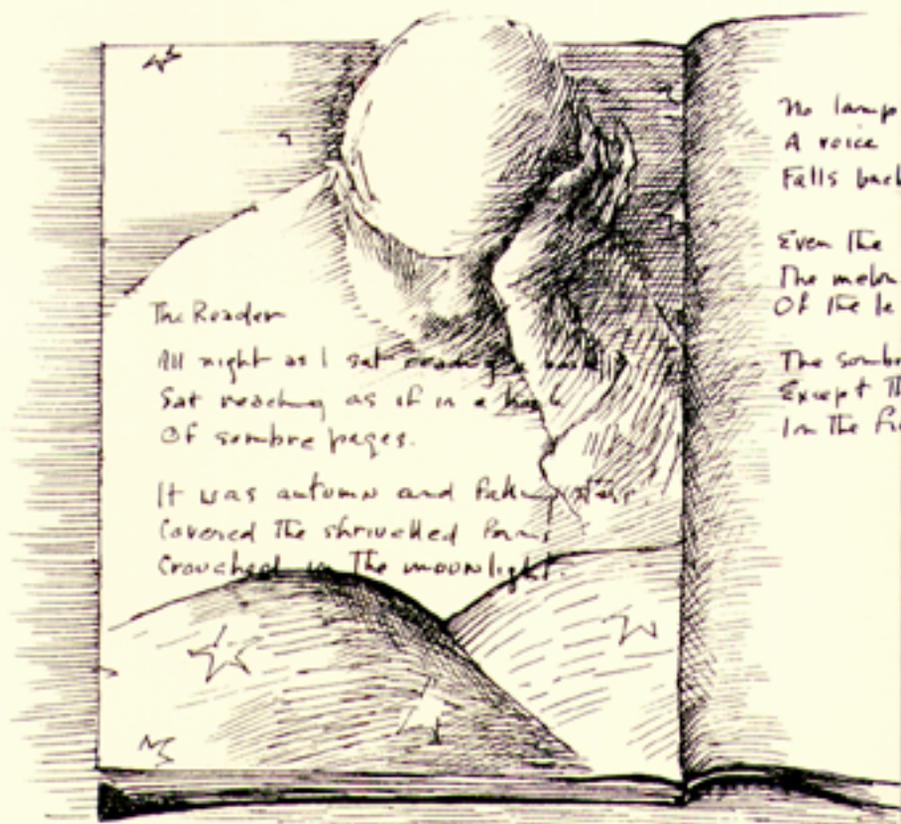


The Wallace Stevens Journal



A Publication of The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

Volume X Number 2

Fall 1986

The Wallace Stevens Journal

Volume X Number 2

Fall 1986

Contents

Wallace Stevens' Reader Poems and the Effacement of Metaphor	
—Alan D. Perlis.....	67
Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore: Two Essays and a Private	
Review	
—B. J. Leggett.....	76
"Preferring Text to Gloss": From Decreation To Deconstruction	
in Wallace Stevens Criticism	
—Melita Schaum.....	84
Stevens' Mother and "Sunday Morning"	
—Jay Dougherty.....	100
Peter Brazeau Remembered	
—Jim Harrison.....	107
Poems.....	108
Reviews.....	113
News and Comments.....	125

Cover by Kathy Jacobi—from "The Reader"

The Wallace Stevens Journal is published biannually (Spring, Fall) by The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc. Administrative and editorial offices are located at Clarkson University, Potsdam, NY 13676. Subscription rates are \$15.00 for individuals (\$25.00 for two years) and include membership in The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc. Rates for institutions are \$20.00 per year (add \$2.00 foreign). Back issues are available upon request.

Manuscripts, subscriptions, and advertising should be addressed to the editor, Clarkson University, Potsdam, NY 13676. Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and accompanied by a self-addressed envelope, with loose stamps attached.

The Wallace Stevens Journal

EDITOR
John N. Serio

ART EDITOR
Kathy Jacobi

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
George S. Lensing

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS
Susan M. Berardi
Faye A. Serio

EDITORIAL BOARD
Milton J. Bates
Frank Doggett
George S. Lensing
Roy Harvey Pearce
Joseph N. Riddel

Robert Buttel
Dorothy Emerson
A. Walton Litz
Marjorie Perloff

TECHNICAL ASSISTANT
David W. Bray

The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

PRESIDENT
John N. Serio

ADVISORY BOARD
Robert Buttel
Kathy Jacobi
A. Walton Litz

David M. Craig
George S. Lensing
Marjorie Perloff

©Copyright 1986 by The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

ISSN 0148-7132

Wallace Stevens' Reader Poems and the Effacement of Metaphor

ALAN D. PERLIS

In *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man considers the role of Marcel as reader in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. By positing a reader reading fiction in his own fiction, Proust, de Man suggests, provides a form of mediation between himself as a writer and his own readers. The "proximity," as de Man calls it, between an external reader and an interior reader, presents great problems for the "test of truth" in a literary text, for "the co-presence of intra- and extra-textual movements never reaches a synthesis. The relationship between the literal and the figural senses of a metaphor is always . . . metonymic, though motivated by a constitutive tendency to pretend the opposite" (71). The interpreting reader *in* the text and the interpreting reader *of* the text are never of the same mind. Thus, a kind of "metonymic skid," as Roland Barthes has called it (*S/Z*, 62, 120), occurs between details described (metaphors) and their interpreters, so that the pretense of embodying truth metaphorically, which de Man calls "totalization," gives way to a reading situation in which "the meaning of the text can be nothing but the plurality of its systems, its infinite (circular) 'transcribability.'" De Man's treatment of Proust's reader Marcel and Barthes's comments on texts' inevitable "plurality of . . . systems" have particular, and perhaps unique, applicability to the poems of Wallace Stevens. In a sizeable number of his poems, he posits readers reading, and sometimes reading the "text of the world" that his own poems depict. These mediating readers, whose perceptions often disappoint the reality in which Stevens places them, complicate the process of reading the poems themselves by introducing a "plurality of . . . systems" and at the same time they explain the corrective Stevens in other poems—the poet who literally edits the passions and observations of his protagonists. Most importantly, these readers speak to the problematic of metaphor and the inevitable "metonymic skid" that has tantalized and often frustrated Stevens' most acute critics.

In his last twenty years, Stevens wrote four poems whose explicit and single focus is readers and reading: "The Reader" (1935), "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" (1942), "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (1945), and "Large Red Man Reading" (1948).¹ "The Reader" establishes the theme for the three poems that follow it: the letters in the texts being read become effaced and the reader finds himself directly confronting nature ("The sombre pages bore no print / Except the trace of burning stars / In the frosty heaven" [*CP* 147]). The reading itself proceeds in darkness but paradoxically gives way to illumination. For as the letters fade, nature superimposes itself, almost like a palimpsest, and speaks in an alphabet that is ultimately clearer than any which makes words. In "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," for example, "That elemental parent, the green night, / [Teaches] a fusky alphabet" (*CP* 267): nature speaks more clearly about nature than anything written in a book is capable of speaking; thus the

book itself, in the hands of the sensitive reader, is retranscribed—the book becomes the world, and metaphors, which Stevens has elsewhere described as “the intricate evasions of as” (CP 486),² are wiped away as if they were so much detritus and are replaced by whatever things a metaphor feebly approximates.

The reader who is confronted with the effaced script of metaphor takes on an almost mystical character in “Large Red Man Reading.”

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the
poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips
among them.

(CP 423)

The catalogue of pots, pans and tulips anticipates the catalogue of bed, books, chair and moving nuns in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” (1952) as images of the quotidian that stand on the threshold of transcendence. The ghosts of ordinary things crave nothing but the things themselves—the poetry of life rather than the poetry of metaphor; they want the “poverty” of “things as they are” (CP 165). When the large red man, the native American, the inhabitant of elemental things, reads the “great blue tabulae,” the ghosts who listen “would have wept to step barefoot into reality” (CP 423). They would even “have seized on what was ugly / And laughed, as he sat there reading . . . The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law: / *Poesis, poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines” (CP 424). The ultimate *poesis* is the “literal character[,]” the thing itself, or ordinary being. That such a *poesis* may be “vatic” suggests that truth lies in the deconstruction of tropes and a return to the mystery of objects unadorned by language.

“Large Red Man Reading” is perhaps Stevens’ most Whitmanesque poem, and Harold Bloom, certainly, would see it in terms of Stevens’ struggle to break away from precursors whom, paradoxically, he is compelled to emulate.³ What is Whitmanesque in the poem is not only the long, rolling lines, wholly uncharacteristic of Stevens, but also the catalogues which, like Whitman’s own, are meant as a simple listing of objects rescued from the clouds of trope and returned to their literal selves. But this poem about a vatic reader reading from the book of “things as they are” is also unlike Whitman in a very significant way: it is couched in a language that is conditional. The word “would” stands out as if to suggest that the deconstructed thing can only exist in the absence of the human referent. The last (and longest) sentence of the poem is entirely premised on what “would have” happened if a large red man could have actually superimposed “the great blue tabulae,” the catalogue of “things as they are,” upon the alphabet of tropes.

But nothing actually happens in the poem beyond the expression of the poet's own belated hope.

In fact, not only is the "fussy alphabet" inaccessible to human perception; the attempt to read such an alphabet involves the reader in an inevitable and unavoidable solipsism. "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" outlines this dilemma. Once again, the reader becomes the book and "The words were spoken as if there was no book" (CP 358) but only things themselves. The characteristic Stevensian night is like "a perfection of thought" (CP 358) because it is only night and not words about the night. This, Stevens tells us, is "The access of perfection to the page" (CP 358). But the conclusion of the poem militates against its own premise:

The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

(CP 359)

If the "calm" of meaning is the night itself, and if the night itself is the reader reading, then things themselves are driven back into the human referent, where, as Stevens said only a few months after completing "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "Life consists / Of propositions about life" (CP 355). This is why "Large Red Man Reading" must be a conditional—should I say "provisional?"—poem. Left only with propositions—"tropes" would be a crucial parallel term—the reader in the poems is stuck in a quagmire of language just as is the reader of the poems. He, too, is a "scholar of one candle" (CP 417), as he is called in "The Auroras of Autumn": a solitary figure struggling against nearly total darkness to find reality with the imperfect tool of tropes.

There is, finally, a pathos of disappointed desire in these poems about readers. And a part of this pathos must be directed toward *ourselves* as readers. For Stevens, in placing a reader between his own readers and his unavoidably trope-ridden text, has created a screen between us as would-be readers, who might have enjoyed "the pleasures of merely circulating" in the wizardry of metaphor, and the belated, failed hope of the text, which ostensibly was to speak to some kind of truth. It is as if Stevens had placed a danger sign between us and his metaphors to warn us that the act of reading has more to do with the act itself than with increasing our knowledge of reality. If we can derive enough to "suffice" in "merely circulating," we can find fulfillment in the text. If we demand more than new "propositions about life," Stevens' interior readers teach us to beware. For in these reader poems, Stevens has created a poetics of indeterminacy; just as, in its counterpart in physics, the act of observation sufficiently disturbs what is being observed to make it impossible to know the observed itself as it actually is, so in poetry the recording of observation, the act of the mind, blurs the thing recorded. To the question at the end of "The Man on the Dump"—"Where

was it one first heard of the truth? The the" (CP 203)—the example of Stevens' interior readers seems to suggest that the answer is "nowhere," precisely because of the humanity of the premised "one."

But however imperfect language is as a vehicle for embodying "The the," it is nonetheless valuable because it is our only access for continuing to make propositions about life. Stevens may deconstruct the ideal of his interior readers, but he does not attempt to deconstruct the desire to read. And in fact the very presence of these interior readers is a crucial form of a kind of dialectic⁴ that Stevens uses often and for powerful effect in other, longer poems. The dissonance created between the interior readers and ourselves is symptomatic of the dissonance between the voice of the poet and the thinkers and/or speakers with whom he peoples his poems. In "Sunday Morning," "The Comedian as the Letter C," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," and "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay," to name a few of the most salient examples, Stevens sets up "straw dog" protagonists whose beliefs and aspirations seem to exist for the purpose of the poet's attacks on them. They, too, are readers; though they do not have books before them, they have the world, and though they do not seek things as they are, surely they are committed to an understanding of things as they should be.

The woman's search for some "imperishable bliss" (CP 68) in "Sunday Morning" is to a certain degree realized in the high-toned Christian woman's conception of an ascetic and single-minded heaven; the comedian's search for a true, polar North is likewise realized in Mrs. Uruguay's naked search for the real, which requires her to "wipe[] away moonlight like mud" (CP 249). In each of these four poems, the "sleight-of-hand" poet explodes the myopic search for an ultimate, imperishable truth into a fragmentary and fleeting panoply of images. He is the "figure of capable imagination" (CP 249) who climbs *down* from the mountain of inaccessible truth into the village and creates "out of the martyrs' bones, / The ultimate elegance: the imagined land" (CP 250). The "imagined land," in turn, is the poet's system of tropes, which Stevens confesses are "evasions" of the unrealizable "things as they are."

Probably the most obvious and certainly the least compassionate of these attempts to deconstruct the premises of an interior reader-of-the-world is "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." When Stevens transforms the woman's vision of a "haunted heaven" into a "masque / Beyond the planets" and creates a "bawdiness" of fat monks participating in a "jovial hullabaloo among the spheres" (CP 59) from her prim little conception of an ascetic life, he establishes a dialectic between the impoverished⁵ and the fertile imagination, though suggesting that the latter is more poetic, and ultimately more naturally human. But, given the evidence from the reader poems that Stevens would begin composing thirteen years after "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," it is clear that the object of such a dialectic is the debunking of all figures who attempt to read the world in a single-minded fashion. In short, it is almost programmatic in his poems to take apart all searchers for "The the" and to leave the poet sitting like a king on the detritus, or "dump," of his imagery from which, in the absence of ultimate truth, he continues to spin out "propositions about life." Thus the dicta which organize

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" — "It Must be Abstract," "It Must Change," "It Must Give Pleasure" — seem to embody an aesthetic that Stevens had developed over the years: each of these dicta is premised on the failure of Stevens' interior readers to find some kind of final reality in things as they are.

The four reader poems discussed earlier can be seen, then, as culminations of Stevens' pervasive tendency to place a mediating figure between his readers and the context of his poems. What we as readers and these mediating readers have in common is the role of interpreter; yet the interior and exterior readers arrive at different, and often contradictory, interpretations of his imagery. Moreover, though the voice of the poet seems to serve as a corrective to the misguided and hopeless search for a monochromatic reality on the part of his interior readers (both of texts and of books of the world), it is not as if our ultimate distance from these misguided seekers affords a more accurate view of reality. For if reality can only be evaded rather than reached by means of tropes, we are no closer to it than they are, since beyond their reality lies only this world of tropes, "The ultimate elegance: the imagined land." In Barthes's terms, we are left with a "plurality of systems" arranged—or should I say "disarranged?"—in no hierarchical order.

Furthermore, it is this disavowal of an ultimate reality that creates "metonymic skid" in Stevens' poems. In de Man's terms, the difference between metaphor and metonymy is the difference between "analogy and contiguity" (14). Metaphors embody reality; metonymy creates a kind of parareality, though it claims to perform the same function as metaphor.⁶ De Man discusses the hopelessness of metaphor, of the "totalization" of reality, in Proust's passage about Marcel reading in *Swann's Way*:

For our present purpose, the most striking aspect of this passage is the juxtaposition of figural and metafigural language. It contains seductive metaphors that bring into play a variety of irresistible objects: chamber music, butterflies, stars, books, running brooks, etc. . . . it writes figuratively about figures. It contrasts two ways of evoking the natural experience of summer [Proust's and Marcel's] and unambiguously states its preference for one of these ways over the other . . . The preference is expressed by means of a distinction that corresponds to the difference between metaphor and metonymy, necessity and chance being a legitimate way to distinguish between analogy and contiguity. . . . The passage is *about* the aesthetic superiority of metaphor over metonymy, but this aesthetic claim is made by means of categories that are the ontological ground of the metaphysical system that allows for the aesthetic to come into being as a category. (14)

The "ontological ground" of Proust's passage is effaced by the fact that the superiority of metaphor over metonymy can only be expressed metonymically. As de Man puts it: "A rhetorical reading of the passage reveals that the figural praxis and the metafigural theory do not converge and that the assertion of the mastery of metaphor over metonymy owes its persuasive power to the use of meto-

nymic structures" (15). De Man's observations prove to be remarkably consistent with Stevens' own "figural praxis." In the reader poems, Stevens provides his own "variety of irresistible objects"—objects even more commonplace than Marcel's—yet they are evocations of a reality that can only be described paratactically and thus evasively.

In "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," for example, the summer night which is "like a perfection of thought" is the "totalization" of reality. It is a metaphor; but it can only be embodied metonymically. For the ultimate reality is the reader reading and not the subject of his text. The hoped-for reality of metaphor remains mute; the poet, meanwhile, is left with the image of the reader reading a metonymic representation of *experiencing* reality, which itself is driven back into the solipsism of the reader and away from the text. Not only is the poem doomed to speak metonymically about the superiority of metaphor; it is also dooming "the the" by suggesting that the very act of reading metonymizes unrealizable metaphorical structures.

While such a deconstructive praxis, which reveals itself not only in the reader poems, but in all poems in which Stevens places intermediary interpreters, may seem like mere trickery, it in fact performs an essential service for one of Stevens' broader aims as a poet: it appropriates reality to his ultimate concern with the phenomenology of perception.⁷ While the poet's images serve to evade the reality of the world external to mind, they say a great deal about the "imagined land": the world of the mind itself. To appreciate the importance of the reader poems to Stevens' observations about perception, one need only note the differences between the poet's early and late work.⁸ The concern for the transient world of physical reality in such early poems as, say, "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," and "The Comedian as the Letter C," where such questions as whether man is the intelligence of his soil or the soil is man's intelligence are raised, gives way to a far more meditative mode, in which an "inquisitor of structures" (CP 510) creates a purely human intelligence. This intelligence, in turn, is based on the assumption that while we keep "coming constantly so near" (CP 521) reality, the ennobling of the human spirit comes from the act of meditation itself, which bears relation to the principle of Zeno's arrow and not to any discovery of things themselves as they actually are. In the next-to-last year of his life, Stevens would write a short meditative poem that speaks definitively to things themselves. "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" conveys his "new knowledge of reality."

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.

