not matter because no one knows. Poets continue to be born not made and cannot, I am afraid, be predetermined. While, on the one hand, if they could be predetermined, they might long since have become extinct, they might, on the other hand, have changed life from what it is today into one of those transformations in which they delight, and they might have seen to it that they greatly multiplied themselves there. (OP 176)

To which one may add an entry in the "Adagia":

The transition from make believe for one's self to make believe for others is the beginning, or the end, of poetry in the individual. (OP 169)

Although it is possible to read this sentence as a confirmation of the statement, "All is trope save in games," it seems impossible to read the passage from "The Irrational Element in Poetry" in that way. What finally seems to matter is whether Stevens reminds us, as Walter Jackson Bate has recently said Johnson reminds him of "that ancient Greek epigram about Plato: that, in whatever direction you happen to go, you meet him returning on his way back. . . . The way back is what Coleridge said about Shakespeare—it is the 'High Road,' the main road. And the High Road, where we meet the greatest writers, after the long, and often fearful pilgrimage they had—and which we, in our own ways, share with them, and through them, and by means of them, is the road home."⁶

We know too little of Stevens, even now, to say whether he is one of the "greatest writers;" and we still know very little about his pilgrimage. For all that, and without benefit of explication or apology, he sometimes is the man we meet "On the Road Home":

It was when I said,
"There is no such thing as the truth,"
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole.

You . . . You said,
"There are many truths,
But they are not parts of a truth."
Then the tree, at night, began to change,

Smoking through green and smoking blue.
We were two figures in a wood.
We said we stood alone.

It was when I said,
"Words are not forms of a single word.
In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
The world must be measured by eye";

It was when you said,
"The idols have seen lots of poverty,
Snakes and gold and lice,
But not the truth";

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
And longest, the night was roundest,
The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
Closest and strongest.

Notes

1. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. By Harold Bloom. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1977. x+413 pp. \$17.50.

2. *The Explicator*, VII (November 1948), unpagged.

3. All my own quotations from Emerson come from "The Poet," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson. (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 338.

4. Cited in R. A. Macksey's "The Climates of Wallace Stevens," as quoted by Marius Bewley in *The Complex Fate* (London, 1952), p. 171; *The Act of the Mind*, edd. Roy Harvey Pearce & J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 194.

5. In the "Adagia," Stevens says: "Nothing could be more inappropriate to American literature than its English source since the Americans are not British in sensibility" (OP 176).

6. These remarks by W. J. Bate were made at the opening of the new 18th century rooms in memory of Donald Hyde, at the Houghton Library at Harvard.

Cortège for Stevens

Magus, magister, and finical
Who dreams of baboons and peri-
winkles
And apprehends tigers,
For whom Dieu is Monsieur,
quoique affligé,
Who bears us into the sky,
And returns us with a dagger
in our hearts,
For whom ciel is mondial
And body as well as soul has a
place in the sky,
And for whom, it is said,
Rosenbloom is dead.
"Tom-tom, c'est moi";
The hill *is* sullen,
The weather *is* red.

—Walter Albee

Harold Bloom's Wallace Stevens

R. D. ACKERMAN

Obviously Bloom is vulnerable. But he is also usually ahead of his detractors. He is vulnerable because he ventures avowal in a time of disavowal. He is ahead because he aspires beyond the deconstructive enclosure which few American critics have even entered. But Bloom's heroic endeavor is ill-fated. That his step beyond deconstruction is premature is especially evident in his positive antithetical misprision of Stevens. The logocentric ground of assertion has been altered beyond repair. The figures in that ground will not be summoned, even at Bloom's hyperbolic insistence: "imagination," "vision," "revelation," "transcendence," "sublimity"—all emptied husks irredeemable even by antithetical reversals. There is a Stevens of course who doesn't think so. There is another Stevens who seeks like Mammon to make the most of diminished things with qualified assertions. And finally there is a third Stevens who tries to get beyond traditional views of the Romantic and the Modern—but at what cost criticism has yet to make clear. Bloom's subject is this third Stevens, but given Bloom's nostalgias the third Stevens turns out looking much like the first.

The danger of relying on logocentric figures in (and supposedly beyond) the intratextual space of deconstructive criticism is illustrated in Bloom's effort to deliver the non-canonical Stevens of the very late poetry, a phase strenuously privileged throughout Bloom's book. For instance, "The Auroras of Autumn" and "The Rock" are High Romantic, Wordsworthian-Whitmanian crisis-poems . . . [that] rely upon *Notes* at every point" (p. 3); "Description without Place" is "very different [from *Notes*] . . . not naturalistic but apocalyptic . . . an antithetical revelation . . . more prophetic of Stevens' last phase than anything in *Notes*" (p. 240); the "question ["How can the plain sense of things allow for transcendental or visionary forms?"] will be the burden of Stevens' final phase, to which "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," more even than "The Auroras of Autumn," is the prelude" (p. 283). The list could be extended, but this is enough to indicate that Bloom intends the last phase to clinch his reading of the "High Romantic," "apocalyptic," "transcendental" Stevens, whose earlier poems are to be clarified and validated by this end result. Why are the very late poems so important to Bloom?

This is a question we can begin to answer by looking at his approach to a passage from "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," the one beginning: "What / One believes is what matters. Ecstatic identities / Between one's self and the weather. . . ." Bloom says: "What does it mean to believe in the weather? Well, what is weather for an American poet? New England weather is infamous for its variety . . . Stevens could not get enough of it. The root of 'weather' means 'to blow,' and that is what the weather does in Stevens' poetry; it blows right through, fulfilling the

ancient function of inspiration" (pp. 155-56). This does not sound like a critic who has got beyond romantic mind-nature dichotomizing, and Bloom does not allow himself this slip very often. But the nostalgia remains and will surface negatively in his overreaction against the reductive Stevens and positively in his oversimplification of the "discoveries" of the very late Stevens.

At this point Bloom interrupts his reading of "Extracts" to quote from Stevens' "hushed prose piece 'Connecticut'" (too ingenuous a piece, I think, to freight with much critical cargo), following which Bloom concludes: "That is Stevens at seventy-five, close to death, breathing in with every breath the joy of the weather and the place, himself at the end having become one of the poems of our climate" (p. 156). The problem of course is how to *become* a poem and still remain open to the weather. In his very next sentence Bloom quotes approvingly from the very late "A Clear Day and No Memories": "Today the mind is not part of the weather." Bloom comments: "But until then [the year before his death], he mixed mind and weather, not wanting to know how much of the weather came from the light of his own mind, the breath of his own spirit. Not knowing was a sacred ignorance, 'the exactest poverty,' the gap or void out of which his imagination could rise (p. 156). This is just blatantly wrong. If mind and weather were mixed by Stevens there would be no ecstasy in their coming together. Stevens the Romantic (in the traditional sense) expends most of his poetic energy separating mind and weather, and the quotation from "Connecticut" is a good example of someone who would *not* say "Today the mind is not part of the weather." But Bloom is anxious to get Stevens whole in the end, a unified subject toward which his lifelong oppositions can lead. Such a self can then validate for Bloom poems like "Extracts": "The imagination rises in section viii, the concluding movement of "Extracts," with a humanistic dignity and interpretive power surpassing anything previous in Stevens. For the first time he becomes what he afterward frequently was to be: he becomes what criticism scarcely so far credits him with having been, a sage and seer, who chants persuasively a possible wisdom" (p. 156).

But what of the Stevens who becomes the poem, who is "not part of the weather?" This is the fictive self, the third Stevens, who has nothing so inspiring as weather to rely on. Bloom agrees with Doggett that Stevens' "philosopher's man" (in "Asides on the Oboe") follows Schopenhauer, who "demystified the inner self as being a mere fiction." But Bloom adds: "yet because belief is final in this known fiction of the self, the Emersonian emblem of transcendence, 'the transparence of the place,' is possible; and as Emerson has prophesied, such a self must be a poet's, 'and in his poems we find peace.'" Bloom goes on to call attention to Stevens' "acute anxiety at his own affirmativeness" (p. 163), but one wonders also about Bloom's own anxiety, for this is a position he will support to the end, especially in the end, despite the fact that the third Stevens eventually defends a different terrain because he comes to see that for a self to be the "transparence of the place" he must know himself "without external reference" (p. 164)—and this the fictive self cannot do, for *who* can be the knower, the believer, in such a grammar?

Yet Bloom continues to celebrate Stevens' potential for "Transcendental perceptiveness" (p. 329), even though Bloom has admitted to Stevens' "total surrender of what Emerson and Whitman had fought to preserve, the fiction of a Transcendental consciousness in which the ontological and empirical selves can fuse together" (p. 215). Without hope for this fusion, what can words like "transcendence" and "sublimity" mean? Commenting on the "endlessly elaborating poem" passage of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Bloom says: "We have met this viewing throughout the poem's theatre . . . the attempt to see earliest, the Emersonian and American doomed attempt to establish a priority in seeing. . . . Stevens knows himself to be a great elaborator of this program, but he cannot extemporize as subtly and as urgently as . . . Whitman." In fact, unlike Whitman, "Stevens is too Nietzschean to assert that his poem can give truth. . . . Yet Stevens is never more moving than when he affirms the Transcendental nostalgia by negating it" (p. 332). What are we to make of such logic, except perhaps that it is Bloom himself who sings the transcendental strain while negating it as nostalgic.

And what are we to make of Stevens' last phase, "his best," ushered in by "As at a Theatre," whose "candle of another being" is "a self-meditating image in a wholly transcendental world" (p. 338)? What does "transcendental" mean here? Is Stevens' rock really "both self *and* other, me *and* not-me, mind *and* sky, imagination *and* reality" (p. 344)? If "life and trope" are indeed "one" (p. 354), what is the ontological status of such categories as "imagination" and "reality?" What and where is a *self*? Is "Stevens' reductiveness" (in "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself") really "exposed as a lifetime's self-deception," and does Stevens now emerge "more clearly as what he was, a true poet, who heard and saw into the life of things" (p. 359)? What and where are *things*?

The "antipodal, far-fetched creature" of Stevens' last poems is a "child asleep in its own life." This "child's vision" does not resemble "Wordsworthian primal perceptions," nor is Stevens' "discovery of thought . . . the arrival of a new primal word, logos, or meaning" (p. 353). The "vivid sleep" concluding "The Rock" is not a "Transcendental lunge . . . a dream of what is to come, or what Keats might have called a dream of reality" (p. 351). The post-Romantic, post-Modern Stevens of the late poetry (and earlier) calls into question the very ideas *perception* and *reality*. And this Bloom cannot do. Despite his antithetical gestures, Bloom's psychodrama of poetic influencings can only be articulated within the logocentric enclosure. The radical disjunctiveness of the real non-canonical Stevens escapes Bloom in the end.

Bloom — A Commentary — Stevens

JOSEPH N. RIDDEL

A commentary? On Bloom? Stevens? Stevens/Bloom? On Bloom on Stevens? All texts. Without bottom? Walter Benjamin distinguished between commentary and criticism (or critique) as the difference between a concern for "subject matter" and a concern for the "truth" of a work. And Michel Foucault remarks on the self-deceptions of that *rarefaction* awkwardly concealed in commentary—its pretense of maintaining the priority and integrity of a primary (as in the "creative," "imaginative," or "literary") text to any of the discourses on or about it. What Foucault calls the "infinite rippling of commentary"—its desire to say what has already "silently been articulated deep down" in the primary text, yet to say this "never said" for the "first time"—implicates commentary in a "masked repetition." Even "simple recitation" translates, transcribes: "Commentary averts the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is the text itself which is uttered and, in some ways, finalised." Anglo-American criticism tends to repress the contradiction and the "play" and to present the relation of critical text to creative text in the guise of a simple, orderly representation, a humble criticism that effaces itself, becomes transparent, in the very moment of finalizing a commentary that is itself finalized and ordered by the priority of the creative text. American criticism wants to make the "infinite rippling" of commentary into a fixed repetition, to mask its own "masked repetition," to proclaim itself "valid," a "proper" "description," a description with (rather than without) place.

Bloom on Stevens is obviously "critique" and not "commentary," within the parameters of Benjamin's and Foucault's categories, though the "truth" it seeks might seem to be (and in a theoretical sense, must be) elsewhere, in a movement between texts, whether two primary texts or a primary and a secondary text, between texts marked by "strength" rather than by the hierarchy of "strong" and "weak." Stevensians appear to be irritated, or so hums the vines of academe, at Bloom's audacity in placing the grid of his system upon the Stevens canon, particularly since so much of Bloom's own canon/system has been derived by a long, revisionary meditation upon Stevens, or upon the Stevens canon as a textual crossing of all the conflictual threads of Romantic (which for Bloom is "western") utterance. Bloom has touched (and contaminated) the rituals of commentary as surely as Mallarmé's "moderns" had besmirched the laws of verse, a touch not without its touch of irony. He has claimed to see Stevens, if not steadily and whole, then centrally and totally—but at the center of a rhetorical prism that appropriates Stevens, *the* Stevens, overwriting him in a commentary that refuses to efface itself, that refuses the practiced humility of commentary.