(CP 534)

The solitary chorister's song is part of the "colossal sun"; the would-be choir is the sun itself. And though the chorister's song comes from the sun, the sun is no closer to him in the heavens than it has ever been. The "choral rings" are the human song of the sun and not a part of the sun itself. Thus, the "new knowledge of reality" is the act of singing the song and not the sun as a freshly realized object. If the "thing itself" is unreachable, we can at least take comfort in the imaginative mind that attempts its metonymic approximations.

This developing and maturing process in Stevens' *oeuvre* is intersected by his reader poems which, by positing an intermediary voice between his images and his readers, speak frankly to the "metonymic skid" that makes the "totalizing" process of metaphor impossible to achieve. The effaced text in Stevens' work is the only text. And the palimpsest-making process is susceptible to infinite transcriptions. But by employing metonymy to create a "plurality of systems," Stevens would ultimately suggest the poet's greatest accomplishment: the realization of an "act of the mind" (CP 240). As to the ability to produce a faithful rendering of things in nature, the mature Stevens asserts in "Description without Place" that

the theory of description matters most.
It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world,
The buzzing world and lipping firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self.

(CP 345)

In "Stevens' Boundaries," Michael Beehler writes that the "horizon of poetic language . . . cannot fail to be thought and written—even if what is then affirmed to lie over that horizon in some literal reality is marked only by disclosing an absence within metaphor itself."⁹ What is finally solid in the mind is not some literal reality over a horizon beyond which we cannot see. But the metonymizing of things as they are produces a structure of greater value to us humans than the thing itself, which preceded the coming of the word and can all too easily turn it away.

University of Alabama at Birmingham

Notes

¹For the dating of these poems, I have used Holly Stevens' *The Palm at the End of the Mind* (1972). Quotations from Stevens' poems are taken from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, and will be cited in the text parenthetically as CP and page number.

²Helen Vendler speaks at length about these "evasions" in "The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens." She contends that Stevens alternately makes propositions in metaphors and then recants. "As if" becomes a dominant motif in many of his poems—a phrase that hedges against the reality of his own assertions. In "That Which Is Always Beginning": Stevens's Poetry of Affirmation," Steven Shaviro makes especially apt use of "The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens." In his own deconstructive reading of "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," Joseph Kronick sees Phosphor as a realist. Kronick says of the realist that he "believes in nature, 'the elemental parent,' as that which guarantees the descent of meaning and language, and thus expects to find the voice of the author, or truth, in a text" (91). He also says of "Large Red Man Reading" that it is "an allegory of our desire to hear in a poem the echo of the logos, 'a parental space'" (98). But I believe that this is a failed desire, just as the desire to find truth in the text must inevitably fail, since all one finds is a series of metonymic translations. Kronick shrewdly and, I think compellingly, concludes that "the reduction to the first idea" (93) in the reader poems "becomes, not an approach to the thing itself, but a denial of the temporal succession that ties language to the phenomenal world" (95). This is an anti-romantic element in Stevens that seems to become more pervasive as his poetic career progresses.

³See Harold Bloom's *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, which is predicated in part on the argument that Stevens' poetry establishes a tradition that springs especially from Emerson and Whitman.

⁴Shaviro would disagree here. "Stevens's Poetry of Affirmation" is predicated in part on the idea that, at least in the later poetry with which he is mostly concerned, "incompatible possibilities subsist together . . . without undergoing any process of unification or dialectical interaction" (221). The absence of unification is certainly crucial to an understanding of the reader poems, but to argue that there is a like absence of a dialectic is to ignore the argumentative stance that Stevens so often takes vis-à-vis his interior interpreters of reality.

⁵In *The Poems of Our Climate*, Bloom sees the terms "poverty" and "impoverished" in a different light—as embodying the hunger of the human imagination rather than its emptiness or exhaustion. I accept Bloom's interpretation in most instances; but I would also assert that many of Stevens' poems, including the ones I discuss here, spring from a conflict between the absence of imagination, which produces myopic perceptions of reality, and the fertile imagination, which is capable of making endless "propositions about life."

⁶For an especially useful discussion of the differences between metaphor and metonymy in de Man's work, see Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction*, pp. 243-46.

⁷For this observation and its implications, I am especially indebted to David L. Lavery's "The More Than Rational Distortion' In the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," an article that focuses on the relationship between perception and reality in Stevens' work.

⁸Shaviro's focus is on the spare, determined quality of Stevens' later work, which he sees as more nearly "affirmative" than his earlier work. Not everyone agrees with Shaviro. Robert Buttel, for example, proposes in "Knowledge on the Edges of Oblivion": Stevens' Late Poems" that external reality is almost entirely absent in Stevens' later work, and that, far from being affirmative, it seems almost to deny external reality and leave the reader with the sense that the only reality is the shifting mental constructs—the "propositions about life"—that are structured against the unknowability of external fact.

⁹*The Wallace Stevens Journal* 7 (1982): 103.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- Beehler, Michael. "Stevens' Boundaries." *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 7 (1983): 99-107.
- Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Buttel, Robert. "'Knowledge on the Edges of Oblivion': Stevens' Late Poems." *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 5 (1981): 11-16.
- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Kronick, Joseph. "Large White Man Reading: Stevens' Genealogy of the Giant." *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 7 (1983): 89-98.
- Lavery, David L. "'The More Than Rational Distortion' in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens." *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 7 (1983): 3-9.
- Shaviro, Steven. "'That Which Is Always Beginning': Stevens's Poetry of Affirmation." *PMLA* 100 (1985): 220-233.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*. Edited by Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage, 1972.
- Vendler, Helen. "The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens." In *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, eds. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller, 163-78. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965.

Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore: Two Essays and a Private Review

B. J. LEGGETT

I knock this morning at your door
To bow and say Forever! Moore!
Wallace Stevens¹

"The web of friendship between poets is the most delicate thing in the world—and the most precious," Wallace Stevens wrote to Marianne Moore in 1953 (L 771), and he had good reason to value their late-blossoming friendship. Of the contemporary poets that mattered, it was Moore who first recognized the peculiar virtues of Stevens' poetry and brought attention to them in a succession of encouraging reviews. Her earliest review (of *Harmonium* in 1924) was the most enthusiastic notice Stevens' first volume received; her last (of *The Auroras of Autumn* in 1951) pays tribute to a collection of poems "embodying the thinking of a lifetime."² In between she celebrates Stevens as "America's chief conjurer—as bold a virtuoso and one with as cunning a rhetoric as we have produced."³

It was not, however, mere gratitude for Moore's championing of his verse that determined Stevens' view of their friendship. He clearly saw her as the embodiment of a movement in contemporary poetry to which he himself was dedicated, and which he described in the thirties as the "new romantic." Long before their first meeting she is for him "one of the angels" whose "style is an angelic style" (L 290). What she is attempting in poetry "is really a good deal more important than what Williams does" (L 278). Her style is "as unique as Gertrude Stein's and . . . makes Miss Stein seem shallow" (L 290). She is, in short, a model for the direction of contemporary poetry:

the way she breaks up older forms is merely an attempt to free herself for the pursuit of the thing in which she is interested; and . . . the thing in which she is interested in all the strange collocations of her work is that which is essential in poetry, always: the romantic. But a fresh romantic. (L 279)

After he met Moore—surprisingly late in his career in 1943⁴—and came to know her, Stevens' praise turned from her style to her personal integrity. She is now "a moral force 'in light blue'" (L 715), "the true connoisseur, who expertises everything she does" (L 734). He recognizes "her faithfulness to the exquisite standards she sets for herself" (L 780); he appreciates the absence in her of the usual artistic ego: "How good she is as compared to most literary people! None of the egotism and nerves" (L 772).

On his side of the friendship Stevens published two essays on Moore, "A Poet That Matters" in 1935 and "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems" in 1948.⁵

These essays are, however, as much concerned with other (for Stevens) weightier matters as with Moore's poetry, and they suggest that Moore and Stevens represent opposite poles in their exercise of the craft of the review. Moore, as Donald Hall has observed, is an unsystematic reviewer who depends less on a thesis or point of view than on a canny juxtaposition of quotation and comment.⁶ Her reviews of Stevens are, characteristically, direct confrontations with his poems, attempts to distill the essence of his verse through a series of quotations interspersed with comment that never wanders from the poems themselves. Stevens, on the other hand, avoided such naked confrontation. He required a more impersonal context, a larger theme, and in his two published treatments of Moore's verse she is subordinated to other concerns, the "new romantic" in 1935 and "poetic truth" in 1948, for both of which she serves as example. To discover a more unguarded reaction to Moore's poetry, one must go to an unpublished review Stevens wrote in the back flyleaf and paste-down of his copy of Moore's *Selected Poems*.⁷ I am interested here in all three reviews—two published and one unpublished—for what they reveal both about Stevens' reading of Moore and about the shifts in the conception of poetry that determine his reading.

The first of the published essays, "A Poet That Matters," was written at a time when Stevens was attempting to define something he called the "new romantic." A week or so before receiving the request for the Moore review, he had completed and submitted to the poetry quarterly *Alcegis* the poem "Sailing After Lunch" (see *L* 276-78), and he later informed T. C. Wilson, who had solicited the Moore review, "Both the poem SAILING AFTER LUNCH, and the note on SELECTED POEMS are expressions of the same thing. The poem preceded the note" (*L* 282). "Sailing After Lunch," which begins, "It is the word *pejorative* that hurts,"⁸ is explained by Stevens in this manner:

When people speak of the romantic, they do so in what the French commonly call a *pejorative* sense. But poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic. Without this new romantic, one gets nowhere; with it, the most casual things take on transcendence, and the poet rushes brightly, and so on. What one is always doing is keeping the romantic pure: eliminating from it what people speak of as the romantic. (*L* 277)

Having completed "Sailing After Lunch" and pondered the new romantic, Stevens quite understandably responded to the request for a review of *Selected Poems* as an opportunity to explore his new conception. He replied to Wilson: "it seems to me that Miss Moore is endeavoring to create a new romantic; . . . Anyhow, whether or not that is what she intends (even though unconsciously) it would be interesting too, if on a careful review of her work the work supported it, to apply her work to that theory" (*L* 279).

It is in this context that "A Poet That Matters" can best be understood, that is, as another version of "Sailing After Lunch" with Moore as the contemporary poet

attempting to purify the romantic. The significance of the review for present readers of Stevens' critical prose is not, consequently, its analysis of Moore's verse but the answers it provides to two questions: Why did Stevens choose the label *new romantic* to designate what he saw as the proper direction for contemporary poetry, and why did he choose Moore as his representative poet for that movement? The essay juxtaposes two romantics, one of which is "a relic of the imagination," the romantic in the pejorative sense which "merely connotes obsolescence" (OP 251), and a second which is the romantic of Moore. Since Stevens obviously identifies the romantic with the creative imagination (the romantic "mean[s] always the living and at the same time the imaginative" [OP 251]), then it follows that the romantic "constitutes the vital element in poetry," and it is "absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet." One is a romantic or "one is not a poet at all" (OP 251-52). Yet the imagination, as the essential romantic ingredient of poetry, "does not often delight in the same thing twice" (OP 252), and the romantic in its pejorative sense as a "relic of the imagination" means something that the imagination has, *in the past*, delighted in. "A Poet That Matters" is also, then, an early version of what in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" becomes the dictum "It Must Change" and what in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" becomes a conception of the imagination as "always attaching itself to a new reality" (NA 22). The new romantic is for Stevens the imagination constantly adjusting itself in relation to what he later calls "the pressure of reality" (NA 36). The romantic "must always be living. It is in the sense of living intensity, living singularity that it is the vital element in poetry" (OP 252).

How, then, does Moore's verse exhibit the new romantic? Principally, Stevens implies, in its intermingling of the imaginative and the genuine, which is to say that in Moore's poetry the imagination has successfully attached itself to a new reality. He quotes two passages from "The Steeple-Jack" as illustration. The first contains the phrase "moon vines trained on fishing-twine." Stevens comments, "Moon-vines are moon-vines and tedious. But moon-vines trained on fishing-twine are something else and they are as perfectly as it is possible for anything to be what interests Miss Moore. They are an intermingling" (OP 251). The romantic moon-vines, that is, are authenticated by the genuine fishing-twine. The second passage—"There are no banyans, frangipani nor / jack-fruit trees; nor an exotic serpent / life"—is saved from becoming romantic in the pejorative sense by the fact simply that Moore *denies* the presence of these exotic images in the scene she is describing: "She hybridizes the thing by a negative" (OP 251). Moore has in fact defined Stevens' new romantic in her conception of "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Stevens notes,

The very conjunction of imaginary gardens and real toads is one more specimen of the romantic of Miss Moore. Above all things she demands

the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness.

She demands the romantic that is genuine, that is living, the enriching poetic reality. (*OP* 253)

Moore exemplifies for Stevens his assumption, later amplified in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," that the vitality of poetry wanes when it adheres to the past, the obsolescent, and flourishes when it adheres to the present, the living, the singular.

By the time of the second essay on Moore in 1948, "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems," Stevens' view of poetry had undergone a subtle change. He was now attempting to define not the romantic but the real—"poetic truth." Moore once again becomes his representative poet, and her verse is once again relegated to the status of illuminating example, her poem "He 'Digesteth Harde Yron'" being used to illustrate a thesis Stevens had taken from a philosophical paper by H. D. Lewis, "On Poetic Truth."⁹ "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems" is of very minor interest as an account of Moore's verse, and it contains surprisingly little of Stevens himself, since he is present, as he says, only to bring together the poem and the paper. The thesis of the paper is that "poetry has to do with reality in its most individual aspect" (*NA* 93), so that an isolated fact, released from its context, from experience, from an individual perspective, has no significance for the poet. "Reality," Stevens interprets Lewis as saying, "is not the thing but the aspect of the thing" (*NA* 95), in poetry the aspect of individuality imparted by the poet's perspective. Stevens illustrates this easily enough by comparing two accounts of the ostrich, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* account illustrating "the reality of isolated fact" (*NA* 94-95) and Moore's "He 'Digesteth Harde Yron'" illustrating the reality of "aesthetic integration" (*NA* 95) or the establishment of an individual reality.

This rather predictable argument does, however, reach a surprising conclusion, surprising especially in light of Stevens' earlier account of Moore's poetry. He now concludes, following Lewis, that the function of the poem is not to produce meaning or even to communicate emotion, but to impart the sense of a solid reality beyond the imagination. The purpose of the poem, he argues, is "to mediate for us a reality not ourselves" (*NA* 99):

if [Lewis] is right, the question as to Miss Moore's poem is not in respect to its meaning but in respect to its potency as a work of art. Does it make us so aware of the reality with which it is concerned, because of the poignancy and penetration of the poet, that it forces something upon our consciousness? (*NA* 99)

This means that the "'something said'" in a poem is important neither as statement nor as expression of feeling; it is important "only in so far as the saying of that particular something in a special way is a revelation of reality" (*NA* 99).

In the earlier essay an examination of Moore's "The Steeple-Jack" "leaves one indubitably convinced that she leans to the romantic" (*OP* 250), that, in fact, she is a representative of the romantic imagination's adaptation to the twentieth cen-

tury, hybridizing moon-vines and fishing-twine, smuggling into the poem exotic images. Moore is romantic, according to the definitions by A. E. Powell and Professor Babbit that Stevens gives us in the first essay, in that she "seeks to reproduce for us the feeling as it lives within [herself]" (OP 251); she is romantic in pursuing what is "wonderful rather than probable," what is "strange, unexpected, intense, superlative, extreme, unique, etc." (OP 252). In the later essay, however, she represents a conception of poetry which appears implicitly to deny or contradict the new romantic. She represents the function of poetry as "contact with reality as it impinges upon us from outside, the sense that we can touch and feel a solid reality which does not wholly dissolve itself into the conceptions of our own minds. . . . Is not Miss Moore creating or finding and revealing some such reality . . . ?" (NA 96), Stevens asks. His reading of her poems has thus moved to re-align itself with a theory of poetry that shifted perceptibly in his later years from a reliance on the properties of the creative imagination.

Drawn to Moore's verse for reasons which are hardly articulated in his published accounts, Stevens easily molded it into whatever shape his evolving theory of poetry demanded, and the two published essays give us very little of his direct response to the poems. It is for this reason that his private review of Moore's *Selected Poems* is of interest. Because it is not in the service of a thesis and it escapes as well the evasiveness produced in Stevens by the presence of an audience, the brief review offers a relatively candid account of his reaction to Moore's verse which did not survive in the published essay. Apparently written in 1935 as a warm-up for "A Poet That Matters," the review begins formally and almost comically periphrastically, but abandons its pretensions at the end of the first paragraph to adopt a more intimate and revealing tone, as if Stevens has dropped his public mask for a moment. Here it is in full:

What are the spiritual forces that have made Miss Moore? One of them is the desire to come close to the truth. About what? I think about literature as a phase of life. Not about literature alone. Nor about life alone. Not about literature and also about life. But about literature as a phase of life. And not, of course, about life as a phase of literature. This gives her book an extraordinary value, vivacity and an extraordinary variety. It is an exquisite book. But it does communicate literature rather than life although it is true that the literature that it communicates is a phase of life.

It has not the tiniest interest in people. There are no people in the book. Thank God. This is a great relief. It is nice to relax with a book that is not about people. On the other hand, there are more animals than there are in Barnum & Bailey's big show. Miss Moore loves animals. Not the way people love animals. But the way Miss Moore loves them. She loves stranded whales, twenty-five-pound lobsters, ring lizards, newts, snakes, cats, storks, anoas, mongooses, and Nile geese, the bower-bird, the dragons, the serpent-dove, the frigate-pelican, the peacock, barnacles, a horse that feels a flea, real toads, zebras, mocking-birds, sea-

unicorns and land-unicorns, apes. However, you no more think of a menagerie while reading the book, than you think of fertilizer while eating an apple. Miss Moore has no more interest in animals than in people. She loves them as subject-matter. In *The Buffalo* (26) she is not concerned with that animal as an animal, which is how people are usually concerned with animals, but she is concerned with buffalos in general or rather with the buffalos of India compared with other animals of ox-ancestry. The animals are not masks for people. They are animals but abstract or aesthetic animals.¹⁰

Apparently Stevens wrote this before he had conceived of the review of *Selected Poems* as an opportunity to expand his theory of the new romantic; at any rate there is no trace of it in this version. The antithesis is not past and present or the obsolescent and the living, as in the published essay, but life and literature, an uncommunicative dichotomy we recognize as simply a variation of the equally vague imagination-reality complex. The review is in this sense typical of Stevens' cast of mind in the years immediately preceding "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and its prose counterpart "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." His tendency at this time is to divide the whole of experience into imagination and reality, literature and life, and to locate the object of his critical inquiry somewhere in the space between the two poles.