What has fallen out here, now, in this poetics of “our climate”? And what is going down? Why has Bloom’s Stevens—after all, a “humanist” Stevens—appeared as a defilement of all the other humanisms? Perhaps, indeed almost certainly, because it is Bloom’s Stevens, and not criticism’s fictionally *true* Stevens, *the* Stevens of some hypothetically neutral, transparent commentary. One has to read Bloom here in order to “read” Stevens. So much for the masks of unmediated commentary; not to say, unmediated poetics. The arrival of the “new rhetoric”—both in Bloom’s notorious theory and in that of his Yale colleagues—has been painful for an academic critical tradition which seldom or ever interrogates its own discourse. Therefore, it has been easier to associate Bloom with his colleagues, Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman, or even with French “deconstructive” criticism, than to ask what compels his theory in the first place, why it is a vigorous and passionate defense, an antithetical “reading” of a resistance to the “nihilisms” (beware of the simple negations suggested by the term) of de Man and deconstruction, which include a “reading” of Romantic texts as the artifacts of a severe self-questioning.

It is precisely the ardor of the Stevensians (a metonym for any criticism which identifies with the “originality” of a privileged author) to preserve a traditional and uncritical notion of the “author” (or of the “imagination”) and his texts as expressions and representations that seems most at stake in Bloom’s antithetical and “strong” reading (as he would no doubt characterize his book). But to the contrary, it is this very notion of “self” that Bloom’s heuristic theory is erected to preserve. Bloom reminds us that texts are, after all, repetitions on which one writes “masked repetitions” which have “rippling effects,” and moreover, that the primary text on which the critic writes is itself a layered repetition, a weave of interpretations, a reading of *earlier* texts. This irrefutable Nietzschean complication has put the very notion of author/self in jeopardy, and routed the classical notion of hermeneutics. The author and originality can be recuperated only by a radical rereading, and not a simple reversal, of the old poetics and the concepts of intentionality (and influence) that sustain it.

I have argued elsewhere that Bloom should be acclaimed as the last apologist of the classical notion of poetry, that he is a *herald* not of some new fiction of fiction but a re-cognition of the old (see *The Georgia Review*, xxx [Winter 1976]). Bloom has recently summed up his systematic defence of poetry against deconstruction in a concise phrase: “The theoreticians of deconstruction in effect say, ‘In the beginning was the trope,’ rather than ‘In the beginning was the proper’” (*The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 12). In the beginning for Bloom, as for Vico (or a certain reading of Vico), was the poet. But Bloom has long since recognized what his detractors quickly forget: that this purely “historical” notion of poetry entangles and puts in question a notion of originality and demands a revisionary reading of authoritative or “strong” poets; it demands a genealogy and a canon formation, inscribing lines of succession, a struggle of generations and a story of generation by reversal and displacement, a complicated history marked by the drama of conflict and anxiety played out as a psychic economy.

The case against Bloom, however, would seem to be that in carrying on his debate with the avant-garde of criticism he already violates the hierarchical decorums of academic criticism. Criticism should be heard and not seen, heard as a ventriloquism, through which the primary text (script) magically is made to speak, or better, speaks. The messiness and vulgarity of deconstruction (or semio-clasm) is that it overwrites, displaces, appropriates the text; and to refute or resist deconstruction demands a rhetorical treatment of a theory of rhetoric. Bloom's system revises the poetic text as surely as any deconstruction. Bloom, then, begins from the foreign assumption that poetry is a discourse, though he would try to provide a sanctuary, a privileged place for it. That, indeed, is for Bloom the triumph of Romanticism in the broadest sense—of the "crisis poem"—that it has confronted all the aporias of rhetoric and the broken immediateness of language, and if it has not resolved what is beyond resolution, it has turned or troped the problematic, and rejoined them into a figural "unity" or "figures of capable imagination." Bloom's Stevens is one of those "figures" (authors) who has re-worked the "figures" (poems) in a ceaseless movement we call history. Thus Bloom argues for a poetry that is temporal in its movement—a rhetoric that turns, reverses, re-reads other poems in a folding/unfolding of the will to power, or will to signification.

It is necessary at this point to review briefly Bloom's evolving "map of misreading," which begins with his set of six "revisionary ratios" in *The Anxiety of Influence*, is ramified into the grid of *A Map of Misreading*, and is further supplemented in *Kabbalah and Criticism* and *Poetry and Repression*. But I can do it only obliquely. (I refer again to my review of the last two books in *The Georgia Review*, and to the several reviews of his various texts that have run in *Diacritics* over the past few years.) If Bloom's system has a key or clue, it lies in the "map's" capacity to be revised or re-read, to accommodate a series of substitutions, or to function regionally, so that one can apply the relation or crossing between any two pairs of tropes to an appropriate place in any particular poem. His "theory" has long since passed beyond the theory of "influence" outlined in the first text. To be as brief as possible, if one goes back to Bloom's earliest series of tropes, the "ratios" of *Anxiety*, he finds a heuristic rhetoric coined to describe a psychodrama. (Its relation to Kenneth Burke's dramatism becomes evident in later books; a dialectical notion of language as a stage of action or praxis, in contrast to, say, Jacques Derrida's notion of writing as a "scene" or "stage" of a problematic of representation.) What Bloom calls the "anxiety" of influence does not describe a poet's "experience" or "consciousness" in the "event" or "moment" of his "creating" a new poem in defense against the poems of his fathers. (The quotations mark a problematic of such metaphysical terms, which are widely used to present either a psychology or phenomenology of creation.) They "map" the structure of a "history" that is an economy of relations, that mediate a destructive conflict of generations, of authors, a history repeated in each particular "strong" poem, or re(mis)reading. When, in *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom expanded his unilinear series into a structural "map," accommodating Paul de Man's observations that, after

all, Bloom's invented series had close parallels with the terms of classical rhetoric, Bloom in the same gesture revealed that his "history" was structural and not narrative. Further additions, like the terms of Kabbalah which Bloom says derived, even historically, from Greek terms (*The Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 382-83) complicated his systematics almost beyond the bounds of tolerance and certainly to the margins of coherence. Bloom's map expanded to include not only the two rhetorics (his own and the Greek) but a series of poetic tropes and images and a series of psychological figures. In *Poetry and Repression*, the supervention of a dialectical series (limitation/substitution/representation) upon the map, to account for the working between related pairs of figures in any one series, produced a machine not only for reading poems but for producing (in his sense of a "strong" reading) them. With all the complication, however, two things become evident about his "map": it accounts for poetry in terms of a theory of "repetition"; and the repetition, which like Nietzsche's produces a deviation and not the eternal return of the same, is governed by a repeatable dialectical structure. Thus Bloom recuperates the notion of the poetic "subject" or "self," by restoring its "place" or function in a process that is first, last, and irreducibly rhetorical. (The movement between two kinds of trope, for example, between irony and synecdoche in Bloom's rhetorical series, or between the complementary pair of clinamen or swerve and tessera or antithesis in his revisionary ratios, is diagrammed always as a movement of two kinds of substitution. Thus, substitution is always a double movement between two kinds of substitutive trope, between a trope of limitation like irony and a trope of representation or displacement like synecdoche. Bloom may describe the movement of a poem as a sustained movement through an entire series of six figures, or through three pairs of two figures, or simply as a play between two figures; or he may move between description of the rhetorical action of the poem and a decription of the psychic defense system involved in any creative act, which is, of course, a revisionary act. The movement, or double movement, that takes place between a limitation, as in a poem that breaks away from its predecessor, and a representational re-writing, is a play of substitutions. In *The Poems of Our Climate* Bloom begins to graph this dialectic in terms of a figure of "poetic crossings," and to employ yet another terminology: Ethos/Logos/Pathos or, in terms derived from Emerson, Fate/Freedom/Power.)

Bloom wants his map to allow a movement between the inside or art and the life (psychic life) from which it stems, and for which art provides the only economy, including the necessary defense mechanisms. A reader seeking a path through Bloom's forest of tropes might do well to begin with the first and last chapters of *The Poems of Our Climate*, where Bloom maps or remaps Stevens' relation to the American Romantic tradition which is itself a representation of and a substitution for the western Romantic tradition. Bloom wants to mark the dialectical turn that allows each poet to be "original" (an individual difference from a predecessor), that accounts for the movement within a poet's individual poems, within his entire canon (between its early stance against its fathers and its later revisions of its

early stance), and within the tradition of ancestors that his work rereads. Moreover, he wants to implicate his own (the critic's) reading in this incessant revisionary turning of early and late; and so establish his writing/map as a part of the crossing, as a "strong" poem in its own right.

Bloom wants to totalize literature, and the study of literature, in a way that would both subsume and transume all previous totalizations: for example, Northrop Frye's. This is necessary not only for the "authority" of his own readings, but for the pedagogical thrust of his system, which in his terms would provide a "scene of instruction" for critics. No critic writing today commands the range of detail, a "knowledge" of various poems, mythologies, philosophies, or methods—but particularly poetry—that Bloom can exhibit. If there is a fault to his astounding memory, it is that he cannot "forget" anything, even the mechanisms of repression. (If there is a lacunae in his knowledge, as well as in his sympathies, it lies in postRomantic French poetry and French philosophical literature. Thus his curious response to what is often called "modernism," with its *Symboliste* origins.) Nevertheless, Bloom's canon of western literature and thought remains classical and even conventional, and is commanded by the great metaphysical and theological systems that sustain the normative concepts of "literature" and "poetics." Just as a classical rhetoric is at the etymological origin of Bloom's Kabbalah (a Gnostic or critical Kabbalah, as he insists), it also commands his reading of psychoanalytic and poetic terms.

This return to rhetorical criticism, however, is not a reversal of formalism (or if a reversal, it becomes another formalism). If poetry is to be read in terms of its persuasive or troping movement, in contrast to the meanings or truths conveyed by tropes, this choice between rhetorics (what Paul de Man calls rhetoric-as-persuasion or performative language as against rhetoric-as-knowledge or cognitive language) is made only in terms of a persuasion that affirms itself as an authoritative cognition. The recent criticism of de Man, with which Bloom must carry on a running debate, repeatedly masks the aporia that denies either a choice between the two or makes a reversal meaningful. So that Bloom's celebration of the will to power of rhetoric, of the triumph of strong poets over their strong fathers, or the three-fold movement of the strong poet and strong poem in fragmenting the old vessels and putting them back together in a new arrangement, and his own insistence that his theory can eventually transume de Man's locating of the irreducible contradiction of language, chance all the risks of repeating what has had to be abandoned by traditional criticism. For Bloom wants nothing more than to recuperate, perhaps for a final time, the primordial power that western poetry and criticism celebrates in the form of loss. He wants to valorize a language that has been denuded by modern criticism.

Bloom ends his book on Stevens by forecasting a further book (there will always be re-visions), a book on *topos*, on poetry as the re-grounding or re-founding of place. What he is forecasting or forestructuring, is the necessary return of the "subject," of man as "will," a functional notion of self without which the privileged concepts of poetry or literature are

unthinkable. Thus, his revamped maps never escape the tautology that is literary criticism. Bloom must resituate the troper behind the trope, if only as the structural name that preserves culture and history from disintegrating, from returning to the anarchy of nature. (Bloom has never read Romanticism as a naturalistic poetic, but always as a pathetic/prophetic idealism.) His poetics of "strong" and "weak," of the rhetorical movement of displacement, repression, substitution, echoes Nietzsche's critique of the Romantic thing-in-itself, of a "nature" that is a chaos or "chaosmos" (Joyce's term) or unequal forces, irreducible to a single force. Except that Bloom will not follow out the consequences of a modern reading of Nietzsche. He opposes Emerson to Nietzsche, as he opposes the triumphs of the "crisis-poem" to deconstruction. On Bloom's poetic stage, the will to power or will to signification realized in the final movement of any poem or any poet's canon, though it is destined to be broken by some subsequent writing by some future son, is a sufficient sign of "power," which has always been realized in the conflict of interpretation.

Stevens' heroic place in this, "our" modern repetition of the great Romantic stage, should please the Stevensians. What displeases, evidently, is the heuristic reading of a history that makes the "modern" at best an enervated or nostalgic repetition, thereby reducing Stevens' "originality." Of course, Bloom rejects this view of originality as absolute difference. He poses, instead, a question of literary history and periodization by employing the old categories in a uniquely temporal sense. The western literary tradition is, for him Romantic, which produces a series of repetitions on the paradigm of the "crisis-poem;" the American Transcendentalist tradition, which includes Stevens, plays a special role in this history of repetitions, which are always fragmentations, breaking up an old closure.