If the published review of 1935 anticipates the second of his notes to the supreme fiction, "It Must Change," the unpublished review anticipates the first of the notes, "It Must Be Abstract." The review is helpful in suggesting how Stevens himself read that note. In the life-literature antithesis Moore's verse is placed on the side of literature: "it does communicate literature rather than life." It has "not the tiniest interest in people," and although Moore loves animals, she does not love them "the way people love animals." Following his catalog of animals found in *Selected Poems* Stevens notes that "you no more think of a menagerie while reading the book, than you think of fertilizer while eating an apple." This is because Moore "has no more interest in animals than in people." She loves them only "as subject-matter," since her verse communicates not life but literature. Her animals are, finally, "abstract or aesthetic animals."

Stevens' conception of abstraction, especially in the first section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," is perhaps the most frequently misread aspect of his theory of poetry. I have argued elsewhere that critics such as J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Joseph Riddel go badly wrong in equating Stevens' use of the term *abstract* with a search for the thing itself, what Miller calls the "uncreated rock of reality."¹¹ Stevens' use of *abstract* in this review of Moore obviously supports the conclusion that he means by *abstract* the opposite of "real" or "the thing itself." Moore's animals are not real animals. She, in fact, has no interest in animals except as subject-matter for poems that express literature rather than life. Her animals are therefore *abstract* in the sense that they are "aesthetic" rather than "realistic." This is the only instance I have discovered where Stevens explicitly equates *abstract* and *aesthetic*. Had he

been as explicit in other uses of the term we would perhaps have a better understanding of the first of his three notes on the supreme fiction. On the basis of his use of the term here (and elsewhere),¹² it seems clear to me that "It Must Be Abstract" cannot be translated "It Must Be the Thing Itself"; it suggests, to the contrary, "It Must Be Aesthetic" or (if it did not produce a tautology) "It Must Be a Fiction."

What is apparent in this private review is that it is the remoteness of Moore's verse from "life" that makes it most attractive to Stevens. The fact that it is about literature as a phase of life (and not the opposite) gives the poetry its "value," its "vivacity," and its "extraordinary variety." The fact that it has not the slightest interest in people is a "great relief." The underlying assumption is that Moore's people and animals are purely abstract or aesthetic so that they do not remind the reader of the reality from which they are derived: reading about Moore's literary animals no more produces a sense of a menagerie of real animals than the act of eating an apple produces a sense of the fertilizer that nourished it. As we have seen, this view of Moore's verse will be almost completely reversed by the 1948 essay, where the value of her poetry lies in its ability to give us contact with "a solid reality which does not wholly dissolve itself into the conceptions of our own minds" (NA 96). And it is this tendency which is perhaps most noteworthy in following Stevens' criticism of Moore: as his views of poetry changed Stevens did not abandon Moore's verse but simple reinterpreted it. The two reviews of 1935 reflect the notions of the romantic, the imaginative, and the abstract that culminated in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The 1948 review is a product of the post-supreme-fiction attempt to transcend the intentional and the imaginative that culminated in the poems of *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*.

Stevens' three accounts of the contemporary poet for whom he had the highest regard reveal more than anything else the degree to which his reading of contemporary poetry was dictated by his privileging of theory, so that a description of Moore's verse is always subordinate to a conception of poetry. The two published reviews, since they give us two quite divergent conceptions of poetry, present two versions of Marianne Moore which bear only the vaguest resemblance to one another. It is only in the unpublished review that we approach a reading of Moore that is not wholly dictated by theoretical concerns. Here we have at least a glimpse of the appeal that Moore's poems held for Stevens in 1935, and it appears to lie in their fictive or, in Stevens' term, *abstract* qualities. They announce their status as artifice and are removed from the world of real people and animals; they communicate literature rather than life. Such an appeal may have been to a great extent a matter of temperament or taste. "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble," Stevens confesses in the *Adagia* (OP 158). Whatever the ultimate appeal of Moore's poetry, it is one which seems impervious to Stevens' two published attempts to capture it, for no amount of theorizing on his part is of much help in explaining it. The fact that Moore illustrates the new romantic or poetic truth is of value only for Stevens the theorist. As a reader of poetry, he is attracted, predictably enough,

by qualities—a lack of interest in human subjects, an abstractness, a remoteness from naturalistic themes—that have been used to describe his own verse.

University of Tennessee

Notes

¹Stevens' telegram to Moore on the occasion of her 1952 National Book Award for *Collected Poems*. In *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 738; hereafter cited as *L*.

²"The World Imagined . . . Since We Are Poor," first published in *Poetry New York* and reprinted in *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, eds. Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1962), p. 165.

³"Conjurings That Endure," first published in *Poetry* in 1937 and reprinted in *Predilections* (New York: Viking, 1955), p. 32.

⁴Two of Moore's biographers are almost certainly wrong in implying that the Stevens-Moore friendship began much earlier. Pamela White Hadas places Stevens and Moore together in a group of young poets in Greenwich Village in 1916. See *Marianne Moore: Poet of Affection* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1971), p. ix. Donald Hall gives the impression of an association between Stevens and Moore in the early 1920s. See *Marianne Moore: The Cage and the Animal* (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 28. Stevens, however, makes clear that they first met at Mt. Holyoke College when Stevens delivered the lecture "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (*L* 457). See also Laurence Stapleton, *Marianne Moore: The Poet's Advance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 29, 238n. Moore confirms that they first met on the occasion of Stevens' lecture at Mt. Holyoke, although she mistakenly dates the lecture as 1941.

⁵"A Poet That Matters" appeared in *Life and Letters Today* in 1935 and is reprinted in *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957), pp. 247-54; hereafter cited as *OP*. "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems" was published in *Quarterly Review of Literature* in 1948 and is reprinted in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951), pp. 93-103; hereafter cited as *NA*.

⁶See Hall's estimate of Moore as a reviewer in *Marianne Moore: The Cage and the Animal*, pp. 135-36.

The volume is in The Wallace Stevens Archive at the Huntington Library. I am grateful to the Huntington for permission to quote from Stevens' marginalia.

⁸*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 120.

⁹Lewis' paper may be found in *OP*, pp. 235-238, since Morse mistakenly attributed it to Stevens (Stevens having copied it out in his own hand).

¹⁰I have supplied only three minor editorial changes—the indentation at the beginning of the first paragraph, the mark of interrogation following the first sentence, and the spelling out of the word *come*—which Stevens had abbreviated as *c.*—in the second sentence.

¹¹See "Why It Must Be Abstract: Stevens, Coleridge, and I. A. Richards," *Studies in Romanticism*, 22 (Winter 1983), pp. 489-515.

¹²See pp. 496-500 of "Why It Must Be Abstract" for other examples of Stevens' use of the term *abstract*.

"Preferring Text to Gloss": From Decreation To Deconstruction in Wallace Stevens Criticism

MELITA SCHAUM

I think it a capital error to confuse "decreation" with "deconstruction," and to make Stevens' use of the concept an occasion to "deconstruct" Stevens' poetry in particular and modernist poetry in general.

Roy Harvey Pearce, "On Decreation"

Stevens is engaged in an "act" of decreation, one dimension of which is the turning of language . . . back upon itself . . . It is precisely because Stevens is so insistent on decentering or interpreting the myth of the center, even as he moves toward the poet's necessity of totalization, that he is the ideal poet for exposing the blindness of a formalist criticism. He is postmodern.

Joseph Riddel, "Interpreting Stevens:
An Essay on Poetry and Thinking"

One of the main observations which Joseph Riddel made in his essay of 1964, "The Contours of Stevens Criticism," was of the growing critical acceptance of and focus on the later poems of Wallace Stevens, those which had puzzled, alarmed, or drawn censure from earlier schools of criticism. On the one hand, it seems almost as if Stevens' perceived "search" in these later poems paralleled a new search in criticism. On the other hand, the postmodern appropriation of Stevens beginning at this time demanded a critical strategy which would not only wrest the author from the New Critical hold, but which would venture further in addressing all of Stevens' works. New issues were raised which in themselves might serve to undermine the conventional modernist view of Stevens as well as provide that more comprehensive—and therefore more powerful—new framework.

There was a questioning of the nature and function of language beyond traditional formalistic and semantic analyses and towards a concept of the mediate, insufficient, self-undermining nature of language. The issue of Stevens' "annihilation of art" was raised by such critics as Roy Harvey Pearce—not as superfluous or pejorative poetic violence, but as a necessary stripping of the inadequacies of language and of the evasive "will to compose" in the human mind. There

seemed to be a search to come closer to an "ultimate reality" beneath or beyond the mediate functions of language and poetry. Yet the nature of this "ultimate reality" itself was questioned, with critics divided—often within their own works—between seeing that reality as a possibility to be rationally *known* or as an existential self-creation or *being*. The paradoxes in Stevens between flux and abstraction, life and stasis, became epistemological foci, and elements of reduction and negation in Stevens' later poems were no longer subject to earlier charges of escapism or banality, receiving instead serious consideration as philosophical and stylistic reflections of the modern imagination.

Riddel's essay addresses in particular Roy Harvey Pearce's theory of decreation, calling it a "striking thesis" which "provides a rationale for Stevens' breakthrough to the poetics of the future":

Picking up Stevens' phrase, "modern reality is a reality of decreation," Pearce applies it to the later Stevens' "act of the mind," claiming that his search for an "ultimate poem" (or ultimate reality) constituted an act of imaginatively breaking down the commonsense structures of reality by way of possessing a reality within reality, a pure abstraction. . . . In other words, those late difficult poems of Stevens, as Pearce sees them, are processes of decreasing the structure of things perceived, subjecting experience to a process of imaginative abstraction which pushes towards a grasp of the "thing itself," an ultimate reality. (CSC 134-35)

Riddel's essay grapples with the question of "being" vs. "knowing," of self-definition vs. apprehension of an external *Ding-an-Sich* in Pearce's interpretation, revealing crucial assumptions about the nature of language underlying each critic's stand. Pearce establishes early in his writings the mediate nature of language as a limit to man's knowledge which *can*, however, be surmounted. He identifies the "decreation" of language and language's metaphoric distortions as the motive behind Stevens' "annihilation of art" in the late poems, the poet's attempt to strip away the human "will to compose" in order to apprehend reality directly. Riddel, on the other hand, sees no exit from the "uncomfortable knowledge" of our mediate understanding. Instead, he focuses on the "truth" of the "evasion" of language itself, on Stevens' affirmation of limitations and qualifications rather than transcendence and totality:

Even though this last poetry evidences the wish to get beneath appearances to a thing-itself, even though its own style seems intent on pulverizing the metaphors and myths by which mind clothes reality, even though it occasionally asserts that the self must push itself toward the purity of the ultimate abstraction—even though all these are given voice, what remains vital in this poetry is the tension . . . between what is desired and what is finally accepted as possible. (CSC 138)

This split between desire and possibility, between totality and sufficiency in man's confrontation with language, marks both the common foundation and the inevitable rift between two central critical paradigms for Stevens' later poetry, the decreative and the deconstructive—paradigms whose clash in the critical arena continues to reveal much about contemporary critical assumptions and their impact on Stevens' placement in the American poetry canon.

"Decreation" is itself a volatile term, changing with its context from its original use as a religious emptying of the self towards God in Simone Weil's work of Judaeo-Christian mysticism, *Gravity and Grace*, through Stevens' use of the term as indicative of modern secular reality in "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting," to Pearce's distinctive appropriation of the term and the engagement of subsequent critics with the concept. J. Hillis Miller and Joseph Riddel are just two who adopted and adapted the term early in the development of their own analyses of Stevens, and who demonstrate by the changing nature of their views how issues raised by the decreative paradigm implicitly anticipate a deconstructive re-evaluation of modern poetics. To examine the issues which this concept raised we can best look at its evolving significance in the criticism of Pearce, tracing its efficacy as a theoretical "answer" to questions of language and knowledge explored in Stevens' texts.

Pearce's early articles set the groundwork, so to speak, for the adaptation of "decreation" as a solution to Stevens' often perplexing poetics. The critic's early focus is on Stevens' dilemma of imagination and reality as a dilemma of humanistic belief, a focus which continued to inform his criticism for three decades. In 1951 Pearce established his stance:

Treating of the relation of the imagined to the real—figured recently as the war between the mind and the sky—Stevens is treating of our problem of belief. Unlike an Eliot, he has refused to move out of our culture and into another and to seek a solution for the problem in the discovery of a "usable" form of belief. Rather, he has relied entirely on his own sensibility: he has tried to create the object of belief rather than discover it. . . . [Stevens] began by looking directly at the world which limits belief, continued by examining the possibility of belief and commitment in the face of that possibility, and has most recently been exploring the nature of possible belief . . . mature, considered belief in the reality which we have "as and where we are." (WSLI 562)

For Pearce, Stevens' early poetry is an endless exploration of the dilemma that one cannot *know* anything "unsuffused by the light of humanity," a dilemma which necessitates a re-evaluation of the "real" in the context of human sensibility, the mind working on "the reality which it must inform" (WSLI 566). Although in *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order* "Stevens does not move from recognition of a problem to an attempt to work out a solution" (WSLI 568), Pearce sees that "solution" finally reached in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

Pearce interprets the three sections of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" as a discovery of those "truths" which move the poet towards humanistic affirmation and a "resolution" of the paradox of mind and reality. In "It Must Be Abstract" it is man himself who exists as the Supreme Fiction in Pearce's view, embodying and reconciling both the abstract and the particular. "It Must Change" identifies the changing nature of language as mimetic of the changing nature of reality, and therefore as an authentic vehicle for its expression. In his recognition that the poet is "not hemmed in, but . . . released by reality" and change, Stevens appears both to celebrate life and to resolve the paradoxes of human limitation less fruitfully examined in his earlier work. "It Must Give Pleasure," finally, celebrates man's move towards belief, "inevitable" in light of this new "knowledge," fortified by a renewed acceptance and synthesis of "the rich pleasure of existence" (WSLI 576).

Pearce's reading of Stevens affirms secular self-creation, the achieving of "form and wholeness," the reaching of an ultimate belief, and an authentic apprehension of reality. His conclusions parallel certain New Critical preoccupations with elevating artistic formalism into metaphysical transcendence. "In the end," Pearce insists, "what issues from the poems is indeed a kind of estheticism, but as Stevens defiantly insists, the highest estheticism . . . locating, by means of the elegantly creative act, moral order in the world that men must make and suffer to make. . . . The reward . . . is knowledge and individuality—and a measure of freedom" (WSLI 579, 582). But although Pearce's transcendent terminology seems conclusive, his subsequent essays indicate the need to return again and again to Stevens' difficult—and unresolved—concepts of authenticity, authority, self, and reality.

In Pearce's essay of 1952, "The Poet as Person," the paradox of imagination and reality is replaced by the dilemma of the individual and culture, the "personality" (imagination) struggling for precedence over a social order (reality) hostile to it, but without which it has no existence (PP 430). In "Stevens Posthumous" (1959), the problem is dressed in the metaphor of literary tradition, Stevens representing the "Adamic" poet in American letters, one of the "Romantics," bound and determined to push toward realization of that belief in the radical freedom of man which was one of the latent productions of their culture" (SP 67). For such, furthermore, "The balance between the claims of the other and the claims of the self could be only unpredictable" (SP 68). Throughout, however, Pearce continues to perceive a move in Stevens towards stability and certainty: "through the act of the poem to its essence; through poetics to ontology" (SP 69), believing that Stevens' ultimate certitude was that "Somehow, somewhere, the transformative act that was the poem had itself to be transformed" (SP 71). Language, however, remained the problematic element in this transformative reconciliation between mind and world, imagination and reality. Even Pearce admits that "poems, we must recall, are creations" (SP 81).

It is in Pearce's analysis of *The Auroras of Autumn* that the concept of "decreation" surfaces as the most feasible paradigm with which to explain and resolve this dilemma. *The Auroras of Autumn* represents for Pearce the poet's "exercises

in the exhaustion of the urge to compose" (SP 76)—an urge which separates the mind and the world through the distortion of words. Pearce interprets Stevens' drive as the drive to abstract language out of existence, thereby glimpsing ourselves "truly" existing, without the separating function of language, achieving an "ultimate certitude that will derive from a confronting of the ultimate poem" (SP 80).

The sum total of all poems—indeed, as Stevens was to declare . . . of all creative acts—is decreation and makes pass to the reality on which such creative acts are operative. Thus the poet as decreator apprehends reality as it has been before . . . it could be overcome and transformed by the poet as creator. Decreation, then, is not so much a means to theorizing about reality as to knowing it. (SP 81)

Pearce's "decreative" move involves the stripping of language to reach and "know" reality, the undermining of traditional ideologies in favor of "recreating" an authentic culture in terms of the fluctuating self, and success in achieving an oxymoronic "created belief" for modern man. Pearce places special emphasis on Stevens' last published poem, "A Child Asleep in Its Own Life," as a summary of Stevens' position. Stevens' persona is one who "wills himself to be unnamed. He wills his own decreation so, that, beginning at the beginning, with the uncreated, he can come to know and teach what naming is" (SP 89). But in the end, Pearce believes that Stevens "perhaps demanded too much" of poetry in demanding "that poetry transvaluate itself by exhausting itself (which was its mode of being itself); that it become an instrument which, in all its decreative power, could blazon forth the pure power of creativity" (SP 89).

This intriguing, self-disassembling power of poetry, its "decreative" attempt to achieve the essential condition of its own being, anticipates much postmodern thought concerning the self-reflexivity of literary language. It is a concept vividly articulated in Pearce's article of 1960, "Poetry, Language, and the Condition of Modern Man," co-written with Sigurd Burkhardt. Burkhardt begins the essay with a discourse on the modern poet faced with the "threat" of the disintegration of language, the sense of language being "a vast game of question-begging," and the correlative view of man as an arbitrary, alienated entity equipped with an inadequate medium for thought, expression, and being (PLCMM 5). Burkhardt traces a number of poets' responses to this "threat of disintegration," contrasting a Metaphysical poet such as Herrick—aware of, yet undisturbed by the fictionality of language—with a modern poet such as Hopkins, whose words call a far more disturbing attention to themselves as fictive entities straining to cohere.