Bloom's criticism should remind us of the aggression and transgression of reading, and that every "reading" of a poet, traditional and/or modern (if these categories have any meaning) or repressed, of a notion of history as representation/repetition. And that if we forget, doubly forget, that this history is itself a layered interpretation, a text, deeply embedded in language and marked throughout by what de Man names as the aporia between a persuasive and a cognitive reading, we will always be tempted to close interpretation with a simple theory of expression or a phenomenological theory of imagination. Bloom acknowledges the argument of deconstruction, derived in a sense from revisionary readings of Nietzsche, that there is no opening into a text. We have never been outside of the text in the first place. There was no "first" place. The fable of the "first" time, of originality, of an uninterpreted truth concealed in an interpretation or a meaning inscribed in a text—this fable, which is the model for every hermeneutics, must be abandoned. Thus Bloom is left with a fragmentation, a theory of rhetoric already turned from (in the manner of Bloom's theory of tropes) the classical notion of rhetoric.

But it is with this limit of deconstruction that Bloom wants to quarrel. He seeks to rewrite the fable, to recompose a rhetoric that is real (to echo Williams' *Paterson*). He cannot remain, or allow his poets' to remain, within

the brokenness which must be produced with every effort to begin again, to be original. Thus the opening proposal of *The Poems of Our Climate*: "I begin by proposing an antithetical formula as the motto for post-Emersonian American poetry: *Everything that can be broken should be broken*" (p. 1). Every poem begins by breaking an earlier poem, turning from it, turning it, in a movement of limitation and/or displacement; so does every interpretation, and every hermeneutical system. The breaking is an originless "origin" of a strong poem. So Bloom rewrites the critical fable, and does it within the fabulous coherence of an *ad hoc* dialectic, a daemonic invention. Bloom's system is so *overwrought* that it must reveal its own artifice: it is like a *dedalé* with its false and self-consuming center. The self or will that Bloom finally situates at the pseudo-center of his map/labyrinth is as dangerous in its way as the minotaur, and one may well recall here the "figure" of Stevens' "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet."

So what if Bloom's critical fable rewrites Stevens? That he does it with such a rigorous though illusory consistency highlights the desire for such consistency in the more timorous humanistic criticisms, which is to say, the customary kinds of criticism that pile book upon book with the weight of clarification. After all, Bloom's account of Stevens' *development* follows a theme not only of Stevens criticism but of that criticism which almost always *sees* the canon of a poet in narrative terms, thus following the course of a literary history that can see modernism as the culmination of a long evolving series of discourses. Bloom's readings, of course, disrupt the "narrative," and tangle the thinking of influence, of a line leading from early to late. Breaking the narrative, however, is necessary to any restoration of the fable of development, the triumph of power. Thus Bloom's rhetorical or persuasive story resists, or tries to resist, anyone's reading or breaking it. If Bloom offers his readers little room for alternative or antithetical readings—provoking Denis Donoghue to remark that reading Bloom leaves you with the feeling that you don't have a mind of your own—it is only because he is consistent with his fable of the "strong poem." But it must nevertheless be broken.

Bloom's critical authority is intimidating, provoking, and severely paternal. I can foresee a rush of essays over the next few years disputing his readings of individual poems. The correctives will no doubt be less than instructive, and strategically imprudent; and may very well prove Bloom correct about the necessity of mis-reading, in both the technical and banal senses of that term. For Bloom is contestable only on the grounds which Anglo-American criticism, formalist or thematic, has long since abandoned: the question of language. As one who wrote an early book on Stevens, taking the poet's terms as descriptive or nominal and hence as elaborated within a coherent system of aesthetics and philosophy, I have begun to reread Stevens lately (and belatedly) in terms of what Bloom calls an antithetical criticism, though not exactly in his sense of anti-thesis. If I have been criticized for making Stevens into a philosophical poet—for example, by following out the epistemological implications of his polar terms, imagination and reality, within the context of a Kantian and post-

Kantian aesthetic—I now admit to the charge only by way of pointing out that I considered Stevens to be working a reversal upon that epistemology, thus putting it in question. Yet, to read Stevens as reversing an epistemology is to forget that reversal almost exactly reconstitutes the structure it overturns. Bloom's theory of tropes at least complicates and defers a full reversal. For example, Bloom is the first Stevens critic to abandon reliance upon the polar terms of imagination and reality, which seem to give the Stevens canon, both poetry and criticism, a kind of stability, and a relationship to a world of experience upon which it could play extravagant variations. Whether one considers Stevens a poet of "thought" (like Frank Doggett) or a pure stylist elaborating language within the reserve of a purely aesthetic field (Helen Vendler), the structure that governed the criticism was derived from a nominal polarity, of names (imagination and reality) which seemed to name something as *real*, as *presence* (or *absence*), as self and world. (One wonders why the parallel terms *subject* and *object*, or even metaphors like *inside* and *outside*, are thought to be more abstract; or why nature, or even the *credences* of summer, the *language* of Oley, are concrete!) In short, Stevens read within the coordinates of a Romantic epistemology, even as a post-Romantic inversion, a secularization of the theological vision of Transcendentalism, is coherent only because he is read through the grid of another, a master text. Hillis Miller's reading of Stevens' phenomenology of mind, in *Poets of Reality*, is not radically different from Helen Vendler's testing of the internal coherence of a select few of the individual poems. (Miller's more recent reading of Stevens, in *The Georgia Review* [Spring and Summer, 1976], is, on the other hand, not only the beginning of a "new" reading of Stevens, but a rereading of Miller's earlier criticism.)

As long as Stevens criticism remains within the valorized terms of the poet's own language (which, in effect, are the terms of post-Kantian aesthetics), it remains, as Bloom shows, within the framework of a very traditional (metaphysical and theological) notion of Romanticism as "natural supernaturalism." Bloom disrupts this paradigm. But does he "go beyond" it? A critique of Bloom's reading of Stevens must begin where Bloom begins, by taking up the critique of this received Romanticism. Yet, Bloom's critique, in his four theoretical essays, in fact seeks to restore or resituate that "consciousness" (now called "will," itself a trope, as Bloom cautiously notes) that is the center or place of Power in the old poetics, a Power which originates in and reproduces the "lie" of rhetorical play. Rather than a poet's *world*, we now read poems of a "climate," of "our climate," a geo-graphy, a world of writing.

If one is to "break" Bloom's system, he will have to do it by raising once again what is vigorously (rhetorically) repressed in it. This repression is all the more curious, for it lies bare and denuded on the surface of Bloom's argument. In the concluding chapter of *The Poems of Our Climate*, Bloom mounts a sustained attack of de Man's (and Jacques Derrida's) theory of rhetoric, of the *aporia* or *undecidable* that is inscribed in every text, poetic or discursive, and produces the aberrant readings of every text, readings

which the old criticism tended to attribute to the meaning-fullness or plenitude or plurisignificance concealed within the text itself. But Bloom argues, in a brilliant rhetorical detour, that poetry can never be reduced to writing (to *écriture*, in the Derridean sense), but that poetry or poetic language is irreducibly "images of voice." Bloom thus takes up the deconstructionist argument in its most literal sense; for Derrida has argued that the structure of metaphysics derives always from a certain notion of the degradation of writing to secondariness (or belatedness), in its relation to speech. Speech, on the other hand, is more closely related to Idea, to presence. Writing, for Derrida, suggests more than the physical inscription, and implies the original difference or original dispersal of language; it signifies that language never fell from unity or presence into belatedness and that language can never convey an original unity or presence, even at second or third remove, that *presence* never preceded language but is a fiction produced by language. Bloom, of course, accepts this argument. His invention (or borrowing) of the phrase "images of voice," however, is part of a strategy for transuming the Derridean argument; since "images of voice" implicate speech in writing, the phrase reweaves the notions of speech and writing into an alogical tangle, breaking up the logical hierarchy of speech to writing without admitting or conceding anything to *écriture* and the nihilism most foes read in deconstruction. This saves poetry, for Bloom, for it situates poetic language as a kind of primordial "well" (more Hegelian than Jungian), from which the poet steals his figures, by giving them a place. The will wells up as a *topos*. Bloom's fable remains daemonic and visionary.

It cannot be simply denied. Nor logically unlocked. Like Emerson's rhetoric, as Bloom himself argues, it cannot even be deconstructed. But it can be reread. That is, Stevens can be reread. Which will include a rereading of Bloom's reading. Not in the way of the old critical argument, by a point-by-point refutation and a corrective. But by a reading. I wonder how many critics will take the trouble, or even concede its importance? And how many will simply go on denouncing Bloom's enterprise, on the ground that criticism must finally uncover *the* Stevens.

Wallace Stevens on the Podium: The Poet as Public Man of Letters

PETER BRAZEAU

“Authors are actors, books are theatres,” Wallace Stevens noted in his *Adagia* (OP 157).¹ In later years there was an unlikely scene change, however, as this private poet found himself actually on stage, facing large audiences that had come to hear him perform. Stevens added a significant dimension to his career in the 1940’s and 1950’s in this new role as public man of letters, with his lectures among the most important of these appearances. The recollections of those who had contact with him on four such occasions provide a useful view of the poet in public. These reminiscences, excerpted from a more detailed section on Stevens as a man of letters in an oral biography of the poet, have been selected to offer a sense of Stevens on and off stage.

One of Stevens’ early public appearances was at Mount Holyoke College where, in August, 1943, he delivered “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet.” This New England campus had become the scene of one of the most energetic intellectual gatherings spawned by the war, *Pontigny en Amérique*. When Stevens came, it had been transformed into the American equivalent of the French monastery where, for nearly thirty summers between 1910 and 1939, European artists and intellectuals had converged for month-long discussions. Beginning in 1942, Mount Holyoke and the *Ecole Libre des Hautes Etudes*, the Franco-Belgian university-in-exile attached to the New School for Social Research, had brought refugee-intellectuals and American thinkers to this Western Massachusetts campus as Paul Desjardins had earlier brought Valery, Gide, Strachey, and a host of others to his Burgundian retreat.

The Mount Holyoke seminars were staged in an informal setting, under the large elms near Porter Hall. Alan McGee, a Mount Holyoke professor, recalls that Stevens “spoke outdoors to a group of people sitting on dining room chairs around a rectangle. . . . He was sitting near the porch, and Marianne Moore was right beside him in the courtyard facing the audience. . . . He lent a great aura of distinction . . . his appearance and clothing were of the gentlemanly perfection . . . some of the speakers who spoke later . . . indicated that they had been affected by what Stevens had said.”²

There were other lectures on poetry by John Peale Bishop, James Rorty, Marianne Moore, and Jean Wahl the week that Stevens came to Mount Holyoke. At these Pontigny seminars the lectures, however, were not intended as ends in themselves but as catalysts for discussion. This was viewed as an equally important aspect of each two-hour session. The official title of this summer gathering, *Entretiens de Pontigny*, indicates the stress placed on discussion. As John Peale Bishop remarked in his introduction to a selection of Pontigny lectures published in the *Sewanee*

Review, the poets “understood, these being conferences and not lectures, that they should, when they had come to a close, hear their conclusions disputed and their dearest convictions put to doubt.”³ Stevens entered less freely into discussion than did Bishop or Moore, for example, according to some who recall the lecture. Indeed, Constance Saintonge, a member of the English faculty at the college, notes that the session “was not what you’d call a give-and-take between the audience and the poet. . . . He perhaps answered two or three questions and went off. . . . His manner didn’t encourage a response . . . it was . . . a sense of his own reticence that kept one from interfering. He was like an angel who flew in for a minute and went out.” Stevens’ public reserve is a vivid memory to many who recall their contacts with him at various lectures. At Pontigny, apparently, it affected an aspect of the proceeding itself.

Ironically, it was the very stress on discussion at Pontigny which had appealed to Stevens, who wrote to Henry Church that this was one of the reasons he had accepted Jean Wahl’s invitation to come to Mount Holyoke: “In the long run, I decided to do so because it would give me an opportunity to gather together my ideas about the status of poetry as something to teach: perhaps I ought to say to study. It will also give me an opportunity to hear the thing discussed” (L447). If his reticence did not encourage an exchange, his rhetoric in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” seems designed to provide the lively text for discussion Wahl had hoped for in his letters to Stevens. One senses the provocative quality of the piece better by seeing it not within the covers of *The Necessary Angel* but within the context of that Pontigny summer. As Stevens knew from scanning the brochures, the poetry seminars immediately followed a week devoted to philosophy. With lectures by such metaphysicians as Paul Weiss still echoing in the audience, Stevens began his lecture by asserting that “what is central to philosophy is its least valuable part.” He went on to describe the poet’s world as a “radiant and productive atmosphere,” the philosopher’s as the “gaunt world of the reason;” he argued that “if the end of the philosopher is despair, the end of the poet is fulfillment” (NA 39, 58, 43). That Stevens wrote his lecture with the sense of its piquancy in the context of Pontigny seems clear even in slight details. Knowing Jacques Maritain was honorary president of the group before which he was speaking, Stevens asserts rather puckishly near the end of his speech, “in spite of M. Jacques Maritain, we do not want to be metaphysicians” (NA 59). At Pontigny, Stevens delivered his most aggressive lecture on the superiority of the poet to the philosopher, giving a cutting edge to his remarks not found in his other statements, such as the much more benign “A Collect of Philosophy.” It was a rhetoric in keeping with the spirit of Pontigny where lectures were seen as catalysts for discussion.⁴

It is not difficult to imagine why, after Stevens left Mount Holyoke, some of those who stayed on might have found Stevens’ lecture a stimulus for conversation. As Helen Patch noted in the 1954 Trinity *Festschrift* for Stevens “the discussion began . . . and continued on into the night. Meanwhile the speaker had unobtrusively slipped away.”⁵ Paul Weiss gives a sense of the reaction Stevens’ remarks could stir among Pontigny

participants. Though Weiss had left Mount Holyoke before Stevens' lecture, when he read it in the *Sewanee Review* months later he immediately wrote to him arguing that the virile young poet should be matched against some of the patriarchs of philosophy before being given the decision in the contest Stevens had set out: "I thought very highly of him . . . what I was trying to say to him . . . was that if he's making this kind of a criticism of philosophers, he would perhaps have something else to say if he had faced the great ones, not because they were having the same insight into the reality that he had but because they were not subject to the kind of criticism he was making."

After exchanging a few notes on the subject as friendly adversaries, Weiss and Stevens met when the poet came to Yale as a Bergen lecturer in 1948. Weiss' reaction was one shared by many who met Stevens at similar university gatherings:

(I was) amazed at a man who was so successful in business and who was so big in his physical presence was so shy . . . when I went over to speak to him afterwards . . . I found him very shy, almost timid, hard to make contact with. . . . We spoke a little . . . but it was sort of polite, and he was always sort of moving away rather than toward me. He apparently didn't realize the great respect I had for him, and how highly I thought of him, and how willing I would have been to sit down and go over the matters that bothered him. But there was no real confrontation with me, no asking me the questions that he should have asked.

When I told Paul Weiss of the hearty regard for him that Stevens expressed to Theodore Weiss after this meeting (L587), he found it "interesting that he had this reaction to me, and yet he didn't move in on it." It was not unusual, however, for Stevens to keep his distance even from those he met at these public appearances with whom he felt affinities. Jean Wahl, the French philosopher-poet, for example, lived only an hour away from Hartford at Mount Holyoke from 1942 to 1945. Despite obvious sympathies with him, Stevens wrote of Wahl to their mutual friend Henry Church: "He is precisely the sort of person that I should like to have down over weekends, talking about a thousand things. But that is out of the question."⁶

Stevens came to Yale in March, 1948, to read "Effects of Analogy" and "A Primitive Like an Orb." He had been in New York earlier in the day, presiding over two meetings of the Hartford Live Stock Insurance Company, one of his annual corporate responsibilities. Though Stevens found it tiresome when others pointed to his dual career as businessman-poet, that afternoon he himself called attention to it and the way he handled it. Louis Martz, his campus host that day, recalls: "As he was arranging to give his lecture, I took him back to my office. . . . He opened up [his] briefcase, and he said, 'Now you see everything is neatly sorted out here. Over here in this compartment . . . is my insurance business with the farmers, and over here in this compartment is my lecture and some poems

that I want to read. I keep them completely separated.'" At other times, of course, Stevens might argue just the opposite, stressing the seamlessness of his career if someone suggested the discontinuity that he pointed out to Martz. While compartmentalization seems to have been the ordering principle in his career, there were blendings of these two worlds which Stevens' remark did not suggest that day. There were occasions, for example, when he read extensively from manuscript poems to colleagues or included men from the office in a lyric.

That day, however, Stevens' behavior impressed on Martz the sense of separation as his guiding principle, even when it came to the matter of a lecture fee. "It's a custom to go into the university secretary's office . . . and be presented with the check for the lecture . . . so Stevens . . . looked at the check, turned to Norman [Pearson] and said, 'What do I do with this?'" When a university official in the room answered that "'Most of our poets use it to eat with,' Stevens said, 'I couldn't do that, I couldn't do that. Oh, I never use my poetry fees. . . . Take it. Give it to some worthy cause.' He signed the check and turned it over to Norman Pearson, and Norman gave it, I think, to some little magazine." It was Stevens' characteristic gesture on such occasions. While he wrote that "Money is a kind of poetry" (OP 165), he usually reinvested the money he made from his art in the cause of poetry.

Despite the inherent value in the essays themselves, the account Martz gives of the Yale reading illustrates how taxing Stevens' lectures often were on both the poet and the audience.

Generally in the auditorium we were using, you don't need a microphone, and we had not hooked one up. This was a great mistake because his voice hardly carried beyond the third or fourth row. There may have been three or four hundred people in this auditorium, and as he began reading his lecture, people pretty far back just couldn't hear at all. At one point a woman raised her hand and said, "Could you speak more loudly? I can't hear a thing." And at that point, that seemed to upset him so much that his voice dropped down even lower. He said, "I'll try, lady, I'll try. . . ." The audience . . . took it, a full-hour lecture, and there was a big round of applause. . . . It was just a tribute to him, even though half the audience couldn't hear what he was saying . . . he was obviously much admired.

The lecture over, Stevens was guest at a small dinner hosted by Norman Holmes Pearson. Here, as on other occasions, after a few drinks Stevens relaxed his usually reserved public manner. Martz, as did Weiss and others, sensed that Stevens was "very shy," but he adds that "as we had cocktails and a little wine, he began to unfold and became quite genial and friendly." The enjoyment he imbibed in these relaxed moments occasionally left him with an after-taste. Cleanth Brooks' experience that evening was an extreme version of what might happen.

After a couple of drinks, Wallace Stevens became a different man: he was relaxed, easy, joking, talkative, a delightful companion. I remember having a good deal of talk with him about a variety of things. . . . There was a sequel, however, to that particular, pleasant meeting. I began to hear stories around that Wallace Stevens thought he had mortally offended me. . . . I really was completely shocked and surprised. We had had a very pleasant conversation. I think he teased me a little . . . but it was all lighthearted teasing. I found nothing offensive at all; I thoroughly enjoyed it. Anyway, I did get, later on, a very formal apology from him. . . . But I was able to write him with utter sincerity that I had taken no offense . . . by that I can only conclude that Wallace Stevens was a true poet as well as a gentleman—a true poet in really letting his imagination oftentimes completely alter his picture of what the situation was. . . . we're dealing here with a full-grown chimera, a fabulous monster, something that didn't occur except in his imagination.

These morning-after chimeras bothered Stevens following other gatherings. In 1941, Stevens had stayed with the Churches for his Princeton lecture. Not having heard from them after returning to Hartford, Wallace Stevens was sure that he had offended in some way at a party they had given. Upon learning of this, Henry Church wrote to assure him he had given no offense whatsoever. Stevens' thank-you notes after he had been a guest at a social gathering of literati or academics might sound a note of apology similar to that which he wrote Norman Pearson the day after his Yale visit: "I left your house without much ceremony last night. Nothing could have been nicer than to spend the evening with you. Everybody seemed to be so friendly that I rather let go, I am afraid, on the cocktails and Benedictine."⁷ Stevens seems to have been unsure of himself at times in these circles.

Despite the personal strain his appearance caused him and his complaints about the time taken up in preparing his remarks, Stevens continued to lecture. In a 1951 letter to Barbara Church written shortly before delivering "Two or Three Ideas," Stevens indicated at least part of the reason he continued lecturing: "I have spent every spare moment recently and the whole of Saturday and Sunday on it. But I like to do these papers because they clear my mind and make it necessary to take a good look at ideas that otherwise would drift about, vaguely, with no place to go."⁸ Stevens had agreed to speak at the College English Association meeting held in April, 1951, at Mount Holyoke. "Two or Three Ideas" was his third speech there in eight years, following a Kimball lecture in 1948 and the Pontigny address of 1943.

Elizabeth Green and Joyce Horner, members of the English faculty, had attended these earlier lectures and volunteered to chauffeur him from Hartford to the campus. This public appearance offers an opportunity for a rare glimpse inside the Stevens household. Miss Horner, consulting diary notes made soon after the trip, vividly recalls certain aspects of their brief visit to Westerly Terrace.

My recollections are mainly of going to the house and meeting Mrs. Wallace Stevens. . . . She was thin and faded, *blanched* was the word I used. . . . She was wearing a pink house dress, and she received us; Mr. Stevens was not quite ready. . . . We had a very curious conversation. She said, "What do you teach? My ancestors were concerned with education." Here there was an interruption from Wallace Stevens, who had come in. He said, "Need we go into that?" She went on. She said, "I never went to college, but I made good marks in composition and art, I got an A in composition." I thought perhaps there was some glow of remembering she got an A on her own, but *glow* is too strong a word, as if she remembered that she had glowed before she met the man who was too clever for her. . . . Then Elizabeth said, "I'd like to hear about your ancestors." She said, "They were Swiss schoolmasters, the first schoolmasters in Berks County." Well, at this point Wallace Stevens got up, impatiently. "He doesn't like me to talk about myself," she said, "But I do like people to know that I am interested in something besides cooking and cleaning. . . . Oh dear, you haven't finished your cocoa."

At the outset of their hour drive up the Connecticut Valley, Stevens announced "that he had a sore throat and he wasn't going to say a word all the way up. About all we said was *yes, no, and thank-you*; he talked non-stop," Miss Green remarks. He made it clear from the beginning that he did not wish to talk about his poetry, his conversation ranging from Hartford to Dublin to Paris to Salzburg. He impressed both listeners as "urbane, traveled, wealthy, but you would never have suspected the poet. . . . It was much easier to believe the insurance company vice-president." When they arrived at Mount Holyoke, Miss Horner adds, "He said, 'I'll tell my wife neither one of you made any passes at me!'"

Stevens delivered his remarks to New England professors gathered on campus that Saturday for seminars and discussions. "The talk was splendid," Miss Green remembers, adding "his voice was low . . . we all had the good sense by this time to crowd the front seats." Encountering him later that day, Miss Horner notes she "asked him if he had been to any of the other lectures or speeches. He said, 'These fellows are probably fascinating, but I'm getting old.'" It was rare for Stevens, even jokingly, to offer his age as an excuse. He was much more likely to maintain, as he did in a get-well note to William Carlos Williams at the time, that at 71 he felt more like 28 (L716). His schedule of public appearances in 1951 hardly suggests that he was slowing down. Besides lecturing at Mount Holyoke, he spoke at City College of New York, addressed a gathering at the Museum of Modern Art, read at the YMHA Poetry Center, talked at the National Book Awards, and went to Bard to receive an honorary degree. This roster indicates the energy that Stevens put into the role of public man of letters in his last years; it also suggests the pleasure he must have taken in this public regard, despite the difficulties it caused him at times.

The most extraordinary of his appearances that year was in late 1951 when he went to the University of Chicago to deliver his last major lecture, "A Collect of Philosophy." Stevens turned down invitations to appear much closer to home because he said they were not in his orbit, but in November he came to Chicago as a Moody lecturer. Elder Olson, the University of Chicago poet, observed Stevens at close range that evening:

There was a cocktail party for him prior to a dinner at the Quadrangle Club . . . [where] he sat at one end of the table and I sat immediately to his left. . . . I remember in the course of the dinner asking him about the phrase "Rouge-Fatima" [Academic Discourse at Havana]. I said that had always puzzled me. He told me that he had originally intended to put in something like Helen of Troy, but he decided the poor girl was overworked, especially in poetry, and that he thought of another beautiful woman, therefore. . . . I pronounced the word FaTIma, by the way . . . and he corrected my pronunciation . . . and said it was FATima. . . . I said, "That's fine, but what about the rouge?" "Oh," he said, "that's just to dress her up a bit."

He then asked me when I thought philosophic ideas became poetic. I did not know this was to be one of the topics of his lecture. I told him that in my view when they were handled by poets, and that the pure concept, as such, had no reference to poetry. Something had to be done by the poet. He said, "Don't you think there are any ideas which are inherently poetic?" I said, "No, I would deny that as I would deny that there is any subject which is inherently poetic."

Olson offers a useful view of Stevens in a situation which casts light back on Pontigny, suggesting one reason why the lively discussion and debate which often characterized lectures there did not take place at Stevens' seminar. Though Stevens was about to lecture on the idea that Olson was rejecting, Olson observed:

He didn't argue; he meditated. He struck me all the way through as a very reflective and reticent man. . . . He spoke in sentences not in paragraphs. There was no such thing as a connected argument. What you had instead was a series of intuitive and highly perceptive remarks, mixed in with the ordinary chit-chat of the dining table. . . . When he got on a subject, he would talk with flashes of intuition . . . this was not a man who thought consecutively. . . . His real style was the *Adagia*, and that was very much his conversational way. . . . He was a reflective man. He would hear something, and you could see him think about it—in fact, you could practically hear him think about it.