If Hopkins demonstrates, in a poem like "Spring and Fall: To A Young Child," "the linguistic impossibility of that pristine innocence and sense of harmony in which all things stand side by side, inviolate, substantial and yet intimately related" (PLCMM 8), still Hopkins' dismay with language pales before Stevens' "merciless stripping." For Burkhardt, Stevens' "structured and mounting negation, until we have the thing 'itself,' untranscending, uncommunicative"

(PLCMM 9), presents the ultimate modern dismantling of an inadequate language, a type of "linguistic existentialism" striving for both the irreducible nadir and for the rebuilding of authentic meaning. In Stevens' "The Course of a Particular"

we get the feeling that to say more than [the] barest of sentences is already too much, too risky, involving us, on the one hand, in fantasies of togetherness and on the other in a mode of speech so drained of all concreteness and felt reality that it seems to issue from a Hartford, Conn. office building. Anything that might smack of artifice, of vividness, is stringently avoided; even images are too much, it seems, because the human mind is so constituted that it takes images as metaphors and finds a specious consolation in the sense that things have, after all, a meaning, are related, cohere. It is this consolation Stevens deprives us of; he will not supply us with any props for our illusions. . . . [W]hat we have here is a poem of radical doubt and analysis, in which the poet tries to get to the minimal, the quantum of meaningful language, out of which to rebuild the universe of discourse. (PLCMM 11)

Burkhardt, however, insists that even a "quantum" of meaning is still necessary, that some affirmation must evolve "which does not reduce the poet's whole enterprise to nonsense." This need for belief is reiterated in Pearce's response, which develops Burkhardt's sense of the paradoxical quest for an authoritative language, for that "pervasive Paradigm" which might serve as a new foundation for discourse. For Pearce, the answer lies in a "mutual mastery and submission" between poem and poet, language and man. Poetry's function is to reveal man's ability to free language from its conventional uses and so to imaginatively free himself by making language "his own." Language, Pearce concludes, is "our prime instrument for being" in that it is our only vehicle for meaning; for man, according to Pearce, Meaning and Being are identical. Language reveals both its own powers and ours in its ability to define, and thereby to create (PLCMM 15).

Pearce's affirmative views on language, self, poetry, and the decreative act are summarized in his 1980 essay "Toward Decreation." In Stevens' poem "Credences of Summer," Pearce finds an explicit indication of the poet's ability to pass through negation to genuine meaning. He believes that the poem's fictive "singers" do in fact achieve the "hard prize, / Fully made, fully apparent, fully found" by working *through* "that decreative mode that requires denial and doubt as a condition of achievement and certitude" (TD 297). And, although a poem like "The Well-Dressed Man With A Beard" ends with the claim that "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never," Pearce insists that "in the great later meditative poems the mind—working through the decreative process—can indeed find its 'satisfactions'" (TD 298).

For other critics, however, this humanistic affirmation of imaginative power presented a facile sweeping under the carpet of issues of reduction and negation raised by the concept of "decreation" and an avoidance of its implications about

modern language and poetry. As co-editor with Roy Harvey Pearce of the collection *The Act of the Mind*, in 1964, J. Hillis Miller had already taken a significantly bleaker view of the dilemma of modern man and the theme of Stevens' work, one which might have presaged his later turn to a deconstructive reading of Stevens. In "Wallace Stevens' 'Poetry of Being,'" Miller writes: "The evaporation of the gods, leaving a barren man in a barren land, is the basis of all Stevens' thought and poetry." Here man is caught in a world informed by division and nothingness, a bleakness which permeates the relationship of the imagination to reality: "Imagination is the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world with which imagination carries on its endless intercourse" (PB 145).

A far cry from Pearce's perceived land of richness and celebration, Miller's modern world is characterized by man's homelessness ("The true reality has always been the wind and the indifferent glittering of an external world, a world in which man can never feel at home" [PB 87]), by the concealed nature of things ("Instead of being intimately possessed by man, things appear to close themselves within themselves" [PB 88]), and the discovery of the nothingness underlying existence ("God is dead, and therefore I am. But I am nothing. I am nothing because I have nothing, nothing but awareness of the barrenness within and without" [PB 88]). In a world whose only constant is the division between subject and object, mind and world, reconciliation is impossible in Miller's view, and he sees Stevens' "search" instead as an endless attempt to escape from the conflict.

Focussing on the rupture between the imagination and reality, Miller commends Stevens' poetry as being an authentic reflection of this situation's irresolution:

Such poetry [as Stevens'] is not dialectical, if that means a series of stages which build on one another, each transcending the last and moving on to a higher stage, in some version of the Hegelian sequence of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. At the beginning Stevens is already as far as he ever goes. After the disappearance of the gods the poet finds himself in a place where opposites are simultaneously true. (PB 89)

For Miller, Stevens' "chief contribution to poetry" is the invention of a mode of writing which can possess both extremes. Stevens' style exhibits an open-ended inclusivity—an *aporia*—of thought and image. It presents us with poems which violate organic unity in that they "begin in the middle of a thought, and their ending is arbitrary." Similarly, Stevens employs fragmentary titles which "emphasize the broken, partial nature of the poem" and the lack of comforting connections between title and content. Stevens' poetry is, in short, a poetry "appropriate to the incomplete" (PB 90).

It is the very indeterminacy of the poems which causes them to remain "true to life . . . a constant flowing of images which come as they come, and are not distorted by the logical mind in its eagerness for order." The longer poems' ability to "proceed in a series of momentary crystallizations or globulations of thought, followed by dissolution, and then re-conglomeration in another form"

(PB 90) becomes an analogy to Miller's own modified concept of "decreation," a concept worth quoting fully in order to demonstrate its recognizable origin in, yet its distinct move beyond, Pearce's use of the term.

Within the "endlessly elaborating poem" which is life, the same sequence of events is constantly happening over and over again. First something happens which "decreates," which destroys an earlier imagination of the world. Then man is left face to face with the bare rock of reality. . . . This clearing away is experienced not as a loss but as a gain. What is removed was a fictive covering of the rock, and what is exposed is the real in all its clarity . . . It is as if the poet were like the first man facing an "uncreated" world, with everything still to be imagined.

This experience of coldness and earliness is only the start. The poet is not satisfied to confront a bare and unimagined world. He wants to possess it, and it can only be possessed by being imagined well. Man is inhabited by a "will to change" which is just as unappeasable as his will to see the rock of reality exposed in all its bareness. The experience of decreation is followed by the reconstruction of a new imagination of the world. (PB 92-93)

But Miller goes on to describe the process of decreation/recreation as an *endless* one, unlike Pearce's final synthesis and satisfaction in "imagining well":

No sooner has the mind created a new fictive world than this "recent imagining of reality" becomes obsolete in its turn, and must be rejected. This rejection is the act of decreation, and returns man once more to unadorned reality. The cycle then begins again: imagining followed by decreation followed by imagining and so on for as long as life lasts. In this rhythmic alternation lies our only hope to possess reality. (PB 93)

Miller stresses this endless, unresolved motion of decreating and recreating as a possible accommodation of the Cartesian impasse, both in life and in poetry. In life, the ideal becomes the present moment, that instant "disencumbered" of the past and existing purely in its own being. In poetry, the goal becomes the grasping of that Present. For Miller, Stevens captures this elusiveness of being and time in his use of "autonomous" images and phrases, each of which, in some way "moves so rapidly it has beginning and ending at once. Instead of being fixed and unyielding, a solid piece of language interacting with other words, each image recapitulates within itself the coming into being of the moment and its disappearance" (PB 96). This, for Miller, represents Stevens' "Poetry of Being" and the conditional achievement of cyclical decreation.

By 1980 Miller's views on Stevens had moved still further from Pearce's decreative synthesis. In his essay "Theoretical and Atheoretical in Stevens," the critic goes so far as to indict his earlier paradigm—and all paradigmatic criticism which presupposes one authoritative interpretation of poetry. Miller admits that "the

vague outlines of Stevens' particular version of the ancient Occidental metaphysical system of concepts involving the presence of the present and the fleeting revelation of being in the vanishing of the instant" lures the critic—as it certainly did Miller—to claim Being as the key to Stevens' work. "Nevertheless," Miller now concedes, "the authentic voice of Stevens as a poet is not touched by such explanations. That voice is something unpredictable, savage, violent, without cause or explanation, irrational—as he always knew genuine poetry must be. . . . Continuously present, it is nevertheless a principle of discontinuity" (*TAS* 282-83).

The "new" root, then, of Stevens' poetry is no longer that fundamental expression of Being which Miller had outlined in his early essay. Instead, the critic now finds a disturbing and unnameable "enigma" at the heart of the poems. Miller avoids naming this mysterious "essence," claiming that, if "seen through" theoretically, the poem itself fails:

To identify this disrupting element in Stevens' poetry, if it is neither imitation, nor "Being," nor merely the play of language, would require a full reading of his work. Even then, it may be that the identification would be a discovery of what cannot be named or identified in so many words, even figurative ones. (*TAS* 284)

Miller ends his essay with the supposition that, were we to try to "name" or ultimately explicate this "enigma," we would lose precisely "the essential poem at the center of things, which may be neither named, nor seen, nor possessed theoretically" (*TAS* 285).

Although a careful inconclusiveness and a hermeneutic self-awareness marks this later essay, still Miller's move has not been fully deconstructive. His interpretation of Stevens has only moved from the sense of an unfixed but nameable concept of "Being" as the nucleus of the works, to the unnameable but still implicitly possessed or "known" (else how could we "lose" it by theorizing?) "essence" of the poem: the "enigma." Miller's final critical turn is to see even this "enigma" as an utter Unknown—one, further, which implicates the critic in a ruinous, self-undermining linguistic game. In Miller's "Dismembering and Disremembering in Nietzsche's 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,'" Miller seems to have worked through the implications of his deconstructive turn more fully. Although this essay makes only a passing reference to Stevens, many of the concepts touched on in "Theoretical and Atheoretical in Stevens"—the "enigma," the "abyss of interpretation," the inextricability of language from metaphysical concepts—are theoretically worked out through a reading of Freud and Nietzsche.

Miller begins with the "enigma" as the hypothetical site or "center" of the mind and of the text, which "cannot ever be clearly mapped," which can never be clearly spoken. Due to the nature of language itself, Miller writes:

"Clear expression" must be qualified by saying that this clarity, for example in rational distinctions or in binary oppositions, is itself a trap for

the unwary. . . . What seems at first so logical and rational [in the text] . . . breaks down into the illogical and irrational. It is a path to a blank wall the critic must in his own turn follow again if he goes far enough, not very far in fact. (DD 43)

The dissolution of the text's own meaning into its opposite, through the "self-subversion" of language's figurative qualities, now makes the presumed nucleus "a permanently unknown X . . . neither thought, nor thing, nor word." Metaphor, and the metaphoric quality of language, rather than being a synthesis of thing and meaning, becomes instead an endless deferral, the more and more distant transposition of that "something outside human knowledge" which speech attempts to name. "The human world," concludes Miller, ". . . is a labyrinth of figurative displacements around an unknown center" (DD 45).

But even this "labyrinth" is no resting point, no safe (if provisional) structure which protects man from the unknown. Even in trying to discuss the situation, Miller points out, we become implicated in our need to work with language, and therefore with a medium which is endlessly folding in upon itself, relentlessly subverting itself. Man's "essence" takes on a bleaker definition, being "neither consciousness, nor 'spirit,' nor 'selfhood,' but the power of making false transpositions" (DD 47). All "truths," then, even those offered by critics attempting to describe accurately the situation of endless displacement, become illusory figures. *This*, finally, constitutes the danger of modern dis-integration beyond Burkhardt and Pearce's initial and tentative description of the dilemma. Miller traces the condition behind the decreative impulse to find that the linguistic labyrinth truly "displaces itself everywhere. . . . Everything moves, wobbles, or stammers, as it does also in any commentary on the system." The work of the critic now, as well as of the poet, becomes a "stammering," a "stuttering transposition of what may not be articulated clearly, namely the atotopical unknown X" (DD 50).

The implications of this view of language, involving both literary and critical discourse, are radical for a truly revised view of Stevens' poetry and poetics. The working-through of a theory like decreation—which points to paradoxes underlying the linguistic game, yet averts its far-reaching implications by continuing to rest on humanistic, metaphysical foundations—might be said to be one of the recognizable patterns of the deconstructive turn. Joseph Riddel, in a career of Stevens criticism spanning from 1958 to the present, undergoes many of the same reappraisals of the nature of language and the critical enterprise as did Miller, beginning with an engagement with the decreative paradigm and moving into its logical outcome in deconstruction.

Riddel, too, began with a series of interpretations of Stevens which revolved around the rhetoric of resolution, synthesis, origin, and presence. In his 1958 article titled "Poets' Politics: Wallace Stevens' 'Owl's Clover,'" Riddel is preoccupied with an underlying stratum of "myth" in Stevens, an emphasis on "the universal human constant" which has the power to transcend the divisiveness of the modern situation. The essay analyzes Stevens' attempt to render poetry as the antidote to political institutionalization: "poets' politics" are, for Riddel,

based on "ritual" rather than "doctrine"—are, essentially, "not politics at all but precede politics and eventually allow men to live within political systems without capitulating to them" (OC 119). Riddel's explications here and in other early essays, however, are based on what Paul Bové would call an "unexamined" system of binary opposites which implicitly valorize one term: organicity/artifice, truth/falsehood, "genuine"/imposed systems of order. Riddel emphasizes throughout the need for a "human constant," man's desire to "come into a harmonious relationship with his moving world" (OC 124).

Riddel interprets the poet's "rage for order" as a much-needed return to myth: that "changeless element," that archetype which is both stable and vital, abstract as well as connected to "the earth." Through myth (and, implicitly, through "genuine" art which draws on this fundament), reality and the human imagination can fuse into a true, transformative order incorporating both change and permanence. But in his analysis of Stevens' "Owl's Clover," Riddel finds his optimism thwarted in the poem's ambivalent ending. Presented with the choice of "portent" or "statue"—for Riddel, the choices of a metaphysical/spiritual or a secular/imaginative order—the poet rejects both. The rejection of the "statue" as a poetic symbol (which through the poem has accrued implications of art, imaginative energy, and humanistic affirmation) poses for Riddel

one of Stevens' rare moments of doubt in the greatest of human powers. . . . If Stevens has begun with the idea of testing the possibilities of order presented in the 1930s, he has ended by rejecting everything, including the imagination. Politically, this would be anarchy, and irresponsible. Poetically, it ends by denying poetry. Is this Stevens' accomplishment? Has complete skepticism of system and ideology led him back to the most primitive of existences? No, although the fact that such thoughts can arise is a possible indication of his failure. (OC 129-30)

Affirmation/doubt, order/anarchy, responsibility/irresponsibility, system/primitivism—Riddel is here enmeshed in a rhetoric of binarism which implicitly looks for and valorizes an underlying order. Not surprisingly, he sees "failure" in Stevens' poetic rupture, in "what H. H. Watts calls the 'cul-de-sac' which 'often terminates Stevens' wonderful testimony to his chosen solution'" (OC 131).

Elsewhere, though, Riddel finds Stevens more receptive to a humanistic reading. In a subsequent essay of 1961, "The Metaphysical Changes of Stevens' 'Esthétique du Mal,'" Riddel posits the Arnoldian claim for poetry as a surrogate religion, "capable of saving us." The poet effects this "salvation" by virtue of his language and the "ritualistic" use of what Riddel sees as the word's inherent ordering power: "Language, of course, is clearly a form of order, and syntax a convenient arrangement of one's world. . . . The poet becomes the custodian of enduring values . . . Poetry is a conservation of both language and values" (MC 65). Riddel sees the modern world as a "tragic disruption in the moral continuum," and war as the central meaning-shattering event of the 20th century, in which "things are dislocated from a natural order . . . objects preempt man and disturb

the continuum of humanistic values" (MC 66). Throughout, Riddel appears to valorize what even Stevens' own "Of Modern Poetry" clearly abandons: in the "changed theater" of the modern world, Riddel still paces the empty stage of "natural order," the "continuum," and sacrificed "values."

Riddel's early concepts of stability, meaning, order, and preservation continue to inform his essays through the 1960s. Although he is careful to dissociate the function of art from metaphysical transcendence, nonetheless Riddel's aesthetically "transcendent," "hovering" attitude is clear. Theories of art as a type of mystical paradox by which man can "resist and reconcile the vicious 'otherness' of reality" (AWS 129) reveal a groundwork of belief in art's powers to stabilize and transcend. Riddel's interpretations through these years demonstrate assumptions about language's ability to preserve values, reinstate the authenticity of ritual, and effect gestures of return: to nature, to origin, to the "innocence" of direct perception, to the "purity" of vital myth and the emotional symbol. This rhetoric, while provisional, nonetheless repeatedly assigns to poetry its humanistic function as "collective" meaning, "human constant," and communicative "universal." The aesthetic experience represents a "psychic balance," "a mysterious blend of subject and object" which exists to reconcile mind and world, composed of both permanence and flux, comprising the "unity that satisfies desire" (AWS 130).

Art's "immutable forms" are further discussed in "Stevens' 'Peter Quince at the Clavier': Immortality as Form," in which the critic describes Peter Quince as the artist-figure who "constructs out of the raw materials of experience the viable forms which will endure: he turns the beauties of flux into the immortality of art." Along a similar vein, the poem's use of music successfully "symbolizes the attuned spirit, allows an aesthetic distance from which one can contemplate the precious object" (IF 308). The New Critical theme of art as icon continues in Riddel's "Wallace Stevens' 'Visibility of Thought,'" in which art is described as "reconciling human conflicts in the 'removes' of metaphor, which capture a reality lying somewhere in the perceptual tension between self and world" (VT 483). Moreover, although man exists "always at the edge of reality, and any question he asks about it qualifies the answer he receives," the meditative power of Stevens' poetry, for Riddel, has even the ability to break us out of this "hermeneutic circle," since "the efficacy of meditation is its release of the self from preconception" (VT 485). And elsewhere: "in the intuitive resolutions of meditation, the world loses its alien identity with the self—time . . . is removed from space and purified (made timeless in the self)" (VT 487). Finally, "Man and his world become one in the poem, the icon of order which is the single remaining form of spiritual order in a secular world" (VT 498).

By 1972, however, Riddel's critical position had shifted markedly. In his review of Helen Vendler, titled "Interpreting Stevens: An Essay on Poetry and Thinking," Riddel uses a new theoretical framework based on Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Foucault to analyze Vendler's own rhetoric of "presence." In so doing, Riddel reveals (to use Paul de Man's paradigm) much of his own previous "blindness" in the course of his "insight" on the mystified assumptions of critical discourse. Riddel opens his essay with a discussion of the "onto-theological

tradition" in Western thought and language which has affected both criticism in general and in particular criticism on Wallace Stevens.

Inarguably, the history of literature has been inseparable from the destiny of onto-theological language. And likewise the history of literary criticism. The language of Being or presence stands at the authoritative center of our thinking, and the varieties of dualisms emanating from it compose the manifold of what was up to Nietzsche an unbroken western tradition. (*EPT* 79-80)

Riddel examines the dilemma of modern poets and critics in their new context, deprived of a metaphysics of presence, yet still caught in the rhetoric of that tradition:

Nietzsche's pronouncement on the death of God may well have ended the era of onto-theological metaphysics, as Heidegger says, but the rhetoric of that tradition lingers on. Our modern poets and modern critics still think in the language of primary being, and suffer from the alienation that Nietzsche's question poses. . . .

What does it mean, then, when a modern poet like Wallace Stevens restores, or attempts to restore, man to his centrality? Has he ignored Nietzsche, and returned to Emerson, as some critics have claimed? Or has he become the Nietzschean poet, taking the language of presence and bringing it into question? (*EPT* 80)

Riddel anticipates his own hypothesis: that Stevens is indeed a "postmodern" or "Nietzschean" poet, *questioning* rather than affirming the tradition, attempting to undermine rather than find "salvation" in the language of presence.

Vendler's division of Stevens' poetry into "Two Poetries"—the poetry of words and the poetry of the idea—signifies for Riddel the misdirected "initial Richardian split" which identifies the poem both as autonomous, autotelic "object" as well as "a stage in the sequence of development," a step in a process of "teleological refinement." For Riddel, this New Critical attempt at a "rescue of 'value'" by "sanctifying" the autonomy of the poem informs Vendler's formalist standards of internal coherence and wholeness—standards, further, *towards* which she sees Stevens maturing through the course of his career, in a fashion explicitly revealing an unexamined teleological paradigm (*EPT* 81-83).

Riddel reveals his own new orientation, using the theories of Jacques Derrida to summarize his revised, deconstructive approach to Stevens:

Modern critical thought applies itself to received texts, bringing those texts into question, exposing the hidden assumptions of their language. This thought, says Derrida, derives from a recognition that the old texts or systems of thought are composed of a language of presence. The new thought brings that language into question, thus introducing the

problematic of a "discourse on discourse." This critical language, however, must take the old terms, for it has none of its own. It proceeds by turning language upon itself . . . Is it not possible that the difficulty we have had identifying the "themes" of our modern poets, or of rescuing them from their evident banality, is that we have confused their statements, have taken the concepts as concepts or assertions (semantics), and refused to recognize the radical nature of their self-qualifications (semiotics)? (*EPT* 84-85)

Riddel re-defines Pearce's term "decreation," that term which earlier had fascinated him as precisely that "rationale for Stevens' breakthrough to the poetics of the future." For Riddel, however, "decreation" now points not to the discovery of stability and the authenticity of re-creation, but to a fundamental and unavoidable absence at the "center" of language and the poem:

Stevens is engaged in an "act" of decreation, one dimension of which is the turning of language, and in certain instances a familiar or even banal concept, back upon itself, by way of pursuing some origin at the heart of utterance—or to put it in the terms of one of his poems, to seek the unspoken word of the "central poem" that is at once proved and disproved (and thus displaced) by "lesser poems." In short, Stevens seems to sense a presence at the origin, a discoverable presence, but every penetration to that presence only reveals that the place is a fiction, an interpretation, and thus not an ultimate or supreme or central poem but only another lesser poem. . . . [The search for the center of reality] is a search, of course, that must repeatedly bring into question all other centers . . . and ultimately bring into question the idea of a center itself, until in the centerless center of the imaginative activity, of the poem speaking itself, we understand the significance of poetry of "play." (*EPT* 85-86)

As if to demonstrate the significant shift in his paradigm, Riddel returns to the example of Stevens' final "crystal" of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," an image which the critic had earlier used as a resonant symbol of synthesis and stability, the "apotheosis" (to use Riddel's term) of man by his imagination (*NTSF* 40). Now, however, "the fiction of presence is revealed; the center of the crystal is a point of infinite refractions, a nothingness" (*EPT* 91).

Riddel's paradigmatically postmodern Stevens is explored further in an essay of 1980, "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the 'End of the Book.'" Here, a poem such as "Esthétique du Mal" begins to question not only the efficacy of language, but the position of the writer himself, the possibility of the "self" as the new modern "center," concluding that "The self no longer governs language, but is governed by it." What ensues is "an emptying out of all those follies of a 'paradise of meaning' or transcendental signifieds that have accounted for the place of a self between sun and moon, as in a theater of proper images." Language is unveiled as an "assassin's movement," an undermining which

murders the illusions of wholeness, a "dissemination" of meaning, and a negation of system (MS 311).

Riddel examines the notion of the "book" as it engages Stevens, the paradoxical "notion that, as Derrida has shown us, bears within itself an *aporia*: the idea of the book prefigures or represents a unity that it at the same time produces and commands." For Riddel, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" constitutes "the great text of this writing against the 'book.' . . . [I]t is a master text that masters nothing" (MS 315-16), but which instead unfolds in an endless scrutiny of its own textuality. The inescapable figurality of language precludes any return to a "first idea," to that beginning which will be authentic and original ("immaculate"), or to the attainment of that ideal "metaphor that murders metaphor" (MS 316). But in order to begin at all, Riddel posits, one must "forget the metaphoricality of the sun [reality] . . . evoke the origin of poetry in a truth preceding language . . . producing the illusion of a moment when language and idea were one" (MS 319). This provisional "forgetting" in order to begin becomes that gesture which allows the writer to reinvent, at the moment he unveils, the fiction of origin.

This succession of paradoxical language-traps continues throughout Stevens: the writer unravels previous, mystified systems, only to substitute yet another unsatisfactory structure in place of his negation. Repetition, play, difference, and centerlessness constitute Riddel's image of Stevens: everywhere, the poet "empties out the dream of closure," deconstructs "the fiction of an absolute," and turns the "golden center" into the "violent abyss" which is the scene of writing (MS 321). "From 'The Snow Man' to the late discourses on discourse, Stevens projected a shudder through the 'whole shebang' of representation, the fiction of the book" (MS 327). Far now from the imaginative arena of humanistic affirmation and order, Stevens' work has become for Riddel that deconstructive "theater of trope," caught—and, for Riddel, *aware* of its own entrapment—in an endless play of figurality and deferral.

In the deconstructive paradigm for Stevens' works neither primacy, nor synthesis, nor paradoxical "poise" will suffice as explications of the poet's complex system of unresolved antitheses and open-ended play. But the deconstructive appropriation of Stevens demonstrates merely another turn in criticism, by no means a definitive or final resolution in the play of power and knowledge which informs the critical enterprise. Deconstructive paradigms such as Miller's and Riddel's, though reviving previously marginal elements in Stevens' texts—elements of rupture, non-sense, flux—often succeed only in inverting standards while remaining themselves fixed in the very framework of centrality in language and authority in criticism which they attempt to undermine. The recruitment of Stevens into a deconstructive perspective illuminates and emphasizes his concerns with language and the interpretive gesture in a way which implicates the critic himself; the space between literary text and commentary diminishes, becomes more dynamic, reciprocal, involved. As a gesture which takes concepts introduced by earlier theories such as "decreation" and develops them to their radical ends, deconstruction's contribution to Stevens criticism may be just that significant transposition of literature to the "world" which Stevens sought—the

mutual, if irresolvable, attempts of all linguistic enterprises to situate man within the perplexing play of reality, interpretation, and understanding.

University of Michigan-Dearborn

Works Cited

- DD Miller, J. Hillis. "Dismembering and Disremembering in Nietzsche's 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.'" *boundary* 2 9 (Spring 1981):41-54.
- TAS _____ . "Theoretical and Atheoretical in Stevens." In *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, eds. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel, 274-285. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- PB _____ . "Wallace Stevens' 'Poetry of Being.'" *ELH* 31 (1964):86-105. Reprinted in *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, eds. J. Hillis Miller and Roy Harvey Pearce, 143-162. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965.
- PP Pearce, Roy Harvey. "The Poet as Person." *Yale Review* 41 (March 1952):421-440.
- PLCMM _____ , and Sigurd Burkhardt. "Poetry, Language, and the Condition of Modern Man." *Centennial Review of Arts and Sciences* 4 (1960):1-31.
- SP _____ . "Stevens Posthumous." *International Literary Annual* 2 (1959):65-89.
- TD _____ . "Toward Decreation: Stevens and the 'Theory of Poetry.'" In *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, eds. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel, 286-307. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- WSLI _____ . "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination." *PMLA* 66 (1951):561-582.
- AWS Riddel, Joseph. "The Authorship of Wallace Stevens' 'Of Poetic Truth.'" *Modern Language Notes* 76 (February 1961):126-129.
- CSC _____ . "The Contours of Stevens Criticism." *ELH* 31 (March 1964):106-138.
- EPT _____ . "Interpreting Stevens: An Essay on Poetry and Thinking." *boundary* 2 1 (1972):79-97.
- MS _____ . "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the 'End of the Book.'" In *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, eds. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel, 308-338. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- MCS _____ . "The Metaphysical Changes of Stevens' 'Esthétique du Mal.'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 7 (July 1961): 64-80.
- OC _____ . "Poets' Politics: Wallace Stevens' 'Owl's Clover.'" *Modern Philology* 56 (November 1958):118-132.
- IF _____ . "Stevens' 'Peter Quince at the Clavier': Immortality as Form." *College English* 23 (January 1962): 307-309.
- NTSF _____ . "Wallace Stevens' 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.'" *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 2 (Spring-Summer 1961):20-42.
- VT _____ . "Wallace Stevens' 'Visibility of Thought.'" *PMLA* 77 (September 1962): 482-498.

Stevens' Mother and "Sunday Morning"

JAY DOUGHERTY

"Sunday Morning" is commonly viewed as a renunciation of Christianity, or of any supernatural religion, in favor of what one might call a religion of reality, a worshipping of things palpable and real. In a recent article, however, Joy Pohl has shown that Stevens' poem reflects a much more ambivalent attitude towards this theme. She argues that although the poem attempts "to substitute for faith a kind of pantheism which celebrates immersion in physical sensation," the rhetoric and imagery of the poem belie that aim: "'Sunday Morning' attests eloquently to the failure of these efforts." Although Pohl concludes that the poem's ambivalence "is no doubt the product of a deep ambiguity in Stevens himself, the conflict produced between the intensity of his reactions to the natural world and the somber religiosity in his upbringing,"¹ she does not explore the origins of this conflict in Stevens' relationship with his mother, a devout Christian, who died on July 16, 1912, just three years before the publication of the poem.

Stevens grew up in a decidedly religious home, of which his mother was the cynosure. She instilled in Stevens, if not a commitment to Christianity, at least a knowledge of Christianity's tenets. Stevens recalls this aspect of his childhood in a letter to his wife shortly before his mother's death:

I remember how she always read a chapter from the Bible every night to all of us when we were ready for bed. Often, one or two of us fell asleep. She always maintained an active interest in the Bible, and found there the solace she desired[.]²

In addition to this religious training at home, Stevens attended parochial schools until high school. Although there is no evidence that Stevens treasured these teachings as a youth, it is clear that they left a mark on him, for, as his *Letters* reveal, he attended Sunday masses regularly and, at least until March 1907, recited his "prayers every night" (L 96).

Despite Stevens' firm Christian upbringing, he evinces at several points before the writing of "Sunday Morning" a disillusionment with the Christian promises and solaces that his mother cherished. The first and the most vague of these hints at disillusionment surfaces in a journal entry for April 30, 1905, a year after he was admitted to the bar and about ten years before he wrote "Sunday Morning":

I am in an odd state of mind to-day. It is Sunday. I feel a loathing (large + vague!), for things as they are; and this is the result of a pretty thorough disillusionment. Yet this is an ordinary mood with me in town in the Spring time. I say to myself that there is nothing good in the world

except physical well-being. All the rest is philosophical compromise. Last Sunday, at home, I took communion. It was from the worn, the sentimental, the diseased, the priggish and the ignorant that "Gloria in excelsis!" came. (L 82)

Here Stevens expresses something close to disdain for those drawn to Christianity, calling them "worn," "sentimental," "diseased," "priggish," and "ignorant." One year later, in a journal entry recounting a solitary walk, Stevens indicates even further his growing dissatisfaction with his inherited faith: "I grow tired of the want of faith—the instinct of faith" (L 86). Finally, one year after that, he states openly in a letter to his fiancée that "I am not in the least religious" (L 96).

During this period of religious skepticism Stevens took numerous walks wherever he happened to be, always reveling in the beauty of his natural surroundings and often, as his journals indicate, recording his impressions afterward:

winter birds on winter branches, summer birds on summer branches,
green mountains . . . (L 85)

Then I noticed the way patches of trees stood on hill-sides, and couldn't think even of a simile. Then I found some pussy willows, the first of the year—and some yellow river willows. . . . A bird on a telephone wire turned its tail toward the wind and seemed to enjoy the raking. Good old fellow! (L 86)

Twice in his epistolary musings on nature Stevens drifts into discussions of religion—as if Nature inspired such thoughts (L 86-87, 91)—and both times reveals his dissatisfaction with, as he states in "Sunday Morning," "divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams":³ "It would be much *nicer*," Stevens writes on February 5, 1906, "to have things definite—both human and divine" (L 86-87). In April of the same year he presages a main argument of "Sunday Morning" when he writes, "The imagination is quite satisfied with definite objects, if they be lofty and beautiful enough" (L 91). Thus, a full eight years before the writing of "Sunday Morning," Stevens was, perhaps unconsciously, replacing the supernaturalism of Christianity with a religion of reality. Or at least so it seemed.

While all of this clearly suggests an atheistic proclivity in Stevens, other letters from the same period reveal a devotion to the church which conflicts with his claim of being "not in the least religious." Stevens was, for example, while entertaining doubts about religious belief, persuading his future wife, Elsie Moll, to join the church: "It has always been a particular desire of mine to have you join church; and I am very, very glad to know that you are now on the road" (L 96). Later in the same letter Stevens asserts that "the church is a mother . . . for us" (L 96). Elsie Moll eventually fulfilled Stevens' desire, and, in March of 1907, Stevens sent his praise in a letter:

Was this the day you joined church—or is it next Sunday? I thought of it before going over for tea. You have kept so quiet about it. Well, if it was, I salute you no longer as a Pagan but as just what you ought to be. I read *Proverbs* in bed this morning and marked [a] verse in the thirtieth chapter . . . So I send that verse to you, as a good desire. (L 98)

Thus, apostate in one breath, proselytizer in another, Stevens vacillates between what he was brought up to believe and what he came to believe on his own.

In light of this evidence, "Sunday Morning" can be viewed as a manifestation of Stevens' own ambivalence towards religion, an exercise on paper of what he would later term in "Of Modern Poetry," "the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (CP 239). The poem unfolds as a dialogue between the poet, who, very much like the Stevens that avers "I am not in the least religious," rejects divinity "if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams," and the woman, who, very much like the Stevens that somehow still finds comforts in the church, laments in the poem that, despite the pleasures she finds in natural phenomena, she still feels "The need of some imperishable bliss.'" The colloquy that develops between poet and lady is not so much an argument as it is simply a dialogue, a mutual effort to find "What will suffice" to take the place of the ostensible permanence provided by the church's teachings.

In the *Letters* and journal entries, Stevens does not again reveal his uncertainties regarding religion until June 25, 1912, when he returned home to be with his mother during her last days:

Fortunately for mother she has faith and she approaches her end here . . . with the just expectation of re-union afterwards; and if there be a God, . . . the justness of her expectation will not be denied. (L 172-73)

The presence of his dying mother, devout Christian that she was, not only rekindled in Stevens his own ambivalence towards religion—which we later see revealed through the persona of the woman in "Sunday Morning"—but also provided Stevens, at least in part, with the setting and themes of "Sunday Morning."

There are significant correlations between the setting of the beginning of the poem and the surroundings of Stevens' mother in her dying days. Stevens, in his journal, describes his mother's last days in her home, surrounded by "certain chairs," "rugs," "grape juice, orange juice, lemon and sugar" (L 173-74). He also records that one day "she saw what a bright morning it was and remarked on it. She said that she would like to have 'a room right in it'" (L 173). In a letter to his wife at this time, Stevens recalls an uncomfortable, recent "meditation on old age, death and the other barebones of the scheme of things," adding that all such thought could be "dissipated in easier surroundings" (L 174). The details that Stevens recounts here are strikingly similar to the surroundings of the woman in the opening stanza of "Sunday Morning":

late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

Although the atmosphere created by the details in these lines ("late / Coffee and oranges"; "green freedom of a cockatoo") is pleasant compared to what one must imagine the atmosphere in Stevens' mother's room was like (though she too was accompanied by rugs, chairs, orange juice, grape juice, and wished for a "sunny" room), the point is that Stevens seems to have been influenced by the details surrounding his mother in her room and has used them to create an atmosphere which would set up the central conflict in the poem between a paganistic humanism and Christianity, a conflict in which Stevens himself, as his *Letters* suggest, was involved.

Interestingly, Stevens creates "easier" surroundings in Stanza I of "Sunday Morning" both for him as narrator and the female persona, who feels "the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe" much as Stevens' mother must have felt her impending death. This atmosphere in Stanza I, coupled with the woman's absence from church on Sunday morning, yet her lingering need, expressed later in the poem, for Christianity's promise of permanence, sets up the poem's central conflict between Christian teachings and paganistic propensities. It is a setting in which Stevens can work through his religious ambivalence and propose a replacement for the consolations offered by Christianity: there is, in the poem, the woman, holding on to her Christian beliefs, and there is the doubting poet. Only now the "uneasiness," I would suggest, has been removed for Stevens: the paganistic atmosphere is already suggestive of the poet's resolution of the conflict, and the woman, not a "real" woman (unlike, that is, Stevens' mother), cannot be disappointed or shattered emotionally by what the poet will say.