After the dinner, Stevens lectured in a large auditorium which "was pretty nearly full. It was not as full as it was for Dylan Thomas, when the place was absolutely jammed, or as full as it was for Eliot and his lectures, when it was impossible to get a seat unless you had a private 'in'." Olson

remembers that "The lecture did not go over too well." A professor sitting next to him voiced at least part of the reason for the dissatisfaction when, picking up on Stevens' references in the lecture, he remarked to Olson that "'the whole, damn thing came out of Rogers' *Student's History of Philosophy*.' Incidentally, he had great respect for Stevens as a poet, but he didn't think much of the lecture. . . . People were very cordial and polite because of the finesse of the poet, but as lectures go, we've heard better ones."

After reading the lecture at City College of New York upon his return from Chicago, Stevens sent the piece to Paul Weiss, then editor of *The Review of Metaphysics*. Weiss was understandably interested in the final version of this essay on which Stevens had asked his help the previous August. Having asked Stevens to submit it, Weiss found upon reading the piece that he could not accept it for his journal. He describes his reactions: "It is a strange mixture. There is a kind of insight . . . raising that fundamental question of what philosophy and poetry have in common, and every once in awhile he edges up to give us an answer to it. But then when he talks about philosophy itself . . . I was embarrassed because of the very elementary quotations and references . . . I couldn't possibly publish it in a highly technical magazine. The other thing about it is that he actually never tells us, which is what he should have done, what it is that philosophy and poetry both see, and that is what I had hoped he would do." A few days after sending his rejection, Weiss wrote Stevens that Pearson was interested in the essay for a Yale periodical. By then, however, Stevens had second thoughts about the value of this work and decided against publishing it.

Stevens, of course, continued to read his poetry and to deliver brief addresses until the time of his death. "The Collect of Philosophy," however, became, in effect, his last major lecture. Given its qualified reception and his own eventual estimate of it, that address brought to a rather poignant close one of the major phases of Stevens' activity as a public man of letters.

NOTES

1. All quotations from Stevens are taken from the originals at The Huntington Library, Art Gallery and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California, to whom I am very grateful for permission to cite these texts. For the reader's convenience, references to published versions of the material are included in parentheses.

2. All reminiscences are transcribed from taped interviews made by the author.

3. John Peale Bishop, "Introduction," *Sewanee Review*, 52 (Autumn, 1944), 494.

4. On March 16, 1943, Henry Church asked Stevens if he had further thoughts on a poetry chair and suggested that they discuss the chair at some point. When Wahl invited Stevens to speak at Pontigny on March 20, 1943, Stevens immediately wrote that he would like to deal with the subject of such a chair. Though he later wrote to Church that he had revised his subject (L 452), when the Churches listened to the lecture that August morning they must have recognized, as others in the audience could not, that the lecture was an extension of the memorandum on the subject Stevens had sent them in 1940. The lecture was Stevens' apologia for the chair, asserting the superiority of the poet to the philosopher, in part, to argue for the establishment of such a chair in the light of chairs already existing for the lesser subject of philosophy. Along with its character as a public statement, then, there was also a more private level of discourse in the lecture. The rhetoric was appropriate on this level, too, for Stevens was formulating a defense of his idea to its possible patrons, who had recently indicated a renewed interest in the chair and who were in the audience that day. To recognize this personal level in the address is to understand, in part, why, as unpublished Stevens correspondence at the Huntington shows, the poet was extraordinarily persistent in urging and arranging for the Churches to attend his lecture. As few other Stevens' essays, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" is an occasional piece whose style and subject are better understood by studying them in the context of the occasion.

5. Untitled remarks, *The Trinity Review*, 8 (May, 1954), 35.

6. Unpublished letter of Wallace Stevens to Henry Church, November 10, 1943.

7. Unpublished letter of Wallace Stevens to Norman Pearson, March 19, 1948.

8. Unpublished letter of Wallace Stevens to Barbara Church, April 22, 1951.

Stevens' Revolutionaries and John Addington Symonds

JAN PINKERTON

In 1944-45 Wallace Stevens wrote two poems that speak of Communist revolutionaries standing on the shores of a lake but yet not appreciating the scene because they are wrapped in abstract or utopian thought. First, in Section XIV of "Esthétique du Mal" (1944), Stevens imagines Konstantinov, a member of the Soviet secret police, standing by Lake Geneva: "He would not be aware of the lake. / . . . He would not be aware of the clouds" (CP 325). Secondly, in "Description without Place" (1945), it is Lenin who is beside a lake, and, as a result of his presence, "The swans fled outward to remoter reaches, / As if they knew of distant beaches; and were / Dissolved." Lenin is seeing, instead of the swans, "apocalyptic legions" (CP 343).

One source for the Konstantinov reference is indicated by Stevens within his poem ("Victor Serge said . . ."), and Stevens quotes the one-time revolutionary (from a source not previously noted, an article in Dwight Macdonald's periodical *Politics*).¹ Serge at this point in his account is telling of a meeting with Konstantinov, who, in his dedication to the revolution, seems "a logical lunatic." Yet Serge tells of meeting Konstantinov at night in a tenement in Leningrad; why, then, does Stevens imagine him instead by Lake Geneva? And why does he imagine Lenin, too, by a lake?

Perhaps behind both poems is a passage from the first few pages of John Addington Symonds' once-popular *The Renaissance in Italy* (1875-86), a passage in which the author characterizes the medieval mind before the awakening of the Renaissance. The man of the Middle Ages, according to Symonds,

had not seen the beauty of the world, or had seen it only to cross himself, and turn aside and tell his beads and pray. Like St. Bernard traveling along the shores of the Lake Lemán [Lake Geneva], and noticing neither the azure of the waters, nor the luxuriance of the vines, nor the radiance of the mountains with their robe of sun and snow, but bending a thought-burdened forehead over the neck of his mule; even like this monk, humanity had passed . . . along the highways of the world, and had scarcely known that they were sightworthy or that life is a blessing. Beauty is a snare, pleasure a sin, the world a fleeting show . . . these were the fixed ideas of the ascetic medieval church.²

The ideology that prevented St. Bernard from seeing the beauty of the lake is Christianity—not Communism, as it is for the Stevens characters. Yet Stevens' seemingly arbitrary placing of his two ideologues on the shores of a lake (in one case, specifically Lake Geneva) is likely explained by this image

of Bernard, the medieval ideologue, at the same location. And Stevens' point is similar to Symonds': abstract theorizing interferes with one's perceptions of the world. Symonds' description of Bernard's inability to see the beauty of the world ("Beauty is a snare . . . the world a fleeting show") is echoed, moreover, by Stevens' statement of the same predicament in the very next section of "Esthétique": "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world" (CP 325).

Symonds (1840-1893), English poet and writer on art, literature, travel, and (in private publication) homosexuality, was widely read in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. It might be noted that among his many books is a collection of essays, *In the Key of Blue* (1893), in the title essay of which he discusses the poetic possibilities of the color blue. One cannot claim for this work any direct influence on Stevens—who, according to Edward Kessler, used "blue" 163 times in his work;³ yet it can serve as an example of the particular interest in color on the part of both poets and painters in the late nineteenth century—an interest that Stevens would continue more consciously and conspicuously than any of his major contemporaries.

NOTES

1. *Serge's Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire 1901-1941* was not published until 1951 (first book-length English translation, 1963). Stevens' entire quote ("I followed his argument / With the blank uneasiness which one might feel / In the presence of a logical lunatic") is taken directly from the first of a series of articles by Serge (later incorporated into the *Mémoires*) that appeared in translation in *Politics*: "The Revolution at Dead-End (1926-1928)," trans. Ethel Libson, *Politics*, 1 (June, 1944), 150.

2. *The Renaissance in Italy: The Age of the Despots* [vol. 1] (London: Murray, 1926), pp. 10-11.

3. *Images of Wallace Stevens* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers, 1972), p. 185.

The Marianne Moore Newsletter

The Marianne Moore Newsletter, sponsored by the Rosenbach Foundation and edited by Patricia C. Willis, is published in the Spring and Fall, beginning in March 1977. It includes brief articles, notes and queries, bibliography and items of interest to scholars from the Marianne Moore archive at The Rosenbach Foundation. For a complimentary copy of the first issue, subscription information, or submission of material, write to the Editor, The Rosenbach Foundation, 2010 Delancey Place, Philadelphia, PA 19103.

The Fourteenth Blackbird

William Faulkner — . . . It was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth. [From *Faulkner in the University*. Edited by F. Gwynn and J. Blotner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), pp. 273-274.]

Review

Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry. By Susan B. Weston. New York and Guildford, Surrey: Columbia University Press, 1977. 151 pp. \$10.95.

In his speeches on religion addressed to "its cultured despisers," Friedrich Schleiermacher descended "into the inmost sanctuary of life," the living moment.

You must apprehend a living moment. You must know how to listen to yourselves before your own consciousness. At least you must be able to reconstruct from your consciousness your own state.

Schleiermacher's description of the actual experience of such listening accounts how we "return into the whole" through our senses, "and into our selves through the unity of the self-consciousness," which is given chiefly in the possibility of comparing the varying degrees of sensation." In this living moment we create the world by allowing to rise together the Whole and the self that "together fashion every act of life."

You become sense and the Whole becomes object. Sense and object mingle and unite, then each returns to its place, and the object rent from sense is a perception, and you, rent from the object, are for yourselves, a feeling.

At the innermost sanctuary of life Schleiermacher finds this moment when sense and object mingle and unite, a moment which we "always experience yet never experience." A moment composed of percept which, as soon as we reflect, as from a glass, becomes veiled in concept. For Schleiermacher as for Stevens "the bride is never naked." The moment is "scarcely in time at all, so swiftly it passes; scarcely to be described, so little does it properly exist." Yet it is within the moment that we experience "the holy wedlock of the Universe with the incarnated Reason for a creative productive embrace." Here, in the "immediate, raised above all error and misunderstanding, you lie directly on the bosom of the infinite world. In that moment, you are its soul." And you hear a sound, as Stevens later would put it, "Which is not part of the listener's own sense" (CP 377).

It can't be my business here to "demonstrate" that in this moment of cleansed perception Stevens found his *noeud vital*, his umbilical, his *belle étoile*, his bride and marriage. I simply assume that our study of Wallace Stevens has reached the stage at which we too must try to keep focussed on the inmost sanctuary, the first idea that rises from the immediate moment of sensation. Recall, as Stevens explained to Henry Church, that to see the world "in the first idea" is to "take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture"; and that to think the first idea is to "think about the world without its varnish and dirt" (L 426-27). Such seeing and such thinking are the columns of the portal through which we pass into an "extraordinary actuality" where "consciousness takes the place of imagination" (OP 165), and where "the mind of one man, if strong enough, can become the master of all the life in the world" (L 360). By absolute definition this actuality is a world outside language, precedent to figure. That is why it evokes a poetry so strikingly fresh.

Critics who treat these and the related central contraptions of Stevens' world as ideas are likely to miss the whole point. Stevens was interested in ideas only insofar as these ideas reached out to caress, and momentarily to embrace, things. Stevens' thought is steadily anchored in or tacking toward the world of sensations that precedes thought, where we find ourselves "more truly and more strange" (CP 65). He took great and steady pains to avoid creating a mental world that was merely notional. His obsession with the umbilical is an obsession with grounding poetry upon a rock, where the holy wedlock of the universe with incarnated reason may take place. There, on the ground where we are joined to an object by sensation, as when "A crinkled paper makes a brilliant sound" (CP 242).

More than once in her "introduction" to the poetry of Wallace Stevens (see, for example, pp. 78-9, 121, 134-35), Susan Weston takes up the possibility of an actual participation of poems in "rock reality," and more than once she rejects it. "The final found' itself is a fiction," she insists (p. 138), thus failing, it seems to me, to fathom the crucial distinction Stevens draws in "What We See Is What We Think": the distinction between "twelve, . . . the imprescriptable zenith, free of harangue," and "the first gray second after." Twelve is wordless. The poem, whose essence is "the beauty of innuendoes," is always "just after." And Stevens' central, his *noeud vital*, his umbilical, is the same moment Schleiermacher describes as "a holy wedlock." To enter it is "like passing a boundary to dive / Into the sun-filled water, brightly leafed / And limbed and lighted out from bank to bank" (CP 371).

Yet if Susan Weston stops just short of passing this boundary, her book, for all the modesty of its title, and style, and length, is a major contribution to our progress toward it.

Many of Ms. Weston's readings and minutiae will become canonical. And to read her, I found, was to be led repeatedly deeper into familiar and unfamiliar texts than I had been before.

Ms. Weston works her way along the edge of things, like Blake's just man, or Steven's man standing up in the boat of stones "leaning and looking before him" (CP 515). Through her we see more sharply a new "far-foreign" world, its mountain and sea, its heroes half of earth and half of mind, its veiled and sequined bride, robing and disrobing before us, through her Jungian manifestations, "positive one moment and negative the next; now young, now old; now mother, now maiden; now a good fairy, now a witch, now a saint, now a whore" (p. 36; the words are Jung's). And even, though in glimpses, we see the new and old lights the bride is seen by.

Susan Weston's book opens with an introduction made up of three sturdy and finely hewn miniatures: "Continuity and Change," "The Supreme Fiction," and "The Poet." In the middle one of these pieces, a powerful essay of scarcely two hundred words, Ms. Weston states her own central premise: "Creating fictions is the essential gift of the human mind; believing them is its curse" (p. 5). And while she stretches this premise to its outermost limits, Ms. Weston remains true to it. Thus, though she reads "Notes" with great power, she mistakes the "bethou me" canto of "It Must Change" for a mocking of Romanticism, a rejection of "the attempt to merge the self with the world" (p. 99). Whereas what we actually find there is one more version of the newly polished glass, freshly reflective consciousness, "aswarm with things going as far as they can" (CP 519). A glass we enter through the senses in a moment.

My argument with Ms. Weston, then, is that she knows only intermittently that the candle and the sun strain to merge into a single light. The claim blooded by all of Stevens' fictions and the claim we may call the supreme fiction is that the subjective valley candle is also *la belle #oile*, that the secondary and primary imaginations can glow for a moment together as one. In a moment, when our subjective light finds itself again part of an objective light, and thus becomes

A flick added to what was real and its vocabulary,
The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring,
Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself,
The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes.
(CP 517)

If we do not believe the transformational promise of these lines, Stevens' poetry reduces to a futile verbal assault upon nothing, a final resignation to the leaden, polar landscape of "A Page From a Tale." But in fact, even on those ice flows, Stevens is seeing a new sun, building his city in the snow (CP 158), his sun-warmed real city, or at least the wall of his house, reflecting the sun like a cleansed mirror. By reaching

down past the abyss that separates language, and all figuration, from the stimulation of the senses that gives language rise, Stevens' words return to the inarticulate mother.

Susan Weston leaves us, in the end, with a bird, a single chorister, that is all metaphor, only "like / A new knowledge of reality." Her Stevens thus, for all the flights and descents through which she has tracked him, subsides to a kind of Victorian stoic, whose "courage in the face of the abyss . . . keeps his poetry alive" (p. 140). And Ms. Weston thus cannot conclude, as she would prefer, "by saying that what Stevens gives us when he is at his best and we at ours is a 'new knowledge of reality'"; instead, she concludes, "he gives us something more rare: the courage to accept the possibility that our every definition of reality is a regulative and saving fiction—an 'as if,' a 'like'" (p. 141). And thus she cuts the umbilical which Stevens was so intent upon preserving.

It is a real bird, a scrawny chorister crying to us as the sun warms, from outside, that we hear in "Not Ideas." Just as it is the real canna that X, awakening from solipsistic sleep, observes "with a clinging eye, / Observes and then continues to observe" (CP 55). So the canon returns to his plain sister, the pianist to the thunder, the idea to "l'oiseau qui chante." We cannot speak of our definitions of reality as regulative and saving fictions unless we speak simultaneously of our holidays in reality as regulative and saving of our fictions.

Bert Stern
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A Note

Wallace Stevens: An Oral Biography of the Hartford Years

During his Hartford, Connecticut years (1916-1955), Wallace Stevens became "one of the great poets of our century . . . (one of) the greatest of all American poets." Recent critical studies and editions of his work have brought a fuller understanding of this major artist. There is, however, a wealth of information which may be lost: the unrecorded recollections of those men and women who knew Stevens as poet, relative, friend, or colleague. I have taped 120 interviews with these individuals to preserve their memories of the poet. Such a collection will be the basis of an informal, oral history of Stevens' Hartford years.

I hope this oral biography will provide some of the insight into a major artist's life which occurred, for example, in Vivian Perlis' *Charles Ives Remembered: An Oral History*. While I intend to edit the tapes for publication, I will also deposit the unedited interviews in an archive accessible to Stevens scholars, such as the Connecticut Historical Society or the Huntington Library, which has recently acquired his papers. Such unedited tapes should be a valuable resource for future Stevens scholars, not only providing them with first-hand accounts of the poet but also allowing them to get a feel for people who were part of his life.

Peter Brazeau
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News and Comments

St. Martin's Press has initiated a "Poetry Reprint Series," the first set of which is now available. Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium* (1923) is among the first five books to be reprinted; the price is \$25.00 for the set of five. The advertising copy reads: "Each volume in the Series is a near-exact copy of the original. With the permission of the owner, the original book has been photographed—illustrations, typographical oddities, library stamps and all; and each reprinted volume is the same size and shape as the original."

Susan B. Weston's *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry* has just been published by Columbia University Press in the "Columbia Introductions to Twentieth-Century American Poetry Series"; the price is \$10.95.

Lucy Beckett's *Wallace Stevens*, first published by the Cambridge University Press in 1974, has now been reprinted in a paperback edition.

Studies in American Literature: Essays in Honour of William Mulder, edited by Jagdish Chander of Punjab University and Narindars Pradhan of the University of Delhi, includes an essay on the poetry of Wallace Stevens.

"Stevens at the Crossing" is the title of Denis Donoghue's review of Harold Bloom's *Wallace Stevens: The Poem of Our Climate* in the September 15, 1977, issue of *The New York Review of Books*.

At the University of Connecticut's Fourteenth Annual Wallace Stevens Program on April 6, 1977, Richard Wilbur read from his own poems and awarded prizes to student winners of the poetry contest. The reading and prizes were sponsored by The Hartford Insurance Group.

John Ehrlichman's Washington novel, *The Company* (Pocket Books, 1977), has as its epigraph a quotation from "Asides on the Oboe": "The prologues are over. It is a question, now, / Of final belief. So, say that final belief / Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose."

A new literary review in Rio de Janeiro called *José*, N. 1 (Julho 1976), has published a translation of "The Snow Man." ("O Homen da Neve" in Portuguese.) The translator is Jorge Wanderley. A note on Stevens says the poet died in an automobile accident in 1955.

Centennial issues: Both *Antaeus*, edited by Daniel Halpern, and *The Southern Review*, Donald Stanford, editor, are planning Stevens issues in 1979 to commemorate the centenary of Wallace Stevens' birth.

Stevens book prices continue to soar. The Current Company in its Miscellany No. 5, Spring 1977, advertises a copy of the 1923 *Harmonium* with "light wear at the extremities; spine paper label chipped without loss of words; spine a bit faded; a very nice copy of a delicate little book" for \$300.00. The Colophon Book Shop in its Catalogue 6, Spring 1977, advertises: *Ideas of Order*, 1936, first trade edition, second binding, slight fading to boards, for \$50.00; *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, 1937, second printing of dust jacket with "Conjunctions" on front inner flap, backstrip slightly faded, for \$40.00; *Parts of a World*, 1942, jacket lightly faded at extremities, for \$95.00; *Transport to Summer*, 1947, minor wear and fading to jacket, for \$65.00. Philip C. Duschnes, Inc., in its Catalogue 218, September 1977, offers a "slightly soiled"

copy of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, 1937, for \$100.00 as well as a copy of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, Cummington Press, 1942, one of 80 signed by Stevens, with a "small owner's name and date on free endpaper," for \$750.00.

We all know and readily acknowledge the value of printed ephemera to both scholars and collectors. I can nominate another collecting category, however, which I will call *inconsequentia*. The rare book firm of In Our Time, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in its Catalogue 75, Spring 1977, offers a clutch of such *inconsequentia* as follows: "A grouping of 13 ephemeral press items that were from the library [sic] of Wallace Stevens. The items include two envelopes addressed to Stevens from the Gregynog Press and sent to him at the Hartford Accident & Indemnity Co.; a September 1929 announcement from the Gregynog Press listing five new books in preparation; a prospectus from the same press for 'The Lamentations of Jeremiah' dated 1933, 4 pgs.; a Christmas and New Year's Greeting sent to Stevens from the Gregynog dated 1936-37. The greeting reprints Gilbert Keith Chesterton's poem 'The Wise Men'; also included is a sheet from the desk of the Pear Tree Press with an inscribed Holiday holograph greeting from James Guthrie; an announcement from the Officina Vindobonensis listing a memorial edition for Gustave Klimt (with order form present); three prospectus from the fine German press, the Bremer Press, one for an edition of Aeschylus with two sample leafs of the book enclosed, two, a six page announcement of their publication of Augustine's *City of Gold*, and three, the Bremer Press eight page prospectus of *The Bible* translated by Martin Luther. Lastly, three single sheets of reviews of the Bremer Press in German. All thirteen items are in fine condition. An interesting grouping in their own right, fine as reflecting the many faceted interests and scholarship of this major American poet." I don't know what the value of this material is, but the price is \$125.00.

* * *

A STEVENS COMMEMORATIVE STAMP

For the past several years the United States Postal Service has issued an annual American Poet commemorative stamp. Among the poets honored have been Vachel Lindsay, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Sidney Lanier and Robert Frost. It is appropriate that Wallace Stevens, an indefatigable letter-writer, should also be so honored by the issuance of a centenary commemorative stamp on October 2, 1979. If postage rates have not increased by that time, a 13¢ stamp will be particularly welcome.

Requests for a Stevens commemorative may be directed to one's own senators, to Connecticut senators Hon. Abraham Ribicoff and Hon. Lowell P. Weicker, and to:

Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee
United States Postal Service
Room 5520
475 L'Enfant Plaza S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20260

Wallace Stevens Society Program

MLA 1977

608. Thematic Materials in Wallace Stevens' Shorter Poems, Part I

7:15-8:30 p.m., PDR 14, Palmer House

Program arranged by The Wallace Stevens Society.
Presiding: John N. Serio, Clarkson College.

Opening Remarks: R. H. Deutsch, editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, California State University, Northridge.

1. "Teasing the Reader into *Harmonium*," Robert Buttel, Temple University.
2. "Stevens and Keats' 'To Autumn,'" Helen Vendler, Boston University.
3. "Themes, Variations, and Repetitions," Samuel French Morse, Northeastern University.

Additional papers will be discussed in Meeting 651, which follows in the same room.

651. Thematic Materials in Wallace Stevens' Shorter Poems, Part II

9:00-10:15 p.m., PDR 14, Palmer House

A continuation of the program arranged by The Wallace Stevens Society (608). Presiding: John N. Serio, Clarkson College.

1. "Art, Music, Angels, and Sex," Michel Benamou, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.
 2. "Cuisine Bourgeoise," Herbert J. Stern, Wabash College.
 3. "Stevens' Thematic Imagery," Frank Doggett.
 4. "Toward 'Decreation,'" Roy Harvey Pearce, University of California, San Diego.
- Discussant: Doris Eder, University of Rochester.

Lecture program to be followed by an open meeting of The Wallace Stevens Society.

Current Bibliography

Beehler, Michael T. "Meteoric Poetry: Wallace Stevens' 'Description Without Place.'" *Criticism*, XIX (Summer 1977), 241-259.

Most of the criticism of Stevens' canon has relied on the assumption that his poetry describes or points towards an ideal presence beyond itself (i.e., "reality," "the imagination," "the self," etc.) But much of Stevens' later poetry, and particularly "Description without Place," consistently disallows this notion of poetry as description by calling into question the concept of presence. For Stevens, presence is an expedient metaphor or "supreme fiction" continually reconstituted by the structure of language and the act of writing. (MTB)

Bly, Robert. "Wallace Stevens and Dr. Jekyll." *American Poets in 1976*. Edited by William Heyen. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 4-19

Stevens is a poet of the shadow, the repressed self, rejecting morality, delighting in physical detail. Following W. James and Conrad, whose work he knew, WS' shadow gives substance to the poems of *Harmonium*. In later years, however, Stevens tended to repress his shadow. Rather than change his life, he became wholly a Dr. Jekyll with a "white nightgown" mentality, and his later poetry is the worse for it.

Cook, Eleanor. "Wallace Stevens: The Comedian as the Letter C." *American Literature*, XLIX (May 1977), 192-205.

"The Comedian" is obviously, insistently, built by contrast. The poem takes the form of thesis versus antithesis with three parts given to each. Further synthesis is impossible, for by the end of the poem antithesis has entirely swallowed thesis. The final judgment on Crispin is left to the reader, as Stevens offers two endings to his story. Crispin ultimately gives up the struggle of the imagination against reality, but Crispin's generations go on, as do the sounds of the letter C—waiting for others to make something of them, perhaps even a supreme fiction.

Eberhart, Richard. "Reflections on Wallace Stevens in 1976." *The Southern Review*, XIII (Summer 1977), 417-418.

It is dangerous to read Stevens now. Twenty years ago there was a secure monument of a few years when WS satisfied the capacity to live with belief within a sophisticated poetry, a great health of spirit that represented America at its best. But perhaps what we need now is a poetry of the people, with less nobility, less imaginative detachment from society, and more universality—though Stevens in his day was universal, too.

Guereschi, Edward. "Wallace Stevens' Angels of Earth." *Notes on Modern American Literature*, I (Summer 1977), Item 25.

In the third canto of *Notes*, WS reverses the flight of the angels and brings them to Hartford, in a sly transformation. If the orthodoxy may invoke the transcendent to create a fictive realm with imaginary figures, why cannot the poet reverse the process and humanize his angels? If the ultimate belief is the power to envision myth, then the ultimate satisfaction lies in this self-creation and recognition of its fidelity to a self-sufficient truth.