With this autobiographical backdrop, several parts of "Sunday Morning" take on an intensely personal, almost confessional, significance. It becomes very hard for us not to imagine, when at the beginning of Stanza II the poet cries out, "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" Stevens himself—the Stevens who is "not in the least religious"—crying out simultaneously the same words concerning his own mother. Conversely, it is very hard for us to forget the Stevens who said "the church is a mother . . . for us," the Stevens who found such comfort there, when we hear the woman in Stanza V lament, "But in contentment I still feel / The need of some imperishable bliss." In this line could be the Stevens who, while sometimes satisfied with the physical as a replacement for the philosophical, still wonders whether "there be a God" and encourages his future wife to join the church while claiming to be irreligious, or it could simply be the Stevens who, with mind already made up, is voicing what he might imagine his mother would have said had he proposed his atheistic views to her during their last days together.

"Mother" and "the church" seem inextricably fused in Stevens, if one takes into account the biographical information that we now have. It is therefore more understandable that in "Sunday Morning" Stevens should, through the voice of the poet, mix "mother" imagery with his questioning of Christianity. In Stanza III, for example, one could say the poet implies that with a human "mother" come the "Large-mannered" solaces provided by Christianity's promise of an afterlife. Jove, not born from or suckled by a human mother, is free of such notions:

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.
He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds . . .

The "Large-mannered motions" in Jove's "mythy mind," one must assume, refers to the motions, or notions, of Christianity's insistence on the afterlife as the true "paradise." It does not seem coincidental, therefore, given our biographical data on Stevens and his mother, that the poet here links the human "mother" to the "Large-mannered" ideas of Christianity, since Stevens' mother was perhaps the primary source of his belief in Christianity. These notions are referred to pejoratively, for they are not what preoccupy Jove, who is referred to as "Magnificent" and who appears as a confident "king" would, moving "among his hinds."

"Confident" is not a word that could be used to describe the tone of the remainder of Stanza III, when the birth of Jesus, from, of course, a human mother, is alluded to:

Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

Though the poet predicts that a world lived around "our blood" "will be much friendlier," he expresses doubt and ambivalence toward the present in "Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be / The blood of paradise? And shall the earth / Seem all of paradise that we shall know?" He acknowledges that, as things stand, the sky is "dividing," as Stevens himself, one must imagine, was divided concerning the promises of Christianity and, more importantly, the fate that awaited the woman in "Sunday Morning."

"Death is the mother of beauty," a central statement that first appears two stanzas after the division expressed through Stanza III, emerges as a resolution in which the poet reluctantly acquiesces to his own intuitions that there is no afterlife for the dead. But the poet has found a resolution in which there is solace for the living and, perhaps, the dying. "Death" and "mother" are, if we remember Stevens' mother, again provocatively combined. But "beauty" is there as well. In Stanza VI, the poet resolves his questioning, his misgivings, his hopes, his doubts, with a rationalization which allows the concept of earthly beauty—as illustrated in Stanza V, for example, with the piling of "new plums and pears / On disregarded plate," a plate long out of use—to replace the "dividing" concept of an afterlife *and* to make up for the loss of an earthly mother:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

The searching, questioning, ambivalent poet thus "devises" the concept of "beauty," born out of "Death," in which both he and, significantly, "our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly," can find solace.

"Sunday Morning" reflects Stevens' religious ambivalence before his mother's fatal illness and the necessity to come to terms with his feelings about Christianity afterward, a conflict precipitated by his visit to his dying mother. The poem, then, becomes not so much a simple renunciation of Christianity's tenets as a dialogue in which to find and explain—to the poet, to the woman in the poem, to Stevens' mother, dead at the writing of the poem—"What will suffice." The tone of the last two stanzas, after the poet has created "beauty" as the receptacle into which "our earthly mothers" are placed, expresses the poem's newly found resolution:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.

.....

She hears, upon that water without sound,
A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free . . .

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

The tone of both stanzas is no longer one of questioning. The poet, in Stanza VII, jubilantly affirms what "shall" be, now that the concept of earthly "beauty" has reconciled his ambivalence toward the supernatural contentment of Christianity. Stanza VIII, which sees this contentment denied the woman by "A voice," is understandably less jubilant in tone, since to affirm that "The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering" is to deny the possibility of an afterlife—a difficult resolution, especially in light of the woman's needs, for both the poet and Stevens himself. But both stanzas proceed with a calm assurance and resolve noticeably absent during the uneasiness of the preceding stanzas, as if a large burden has been lifted off the poet's shoulders.

University of Connecticut

Notes

¹Joy Pohl, "'Sunday Morning': Stevens' Equivocal Lyric," in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 8 (Fall 1984), pp. 85-86.

²Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 173. Subsequent references to this source will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *L* followed by the page number.

³Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 67. Subsequent references to "Sunday Morning" will be from this source. References to other poems from this source will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *CP* and page number in the text.

Peter Brazeau Remembered

"Wallace Stevens," I often thought, "if I should never hear that name again, it won't be too soon!" Only those of us who were fortunate enough to know Peter well are aware of how ascetic, how fervent, how monomaniacal he could be when something captured his imagination. Nearly every evening during the 8 years he was at work on his oral history of Stevens he would regale me with the day's exploits in his world of Wallace Stevens. Invariably, the evening's conversation would begin with a generous, bone-dry double-martini and would continue over dinner with libations of wine. It seemed at the time as though we talked of little else, as I became steeped in others' recollections of Wallace Stevens. On occasion, Peter would share juicy bits of gossip or, as commonly, recount in the most minute detail something that in my impatient naivete seemed insignificant about a man whose life I had believed was draped only in sedate, gray flannel suits.

Over the years I must have read various versions of *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* a few dozen times or more. Reading the manuscript was always a pleasure, but Peter was never content with a suggestion here or there; he would insist that I make extensive commentary comparing alternate sections of narration—usually critical transitions and concluding passages from major segments of the oral history. He would labor for days reworking and finely honing passages that, while of extreme importance to him, I knew would be ignored by all but the most elite of Stevens' readers.

The genesis of *Parts of a World* began in 1975. Peter had become increasingly fascinated by oral history as a genre. At the same time, his interest in modern American poetry was being revitalized, having just completed his dissertation on Edmund Spenser in 1973. While having dinner with friends in Hartford one evening, Peter observed that there were a few people living who still remembered Wallace Stevens in a significant way, that someone should be preserving their reminiscences of one of America's greatest poets. "Why don't you write it?" one of the friends suggested. Thus the period of 1975-1983 was spent recording recollections, exhausting archival resources, and producing the significant accomplishment that it is.

My most vivid memories of that fertile period in Peter's life entail endless speculation about Elsie and Wallace. Did he simply outgrow her intellectually? Was she never more than the Dresden-like doll that so intrigued him in his youth? Why had she become such a recluse? Did Stevens use Elsie as a ploy to maintain an arm's distance from nearly everyone else? Poor Holly! What must life have been like for their only daughter on Westerly Terrace? Peter and I would postulate theories and cite testimony from various interviewees to substantiate whatever the particular claim at the time. In spite of the fact that Peter had over the years clearly reached his own conclusions about Stevens, he was determined to present the poet, the family man, the businessman as other people saw him, to present a vision devoid of his own subjective interpretations, and to preserve the integrity of a genre sometimes little appreciated by literary critics.

As I look back on those years, I realize how fortunate I was to have been able to share, however vicariously, in the creative process of this fine scholar and intellect. To have experienced Peter's exuberance, his enthusiasm, the sheer energy with which he undertook any task of importance is a rare lesson in dedication and devotion of purpose. Would that it were possible for me to relive that precious period.

Jim Harrison
Manchester, Connecticut

Poems

Transformation For Peter Brazeau

After the race, the boat slippery with lake
and our palms red with the tense pull
of jib, we could walk on the dock, legs wobbly,
streaks of sun leaving telltale lines around the eyes.

We have seen so much of summer and lake, how
in early morning the mist speaks in mist
and how when we choose to wander in far marshes
we can drift alongside rubbery lilies.

Green discs float like wishes we half-heartedly
said were everything, and once we believed
this life would always be reflections of good light
on the water—ways we'd take back for winter.

It was not in the design to speak of early dying.
We were disciples, warmed then by a flash of wit,
that good breeze, irreverential, free from penury,
and wholly of the reasoned mind, aflame with poetry

unlike anyone's. That was sailing with the sun
as sextant with that sweet wind coming full
in the sheets. He made us laugh and think
and see the world and things as things.

Gone now, that summer kind. And death too soon
is the nightcrowding, a path plowed away
to oblivion. Against the sounds of summer
the heart objects to the seal, a mainsail stripped.

Harriet Susskind
Monroe Community College

It Must Be Inescapable

The world is a bowl of white
as the poem begins,
issuing from an absence in reality,
rising up in the plainness of porcelain,
tall, and of a port in air.

The first white wall of words
leans to nakedness,
fumbles for form.

See the fitful tracing of a portal
turning in the trouble of the touch.
And on the edge of space, fragrant
gold-dipped feathers flash, dangling
down between was and is—
not of an earthy birth.

The jar of many circles rounds,
spinning its eccentric measure,
wholly containing things as they are.
It gives of bird
and going round and round is roundest,
our focus closest, warmest, strongest.

At the heraldic center of our world,
centering the exactest central of the earth,
the eye of the blackbird
catches our own, seeing
and unseeing of ourselves.

Before the first myth
of man, of bird, of clay,
we lift and sing and nest.
But the cry of the fire-fangled bird
must fade to final black
acutest at its vanishing.

David P. Rosen
Los Angeles

A Voice From a High-Rise

In 1941, he explained it—
the pressure of reality, violence
of a war-like whole, news of Asia,

Africa, Europe—all at one time—at
exclusion of the mind, a violence
against the spirit, for everyone alive.

I've learned it, and I've seen it—
the mother who heard from a microphone
her son's thin, continuing cry, as

he fell away from the mountain,
another who listened to her small
child, by radio, as he choked

in the deepening mud of a mine,
the picture of the four-year-old
girl, suffocated, even as her parents spoke

to guests brought into their home,
the pleas, for help, of the twelve-year-old,
heard for days after the Mexican quake,

on television, carried by satellite,
to us in Honolulu, while no crane
could raise the rubble from him in time.

I hope you fare better—are all right—
though it's more these times than
I can bear. It's enough just here—the wife

dismembered, head dropped in the waters
off Waipahu, hands stuck at an angle in a trash can,
and the street people, just beyond my lights.

—I remember blowing curtains, the smell
of summer lifted through the room with every turn,
the sheer fun of watermelons in my grandparents'

backyard, the wildflowers picked on a hill
years later, with the subtle shift of dawn,
each breath an unfolding contentment—

and I wonder what we have left to will,
if any words could ever be enough resistance,
or sanction, in this modern, bitter inheritance.

Jacqueline Vaught Brogan
University of Notre Dame

Two Poems About Old Paintings

1

Lofty and Remote Streams and Mountains
By Hsia Kuei

Somewhere in China, in the year 984,
a solitary spring traveler
returns alone to his remote valley.

Willow trees weep gently for all,
like him, who are lost against
the jagged whiteness of distant peaks.

He approaches the graceful bridge,
happy with the crooked path
of a winding mountain stream.

2

An Old Woman Cooking Eggs
By Diego Rodriguez de Silva Velázquez

Sunny side up in 1618:
the cracking aroma of olive oil,
the impatient hunger of the young
boy who sits at the old woman's side,
the joy of an artist capturing the beauty
of simply lived human life.

The great benefit of keeping chickens.

That Year There Was No Poetry There

What has he that becomes his heart's strong core?
He has his poverty and nothing more.

—Wallace Stevens

That year there was no poetry. There
was his heartbreak. And the city, dark as
his poverty, bad lighting and no bed . . .

Losing sight of everything, he looked
at himself—to see if he had willed this hell,
hoping to regain himself. He had not.

It had come from the simple cruelty of life,
the sharp crack of unexpected thunder
dogs and children know the meaning of,

That which adults prefer to call luck. Bad luck
had brought him to this dank slum in Brooklyn,
alone but for an iron policeman—

holding out the outer circles of his hell.
While inside his mind shadows lurked,
and meanings to life other than cruelty.

Like loving the woman he had refused.
Believing the thieves would prefer to be elsewhere,
or walking through green hills alone with god.

Jeffrey D. Bolt
School of Law
University of Wisconsin

Reviews

Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923.

By Joan Richardson. New York: William Morrow, 1986.

Ernest Hemingway did his best to make Wallace Stevens' life the stuff of biography one February evening in 1936, when he initiated their famous fistfight. The episode caused them both some embarrassment, Hemingway because the poet was twenty years his senior, Stevens because he did so little damage; he landed only one punch, and that broke his hand. For Hemingway, the incident is but an obscure footnote to a life of physical adventure and misadventure—not to mention serial marriage and suicide. That life, or installments of it, has been the subject of three biographies published in the last eighteen months. On this scale of literary greatness, the portly Stevens is still a bantamweight. During the thirty years following his death in 1955, not a single book declared itself a "life" of the poet.

This is not to say that his life was overlooked in the substantial body of Stevens scholarship and criticism published during that period. Holly Stevens' editions of her father's letters and journal serve not only as the biographer's primary resources but also as quasi-biographies themselves. Peter Brazeau's oral biography affords us the rare opportunity to step outside the literary record, composed mainly by Stevens himself, and see him as his contemporaries saw him. Samuel French Morse, Robert Buttell, A. Walton Litz, Glen MacLeod, and I have all published studies of Stevens' poetic development that examine the fragile ligaments joining the poet's art to his life and times.

Now we have Joan Richardson's *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923*, which covers the poet's life from cradle to first book of poems. Volume Two, which she promises to have in our hands a year from now, will take up the story after *Harmonium* and carry it through to Stevens' death in 1955. It should also offset the starboard list some of us have developed while carrying Volume One to and from the office. With over five hundred closely-packed pages of text and over thirty pages of photographs, the book has the look and heft of a definitive biography; indeed, that much-abused phrase appears on the dust jacket.

Surely there are new revelations lurking in all that print? Not really: Richardson's Stevens is a familiar figure, at least in profile. Stemming from Pennsylvania Dutch stock, no-nonsense people who valued thrift and self-discipline, he went on to study at Harvard College, where he absorbed a new set of values. Harvard weaned him from his provincial hometown and Presbyterian beliefs but not, in the hour of decision, from his father's definition of worldly success. For five years after law school he courted his future wife on paper, then spent the early years of their marriage trying to reconcile the paper wife with the real one. In poetry, meanwhile, he found a more tractable world and scope for his literary ambition.

Queer things happen, however, when Richardson imposes two theoretical templates on the story. One of these is a composite of Perry Miller and Max Weber, the other of Freud and Harold Bloom. She uses the first because she intends her two volumes to be a biography not only of Stevens but also of America between 1879 and 1955. She might just as well have said 1629 and 1955, for she regards Stevens as a latter-day Puritan on an errand into the wilderness, having repeatedly to justify his mode of life to an Old World father. Though religion failed him, it remained entrenched as the work ethic; he became obsessed with material success because he regarded it as a sign of election.

Richardson invokes Freudian psychology to explore Stevens' relationships with his parents and wife. As she sees it, he felt unwanted, being the only child of Garrett and Kate Stevens who was not named after an ancestor. His ambition as lawyer and poet was thus an attempt to win their approval. His married life was unhappy in part because he felt that Elsie had lured him from his parents, yet could not be the mother he needed. To these emotional deprivations were added, in 1919, the death of his younger sister. Richardson maintains that this loss affected Stevens much as the death of God affected Nietzsche or the slaughter of World War One affected Western civilization. She detects, in the months following Mary Katharine's death, dramatic changes in his poetry and relationship with Elsie.

Stevens proves to be the psychoanalyst's dream patient—thoroughly repressed, sadomasochistic, manic-depressive, and sexually ambiguous. That's the bad news. The good news is that this made him a better poet, since his stunted ego rendered him more empathetic and permeable to the voices of his poetic past. Keats would have called this "negative capability," though Keats is not among the "strong" poets whom Stevens sought to supplant, according to Richardson. Instead, he plundered lesser poets while setting his sights on the likes of Homer, Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson, and Browning. She records in some detail his dialogue, through reading, with writers like Matthew Arnold and Samuel Johnson.

Richardson's Freudian and "American Studies" templates often overlap, especially where the word *Puritan* appears. In some contexts, it carries its strict historical meaning; in others it denotes, in the manner of much popular psychology, anyone who shies away from physical pleasure. Separately or in tandem, these schemata often generate useful insights into Stevens' life and work. Richardson is at her best when discussing his feeling for nature, which made no human demands upon him. She is also good on his relationship with Elsie, though here she occasionally crosses the line between biography and biographical romance.

In biography as in physics, one's nucleus largely determines the nature of orbiting particles. Richardson's treatment of Stevens' parents follows from her conception of their son. Garrett Stevens emerges from these pages a one-dimensional man, the personification of reason, practicality, and self-discipline. Virtually absent from this portrait is the man who wrote poetry, rhapsodized on the beauty of nature and the Venus de Milo, and advised his son in a letter to "Catch the reflected sun-rays, get pleasurable emotions—instead of stings and tears." Kate Stevens is called upon to play different, sometimes contradictory roles: she is both the model for "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and the epitome of imagination, both the parent who withheld her approval and the "dreamy, loving mother." On her deathbed, she becomes America itself, her white face above a red blanket in a blue room.

Richardson is very much the Freudian when analyzing Stevens' choice of pseudonyms in college and the occasional errors, cancellations, and changes of handwriting in his letters. These reveal, predictably, his craving for the love and approval he had been denied as a child. In two cases, Richardson provides the reader with a photograph of the document under discussion. In one, a letter to Elsie, she sees "old mom Walker" where Stevens meant to write "old man Walker." Perhaps by the end of Volume Two my gestalt will be sufficiently altered to read "mom" without doing violence to my eyes; for now, I am unconvinced. Elsewhere she notes the similarity between Stevens' signature and the one supposedly penned by W. G. Peckham on an affidavit. This prompts her to speculate that Stevens adopted Peckham as his surrogate father, and so identified with his employer that he began to write like him. The handwriting is in fact identical, and

I think it more plausible to suppose—at least until we can compare this Peckham “autograph” with one known to be authentic—that Peckham asked his clerk to forge his signature on routine paperwork.