Kenner, Hugh. **"Seraphic Glitter: Stevens and Nonsense."** *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, V (Fall/Winter 1977), 153-159.

Nonsense, the impulse to use words as counters in an arbitrary game whose criteria are pattern, symmetry and an elusive quasi-sense—which the French ritualized as *symbolisme*, was the very impulse the English banished to the nursery (by way of Lear). Nonsense freed both Stevens and Eliot, as they much desired, from Whitman, permitting them to manipulate the rituals of certified Poetry without sounding provincial. The way of Nonsense is analytic, detaching the rituals of high poetry from the normal structures of meaning, drawing attention to their self-sufficiency as ritual. Stevens airily resists paraphrase with an aplomb that bespeaks his comfortable situation in the heart of the tradition of Nonsense.

Keyser, Samuel Jay. **"Wallace Stevens: Form and Meaning in Four Poems."** *College English*, XXXVII (February 1976), 578-598.

Correlations of formal structure and content in a poem are closely related and no doubt contribute to the aesthetic value of poetry. In "The Death of a Soldier" verbal agency is suppressed by use of nonprogressive forms and simple present tense to impart a timelessness to the action of the poem. "Poetry is a Destructive Force" works by reversals of line and sound, a chiasmus at the morphological and phonological levels which converges with the imagistic chiasmus. "Anecdote of the Jar" uses variations on "round" and various rhyming devices to create a still-life painting. And "The Snow Man" uses syntactic symmetry and repetition, with changing perspective, to parallel the sense of the poem.

Litz, A. Walton. **"Wallace Stevens' Defense of Poetry: La Poesie Pure, the New Romantic, and the Pressure of Reality."** *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition*. Edited by George Bornstein. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 111-132.

During the 30's, the years of doubt and experimentation, when *Ideas of Order* and *Owl's Clover* were works in progress, WS was trying out various terms and mottoes with obsessive frequency, shifting connotations until he could find their exact properties. Among these repeated terms, ultimately his personal metaphors, "pure poetry" and "the romantic" stand out. "Pure poetry" has its source in Bremond and Croce and represents a counter to the social realism of the times. "The romantic," also best understood through Croce, is a force for continuous self-renewal countering the false romantic of communism.

Lombardi, Thomas F. **"Pennsylvania: A Keystone to Wallace Stevens."** *Historical Review of Berks County*, XLI (Summer 1976), 94-97, 114-123.

Reading, Pennsylvania, and the country around it are central to Stevens' life and poetry, and throughout his life he returned home to the fields, streams and mountains of Berks County. For WS, Reading was a fulcrum, central and pivotal, supplying strength when he needed it most. Reading was order, discipline, hierarchy and affection. Though he spent far more years in Hartford, for WS "home is where one grows up" — Reading and the surrounding countryside.

Prasad, Veena Rani. "Color-Scheme in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens." *Indian Journal of American Studies*, V (January/July 1975), 1-10.

Stevens is a poet of the visual imagination, able to transcribe a scene of reality in the manner of a great painter. Although he admired Picasso and Braque, his technique is less cubist than impressionist. Color symbolism is a vital part of WS' poetic technique: blue — imagination; green — the physical; red — reality; gold — sun; purple — delight in the imagination.

Scott, Stanley J. "Wallace Stevens and William James: The Poetics of Pure Experience." *Philosophy and Literature*, I (Spring 1977), 183-191

In a series of letters regarding his major late poem, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, Stevens leaves clues that link the central ideas of the work to James' philosophy. The specific affinity noted by WS with the "will to believe" is only the hint of a deeper affinity between the two men's ideas and certain Jamesian principles provide a critical approach to Stevens' later thought and art — especially the *Notes*, where the Jamesian notion of "pure experience" clarifies Stevens' emergence beyond the categories of rigid dualism, the imagination being described as that of "pure power" that makes possible the "revelation of reality."

Stein, William Bysshe. "Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice Cream': The Requiem of the Romantic Muse." *Notes on Modern American Literature*, I (Spring 1977), Item 9.

The muse of inspiration that nurtures the raptures of 19th and 20th century Romantics is laid to rest in this poem that WS selected as his favorite, containing "the essential gaudiness of poetry," whose etymology, *gawde*, "jest, plaything, toy," describes the irrepressible ludic impulse behind the creative act, as WS puns on the godhead, debasing the biblical account of creation in "the roller of big cigars" and the chrisemmen dichotomy in "concupiscent curds." The missing 3 glass knobs scoffs at the abuse of religious symbolism while commenting on the vanished Trinity. The protruding "feet," the coldness and dumbness of the Romantic muse show her to be a dead "affix" in the composition of modern poetry, the "emperor" dethroning this vessel of ventripotent nonsense.

Ulliyatt, A.G. "Studying Two Pears: Wallace Stevens and the Creative Imagination." *Unisa English Studies* (University of South Africa), XV (April 1977), 17-19.

The apparent denial of metaphor in the opening section of "Study of Two Pears" is a confession of the intangibility of reality and the intrusion of the creative imagination. By denying resemblance, WS admits that such resemblances have already crossed his mind. That the pears cannot be seen as the observer wills emphasizes the power of the creative imagination.

Dissertation Abstracts

WORDSWORTH AND WALLACE STEVENS: THE DEATH OF THE GODS. A STUDY OF A SECULARIZATION OF POETIC IMAGINATION

BUCHSBAUM, Betty Sanders, Ph.D.
Brandeis University, 1975

This is a study that pursues Stevens' departures or deviations from his romantic predecessor. Critics have noted many parallels between Wordsworth and Stevens. However, criticism lacks a comprehensive view of how Stevens adapts many of Wordsworth's formulations to a thoroughly secular, humanistic poetics; consequently, what also is lacking is an understanding of this process of secularization as a changing, deepening development over the course of Stevens' work and life.

I begin my study of this process of secularization with "Sunday Morning." In Chapter I, I consider those common aspects of sensibility and the changed grounds of belief that produced this naturalistic revision of Wordsworth's "One Life in Nature." I then read "Sunday Morning" primarily against passages in *The Prelude* (1805). By eliminating a transcendent, spiritual realm of being and meaning, Stevens inverts the grounds on which an harmonious "marriage" between mind and world rests and reduces perception to the surfaces of self and world, even as he salvages emotional values of the Wordsworthian exchange.

Other poems of *Harmonium*, however, are acutely ill at ease with the naturalism of "Sunday Morning" because of the human anxieties and problems that life in the physical world cannot soften. These poems either create or point to the need for a parallel transcendence within the premises of naturalism: a human order of poetry within the order and disorder of empirical nature. As with Wordsworth, such transcendence often requires the transforming power of poetic imagination and speech rather than a feeling response to the external world.

In Chapter II, I explore poetic power, both its source and developing capability in Stevens' work, in relation to Wordsworth's increasing emphasis on power after 1800. A comparison of poetic transformation in poems of Wordsworth at the height of his powers and in early poems of Stevens reveals the latter's far more restricted engagement of both mind and reality in his direct perception of a physical object or scene and his transformation of that perception. I then examine the change that poetic power undergoes in Stevens as a parallel to a similar dynamic movement between perceptual extremes in Wordsworth. In particular, I focus on the nub of this exchange: the self's periodic confrontation with the force behind nature, primarily in the form of sea and wind. Finally, I examine Stevens' concern, in his middle to late work, with realizing the invisible force behind the moment as a deeply felt presence within the moment of the mind's perception of a visible thing. As Stevens thus engages more of mind and of reality in his exchanges, he adapts many features of Wordsworth's heightened moments of consciousness. His late poem, "The World as Meditation," is one of his single most successful parallels to Wordsworth's goals for human consciousness and poetry.

In Chapter III, I explore how a change in poetics is reflected in an altered relation between poetry and three areas of concern to both poets: (1) Poetry and Personal Security; (2) Poetry and Social Problems; (3) Poetry and Old Age.

Secularization in this study emerges as a process that both destroys and salvages, as the poet gives new shape to old experiences and values. For Stevens, the fulfillment, and triumph, of this process is the poetry of his late years. Stevens, who accepted human limitation in a universe where death is absolute, found the power and repose that finally eluded Wordsworth, who envisioned infinite possibility in a universe where spirit is eternal. Order No. 75-15,097, 197 pages.

DA, v. 36, no. 1 (July 1975), 302-A.

WALLACE STEVENS: THE HEROIC ABSTRACTION IN THE WHOLE OF HARMONIUM

EPP, Irene, Ph.D.
University of Colorado, 1975

Director: Professor Edward Nolan

A major contention of this study of Wallace Stevens is that the success of the later volumes in the *Collected Poems*, *Transport to Summer*, *Auroras of Autumn*, and *The Rock*, is due in large part of Stevens' creation of a viable abstraction as a means of dealing with the problem of contemporary reality and the poetic imagination. The difficulties Stevens encounters in *Owl's Clover* are surmounted by the eventual creation of the heroic abstraction in *Parts of a World*. For the purposes of this study the early work of *Harmonium* is taken as read. The focus of the present thesis begins with *Owl's Clover* since it is Stevens' difficulty with this poem that prompts his direct dealing with abstraction which culminates in the creation of the heroic abstraction in *Parts of a World*.

A tendency toward abstraction is a part of the Cubist experiment and the poetry of Wallace Stevens' middle period. It is a tendency carefully held in check in both instances for both Stevens and Cubists see the absolute necessity of maintaining a clear balance between reality and the imagination, never allowing this balance to weigh too heavily in either direction. A few specific connections between various poems and painting by the Cubists can be drawn such as use of multiple perspective and the employment of facets and intersecting planes on two-dimensional surfaces.

The flaws and difficulties in *Owl's Clover* demonstrate Stevens' need and search for a valid means of incorporating contemporary reality into his poetic system. *The Man with the Blue Guitar* illustrates the fact that success comes with the return of the reference to painting, this time to a painting that is definitely Cubist. Central in Stevens' poetic edifice, *Parts of a World* most clearly demonstrates the connections with Cubism in its creation of the heroic abstraction. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" the culminating poem of *Transport to Summer*, the heroic abstraction is married to Stevens' green and fluent mundo. The validity of this poetic means of dealing with reality is tested and proven by the confrontation with poverty in *Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*.

Readings of the poems treat Stevens' work as a continuous poetic whole, examining all poems volume by volume, and treating each volume as a coherent, controlled exploration with a definite and recognizable movement toward successful yet always transient resolution. All poems are viewed in the context of the poetic whole. The movement of all Stevens' poetry is seen as a process of building a poetic approach toward dealing with reality that is essentially cyclic.

Order No. 75-23, 597, 198 pages.

DA, v. 36, no. 5 (Nov. 1975), 2806A-2807A.

THE FUNDAMENTAL AESTHETIC: WALLACE STEVENS AND THE PAINTERS

WEISS, Kathleen Petrisky, Ph.D.
University of Massachusetts, 1975

Director: Dr. Paul Mariani

Art was a generic term for Stevens. He borrowed the phrase "fundamental aesthetic" from Baudelaire to describe an "order, of which poetry and painting . . . or any other aesthetic realization would equally be a manifestation" (NA 160). In his work, therefore, poetry and painting are interchangeable metaphors for the common process of aesthetically ordering experience. The problem common to all artists, according to Stevens, was how to realize this fundamental aesthetic order. The evolution of the supreme fiction was to be his own example of this struggle to achieve a perfect equilibrium between the imagination and reality.

While Stevens shared the community of feeling among artists about the common problems of "realization," the views on art he incorporated into his work were never the products of a borrowed aesthetic system or the result of conscious imitation. Most often influence was indirect, an outgrowth of an affinity of sensibility between Stevens and some artist. Likewise, similarities in the approach to and organization of reality by both painters and poet led to similarities of technique. On a more theoretical level, there are similarities between the aesthetic assumptions and criteria Stevens held and those which other artists used to define the function and value of art and the role of the artist. A shared sensibility, similar techniques, and common aesthetic criteria, then, are the three general categories in which Stevens' relations to painters and painting are discussed.

Chapter I provides an overview of the development of Stevens' aesthetic criteria and of the artistic milieu in which that development took place. Chapter II focuses on the affinity of sensibility between Stevens and the Impressionists, that mutually intense interest in what Benamou has called the "weather" of a "fluent universe," the ever-changing interaction of light, color, and sight itself on the surface of things. Chapter III explores Stevens' complementary search for substance, for an aesthetic order to support life in the absence of any other sanctions. This search linked Stevens early in his career to the Neo-Mannerists, who emphasized the power of the imagination and the subordination of simple sensation. Neo-Mannerism was an important but temporary phase in Stevens' overall search for the ultimate idea of order, a perfect equilibrium between the imagination and reality. Chapter IV investigates how Stevens approached this goal, overcoming the conflict between sensibility and substance by evolving an order which incorporated his Impressionistic sensibility and which bases its imaginative constructions on acts of discovery made in the visible world.