Parts of *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years* would have benefited from the same kind of careful proofreading Richardson gives to Stevens’ letters. In one chapter she deems it “unlikely” that he read his poems aloud at any of Walter Arensberg’s parties—then, in the following chapter, accepts as fact the reading chronicled by Carl Van Vechten. Drawing upon an interview with Herbert Schoen, one of Stevens’ business associates, Richardson reports that the poet, on returning home after receiving an honorary degree, flourished his academic hood out the window where Elsie could see it from the garden and shouted, “Look, another skull!” Something is obviously amiss here, but Richardson doesn’t seem to notice. Peter Brazeau’s tape recorder picked up a slightly different version of the story from Schoen, and it does more justice to Stevens’ wit. As transcribed in Brazeau’s *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, Stevens’ words were, “Look, darling, I have another scalp!”

Especially in a book this long, there are bound to be minor errors and inconsistencies. One is less troubled by these than by another kind of error that appears too frequently in the book. On the whole, Richardson is well-informed and informative on Stevens’ literary and artistic milieu, and she provides the most exhaustive account so far published of Stevens’ reading. But there are lapses. She makes unwarranted assumptions about his reading of William James and his father’s familiarity with the ideas of Matthew Arnold and Charles Sanders Peirce. She suggests that in “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” Stevens unconsciously echoes a Chinese poem which she quotes not in a translation he might have seen but one published in 1971. Several paragraphs on the verbal experiments of Gertrude Stein depend on the single thread of her assertion that “Stevens was familiar with and admired Stein’s style.” A rather tenuous filament it proves to be: the reader who takes the trouble to look up the cited letter will find Stevens praising Marianne Moore’s style as one that “makes Miss Stein seem shallow.”

Richardson’s treatment of “Sunday Morning” is another case in point. She maintains that Harriet Monroe, realizing that parts of the poem challenge the orthodox Christian view of life, excluded the offensive stanzas from the version she published in *Poetry* magazine. If so, one wonders why Miss Monroe retained the poem’s least orthodox stanza, the one in which an authoritative voice announces that the tomb in Palestine is not a porch but a grave? According to Richardson, “Sunday Morning” was not generally recognized as a great poem until Sartre demonstrated that its brand of existentialism is compatible with Christian humanism. This remarkable bit of literary history fails to explain why the poem was anthologized at least four times before World War Two, including an appearance in the benign *Oxford Anthology of American Literature* (1938).

Wallace Stevens: The Early Years should therefore be read cautiously by anyone who wants to learn the facts behind the poet’s fictions, but it should be read. This task a less indulgent editor might have facilitated; the book could be reduced to half its current length—and improved in the process—by deleting repetitions and superfluous long quotations. In her introduction, Richardson urges us not to skip the quotations, as they “slow readers down and allow them to feel Stevens’s time.” Her readers will certainly experience a more leisurely epoch in American history, though they may not appreciate their enforced leisure. She also defends her practice of using phrases from Stevens’ poems wherever they seem remotely appropriate, saying these are “far superior to any that I might have invented to communicate the tremulous brilliance of his intricate mind in its engagement with the world.” After the umpteenth repetition, however, the most provoca-

tive phrase loses its luster and becomes at best a cliché, at worst an empty cipher.

Is this, then, the definitive biography of Wallace Stevens? Not for the years 1879-1923. Richardson's book is nevertheless a *defining* biography. Besides defining some of Stevens' early influences and relationships in a thorough and genuinely helpful way, it marks the beginning of a new era in Stevens scholarship and criticism. A comprehensive biography of this intensely private poet was until recently unthinkable. Now that it has been attempted, we may be ready to think another unthinkable thought, suggested by Hemingway's recent fate: why not a second biography of Stevens? And a third?

Milton J. Bates
Marquette University

Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage.

By Charles Doyle, ed. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

If reputation means to "think again," now is perhaps an apt time to re-think Wallace Stevens' critical heritage, in the form of his reception in 20th century literary and critical circles. Few authors' reputations have been so reflective both of the certified "new pluralism" in literary criticism today and of the less advertised but equally agonistic "old" pluralism which has characterized American critical voices throughout the 20th century. Stevens himself—elusive, chameleon-like in his complexity, alternately lavish or drily philosophical—could be and was engaged by many modern critical camps, and the history of his reception is a remarkable diagram of the polemical process of critical appropriation. As Joseph Riddel indicated in his 1969 survey of Stevens criticism, the field of Stevens studies by mid-century had become "a mosaic of points of view," and that diversity continues to characterize Stevens studies into the '80s.

Charles Doyle's collection, *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, presents one facet of Stevens' fluctuating reception by assembling a chronology of literary reviews of the poet's works, and the result is an interesting, if ultimately somewhat restricted, picture of the formation of a literary reputation. Doyle's selections illustrate the fascinating polemics surrounding Stevens' emergence in the 1910s and '20s, during the years when modernism was a novelty and tempers detonated between such contenders as Conrad Aiken and Louis Untermeyer, skirmishing for the dominance of aestheticism or New Humanism, respectively, as touchstones for the placement of new poets like Wallace Stevens. Stevens' persona was as perplexing as his poetics: he was scrutinized as an example of the modern dandy, the Laforguian Pierrot, the self-limiting hedonist, the icy cerebralist, or championed as the new modern voice. Doyle deftly choreographs these belletristic pyrotechnics, which often seem themselves infected by Stevens' gaudium of style, alongside the steady support of Stevens' contemporaries—Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Carl Sandburg, Alfred Kreymborg, Allen Tate—and, to the collection's credit, also includes the extensive and important essay by R. P. Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens," which in 1932 succeeded in putting Stevens on the emergent formalist map and opening the field for Stevens' debut into the arena of serious academic interpretation.

Other highlights in Doyle's collection include Stevens' unwitting entry into the political fray of the 1930s, with Stanley Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order* in *The New Masses* of 1935, a Marxist indictment of Stevens' political complacency and escapism which elicited Stevens' poetic response in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" and continued to spark reviewers' debates about poetry and politics throughout Stevens' publications of the 1930s. With each successive publication, from the 1920s to the 1960s, Stevens seemed

to accrue more disparate labels and spur more extensive ideological debates: questions of artistic accomplishment and humanistic involvement, questions of philosophical aridity in Stevens' once-lush "country of metaphor," of nominalism and hedonism, of artifice and the search for reality, and the general questions of the poet's place in a kaleidoscopic American literary canon which appeared to re-arrange itself for each new critical view.

Although a compilation of this sort is illuminating, one problem with a collection focusing almost exclusively on review articles is that it provides a somewhat skewed vision of the field as criticism moves out of the review market and as Stevens becomes a more central figure in serious academic scholarship. The collection presents a clear picture of criticism during the *Harmonium* years, for instance, when most writing on Stevens was in fact in the form of review articles, and when much of the theorizing that proved Stevens to be such a rich vehicle for the deployment of critical ideologies took place at the level of debates between literary journalists. But the view becomes progressively more omisive as we pass mid-century. Although Doyle includes such "academic" critics as Blackmur and Yvor Winters, the work necessarily omits the more central debates of the 1950s and '60s which saw Stevens as a key figure in John Crowe Ransom's *The World's Body*, or the appropriation of Stevens as structuralist, metaphysical, platonist, linguistic existentialist, early deconstructor. We miss the Stevens who was the "hard prize" of the New Critical engagement with moralism in M. H. Abram's collection of 1957, *Literature and Belief*, Roy Harvey Pearce's decreative Stevens or the early phenomenology of J. Hillis Miller, embodying new directions which Joseph Riddel had heralded in 1964 by identifying Stevens' poetics of "rupture" and which forecast his eventual adoption by poststructuralist critics. Such issues, central to a full understanding of Stevens' "critical heritage," are not to be captured in the lighter fare of reviews.

Yet even within the boundaries of review articles, particularly in the 1960s the collection might have better represented the critical climate of the day. Stevens readers will recall that the early '60s saw a virtual gold rush of books on Stevens: Frank Kermode's *Wallace Stevens* opened the decade and was rapidly followed by critical editions by Ashley Brown and Robert Haller, Marie Borroff, and Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller, along with fourteen scholarly books, one monograph, Thomas Walsh's concordance to the poetry, and the revised and expanded bibliography and checklist of Stevens criticism by Morse, Bryer, and Riddel. Compared to a scant three books devoted to Stevens throughout the 1950s, this detonation of scholarly interest moved Stevens firmly into the realm of academic consideration. More relevant to Doyle's project is that a number of these critics, rapidly becoming major actors on the stage of Stevens scholarship, contributed reviews of the *Selected Letters* in 1967, the publication with which Doyle's collection concludes. A. Walton Litz, Joseph Riddel, Marie Borroff, Denis Donoghue, Frank Kermode, Norman Holmes Pearson, M. L. Rosenthal, and William York Tindall were just some of the more nationally known critical figures to respond in review form to this last, important publication, which emerged significantly in the same year as Richard Ellmann's Volumes II and III of the letters of James Joyce and the correspondence of Stevens' younger contemporary, Hart Crane, providing critics with an irresistibly comparative angle with which to discuss Stevens' place in the modernist canon.

Unfortunately, none of these "reviewers" are included in Doyle's collection. Although these notices by the more recognized critics are themselves of varying depth and quality, certainly Doyle's excellent biographical introductions, which clarify the affiliations of many obscure early critics, would have been indispensable in giving a proper view of the critical "scene" of the 1960s. And while Doyle attempts to flesh out the general pro-

gress of Stevens criticism in his introduction to the edition, that introduction itself is largely reiterative of Joseph Riddel's survey of 1969, while it omits the necessary scope of books and academic articles which allowed Riddel to delimit more clearly the contours of Stevens criticism in that time.

Despite these *caveats*, *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage* affords an interesting look at literary reviews of Stevens in the aggregate and perhaps even provides a new context in which to place existing debate. Current Stevensians can find surprisingly early instances of many theoretical issues active today: poetry and politics, rhetoric and reality, dilemmas of formalism and the nature of the poetic, caught in a history of controversy which Stevens' remarkable poetry was able to inspire and concretize. Re-thinking Stevens' critical heritage in this way brings to light a palimpsest of opinion on which our current versions of the poet may be merely the latest, and by no means the last, inscription.

Melita Schaum
University of Michigan-Dearborn

Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism.

By Albert Gelpi, ed. Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Usually collections of essays on a poet have a certain unanimity. This one offers a dialogue of differences by seven experienced critics, none of whom has published a book on Stevens. Contemporary reassessments of Wallace Stevens' poetry bring them together.

Albert Gelpi, in his "Stevens and Williams: The Epistemology of Modernism," prepares a foundation for the other essays by recounting the personal relations of the two poets and the contentions of their poetics as derived from the inheritance of each: Williams from the Imagists and Stevens from the Symbolists. He finds a basis for literary modernism in their mutual concept of the poet as the "constructive faculty" that, through the poet's personality, "strives to compose the fragments of impression and response into an autotelic art-object." Dealing with the rhetoric of each poet, Gelpi hints of an irresolution in the Modernist epistemology.

Gerald L. Bruns in "Stevens without Epistemology" dismisses from his considerations of Stevens' poetry the problems of its philosophy: "how the mind links up with reality" and whether "the mind is all in all." Instead, he theorizes a problem of Stevens' own psychology as being revealed in the work. He explains that working on the poetry from the "linguistical turn" of Derrida and J. Hillis Miller, he discovered that for Stevens "language just didn't have much reality." Now, from the "new hermeneutical turn," which Bruns describes as a concern "with the historical and dialogical nature of understanding—that is, with the temporal, social, and political conditions in which human understanding goes on," he realizes that Stevens' problem is "what to do about other people" for "other people never answer back." Thus, having in mind a Stevens isolated from the dialogical community of men, Bruns sees the poetry as a "drama of fear and repression of alien voices." He goes so far as to indicate that Stevens desired to be rid of his own poetic voice, that vocalissimus which Stevens, unable to explain, called "the voice of someone else."

These assumptions profoundly distort the temper of Stevens' poetry, repressing its constant celebration of language and the body's sensuous life that Stevens sees as continually tending to become language. Indeed, these postulations seem to be assumed for novelty's sake, in view of Stevens' actual life of success in a profession that is all language and discourse, both dialogical and dialectical, in the practical world. Bruns's read-

ings of the poems are impoverished by his withholding of symbolic import and by his failure to recognize the significance of what is actually said.

Marjorie Perloff, in "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," finds Stevens' poems estranged from contemporary poetry by metaphoricality, subjectivity, and mythmaking. In an effort not appropriate to the poetry, she examines the major man poems of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" for their relation to the political upheavals and events of World War II taking place before the poem was finished in 1942. Perloff's great thrust is that the MacCullough of "Notes" is a "good Wasp name" and connotes "racial purity" and "prowess in combat," a "stereotype of Aryan purity, the master race." Her strategy is to interlace the MacCullough with Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini (without committing herself openly to exegesis) by irrelevantly naming them the major men of the time. She quotes from a Stevens letter: "that Mussolini is right, practically, has certainly a great deal to be said for it." She adds, "even though he knows that the MacCullough must undergo a real transformation." This is an example of Perloff's unfair implications. Stevens' letter was written seven years before the MacCullough was conceived. Although she makes much of social context and language of the times, she says nothing about Mussolini being thought of as a benign dictator during the depression, the actual social context of the letter, and that his advance into Ethiopia was part of the colonialism of 1935. She does not quote Stevens' vernacular: "While it is true that I have spoken sympathetically of Mussolini, all of my sympathies are the other way: with the coons and the boa-constrictors." Her speculations about the MacCullough are all arbitrary. Stevens says, "It is any name, any man" in his critique of humanism's apotheosis of Man. Characteristic of Stevens' amused self-ironies would be that he chose the name because his father always believed his lineage to be partly Scottish.

Apparently, Perloff feels a need for support from anything in the letters that can be made abusive of Stevens. Except for a Stevens ambivalent about Jews but drawn to those of intellect, the Stevens she deplores is created by her own innuendos. She disparages this sixty-three year old man because he wanted his private publication of *Notes* to be accurate and attractive, cared about his daughter's dropping out of college and her possible unhappiness, and studied his genealogy—all during the time of war. In her search for Stevens the man, Perloff finds . . . well, Ezra Pound, not such a poet, of course, but an anti-Semite, racist, fascist, a man indifferent to the death of multitudes. It is Pound's "impure" collage poetry, as in *The Cantos*, with its many voices, vernaculars, so-called objectivity, that Perloff sees as bringing to an impasse the genre of Stevens' meditative voice, its "exquisite lyrics of subjectivity" all fading into literary history, belated even in its own time.

Could Stevens have felt an "alienation from the very rhetoricity and discursiveness so dominant in his own poetry," as Bonnie Costello surmises? In "Wallace Stevens and Painting," she says he yearned for the visual arts's "conditions of immanence, unity, presentness and materiality," and compares certain painterly scenes from the poems to selected paintings, as examples of Stevens' efforts to escape rhetoricity and anthropomorphism. She concludes that in his pursuit of the poetic essence possible to painting, "Stevens' poetry passes into the conditions of the visual arts." One would like to surrender to this splendidly written essay, but its flaw is that it ignores Stevens' faith in the power of language. For example, Costello says that Stevens speaks in "Effects of Analogy" of "pictorialization as the essential aim of poetry." Instead, we find on the cited page that Stevens begins to speak of the pictorializations in poetry as being much more, being in fact literary analogies, part of the "fundamental books of the human spirit." In such

analogies, verbal images merge into tropes. Stevens wants his verbal pictorializations to be read as he "read" the painting by Tal Coat: symbolically. Just as illiterates could "read" religious allegory through its emblems, so Stevens read from the scene of a Venetian glass bowl surrounded by bottles and glasses. Through the angel's flight into language, the poetry of an idea became "Angel Surrounded by Paysans." It is significant that when the poem was to be illustrated, Stevens wrote that the artist "could leave the actual angel invisible." Better left to the word, it seems.

The poet with his language and sense of the world creates a "particular site," according to Charles Altieri in "Why Stevens Must be Abstract," and there "we are confronted by a display of our own powers." We are enabled to participate in a transcendence of life lived in the scene, for one of the powers of the poet is to abstract subjectivity and particularity into a verbal possibility in which there is "something deeply enough embedded in our lives and metaphors to take form despite the demise of particular beliefs." Altieri maintains that in Stevens' poetry man's experience of what-it-is-to-be becomes abstracted by methods similar to certain modes in Mondrian and Wittgenstein. With these in mind, Altieri investigates the tenor of some of Stevens' images of man conceived as the hero or the common man and, thus, abstracted in "a figure who carries the allegorical burden as a modern Everyman."

"Reading," Altieri asserts, "produces a sense of ourselves fully inhabiting the forms of desire that most articulately give voice to the world." His account of Stevens' poetry may be taken as a defense of the meditative lyric that abstracts from language a heightened text which, through its contemplative ardor, "offers the mind something like conceptual realities not easily reducible to historical positivities." It is not possible here to give a just account of Altieri's dense and extended dialectic. He evinces a wisdom about Stevens' poetry and poetics that can only come from one who, above any bias, finds in a poem its own pertinent quality and relevant possibilities.

Alan Golding shows in "The Community of Elements" in Wallace Stevens and Louis Zukofsky" an unexpected link between Stevens and the Objectivists. Zukofsky, he asserts, upon re-reading Stevens late in his own career, felt that his poetry was closer to Stevens than to any of his contemporaries, not for philosophical implications or any formal style, which he disliked, but for the verbal play of certain poems, especially in *Harmonium*, that he considered indigenously American. Zukofsky, as a poet "who aspired to return poetry to the conditions of music," "an object in itself," also found congenial statements of Stevens that celebrate literal physical reality. The elements in Stevens' poetry that influenced Zukofsky were limited, and, as Golding says, "Objectivist poets have loved Stevens and left him."

Other poets, however, were influenced by Stevens' poetics, as Michael Davidson reveals in "Wallace Stevens and Contemporary Poetics." His "operative or performative" mode of writing, Davidson says, became for later poets "a way of writing a poetry of ideas within the very terms that those ideas present." "Form as proceeding," Davidson observes, drawing on Coleridge, was a version of Stevens' legacy to postmodernist poetics. For example, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," was a model for later "momentary, wandering interrogatory" procedures, developing by change rather than toward closure. As distinct from some high modernism, Davidson finds in Stevens' poetry a "more speculative, temporarily generative text whose end is not literary history but existential disclosure." He regards Stevens' propositional, philosophical poetry as transformed by later poets into discourses with social and ideological centers. Davidson presents a fine insight into the fluctuating processions of Stevens' long poems and an equitable view of Stevens' presence in contemporary poetry and poetics.