In dealing with Stevens' reality-imagination complex, most critics agree that an Impressionistic influence is evident in his work, and while most see a tendency toward abstraction in the later work, the degree of abstraction is disputed. Contrary to common opinion, however, Stevens never really abandoned his Impressionistic approach to the world but built his aesthetic order upon it. Not only were Stevens' experiments in Symbolism and other movements advocating a detached imagination dismissed early, but even his attitude toward Cubism was ambivalent and defensive until quite late in his career; furthermore, he maintained a lifelong distaste for most non-figurative or abstract art. With Cezanne, Stevens shared an unshakable attachment to the visible world as the only true source for art. His tendency toward imaginative abstraction was always balanced by an external reality acting as his base. He learned, in fact, to avoid the extremes of abstraction of most of Cezanne's successors. Ultimately, Stevens' own ideas of order are modeled on Cezanne's constructions after nature.

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THE INFLUENCE OF PENNSYLVANIA ORIGINS ON WALLACE STEVENS

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Temple University, 1975

This study is an examination of the influence of Pennsylvania origins on the sensibility of Wallace Stevens insofar as manifestation of that influence is to be found in his poetry. Indeed, Stevens' sense of the world informed the content of his poetry, and Stevens derived a substantial part of that sense of the world from Pennsylvania.

Stevens' letters reveal the impact his origins made upon his consciousness. In much of his correspondence and poetry, the Pennsylvania experience of the past becomes a frame of reference for ordering the present. In a manner of speaking, Stevens' preoccupation with the Pennsylvania past was a larger quest for order, and his poetic reconstruction of the originary past afforded him a permanent impression of stability and pattern in a chaotic contemporary world. The return to his origins was a quest for continuity with the past, an exercise that helps explain Stevens' preoccupation over a ten-year period (1942-1952) with genealogy. In the period of his senescence, Stevens interpreted the world of his origins as a norm against which he evaluated all else beyond the Pennsylvania horizon. But going home was not exclusively an escape, but a return to the origin of self. The return to his roots, his home, his past—especially in his last period—was a conscious effort to identify with his heritage and to re-create in poetry what, in actuality, was gone forever. By re-creating the Pennsylvania past in poetry, he gave it permanence.

The focus of this study is on the shaping influence that the formative years in Pennsylvania had on Stevens. His sensitivity to landscape and weather, his love of poetry, his fondness for hiking, his deep sense of family, and his strong identification with his heritage (both Pennsylvania Dutch and Holland Dutch) were cultivated at home. The originary past in which his sensibility was formed emerges in several poems, beginning with verse written as early as 1923 and as late as 1950. These poems (appearing in *Harmonium*, *Parts of a World*, *The Auroras of Autumn*, and *Opus Posthumous*) are evidence that Stevens was conscious of his origins throughout his life. Further, a major part of the dissertation is an examination of the originary poetry of *Transport to Summer*. Three themes are explored in this volume: (1) binding together the past and the present, (2) ancestry or family, and (3) Pennsylvania locality and place. The

first theme is present in all the poems of his origins. However, the "past and present" is discussed only as it relates to poems that sustain either the themes of "ancestry" or "place." The ancestral theme allows one to review Stevens' attitude toward the world of the Zellers and Stevens as well as his intention to bridge the years that separated him from his ancestors. The ancestral poems sustain a dialectic—one worth pursuing—between the Christian world of the Pennsylvania past and the nonchristian world of the present. In short, Stevens endeavored to reconcile in some fashion the religious past with the secular present. In other poems, the existence of Pennsylvania locality and place is analyzed. These poems are more or less re-creations of a sylvan Pennsylvania past. The extraordinary landscape of these poems contrast sharply with the oftentimes ordinary situation of Stevens' personal life in the 1940's.

In summation, the dissertation is a comprehensive treatment of the impact and the influence of the originary past on Wallace Stevens, an examination of the manner in which his Pennsylvania origins shaped his thinking, cultivated his imagination, and contributed to the creation of his ordinary poetry.

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A "NEW LITERARY HISTORY" OF MODERN POETRY: HISTORY AND DECONSTRUCTION IN THE WORKS OF WHITMAN, STEVENS, AND OLSON

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This dissertation destroys traditional readings of the "history" of Modern American poetry. The first three chapters are explicitly theoretical; the second three are close studies of Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and Charles Olson. The poems of these writers are antithetical to New Critical poetics. The dissertation offers, therefore, a way of reading these poets which is more adequate than the ironic, a-temporal, spatial forms of the New Criticism and the Modernist critical tradition to which it belongs.

Chapter one destroys the pervasively logocentric language of Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom and the more de-mystified language of Paul de Man. Their rhetorics of genealogy, dialectic, dualism, and continuity create a "tradition," i.e., a series of texts related by a mimetic principle which functions as an aesthetic bulwark against the ontological insecurity of the world. More importantly, however, the deconstruction reveals that the crisis of historical language which Bate and Bloom attempt to avoid in their essentially psychological theories is unavoidable. The accumulation of meaning in habitual language reified by usage is both the "source" of the anxiety of influence and the "means" to a revived literary history and criticism.

Modern poets recognize that they need to destroy traditional forms of language to disclose obscured human possibilities. In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, language's dual potential to be both discovery and cover-up emerges from the basically destructive and interpretive nature of Dasein's understanding (*Verstandnis*). Heidegger's own project is a destruction of his philosophical past, of the metaphysical tradition which causes Dasein to forget the Being-question (*Seinsfrage*). Heidegger cuts-away accumulated language to re-dis-cover the problem of Being as a problem. Both Heidegger's phenomenologically destructive "method" and his existential analysis of the structure and potential of Dasein's language and understanding "justify" the process of critically destroying the rhetorics of Bate, Bloom, and de Man.

The destruction of these critics demonstrates that the methods and theories which they present as alternatives to the American New Criticism are, in fact, not alternatives at all. They are all caught within the "traditional" critical mold which projects an image of continuous tradition whose autotelic nature is analogous to the aesthetic monad of New Critically closed form.

Since none of these critics systematically demonstrate the New Criticism's "blindness," the third chapter destroys the ironic rhetoric of Cleanth Brooks. The New Criticism reduces the literary event to a spatial art-object which endures and which can be seen all-at-once. Insofar as the ironic imagination, epitomized by Brooks's criticism, removes the poem, poet, reader, and critic from the World into the Word, the New Criticism belongs to the same non-temporal, logocentric "tradition" as Bate and Bloom.

The poetry of Whitman, Stevens, and Olson is a poetry of destructive process. It reveals the inadequacy of the New Critical and genetic approaches to literary interpretation and literary history. These poets make it clear that both analysis and history must begin with the

recognition that poems destroy poems written before them and often common interpretations of earlier tropes and poems as well. Any given text thus stands in a constantly shifting pattern of relationships with other texts and cannot be "studied" as an object in space, but must, on the contrary, be *encountered* as the intentional act of Dasein in time.

By cutting away the habitual forms of language, these poets reveal the nothingness at the heart of utterance which "fiction," when accepted as "truth," obscures. And, particularly in the *Maximus Poems* of Charles Olson, they demonstrate that the privileged notion of a constant "tradition" is itself a defensive trope projected by the a-temporal, technological, coercive, Western mind to protect itself against the *experience of absence* and nothingness.

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THE SECULAR HUMANISM OF WALLACE STEVENS

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Wallace Stevens sought always to be, in Hillis Miller's phrase, a poet of reality. His love of the real is existentially a religious attitude, but following it led him out of both formal religion and the ability to believe in any form of Idealism. In this sense his personal journey recapitulates that of Western culture from the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation to the Twentieth Century. Such movement, and the attention he paid it, qualify him particularly well for what became, in fact, his mission: to be the poet of the modern age. Stevens is always conscious, as in "Sunday Morning," of the loss of a sense of a world in which we are at home, make sense, and attain to fulfillment. He is conscious of the religious basis of Western humanism and sees it effectively shattered by the progress of modern thought. He seeks to devise a secular humanism to replace it, one which affirms humanity for its own sake and rejoices in its autonomous powers of consciousness and affection, giving us back a world which is, if invincibly alien, also full, rich, and fertile with possibilities, "ever changing, living in change."

CHAPTER I. This chapter deals with the religious and philosophical roots of Stevens' poetry. Stevens understood Christian theology and its philosophical and psychological implications. He also understood the implications of modern science as they undermined the mythic substructure of the Christian description of reality. He accepted the scientific description and sought to find an approach to that reality in which individual men and women could experience both its truth and the personal sense of engagement, reconciliation, and wholeness which characterize the traditional religious attitude.

CHAPTER II. This chapter studies the relationship between Stevens and Emerson, an earlier American poet who shared the sensibilities and strategy described in Chapter I. It argues that, inasmuch as he is a Romantic poet, Stevens is specifically within Emerson's tradition rather than that of Coleridge, with whom he is more often compared. In his systematic skepticism and his radical insistence on the continuing need for "an original relation" with the cosmos, Stevens resembles Emerson; and he may be seen as elaborating Emersonian skepticism into a thoroughly anti-Idealistic stance.

CHAPTER III. This chapter traces Stevens' development and ultimate abandonment of the figure of "the Hero," a device by which he seeks to master the task of dealing with an ineluctably nominalistic universe. From the 1910's to the 1940's, he casts version after version of the Hero, refining his views and program in the process. When he bids the figure farewell (in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"), it is to take on himself the Hero's functions of clear perception and courageous human response.

CHAPTER IV. This chapter follows the influence of Santayana, Bergson, and William James on Stevens' development of a secular humanism. Santayana's influence, which was personal, was paramount and mediated the influence of the other two, particularly of Bergson with whose Idealism Stevens disagreed. Santayana's ideas of "essence" and "animal faith" are of use in understanding Stevens' poetry, as is Bergson's doctrine of creative evolution so long as its vitalistic base is discredited.

CHAPTER V. This chapter examines the poetry of Stevens' last years, particularly "Esthetique du Mal," "The Auroras of Autumn," and the powerful final poems of the 1950's. In these works he has become himself "the Hero," fully alive, joyfully human, adequate to the most strenuous philosophical demands of his age and to the inevitable limitations of human mortality and finitude. It is in the confident but dis-illusioned personality behind these poems that his secular humanism is most completely realized. Order No. 76-1081, 256 pages.
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METAPHOR, RELATION, AND RESEMBLANCE IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

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According to Wallace Stevens, the Supreme Fiction may and must be believed precisely because it is a fiction. To move through and to play beyond this paradox is ultimately to transcend the central dichotomy it presupposes: that of reality/fiction. In challenging this polarity, Stevens pushes past even the most recent, and perhaps most complex, interrogation of this old opposition—specifically, phenomenology as initiated by Edmund Husserl. In tracing implicitly the steps of the “epoché” (phenomenological reduction), Stevens eventually discovers ways of moving beyond it, ways that parallel those by which such “post-phenomenologists” as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida eventually surpass it.

Stevens’ somewhat sinuous path to such transcendence may be traced by examining the three primary elements of the Supreme Fiction as expressed philosophically and incarnated in various poetic methods. These three familiar components—“It Must Be Abstract,” “It Must Change,” and “It Must Give Pleasure”—necessarily have their source in language, as seen by examining ramifications and extensions of these “musts” in terms of three kinds of connections with which language works: metaphor, relation and resemblance.

Chapter One finds that abstraction, viewed variously by Stevens as the extraction of qualities, the ineffable Ideal, the result of transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and as the subjective expression of “blooded” fictions, moves through different status-points on the spectrum of the “real,” and influences, along with acceptance or non-acceptance of the *dingansich* as “fiction,” Stevens’ attitude toward and use of metaphor.

Chapter Two examines Stevens’ explorations of relation in terms of some of the elements of change: constancy, mobility, harmony, resistance. It also examines the roles of language and the self in the process of relation.

Chapter Three traces Stevens’ transcendence of the pleasure/pain dichotomy in terms of time, resemblance and “things beyond resemblance.”

Each of these chapters reveals that the concept of “connection” is too complex to be enclosed within and explained solely by the elements of subject and object, as usually conceived. Second, each chapter probes certain outgrowths of the theory that with the fall of the subject/object dichotomy goes that of the real/fictive. What the chapters together push toward is a consideration (the Supreme Fiction itself), developed over a period of nearly fifty years, bears striking similarity to the theories of “post-phenomenologists” such as Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. For the most part, however, such resemblances remain implicit. The chapters refer only, when appropriate, to those philosophers with whom Stevens himself was familiar: Cassirer, James, Santayana, Valéry, Freud, and Nietzsche.

The fourth chapter, “It Must Be Human,” takes its title from a proposed, but never written, section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” In this last chapter, the various ramifications of the philosophical and poetic connections dealt with in the chapters on abstraction (metaphor), change (relation) and pleasure (resemblance) are made human, are allowed to “play” in human terms. This chapter illustrates the naturalness and inevitability of the transcendence already spoken of, for ultimately the labels of “real” and “imaginary” are as irrelevant and inappropriate to this last chapter as they are to the Supreme Fiction itself.

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