A symposium of voices, *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism* should generate essays from other critics fascinated by fresh understandings of the poems and disturbed by confrontations that both Stevens and his poetry must endure.

Dorothy Emerson and Frank Doggett
Atlantic Beach, Florida

The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens: An Interpretative Study.

By Rajeev S. Patke. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Rajeev S. Patke's book presents full-scale readings of Stevens' seven longest poems: "The Comedian as the Letter C," "Owl's Clover," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "Esthétique du Mal," "The Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." His chief aim is the admirably straightforward one of "making sense of Stevens' long poems." He does not, therefore, promote any particular critical theory or argue for any narrow thesis that might distort the meaning of the poems. Nor does he attempt to link the poems into the kind of spiritual biography in which they would be more significant as stages of development than as works of art in themselves. Instead, starting from the premise that "the primary cause of difficulty in Stevens is his habit of continual, often unconscious, self-reference," he reads each long poem in the context of Stevens' work as a whole.

Patke's method is in some ways refreshingly eclectic. He varies his approach to suit the individual poem. In treating "The Man with the Blue Guitar," for instance, he performs a useful service by supplying what few recent critics have attempted: a thorough reading of every section of the poem, in proper order. For "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which has received much fuller critical attention, he adopts a more schematic procedure, dividing into three categories (complete with charts and tables) the ways Stevens embodies ideas in this poem: "plain statement; dramatization or evocation of scene; figuration." His reading of the more casually organized "Esthétique du Mal" proceeds according to a non-sequential, thematic grouping of stanzas.

The readings themselves are consistently intelligent, showing a ready command of Stevens' poetry, essays, and letters—including unpublished material—and of the critical heritage (up to 1983). The book began as a dissertation at Oxford, and it is clearly written for professors and graduate students rather than undergraduates or the general reader. Its general approach to the poems tends to be synthetic rather than innovative. Patke's reading of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," for example, devotes eleven pages to the poem's relation to painting without adding anything new to our understanding of that relation; rather, he summarizes the findings of other scholars and then interprets Stevens' poem as many have done before, according to the aesthetics of Cubism. The literature on Stevens has grown large enough that scholars who are not Stevens specialists may well find this approach useful. Those who have spent more time in the field are likely to find Patke's readings familiar.

The book was apparently written before 1983. Since that time, books like Peter Brazeau's *Parts of a World* (1983) and Milton J. Bates's *A Mythology of Self* (1985) have significantly increased our knowledge of Stevens' life and our awareness of how closely his poetry was related to that life. In the present state of Stevens studies, therefore, Patke's choice to read the poetry in isolation, as a closed system virtually unrelated to Stevens' life or reading, seems unnecessarily limiting and colorless. His conclusion that "the history of Stevens' poems is a self-reflexive one: poems about themselves, poems about poetry, poems as

acts of the mind in which the mind broods over itself" does not quite ring true any more. It seems a return to the time when this was the normal way of reading Stevens, not only because New Critical doctrine emphasized the isolated text but also because we knew so little of his life that we had no alternative. Here is Patke describing Stevens' poetic world:

It is indeed true that Stevens's is a solitary world, peopled with names which refer to nobody beyond Stevens himself. Ordinarily, this might be deemed to impoverish a poetry, and to limit its relevance. But, in the case of Stevens, the unique inventiveness and pertinacity of his imagination introduce and familiarize us with a world we recognize as our own. It may not be a world of action; it may not be populated by too many humans; and even the animals and birds and reptiles might enter carrying the burden of having to be symbols and emblems. Yet there is the elemental interplay of earth, water, air, and fire; there is light; and there are the phenomena of the weather. The poet can surprise us with what can be made from these resources in the other interplay between outer and inner weather.

The rather unidiomatic style of this representative passage, and its half-hearted defense of Stevens, are not likely to send the reader eagerly back to *The Collected Poems*. Anyone who has read Bates's book in particular will wonder that Patke should have felt the need to adopt so defensive a tone at all, and that his description of Stevens' world should be so bleak and impersonal, stripped of the rich social and intellectual background against which we can now see Stevens' poetry.

In regard to the later poems — "Esthétique du Mal," "The Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" — Patke's book contrasts with Charles Berger's recent *Forms of Farewell*. Patke offers standard explication and scholarly detail; Berger opts for greater readability and a more innovative approach. Patke's more conservative method and often defensive tone perhaps stem from the fact that he is writing within the British academic establishment which has traditionally been unsympathetic to Wallace Stevens. In that case, we can only be grateful that he has focused such serious and respectful attention on the long poems of this peculiarly American poet.

Glen MacLeod
University of Connecticut at Waterbury

The American Sublime.

By Mary Arensberg, ed. State University of New York Press, 1986.

This collection of essays asks whether the popular eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British aesthetic of the sublime took root in the soil of the new land, and if so, how it adapted itself to new climates of culture, gender, and history. Both the editor's introduction and Donald Pease's lead essay, "Sublime Politics," address these questions theoretically, but the strength of the volume lies in its articles on specific American poets: one on Walt Whitman, two on Emily Dickinson, two on Wallace Stevens, and one on several modern women poets. Most of the essays transcend the problematic of their topic, providing rich and original perspectives on American poets and poetics. One disappointment is the absence of many writers one would expect to encounter in a book entitled *The American Sublime*, such as Poe, Hawthorne, perhaps Jonathan Edwards, and certainly Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams. Choosing one article on Dickinson and Stevens

would have permitted the editor to include essays on other writers relevant to the tradition.

The selection of poets is inseparable from the central issue of the volume, the nature and existence of an "American Sublime." Although the authors of individual essays all confront this issue separately, the introduction and first article attempt to define a sublime tradition "in the post-structuralist mode." This goal distorts the summaries of Longinus' and Kant's aesthetics of sublimity through the lens of Thomas Weiskel's 1976 book, *The Romantic Sublime*. Weiskel's book, unfortunately not finished at the time of his tragic death, contains brilliant insights through its conflation of Kantian aesthetics, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and post-structuralist emphasis on language. Yet it is one interpretation of the sublime tradition and should be treated as such, not as privileged truth. Following Weiskel, Harold Bloom, and Bruce Clark, Arensberg overrelies on the etymology of the word "sublime." Through its etymological suggestion of limit or boundary, the term becomes equivalent to Freudian "sublimation."

Donald Pease's theoretical essay on "Sublime Politics," while somewhat flawed in its elaborately dramatic presentation of the Kantian "psychomachia," is excellent on Emerson and American politics, setting up the key question that the book might have, but does not, address: "Implicit in the remark 'I do not wish to cast stones at my mother or spoil my gentle nest' is the one question always repressed by the ideology of the sublime. 'When we convert Nature's wonders into our commodities how can Nature remain sublime?' " Pease raises the essential social and historical factors which affect the translation of sublime aesthetics into American culture, but the thrust of essays which follow is to isolate the play of signifiers in the realms of textuality and intrapsychic drama.

Joseph Kronick's article on Whitman forms a bridge between the Emersonian theory Pease elaborates and the poetic practice of Dickinson and Stevens. Interestingly, Kronick's excellent analysis of Whitman's attempts to traverse the border between the "I and the abyss, the diacritical space of writings," illustrates a major difference between the American texts of sublimity and their British precursors. In contrast to the emotional impact analyzed by Burke and Kant and embodied by the Romantic poets and Gothic novelists, the American texts encode a sublime that is abstract and intellectualized, lacking the *feeling* of the sublime, the violent exaltation which results from a momentary glimpse into the abyss. This may be due, in Whitman's case, to what Kronick calls "indirection," an emphasis on the derivative nature of truth.

The articles by Gary Lee Stonum and Helen Regueiro Elam on Dickinson offer stimulating new directions in the book because they interrogate the invisible male bias of the American tradition of serious poetry. However, there are female traditions available, such as the Gothic novel, which might provide female models of the sublime. Relying on the etymology of "sublime" in *limen*, or "threshold," Elam makes a convincing case for Dickinson's involvement with a sublime of power on the brink of obliteration, particularly in the poem "Slant of Light." Stonum's article on Dickinson makes a fascinating case for Dickinson's use of mathematics in her poetry and gives a clear and accurate account of the Kantian mathematical sublime, but the connection between the two remains tenuous.

Michael T. Beehler's essay, "Kant and Stevens: The Dynamics of the Sublime and The Dynamics of Poetry," gives a solid exposition of the historical tradition of the sublime. Admirably exploiting poststructuralist theory without the jargon, Beehler defines the sublime in Stevens as "the metaphor of a journey or passage—a 'search'—in metaphor toward that which lies beyond the boundary of its own metaphoricity." Successfully using both Kant and Weiskel to translate the Kantian sublime into a crisis of representation that also informs Stevens' 1937 essay, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," the article argues that "Like Kant's transcendent, Stevens' 'irrational' appears to be the wholly other to

which his essay can only negatively refer." Beehler manages to incorporate Freudian constructs legitimately into his analysis through Stevens' own allusions to the Freudian "irrational." The Kantian subreption of object for subject becomes Stevens' "supreme fiction that allows poetry to be written as though it were a journey beyond itself." Thus, Stevens' essay is "an ironic rewriting of Kant's dynamic of the sublime." Beehler's reading of Stevens' "The Sail of Ulysses" finds that Ulysses' search for the unknown is "not a passage beyond the horizon of symbol, but is rather a continual rewriting of that horizon as a return to symbol, a return that is therefore the erasure of symbol's 'outside' and the 'horizon' that marks it."

Mary Arensberg's essay, "White Mythology and the American Sublime: Stevens' Auroral Fantasy," interprets Stevens' most obscure poem, "The Auroras of Autumn." She traces "the psychodrama of poet and paramour" from the period of *Harmonium* through *The Auroras of Autumn* in the context of a quest "to break through the matrix of metaphoricity and gaze on poetry's extralinguistic source," or the void. Arensberg develops her interpretation around an archetypal idea of "the choice of the third woman" found in many folk tales. The first woman is "the originating parent," whom the beloved paramour is invented to repeat: "This second woman, who reaches her apotheosis in *Notes*, is the 'green, fluent mundo,' the female presence whose absence predicates poetry." Stevens' third woman is "the death goddess or haunted muse of the *Auroras* section." The essay successfully interweaves Freud's model of the family romance with deconstructive notions of absent signifieds to create a fascinating reading of Stevens' flirtation with the abyss. Arensberg traces Stevens' use of whiteness as a mythic signifier of sublimity back to Melville's white whale.

The pervasive adoption of both Weiskel's "recapitulation of the Oedipus Complex" in the sublime and Bloom's "blending of the poetic self with the fathering force of an anterior power" (Arensberg's summary) reflects the canonization of a particularly male-biased tradition of the sublime in America. In the superb concluding article of the book, "In The Twilight of the Gods: Women Poets and the American Sublime," Joanne Feit Diehl points out that "Even more severely than in British Romanticism, American Romanticism consequently displaces the woman from poetic identity." Despite the book's obvious attempts to shift attention toward a female tradition, the hegemony of Freud, especially the Freud of the Oedipal complex in the critical methodologies used to define an "American sublime," insures the maintenance of a male bias. This bias is exacerbated by the disappearance of the aesthetic dialectic of beauty versus sublimity, in which the former pole represented the more traditionally female side of experience: love, social relationships, sympathy. Both Kant and Wordsworth finally privilege beauty over sublimity, offering more possibilities for a female tradition than do the American transcendentalists.

The American Sublime thus proffers Stevens' readers two articles that place him in a Romantic tradition and yet emphasize his self-conscious belatedness in the quest for sublime transcendence. Despite the book's flaws in its theoretical apparatus and restricted canon of an American sublime tradition, it has a great deal to offer in terms of realignments of the canon, with respect to both American romanticism and the spaces and strategies available to women writers. Much of modern American literary history represents an attempt to break away from the English romantic tradition, and this book contains some intriguing assessments of the degree to which this has been accomplished, and the costs of its achievements.

Eve Walsh Stoddard
St. Lawrence University

News and Comments

A memorial service for Peter Brazeau, who died of leukemia on June 28, 1986, was held at St. Joseph College on July 19. The author of *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (1983), Brazeau was a professor of English at St. Joseph College. Brazeau's early death is an immense loss to Stevens studies. Memorial donations may be made to the Peter Brazeau Poetry Foundation, St. Joseph College, West Hartford, CT 06117, and to The American Cancer Society, 237 East Center, Manchester, CT 06040.

Although the splendid collection of modern literature assembled by the late James Gilvary was centered on Irish writers, the sale at Christie's in New York on February 7, 1986, contained six important Stevens items, all of which sold for well over the estimates. *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (Cummington, Massachusetts, 1942), no. XII of 80 copies signed by the author, brought \$1,430 (including the 10% premium), and *Esthétique du Mal* (also Cummington Press), 1945, No. 174 of 300 but signed by the author, in original green Natsume straw-paper-covered boards and black morocco spine, went for \$1,210. *New Poems 1942: An Anthology of British and American Verse* (Mount Vernon, N.Y., [1942]), copy Y of 26 lettered copies signed by the 32 contributors (including Stevens), sold for \$2,200.

Joseph the Provider, 10 W. Micheltorena, Santa Barbara, CA 93101, has three Stevens TLS to Witter Bynner, 1934-54, annotated in pencil by Bynner, priced at \$2,250. Among the printed works by Stevens is *Ideas of Order* (New York, 1936), in the first binding of the first trade edition (containing three poems not in the Alcestis Press edition), inscribed by Stevens, priced at \$2,000. David L. O'Neal's catalogue 68 (August, 1986), offers 13 more modest Stevens items, ranging from an uninscribed copy of *Ideas of Order* ("boards a little soiled & faded, else a fine copy") at \$85, to *Harmonium* (New York, 1923), in the second binding, "covers bumped, extremities of spine rubbed, label very slightly chipped, very good," at \$175. A copy of the Alcestis Press edition of *Ideas of Order* (New York, 1935), one of 135 copies signed by Stevens, described as very fine in the publisher's slip case, is offered for \$1750 by Glenn Horowitz, Catalogue 13, item 382. The Gilvary copy of *Esthétique du Mal*, mentioned above, appears in the same catalogue (item 384) for \$1750, which reflects a normal markup. First editions of Stevens vary substantially in price, from copy to copy and from edition to edition, mostly because of differences in condition and in the number of copies printed. On all levels there appears to be no sign of a weakening market for his books.

The latest addition to the Stevens collection in the Huntington Library is his *Poems*, selected with an introduction by Helen Vendler (San Francisco, Arion Press, 1985), an edition which, despite a list price of \$525, sold out quickly.

Scholarly and critical products continue to roll out of the Huntington Library's Stevens factory. Here are some of the researchers who have worked on Stevens at the Huntington since July, 1985: Joan E. White (Citrus College) on Stevens and Jorge Luis Borges; David L. Thomas (University of California, Riverside) on a dissertation concerning modern poetry; Theodora R. Graham (Pennsylvania State University, Middletown) on the relationship of Dorothy Pound and Elsie Stevens with their husbands' writings; Linda Gutierrez (New York Center for Visual History) on a PBS television documentary about Stevens; Charles Altieri (University of Washington) on American and modern literature;

Al Filreis (University of Pennsylvania) on a biography of Stevens (Filreis and Beverly Coyle's edition of the letters of Stevens and José Rodríguez-Feo is scheduled for publication this autumn); Lisa A. Banner (Montgomery Gallery, San Francisco) on Stevens' correspondence with the Parisian art dealer Paule Vidal; Joan Richardson (City University of New York, La Guardia College) on a second volume of her biography, *Wallace Stevens* (William Morrow, New York, 1986); Margaret Dickie (University of Illinois) on an article about Stevens; Daniel S. Brint (Cambridge University) on a dissertation about Stevens and American literature; Carter Jones (Brown University) on a dissertation in American studies.

Another work in progress is John N. Serio's annotated bibliography of Stevens criticism, to be published by Garland in New York.

Daniel Woodward, Librarian
The Huntington

ANNOUNCEMENT

**Wallace Stevens Society
1986 MLA Program
New York City**

Topic: Stevens and the Identity of Poetry and Style

Monday, December 29, 1986

3:30-5:30 p.m., Sullivan Room, Marriott Marquis

Presiding: George S. Lensing, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

1. "The Style of the Poem and the Style of the Man," José Rodríguez-Feo, Cuba.
2. "The Voice of This Besieging Pain': The Idea of Style in Stevens' Poems of Order," Elisabeth Stephens, Princeton University.
3. "Wallace Stevens and the Peripatetic Style," Elton Glaser, University of Akron.
4. "Pure and Normal Poetry: Philosophical Structures and Stylistic Modes in Stevens' Later Poems," Joseph Carroll, University of Missouri at St. Louis.

NEW IN PAPER

Wallace Stevens

A Mythology of Self MILTON J. BATES

"Bates has returned Stevens's poetry from the lecturn to the lap of the reader, where it belongs."

--Tom D'Evelyn,

Christian Science Monitor

"At last one feels the intimate connections between the businessman who led a life of exemplary caution and the angel who wrote poems of splendid extravagance."

--Dana Gioia,

New York Times Book Review

At bookstores or call toll-free
800-822-6657. Visa and MasterCard

**University of
California Press**

Berkeley 94720



**“A brilliant,
primary work of rediscovery”***

“Volume I of what promises to be the definitive biography of Wallace Stevens gives us, for the first time, a fully documented and authoritative account of this great and difficult poet in all his contradictions and complexities.”

—**Marjorie Perloff**

“Not since W.J. Bate’s book on Keats has a writer so profoundly read the life of a poet with all of the creative power that his poetry itself demands.”

—**John Hollander**

“At last, a full, amazingly informative and wonderfully sympathetic biography that brings Stevens to life and returns him to the person he actually was. More than any other book this one brings out the immense difficulties over which Stevens triumphed in the blisses of his imagination.”

—**Alfred Kazin***

\$21.95

BIB

BEECH TREE BOOKS
WILLIAM MORROW

105 Madison Avenue · New York, N.Y. 10016